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Narrative and Ideology in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema, 1990 - 1999

Neal Rowland

Ph. D.

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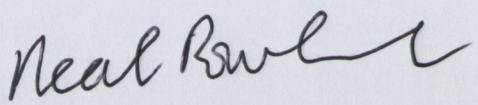
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Neal Rowland

Summary

The main purpose of this thesis is to investigate the relationship between ideology and the narrative structure of popular Hollywood cinema in the 1990s, particularly the manner in which a closed narrative structure serves to reproduce the dominant ideology. I also attempt to account for its ongoing popularity with both filmmakers and contemporary, Western(ised) audiences. Primarily, I employ a materialist, deconstructive methodology, drawing my conclusions from a series of 'symptomatic' readings of certain popular films.

Chapter One establishes and qualifies the structural identity of the individual act of comprehension and the canonic, three-act Hollywood screenplay, then describes the manner in which their similar (closed) narrative structures serve to affirm certain crucial ontological categories of the prevailing realist epistemology and, thus, to reproduce the dominant ideology; the dominant ideology depends for its moral authority upon certain realist ontological categories, especially those of 'reality' and 'representation'. I continue by theorising why the specific affirmation performed by these closed narrative structures is particularly favourable to the goals of the dominant ideology and also why the closed narrative structure is so popular with certain readers.

The ability of the popular 1990s film to perform this affirmation depends upon its readers' ability clearly to recognise the presence, progress and resolution of its closed narrative structure. Chapter Two describes in detail the various narrative strategies employed by these films to assist this recognition; typically by indexing as clearly as possible the roles of the hero and villain, the opposing champions in a conflict the resolution of which typically coincides with the closure of the narrative.

Chapter Three discusses the manner in which the ostensible content of the popular 1990s film further orients readers to the closed narrative structure by invoking

only familiar, ideologically-sanctioned discourses to produce a textual transparency that allows a more unmediated access to its progress and resolution.

Chapter Four attempts to situate the popular 1990s film within its social, political, economic and ideological context. It asks in what ways (if at all) the popular films of the 1990s constitute a distinct mode of film practice. I conclude that these films are not particularly distinct but rather represent a continuation of certain 'blockbuster' industrial principles established in the mid-1970s (and consolidated during the 1980s), principles, I argue, that actually result in a more reactionary film. I then attempt to justify the critical value of establishing this continuity (based on the necessarily reactionary quality of these films) by demonstrating the central and determining importance in these films of their main ideological/reactionary function (performed, as I have already noted, by the closed narrative structure). To do this, I show that the ostensible content of these films is highly fractured and contradictory as a direct result of the greater (ideological) importance of satisfying the narrative prerogatives of the closed narrative structure over the secondary, almost incidental prerogatives of the content.

Chapter Five rounds off my discussion of the contemporary commercial cinema by examining possible alternatives to the dominant strategies outlined in the preceding chapters. It also investigates the possibility of a viable political cinema operating within the mainstream, a 'progressive realist cinema' that accepts for purely practical reasons its status as commodity, making certain necessary concessions to the dominant institutions of Hollywood, at the same time that it attempts to disrupt or problematise their ideological underpinnings. The chapter concludes with a detailed examination of certain alternative narrative strategies deployed in a range of contemporary progressive realist films.

Acknowledgments

In no particular order, I would like to thank the following: Professor Dennis Kennedy, Dr. Paula Quigley, the staff, and my fellow students at the School of Drama in Trinity College, Dublin, Mike Cormack, Professor John Saeed, Val Rust and the UCLA Graduate School of Education, the UCLA Education Abroad Program, the Office of International Student Affairs, Professor Eda Sagarra and Dr. Maurice Bric at the Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences.

On a more personal note, I would also like to thank my parents, my family and all my friends for their kind support and encouragement.

This thesis was written with the financial assistance of Trinity College, Dublin and the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

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INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this thesis is to investigate the relationship between ideology and narrative structure in popular Hollywood cinema during the 1990s. To this end, I hope to show not only how narrative structure serves to reproduce the dominant ideology, but also to account for its dominance in contemporary mainstream industrial practice and for its ongoing popularity with modern, Western(ised) audiences.

SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTERS

Chapter One compares the individual act of comprehension (as theorised by cognitive psychology) and the canonic, three-act Hollywood screenplay (as theorised by many screenwriting pundits) and attempts to establish their structural identity. Both, I show, are based on a dynamic movement from closure, via conflict, to closure again. The main ideological function of this shared (closed) narrative dynamic, I argue, is the affirmation of the prevailing realist epistemology, a way of seeing and understanding the world that is indispensable to the reproduction of the dominant ideology; the moral authority of the dominant ideology depends upon certain distinct realist conceptual categories such as 'reality' and 'representation', 'fact', 'truth', etc. I suggest that the similarly closed narrative structures of the individual act of comprehension and the canonic Hollywood screenplay are reflected versions of each other but on different scales; that they interact, mutually reflect and echo each other and also the many other similarly closed narrative structures present in other discourses and on other levels of experience to create an infinitely self-reflexive loop in which these closed structures all refer to each other rather than to any real outside.

The result of this intertextuality is an illusion or 'effect' of reality that (ironically) sustains the realist epistemology without actually requiring proof of the existence of an external referent. The chapter concludes with a discussion of why the use of closed narrative structures to affirm the prevailing realist epistemology is particularly favourable to the reproduction of the dominant ideology and also why such closed narrative structures are so popular or appealing to certain types of readers.

I go on to argue that the popular 1990s film can only participate in this affirmation of the realist epistemology if its closed narrative structure is clearly legible. In Chapter Two, then, I discuss the many narrative strategies that are employed by popular film narratives to orient us to the presence, progress and, most importantly, the resolution of this structure. As the resolution of most popular films coincides with the resolution of a conflict between a hero and a villain, these 'orientation' strategies tend to be the means by which the text identifies and clarifies these two oppositional roles. The chapter is divided into two sections, each concerned with a particular set of orientation strategies: those that deploy a morally-responsive (or meritocratic) physical universe to reveal indirectly the roles of hero and villain and those that more directly index these characters by ascribing them certain ideologically-determined physical and behavioural traits.

Chapter Three continues with a discussion of the themes and discourses invoked in the content of the popular 1990s film and describes the manner in which content (although secondary in ideological importance to the closed narrative structure) also assists in the affirmation of the prevailing realist epistemology; the repeated use of a limited set of ideologically sanctioned themes and discourses affords popular texts a transparency that allows a more unmediated access to and recognition of the closed narrative structure. These particular discourses are then discussed in

detail and, when appropriate, related to the social and political context of American during the period.

In Chapter Four I investigate whether or not the popular films of the 1990s can be considered a distinct mode of film practice. To do so, I situate this cinema within its material context, examining in what way (if at all) its films engage the social and political realities of the time. I also examine (and in some cases dismiss) certain common claims made about distinguishing features of popular cinema during the 1990s, i.e., an increased level in spectacle, a decline in the importance of narrative, a standardisation of product for foreign markets or to benefit certain ancillary markets (such as music, television, etc.). Ultimately, I conclude that there is nothing particularly unique or distinct about popular film production in the 1990s and that this recent period in popular film history is better seen as a continuation of the popular film practice of the 1980s and mid- to late- 1970s. In other words, the popular 1990s film is simply the most recent manifestation of the blockbuster format, the industrial requirements of which, I argue, actually result in a more reactionary film.

That this necessarily reactionary quality of the blockbuster film constitutes a meaningful basis for establishing a continuity between these films is then reinforced by demonstrating the central and determining importance to these reactionary films of their primary ideological function (performed by the closed narrative structure). To do this, I look for symptoms in the ostensible content that reveal its secondary importance. In other words, I look for the fractures, inconsistencies and contradictions that arise as the direct and inevitable result of the (ideological) need to prioritise the narrative prerogatives of the closed narrative structure over any matters of content.

Chapter Five then attempts to round off a general discussion of the commercial film industry by considering a set of films that appears to criticise the

dominant values of Hollywood from within. I begin by examining certain previous conceptions of a potentially viable political cinema, borrowing from several theorists (such as Comolli, Narboni and MacCabe) to suggest the possibility of a 'progressive realist cinema', a cinema that engages a relevant mass audience (rather than just smaller elite groupings) by using a mode of representation that is not immediately alienating to (and, hence, dismissible by) readers more accustomed to a reactionary cinema. I go on to discuss the means by which a progressive realist film can negotiate (even exploit) the existing apparatuses of the commercial cinema (to overcome problems of financing, distribution and exhibition) and also the manner in which it can employ ironic versions of familiar (dominant) narrative strategies to create in audiences a sense of *malaise*. The remainder of this chapter is then given over to a detailed discussion of alternatives to the dominant narrative strategies described in the preceding chapters, using examples drawn from a range of progressive realist films.

METHODOLOGY

In this thesis, as I noted, I seek to describe and explicate several of the related ideological functions of the closed narrative structure employed by the most popular American films of the 1990s. Consequently, I employ a symptomatic reading strategy to discern certain textual elements, i.e., overall narrative structure, the particular narrative strategies deployed to enable the progress and resolution of this closed structure (including a consideration of the morally-determined causality used and the physical and behavioural characterisation of heroism and villainy), the discourses invoked on the level of content and, most significantly, from the point of view of an ideological critique, the internal narrative contradictions, inconsistencies and avoidances that index the implication of these texts in the dominant ideology.

It is crucial to note at this early stage that this is not a *structural* analysis of Hollywood cinema. Any subsequent discussion of narrative forms within a film text will be situated (ultimately) within the appropriate social, political and economic context. In other words, this is, first and foremost, a materialist analysis of Hollywood film narrative. What formal or structural elements of the texts under scrutiny that are foregrounded for discussion are never presumed to be transcendent or universal. While at times certain elements may appear so, this is acknowledged simply as an effect of their relatively persistent use in popular narratives. Each and all of these elements, however old or apparently commonplace, have a material history and point of origin. Consequently, after theorising the various chief characteristics of popular film narratives of the 1990s (and their contradictions), I attempt to account for their specific form and quality by situating them within the socio-economic, ideological context of America in the 1990s (see Chapter Four).

An understanding of my specific methodological approach can be refined by an understanding of the term 'ideology' as I intend to use it in the work that follows. This term has been interpreted to mean many different things, depending not only upon one's chosen discipline but also upon which particular approach or school of thought within that discipline one follows. In cinema studies, certain film-specific interpretations of the term (and certain related critical methodologies) came to prominence in the late 1960s and early 1970s (mainly due to the renewed interest in materialist criticism, in particular the Marxist philosophy of Louis Althusser, in periodicals such as *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Cinéthique* in France and *Screen* in Britain). Right from the start, however, the specific meaning of 'ideology', as a conceptual category and as a basis for the applied analysis of cinema, has been highly contested. Given that no definitive consensus has been reached (a good thing it could

be said given the ideological nature of anything definitive), the pre-eminent responsibility of anyone hoping meaningfully to engage in an ideological analysis of any aspect of cinema is fully to explain one's particular understanding of the term, then to adhere with rigour to this formulation during all subsequent analyses. Rather than align myself exclusively with a single pre-existing, narrow or specific theory of ideology, I prefer to employ what Mike Cormack calls an 'articulated definition' of the term, a 'broader but ultimately more precise view'[1] that joins together certain aspects of certain theories to create a necessarily complex picture of a necessarily complex process.

At its broadest level of conception, ideology is a process that informs our understanding of the world in which we live. Ideology provides the nexus of concepts and values (moral, political, intellectual, etc.) within which we must (to a certain minimal degree) participate if we are to make sense of our social environment and communicate effectively with our peers. It is an utterly unavoidable aspect of ordered social existence, the absence of which leads to profound social (epistemological and ontological) crisis.

Ideology functions to protect and reproduce the *status quo*. The most direct and significant consequence of this is that the values and beliefs of the dominant ideology are informed (ultimately) by socio-economic concerns. (That this is so, justifies my later consideration of the history of Hollywood's industrial practices as one of the main determinants of its specific narrative structure.) However, as Althusser notes, ideology exists as a set of values or beliefs only to the extent that such values or beliefs are embodied by certain social, political and economic institutions, such as the government, the police, the family, Hollywood cinema, etc.[2] At the same time, ideology can also manifest itself in less obviously institutional (but

equally material) forms, such as certain behavioural patterns (actions and decisions) informed by apparently abstract conceptual categories such as 'individualism' or the 'American dream'. Accordingly, this thesis does not view Hollywood cinema as a simple reflection of the dominant ideology. Like all institutions, indeed, like all elements of our ordered social reality, Hollywood cinema is part of the ideological process itself (as are, incidentally, all critiques of Hollywood cinema). Regardless of this ultimate and unavoidable implication in ideology, we can still try to discern levels of complicity with its 'dominant' elements. In other words, we can try to access the extent to which a discourse affirms or disrupts the goals of the 'dominant' ideology.

As a material expression of the dominant ideology, the Hollywood film industry is especially interesting because its main products, typically filmed narrative fictions, contain representations of other ideological institutions. In the following, I analyse these dramatised institutions (which include, among others, heterosexual love, the nuclear family, individualism, etc.), seeking to account for how their particular deployment serves the interests of the dominant ideology and also how these representations relate to (or even avoid) perceived social realities.

The dominant values (and the institutions that embody them) are not simply prescribed or dictated by the dominant socio-economic groups. Althusser suggested this possibility when he noted how ideology 'interpellates' individuals as 'subjects', a view that sees subjectivity as constructed by (an effect of) the dominant ideology (albeit in collusion with the subjects themselves). On the contrary, our understanding of the world is a constantly negotiated process, an unresolved dialogue between the interests of both dominant and subordinate socio-economic groups. Antonio Gramsci uses the term 'hegemony' to describe the manner in which the dominant ideology exploits this dialogue to serve its own interests. According to Terry Eagleton,

hegemony is a 'whole range of practical strategies by which a dominant power elicits consent to its rule from those it subjugates.' [3] Typically, this is achieved by diffusing the values of the dominant group throughout the entire social framework and by granting certain concessions or 'fantasy bribes'[4] to subordinated groups, all of which encourages a desire to belong to a particular social, political or economic system, to have sense of solidarity, of comforting group identity, usually as members of a community such as a nation. This important qualification of ideology suggests that a strong conception of the dominant ideology as the sole and obviously coercive arbiter of cultural values is naïve. Hegemony is subtly engineered, often in a manner that fails to be detected. Ironically, this apparently weaker version of ideology is more effective in reproducing the interests of the dominant groups. As Terry Eagleton notes:

> It is convenient on the whole for power to remain conveniently invisible, disseminated throughout the texture of social life and thus 'naturalized' as custom, habit, spontaneous practice. Once power nakedly reveals its hand, it can become an object of political contestation.[5]

Of course, at times, the obviousness of certain elements of the dominant ideology can actually benefit its ongoing reproduction. For example, when an obviously repressive police force can be identified and challenged (even reformed), then the more subtly repressive nature of the social structure in general can go unnoticed and, as a result, unaddressed and unchallenged. This homeopathic displacement strategy, it will be shown, frequently operates in Hollywood cinema, i.e., when the overt political content of a text distracts us from the ideological operation of the underlying narrative structure (see Chapter Four).

Another implication of this hegemonic conception of ideology is that it is not (and cannot be) a coherent, monolithic entity. To engineer the consent of the vastly

diverse and disparate social groupings that comprise its 'subjects', the dominant ideology must incorporate a vast range of (inevitably) contradictory elements. As a result, the dominant ideology is a complex and ongoing process that struggles to contain (or simply conceal) its highly fragmented and inconsistent content. This incoherence suggests the usefulness of the symptomatic reading strategy I employ; one of my explicit goals is a laying bare of both obvious and more deeply nested textual contradictions and inconsistencies.

There are other aspects of ideology that are relevant to my thesis and they will be described as they arise. This is simply a brief preliminary sketch of my understanding of the term in order to situate my argument before I begin.

It is important to note that the main concern of this thesis is not specific audience responses to popular film texts but rather the manner in which these texts are implicated in the ideological context of their production. Still, a few matters relating to audience response need to be noted. From a practical perspective, any discussion of popular discourses must acknowledge the necessarily speculative nature of any suggestions it makes about possible audience reactions. A general lack of reliable empirical data on audience responses and, indeed, a lack of consensus on what might constitute an effective or reliable means of recording or calibrating such responses in the first place, combine to rule out any definitive conclusions. Of course, this does not mean that I cannot at times posit possible (even probable) audience responses. It just means that if and when I do so, I am careful to note their speculative nature.

Even so, within carefully prescribed limits, some tentative assumptions about possible audience responses must be made. In fact, a discussion of any 'popular' discourse is meaningless without some such engagement. As a way out of this potential critical impasse, Cormack offers John B. Thompson's concept of 'pre-

interpreted domains'. He paraphrases: 'before the analyst looks to the texts they have always already been interpreted by audiences and in fact the texts themselves are interpretations of the social world. '[6] Film is a hugely expensive endeavour. Hollywood producers (and writers, development departments, etc.), by constantly obsessing over 'what audiences want', are to a great degree pre-interpreting audience responses, trying to manufacture a product that will elicit as high a level of receptive pleasure as possible (in order to make a profit). Seen this way, some potential audience reactions can be discussed in terms of the presumed effects of certain industrial decisions, i.e., what type of hero is used, what type of narrative structure or narrative strategies will be employed, which stars' names will dominate the marquee. Also, and perhaps more significantly, the sample of films I discuss are popular only because they have *already* been consumed by a large audience. Ignoring the alleged coercive influence of mass marketing campaigns (a dismissal of which follows below), the substantial financial performances of these films can be attributed to their appeal on a textual level. They are successful because of the pleasurable outcome of the interaction between text and reader. In other words, my sample of popular films has already been pre-interpreted by audiences as containing textual elements that are appealing and/or pleasurable. It follows that a discussion of textual elements common to certain popular films can stand (if only tentatively) as a discussion of those elements that elicit a positive (pleasurable) audience response. Of course, the specific manner in which these responses occur or why they lend to a pleasurable experience is subject to countless additional and unquantifiable contributing factors such as the specific material context of the individual viewing situation, the social and psychological composition of audience members, and so on. (Certain studies in ideology use psychoanalysis, particularly the work of Jacques Lacan, to theorise these

processes of spectatorship; see below for more on this issue.) In short, I am simply stating that whatever suggestions are made regarding possible audience response, regardless of their apparent common-sense or obviousness, are to be considered speculative and (ultimately) unverifiable.

THE WORK IN CONTEXT

This is primarily a study of the ideological implications of narrative structure in the most popular American films of the 1990s. Consequently, there are three main areas of critical and historical study relative to which this work must be situated and qualified; theories of ideology and their applications to the study of cinema, the study of narrative (or narratology) and the various attempts that have been made to conceptualise the history of popular cinema in the 1990s.

Any thesis that discusses ideology and its relation to film studies must acknowledge its debt to foundational work performed on the subject by certain periodicals in the late 1960s and early 1970s in France (*Cahiers du Cinéma*, *Cinéthique*, *Positif*) and Britain (*Screen*). In the politically charged years following May 1968, these periodicals reintroduced Marxist ideological theories into the study of film, a discipline that up until that point had tended to focus on more subjective, idealistic theories of film analysis such as the *politique des auteurs*. Employing the philosophy of Louis Althusser (and the psychoanalytical theories of Jacques Lacan) various writers developed a materialist theory of cinematic production and a critical apparatus capable of revealing the ideological operations of mainstream, reactionary cinema. At the same time, they tried to suggest what might be involved in the construction of a more intentionally radical film practice or counter-cinema. (This was an issue over which there was significant difference of opinion between the various

periodicals. My discussion in Chapter Five of certain progressive Hollywood films is informed by this unresolved debate. Consequently, a more detailed discussion of the potential in cinema for ideological subversion, as theorised by these formative periodicals, is reserved for later.) Of particular importance in this new approach to film was its emphasis on the ideological implications of certain mainstream narrative structures and their alternatives. As George Lellis writes: 'The efforts of *Cahiers* since 1968 represent a vindication of Brecht's postulate that the form of the work is as much a political question as the overtly political implications of the content.'[7] By acknowledging the inescapable ideological dimension of all aspects of film production and reception, a discussion of narrative structure could now take place within a materialist context and, thus, avoid the anti-humanist, scientific pitfalls of certain preceding, structuralist theories of narrative such as those offered by Vladimir Propp and Claude Lévi-Strauss (and those that followed from them, i.e., Roland Barthes, Tzvetan Todorov, Claude Bremond, Algirdas Julien Greimas, Gérard Genette, etc.).

In the years that followed, the use of ideology in film studies became more widespread and underwent a number of transformations, the most significant of which, I would argue, was the apparent split between theories of ideology that focused on the relationship between ideology and film form and those that focused on the relationship between film form and the individual spectator. It is within the context of this split that I can locate my own critical approach. This is to say that rather than focus on issues of spectatorship and the various (Lacanian) psychoanalytical models for the process, I am more concerned with the manner in which the dominant ideology is discernible in the texts produced by its subjects. In other words, I am concerned mainly with how certain films appear to have been affected by various ideological

factors. While I admit that certain issues of spectatorship are useful in the study of popular cinema, these issues are not the immediate concern or focus of this thesis. Of course, there will be times when I posit certain potential audience reactions but, as I mentioned already, the speculative nature of these suppositions will always be made clear.

In this respect, then, the current thesis should be seen as aligned with the (initially Althusserian) critical project initiated by periodicals such as *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Cinéthique* during the late 1960s and early 1970s rather than with certain later applications of Lacanian psychoanalysis to the studies of ideology and spectatorship. Consequently, I examine texts for symptoms of their ideological nature while at the same time using these conclusions to comment on the possibility of a political (counter) cinema. Of particular relevance to this latter aim is the notion of a politically progressive cinema within mainstream film production, first offered by Comolli and Narboni in their list of possible film types: 'films which seem at first sight to belong firmly within the ideology and to be completely under its sway, but which turn out to be so only in an ambiguous manner.'[8]

Another area of study that relates to the current thesis is narratology. Heavily influenced by the scientific methodologies of Russian formalism and French structuralism, certain more contemporary uses of narratology in film studies (Edward Branigan's Narration and the Fiction Film or David Bordwell's Narration in the Fiction Film) fail fully to account for the material contexts in which narratives produce their meaning. In other words, they tend to ignore the ideological dimension of textual production and reception. I mention this shortcoming only because of the specific use I make in this thesis of certain ostensibly structuralist, narratological theories. Namely, I demonstrate how such theories, by ignoring an ideological context

(and, thus, positing their conclusions as somehow universal or transcendent), actually contribute to the reproduction of the dominant ideology. In other words, when I discuss certain narratological theories employed by cognitive psychology to explain how we see and comprehend the world about us, I do so in order to show how this way of seeing is not, as some might claim, transcendent but rather a material expression of the dominant ideology (predicated on certain realist assumptions of post-Enlightenment rationalism) and one which depends (ultimately) upon coercion for its adequate functioning. It is also important to note that this thesis does not represent an attempt to inject a political quantum into (and, thus, somehow to 'fix') existing structuralist theories of narrative, but rather it attempts simply to point out, when appropriate, the particular manner in which certain types of narrative (and also theories of narrative) are implicated in the dominant ideology.

Of course, there have been many other studies of the various functions of the closed 'classical' narrative structure. In cinema the most prominent is probably Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's The Classical Hollywood Cinema.[9] In other non-cinematic fields, notable proponents also include Todorov, Propp, Lévi-Strauss, Genette and, perhaps most famously, Aristotle. However, what almost all of their theories have in common (regardless of how they variously partition the closed narrative) is an underlying dynamic movement from one closed state to another via a state of conflict. As this central dynamic is the focus of my initial argument, the specific differences between their approaches are, very generally speaking, of no lasting relevance to the arguments of this thesis.

One final context within which to consider the current thesis is as an historical account of popular filmmaking during the 1990s. It is important to note that the relative originality of this thesis does not necessarily lie in the critical methodology it

applies but in the specific subject to which it applies it, i.e., narrative structure in popular films of the 1990s. Only recently have books on film production during the 1990s, considered as a decade, become available. These works have tended to be anthologies, collections of essays that present snap-shots of a decade that has not yet afforded enough critical perspective to allow a deeper examination (Contemporary Hollywood Cinema, edited by Steve Neale and Murray Smith, and The End of Cinema as We Know It, edited by Jon Lewis, are just two recent examples). At the same time, there are certain more specific attempts to describe and account for a single or several filmic elements considered distinct to the period (such as the increasing dependence on spectacle; Geoff King's Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the age of the blockbusters). The current thesis is aligned with this latter tendency, attempting to account for the continued (if not increased) importance to the reproduction of the dominant ideology of the closed narrative structure in 1990s popular cinema.

Also, as far as I am aware, my decision to examine only the *most* popular films of the decade (determined by superior performance at the domestic U.S. box-office) is unique. As I explain below, when defending my sampling technique, this approach resists a familiar tendency to filter the films of a particular time in a manner that furnishes only those examples that confirm a preconceived thesis. For example, in many commentaries on the cinema of the 1990s, one such highly subjective preconception is that the representative films of this period are simply 'bad'. Forced to confront cinema's centenary during this period, many critics, it seems, were pressured to evaluate mainstream filmmaking in the 1990s as the current state of the art, as the teleological culmination of one hundred years of practice and experimentation; with the result that many commentaries on the period were phrased

as laments. (A significant number of the essays in The End of Cinema As We Know It adopt this tone, not entirely surprising when you consider the title of the anthology.) By studying a set of films selected by a more objective sampling technique, I avoid the temptation to prove (with select examples) any such preconceived notion about popular filmmaking in the 1990s. That is to say, I lessen the chance that my conclusions will be based on any preformed subjective opinion I might have about the quality of the films made during this period.

CERTAIN PRELIMINARY QUALIFICATIONS

Before the main body of the thesis commences, it is important to address and resolve several additional, preliminary concerns. First, I must clarify my understanding of the specific manner in which the closed narrative structure typical of Hollywood film production contributes to the ultimate popularity of certain films. Second, throughout this thesis, I make supportive references to a relatively small sample of 'popular' films. As the critical worth of these examples is predicated upon our explicit acceptance that these films are somehow representative of contemporary 'popular' film practice, before I continue, I must also justify my sampling technique.

Popularity and the Closed Narrative Structure

The closed narrative structure is the form most consistently employed by popular Hollywood films. While the detailed discussion of why this is so is reserved for later (see Chapter One), it is important to state up front that it would be both foolish and critically irresponsible to try to account for the popularity or financial success of a film solely through the use of certain narrative structures. The ultimate success of a film also depends on a number of other related elements (many of which

will be discussed during the course of the thesis). The makers of popular films typically have as their explicit goal the reduction of the possibility that their product will fail to sustain the level of mass appeal required to make a profit. As I shall demonstrate, the closed narrative structure is simply one of many 'marketing' strategies employed to this end.

Film is a very expensive medium. The average negative cost of a Hollywood movie in 1995 (combining production and 'prints and [domestic] advertising') was $59 million.[10] However, this level of investment is not quite the gamble it used to be. With the horizontal integration of the film industry in the 1980s and 1990s, the global expansion of markets and also the rise in importance of ancillary markets, i.e., merchandising, music sales, video/DVD, computer game tie-ins, etc., the percentage of overall profit generated by the actual theatrical exhibition of a film has become relatively minor (during the late 1990s and early 2000s its was estimated to be as low as 26%[11]); and potential losses on film exhibition can often be recouped farther down the line by other markets (after generating less than half of its estimated negative costs of $175 million at the domestic box-office, Waterworld (Reynolds, 1995) went into profit after revenue from overseas and ancillary markets was taken into account).[12]

At the same time, it would be foolish to suggest that the increased overall financial stability provided by the modern, integrated corporate structure has led to a corresponding decline in the efforts of production companies to make the most successful film possible. In addition to the massive amounts of revenue that a film can generate if it is successful in its own right, the contemporary Hollywood film also functions as the central marketing device for the ancillary markets (especially video/DVD and cable, satellite and terrestrial television sales). As Geoff King writes:

> Release in the cinema remains the biggest stage on which to display Hollywood's wares. It is the most prestigious part of the life-cycle of Hollywood entertainment. Success in the cinema is what usually translates into the greatest levels of success further down the chain.[13]

As to what will and will not work at the box-office, perhaps the most perceptive insight has been offered by William Goldman who famously declared: 'NOBODY KNOWS ANYTHING', adding: 'nobody, *nobody* - not now, not ever - knows the least goddamn thing about what is or isn't going to work at the box-office.'[14] Similarly, Anthony Minghella describes Hollywood studio executives as 'presiding over a creative activity in desperate pursuit of industrial theory'.[15] At the same time, while it may be true that Hollywood filmmakers lack knowledge of what creative choices will produce success, this does not mean they lack knowledge of what decisions will reduce the risk of failure. As Kristen Thompson writes: 'Just because Hollywood cannot predict how successful any one film will be does not mean that it has no effective guidelines for minimizing its risks.'[16] This 'tendency to *minimize risks*' [17] begins at the earliest conceptual stage of the filmmaking process; and almost all subsequent aspects of the process are subordinate to the demands of this general marketing principle. The adaptation of successful novels or plays to the screen is one such risk-minimisation strategy. As to why Minghella, as both a director and screenwriter, would rather adapt already published and proven material than produce an original work, he writes: 'In an industry where the odds are so absurd, anything which reduces them is attractive.'[18] Other such strategies that are believed to work include: the use of majors stars (including celebrity directors and producers), dazzling special effects, spectacular action sequences, sequels, remakes, adaptations of television shows, comic books, etc. On the level of storytelling itself, such strategies include clearly recognisable heroes and villains, a happy ending, a central heterosexual romance, and so on (many of these are discussed in subsequent

chapters). It is as one such risk-minimisation strategy (on the level of the text itself) that the closed narrative structure is understood to contribute to the success of a Hollywood film; or rather, to reduce the risk of its failure. In other words, it is simply one of many considerations born in mind by filmmakers as they try to establish what will prove popular.

It is worth noting that the choice to employ certain risk-minimization strategies is not necessarily a conscious decision. The most frequently used elements of popular films are also the most natural, the most common-sensical (and, thus, the most ideological). In fact, I would suggest that it is more likely that such strategies become 'visible' when they are lacking from a film. This is especially true in the case of the closed narrative structure, such a mainstay of popular Hollywood storytelling that it has become an almost transcendent given.[19]

Justifying the Sample

As I propose to discuss the popular Hollywood cinema, 1990 – 1999, I have selected what I believe to be the five most 'popular' films of each year during this period. The sample, therefore, comprises 50 films. What constitutes a popular film is here judged exclusively on the basis of superior performance at the domestic US box-office, i.e., the selected films are the five highest grossing films of each year. (See Appendix A for a complete list of the selected films.) Of course, this particular constitution of the popular film requires several important qualifications and justifications.

As with the term 'ideology', there is no meaningful academic consensus on what exactly is meant by the word 'popular'. Consequently, as before, I will simply propose one, then defend it in the critical discussion that follows. For the purposes of

this thesis, what is 'popular' is conceived simply and narrowly as that which has mass-appeal. In this respect, I follow Raymond Williams's definition of the term as implying 'widely-favoured' or 'well-liked'.[20] Of course, such a definition is predicated on the *reception* of the film, i.e., it is popular only because a large number of people chose to patronise it. Thus, if the conclusions reached in this thesis about the popular films discussed are to have any real critical weight, it is necessary at this point to establish that the financial success of certain films (their 'popularity' as it were) is due to a genuine appeal that these films held for the people who went to see them (and who then circulated positive word of mouth, thus encouraging others to sample the product too). Such a proof is necessary if I wish to posit with any credibility what possible ideological functions certain elements of these films *qua* films perform or, more tentatively, if I wish to hypothesise what ideological effects such functions might have on their audiences. Accordingly, if I wish to discuss what it was about these films, in and of themselves, that made them so popular or appealing, then I must first dismiss the (alleged) ability of the colossal Hollywood marketing apparatus to force audiences to consume film products against their will.

A common accusation levelled at the mainstream film industry is that its extensive advertising and promotional strategies are capable of creating mass-appeal against the better judgment of consumers, capable of ensuring the financial success of a film in spite of an obvious lack of genuinely appealing qualities in the film text itself. While it is difficult to dispute the ability of box-office statistics to estimate with accuracy the number or mass of people who physically attend a film over a period of time, it does not initially appear to be as straightforward a matter to discern from these same statistics the extent to which this patronage was due to the actual appeal of the film itself (due to the pleasure of the actual viewing experience). Therefore, if box-

office performance is to be read as an index to popularity as mass appeal, the issue of coercive film 'selling' must be discussed and certain misconceptions dismissed.

In the following discussion, I suggest that the long-term (or ultimate) success of a film is attributable to pleasure derived from certain qualities of the product itself (circulated by positive word of mouth) and not to how the product is (often deceptively) sold. To do so, I must first make a crucial distinction between 'marketing' and 'selling'.

Marketing and Selling

Most of the strategies traditionally associated with drawing an audience, such as advertising and promotion, are often mistaken as the sole and central practices of film marketing. More accurately, they are simply one part of the marketing process, i.e., 'selling'. Marketing, as opposed to selling, is about tailoring the *entire* resources of an industry to the perceived demands of an audience in the interests of making a profit. Accordingly, Stephen Brown describes the marketing concept as including 'an awareness of customer wants... [and] the integration and coordination of all the activities of the firm around this basic consumer orientation'.[21] If the financial success of a film could be attributed solely to aggressive selling, then every aggressively sold product would be a success. The existence of so many big-budget, aggressively sold failures ('bombs') stands as a simple indictment of a full-blown manipulation theory.[22] The opposite is equally true. A film can often succeed financially in spite of its relatively low promotional budget, a phenomenon often referred to as a 'sleeper' hit.

The notion that selling strategies alone are capable of effecting a sustained box-office performance is predicated on principles of 'pre-marketing era marketing',

what Brown refers to as a 'neo-sales or post-product orientation'. Certain critics, he maintains, believe:

> that marketing is basically manipulative and monopoly seeking, that customers in many instances are totally unaware of their needs, and that marketing's task is to shape consumers' wants, determine their perceptions and persuade them of the attractiveness of what the company has on sale.[23]

Any view of marketing that places selling strategies as the primary determinant of consumer needs risks promoting a reductive conception of consumers as without agency and proposes the kind of totalising, monologic, manipulation model for the producer-consumer relationship offered by Theodor Adorno's theory of the 'Culture Industry'.[24] According to this model, consumers value a product for reasons other than certain qualities of the product itself, i.e., its 'use-value'. Consumers are, thus, implicated in a 'regression', a process of alienation characterised by the promotion of 'exchange-value' as an end in itself. The consumers of a product become the 'passive and thoughtless dupes of its producers.'[25] Although Adorno's conception of the Culture Industry is significantly more complicated than this,[26] it is this intentionally reductive (mis)conception of his theory that is most consistently invoked by cultural critics that lament the successes of the popular cinema. Consequently, it is with this particularly vulgar summary that I take issue.

Terry Eagleton objects to any 'dystopian vision of a social order which is capable of containing and controlling all desires because it created them in the first place.' [27] Citing John Elster, he proposes a more hegemonic model when he notes that 'ruling ideologies':

> can actively shape the wants and desires of those subjected to them; but they must also engage significantly with the wants and desires that people already have, catching up genuine hopes and needs, reinflecting them in their own peculiar idiom, and feeding them back to their subjects in ways which render these ideologies plausible and attractive...[28]

In other words, actual consumer needs and desires must be identified in the consumer *before* they can be manipulated.

This dialogic, hegemonic approach is more characteristic of actual marketing practice. As Douglas Foster writes, marketing 'seeks to achieve more effective and profitable selling *by looking ahead.*'[29] In other words, the marketing processes that precede selling, i.e., development and production, have as their implicit agenda the obviation of a 'hard-sell' (and the additional costs that this might incur). Almost always, this involves a consideration of the type of film that a hypothetical audience actually wants to see. It is in this manner that marketing is manipulative. Certain films become popular because perceived consumer needs are manipulated within the product itself. Thus, a well marketed film employs a selling campaign that is manipulative in the second degree in that it simply indexes the elements of the film text that already manipulate perceived audience needs and desires.

Quite often, films reach the market that filmmakers believe, for one reason or another, will not appeal to as large an audience as they had originally anticipated. In these cases, out of simple financial necessity, a need must be artificially generated. It is the proliferation of these types of film product and, more significantly, the aggressive post-product selling strategies that bring them to our attention, that informs the common cynical conception of not just selling but marketing as a whole as deceptive and coercive.

Word of Mouth

Geoff King writes: 'Marketing and promotion can do much to boost a film on opening, but word-of-mouth, over which the studios have little if any control, tends to take over in the following weeks.'[30] This suggests that for a film to enjoy sustained

financial success, it must engage actual consumer needs and desires. If the promise of satisfaction of consumer needs and desires is falsely advertised, if the exchange-value of a film displaces its use-value, word of mouth (through critical responses in the media and through the circulation of judgments within various social groups) will operate negatively in the demystification of these misleading selling strategies. Word of mouth regularly dismantles even the most aggressive selling campaigns.

It is because consumers are capable of such agency that massively promoted opening weekends on multiple screens are seen as a way of recuperating losses on a film that, ultimately, it is believed by its producers, will lack sustained audience appeal. For example, when Warner Bros. released The Avengers (Chechik, 1998), rumours circulating at the time suggested that the film had 'fallen far short of studio expectations.'[31] The film opened on 14th August on 2,466 screens. Furthermore, a worldwide no-preview policy ensured that a negative press-response would not dissuade potential consumers intrigued by the kinetic trailers, countless billboards and full-page newspaper advertisements flaunting co-stars Uma Thurman and Ralph Fiennes. Warner Bros. claimed it '[wanted] to let the public decide.'[32] The following table indicates the rapidity with which the public 'decided', and the extent to which negative word of mouth curbed the film's box-office performance:

Table 1: US box-office performance of The Avengers.

Week	B.O. Rank	Weekly Box-Office	Total Box-Office
1	3rd	14,184,316	14,184,316
2	10th	5,216,025	19,400,780
3	16th	1,977,439	21,377,780

Week	B.O. Rank	Weekly Box-Office	Total Box-Office
4	25th	939,505	22,317,285
5	31st	325,914	22,643,199
6	26th	418,207	23,061,406
7	41st	187,648	23,249,054
8	43rd	103,260	23,352,314

When this performance is compared to the performance of a more positively received film released during the same season, Saving Private Ryan (Spielberg, 1998), we can observe a stark contrast in the rates at which audience attendance deteriorated:

Table 2: US box-office performance of Saving Private Ryan.

Week	B.O. Rank	Weekly Box-Office	Total Box-Office
1	1st	49,760,360	49,760,360
2	1st	36,612,617	86,372,977
3	1st	26,504,898	112,877,875
4	1st	19,728,118	132,605,993
5	2nd	14,590,655	147,196,648
6	3rd	11,049,852	158,246,500
7	3rd	10,325,990	168,572,490
8	4th	6,113,905	174,686,395

These two tables suggest that a film's performance at the box-office during the initial period of its release, i.e., its first few weeks, can be attributed to the efficacy of the advertising and promotional strategies. However, as the above tables demonstrate, the

ongoing success of the film over an extended period of time (its 'legs', to use an industry term), especially in the period after the initial selling campaign has reduced in intensity, is due primarily to word of mouth.

If selling strategies were considered adequate to the task of drawing an audience and generating a profit, then there would not be such an obsessive and ongoing concern in the industry with optimising the appeal of a film on a textual level. One hundred years of intense industrial practice has led to the conclusion that the actual content of a film (including its narrative structure) is crucial to success at the box-office. Thus, the most 'popular' films of each year can be determined by their ultimate box-office performance as this is a relatively reliable index of a genuine appeal such films held for film-goers. Accounting for this appeal (through a study of the films themselves) takes place in the chapters that follow.

Notes

[1] Mike Cormack, Ideology, London: B.T. Batsford, Ltd., 1992, p. 12.

[2] Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', in Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971.

[3] Terry Eagleton, Ideology: an introduction, London & New York: Verso, 1991, p. 115-6.

[4] The term is borrowed from Frederic Jameson, Signatures of the Visible, New York & London: Routledge, 1992, p.29.

[5] Terry Eagleton, Ideology, p. 116.

[6] Mike Cormack, Ideology and Cinematography in Hollywood, 1930-39, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994, p. 15.

Notes (cont')

[7] George Lellis, Bertolt Brecht, 'Cahiers du Cinéma' and Contemporary Film Theory, Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1982, p. 67.

[8] Jean Louis Comolli & Jean Narboni, 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism', p. 62.

[9] Davis Bordwell, Janet Staiger & Kristin thompson, The Classical Hollywood Cinema: film production to 1960, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985.

[10] Richard Maltby, 'Nobody knows everything': post-classical historiographies and consolidated entertainment', in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema, London & New York: Routledge, 1998, p. 37.

[11] Geoff King, citing Screen Digest in New Hollywood Cinema: an introduction, London & New York: I.B. Taurus, 2002, p. 73.

[12] Geoff King, New Hollywood Cinema, p. 70.

[13] *ibid.*, p. 73.

[14] William Goldman, Adventures in the Screen Trade: a personal view of Hollywood and screenwriting, London: Warner Books, 1993, pp. 39-41.

[15] Anthony Minghella, 'Adapt or Die', W Magazine, Vol. 13, Spring 1998, p. 37.

[16] Kristen Thompson, Storytelling in the New Hollywood: understanding classical narrative technique, Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 346.

[17] Garth Jowett & James M. Linton, Movies as Mass Communication, Beverly Hills & London: Sage Publications, 1980, p. 30.

[18] Anthony Minghella, 'Adapt or Die', p. 37.

[19] It comes as no surprise, then, that Syd Field's screenwriting manual, Screenplay [New York: MJF Books, 1994], has been hailed, like so many other such books, as *the* 'Industry Bible', a term which invokes the transcendent religious dimension of the enterprise, as does the frequent use of the term 'guru' to describe exponents of these

Notes (cont')

reductive narrative theories. Such comments include: '[Syd Field is the] guru of would-be screenwriters... Screenplay is their bestselling Bible.' (*Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, Screenplay, p. v.). Kristin Thompson makes the following astute observation regarding these screenwriting pundits: 'Remarkably, a group of people, almost none of whom have ever authored a major feature, have propagated a set of guidelines that anxious producers and writers alike seem to have taken as inviolable formulas [Storytelling in the New Hollywood, p. 339].' This use of a religious vocabulary creates and sustains a (false) sense that these screenwriting books are in some manner originary or foundational texts, that the advice they contain is unassailable or natural. Thus, like all degenerate traditions, they hold themselves up as the bearers of simple 'truths' and, thus, foreclose on the possibility of meaningful challenges or counter-arguments. As Alasdair MacIntyre notes:

> [It is] a mark of a degenerate tradition that it has contrived a set of epistemological defenses which enables it to avoid being put in question or at least to avoid recognising that it is being put in question by rival traditions ['Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science', Paradigms and Revolutions: appraisals and applications of Thomas Kuhn's philosophy of science, ed., Gary Gutting, Notre Dame & London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980, p. 63].

[20] Raymond Williams, Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society, London: Fontana, 1976, p. 198.

[21] Stephen Brown, 'Postmodernism: the end of marketing?' in Rethinking Marketing: towards critical marketing accountings, London, California, & New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999, p. 40.

[22] As Janet Wasko writes: 'as cinema people know quite well, there are no guarantees when it comes to the success of a motion picture. Despite sophisticated marketing techniques, films sometimes do not do as well as expected [Hollywood in the

Notes (cont')

Information Age, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994, pp. 231-2].'

[23] Stephen Brown, 'Postmodernism: the end of marketing?', p. 42.

[24] Simon Jarvis writes:

> Adorno argues that the real object of consumption in late capitalism is not, as consumers believe, the use-value of a product, but its exchange-value... The actual qualities of the cultural product... are of less and less relevance to its consumption the more consumption comes to be focused on exchange-value [Adorno: a critical introduction, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998, pp. 73-4].

[25] *ibid.*

[26] Simon Jarvis writes: 'If Adorno's theory of the culture industry presented us with dupes on the one hand and conspirators on the other it would indeed be trivial, because the trick would only need to be exposed to be brought to an end [*ibid.*, p. 74].'

[27] Terry Eagleton, Ideology, p. 46.

[28] *ibid.*, pp. 14-5.

[29] Douglas Foster, Mastering Marketing, Basingstoke & London: Macmillan, 1982, p. 2.

[30] Geoff King, New Hollywood Cinema, p. 65.

[31] Bernard Weintraub, '"Avengers" Gets a Stealth Opening', The New York Times, August 12, 1998 (from The New York Times on the Web, www.newyorktimes.com).

[32] Sharon Swart, 'The Brit Bash that Wasn't', Variety, 13th August 1998 (from www.variety.com).

CHAPTER ONE:

IDEOLOGY AND THE CLOSED NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter (and the chapters that follow), I describe one possible model for the reactionary film. This model developed as a result of my symptomatic analysis of 50 popular films from the 1990s. It is important to note that the term 'reactionary' came to describe this model in the latter stages of its development, only when the high degree of complicity the narrative strategies of these films had with the goals of the dominant ideology became apparent. In other words, I did not set out with a preconceived notion that the most popular films of the 1990s were highly reactionary and then proceed to prove this assumption with analyses of selective examples. This was a conclusion reached *a posteriori* through the study of the objects themselves.

This model takes narrative structure as its starting point; and all other elements of the films discussed (including aspects of content) are mentioned only as far as they relate to the pre-eminent matter of narrative structure. This privileging of form over content, it will become apparent, is justified by the central role it plays in the reproduction of ideology, one of the main concerns of this thesis. Many diverse and contradictory discourses, from the psychoanalytical study of dreams to the morphology of the folk-tale, emphasise the crucial role played by narrative structure or form in the determination of meaning, noting that how something is said is often of equal if not greater significance than *what* is actually said. As Hayden White writes: 'far from being merely a form of discourse that can be filled with different contents, real or imaginary as the case may be, [narrative] already possesses a content prior to any actualization of it in speech or

writing.' He refers to this prior narrative content as the 'content of the form'.[1] It might be said that this thesis has as its central object of inquiry the content of the form of the popular 1990s Hollywood film. Accordingly, Chapter One provides a relatively abstract, general description of this ideological function, i.e., its implicit affirmation of the prevailing realist epistemology. Chapters Two & Three then provide a more specific examination of the particular narrative strategies employed by this kind of reactionary film narrative. Supporting examples are drawn exclusively from popular US film texts of the 1990s with the result that the reactionary nature of these texts is demonstrated.

This chapter is divided into two sections. Section one establishes and defends the notion that the canonic closed narrative structure of the popular Hollywood film (as offered by countless 'How To' manuals on screenwriting) and the individual act of comprehension (as described by cognitive psychology) employ identical narrative dynamics. Section Two details how this structural identity (in combination with other similarly closed narrative structures) serves to affirm a realist epistemology and facilitate the reproduction of the dominant ideology. It also attempts to account for the popularity of the closed narrative structure in terms of the assurance and comfort it offers, i.e., its implicit suggestion that the world makes sense.

Of course, the type of closed narrative structure outlined below has already been employed (and regularly) in films that predate the 1990s and, indeed, in many pre-cinematic narrative forms, i.e., the popular novel, the 18th and 19th century stage melodrama, the well-made play, even the ancient Greek theatre. While a detailed history of the various pre-1990s usages of certain narrative strategies (especially in the studio era or classical Hollywood period) would be an interesting inclusion to the current work, any serious attempt to do justice to such a rich and detailed history would involve a scope and scale suggestive of another thesis altogether.

The existence before the 1990s of this narrative form suggests that it is not in and of itself unique to the contemporary period (a point to which I will return in Chapter Four during my discussion of popular films during the 1980s). At this stage it is sufficient to acknowledge that I do not make such a claim. In fact, as I shall hopefully demonstrate, for the reproduction of the dominant ideology, it is crucial that the popular film of the 1990s is merely one of many discourses that employ a similarly closed narrative structure. In other words, the relationship between the individual act of comprehension and the canonic Hollywood narrative is not mutually exclusive. The latter is simply one of many macrocosmic expressions of the former. Other examples include jokes, certain songs, comic books, television shows (sit-coms, dramas, and so on), popular novels, stage melodramas, etc. At the same time, I still establish the comparison between these two particular structures in great detail. Firstly, because I see the canonic Hollywood narrative as a representative example of the many other similarly closed narrative structures employed by other discourses on other levels and, secondly, because the declared aim of this thesis, in the first instance, is an ideological analysis of certain popular Hollywood films. Consequently, the extended discussion below of the canonic Hollywood narrative also serves to set down my specific understanding of it for the purposes of the thesis that follows. It also serves to dispel certain received notions regarding its rigidity as a (prescribed) narrative paradigm.

SECTION ONE: A STRUCTURAL IDENTITY

In this section, I establish and qualify the structural identity of the individual act of comprehension and the canonic, three-act, closed narrative of the popular Hollywood film. It should be noted from the outset that both of these discourses are predicated on reductive structuralist assumptions and, thus, heavily implicated in the operation of

ideology. However, I would argue that it is the very compatibility of these discourses with certain scientific, structuralist assumptions that allows them to reproduce the goals and processes of the dominant ideology. At the same time, I am careful to ground my particular understanding of narrative structure of popular 1990s cinema within the general material context of the post-Enlightenment period and, more specifically, within the context of American society and culture in the 1990s.

The Individual Act of Comprehension

Narrative is not just a discursive tool at the disposal of the storyteller. The study of narrative or 'narratology' claims that narrative is the very means by which, within the prevailing ideological structure, we generate meaning, make sense of the otherwise fragmented universe about us. In a universe predicated mainly on realist assumptions, narrative exists not only at the intersection of the objective world and subjective experience, but also provides the means by which we compare and evaluate different versions of reality, i.e., levels of mediation. In other words, narrative simultaneously gives us access to reality and the tools to communicate our experience of reality to others in (supposedly) unmediated terms or in the mediated form of art. According to cognitive psychology, a discipline heavily influenced by certain narratological theories, the individual act of comprehension (if such an act can indeed be isolated) is an act of narrative interpretation. Ultimately, narrative is believed to constitute the most fundamental basis of our perceptive and cognitive faculties, i.e., the very operation of the rational mind.

Edward Branigan describes the individual act of comprehension as a 'perceptual activity that organises data into a special pattern.'[2] In cognitive psychology, these special patterns or categories are called 'schemas' and provide the indispensable building blocks

of comprehension itself. As E. H. Gombrich notes: 'Without some starting point, some initial schema, we could never get hold of the flux of experience. Without categories, we could not sort out our impressions.'[3] A schema, Branigan writes, is:

> an arrangement of knowledge already possessed by a perceiver that is used to predict and classify new sensory data... [and which also] assigns probabilities to events and to parts of events. It may be thought of as a graded set of expectations about experiences in a given domain.[4]

The testing of expectations is a 'top-down' perceptual process, as opposed to one that is 'bottom-up' in nature. Bottom-up perceptual processes examine data 'in very brief periods of time [and organise them] automatically into such features as edge, colour, depth, motion, aural pitch, and so on.'[5] Such procedures operate largely below the threshold of our awareness and are often mistaken as the simple biological functioning of the body's sensory apparatuses. Conversely, top-down perceptual processes, as the name suggests, begin with multiple generalised notions or expectations, based on past experience, of what a particular bundle of information *in toto*, briefly considered, may signify. This general expectation is then tested against the particular details. Meaning or significance is achieved when the set of incoming data, usually in a modified form, appears to satisfy all (or most) of the criteria of a schema.

The Canonic Hollywood Screenplay

The canonic Hollywood screenplay structure, as described by numerous manuals on the subject, is comprised of three main movements or acts. I discuss below the pundits' version of this structure as a precursor to arriving at a more dynamic model, one that is more typical of actual popular film production practice. Along the way, I hope also to dispel certain common, received notions about Hollywood screenplay structure.

The general narrative function of these three acts is to introduce, complicate and finally resolve the main line(s) of action. Not surprisingly, these acts are often referred to as the 'introduction', 'complication' and 'resolution'. Most commonly, the three-act structure is graphed as follows:

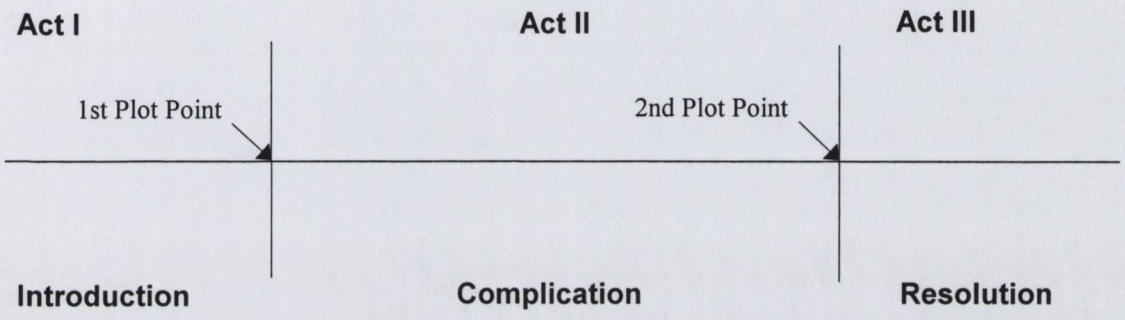


Figure 1: The canonic Hollywood screenplay structure.

Based on a presumed running time of 120 minutes, the format allows approximately one minute of screen-time for each page of the screenplay.

The first act introduces the audience to the narrative's significant characters and also introduces a 'situation that needs to be resolved.'[6] Syd Field refers to this as the 'dramatic premise', or 'what the story is about.'[7] Typically, the first act should provide a clear indication of the direction in which the plot is likely to proceed. This act is usually about thirty pages long and occupies the first half-hour of screen-time. The second act is the longest section of the screenplay, comprising about sixty pages, and occupying approximately one hour of screen-time. This central act is characterised by conflict and contains the most sustained series of obstacles that serve to obstruct (if only temporarily) the fulfilment of the protagonist's established dramatic need(s). The third and final act is the same length as the first and occupies the remaining half-hour of screen-time. In this

final act, all conflict is resolved and the protagonists either achieve or fail to achieve their declared goal(s).

The points of transition between the acts provide the dramatic locus for what are variously referred to as 'plot points', 'turning points' or 'story points', depending on whom you are reading. Such a point, writes Linda Seger, performs any or all of the following functions:

> It turns the action around in a new direction. It raises the central question [premise] again, and makes us wonder about the answer. It's often a moment of decision or commitment on the part of the main character. It raises the stakes. It pushes the story into the next act. It takes us into a new arena and gives us a sense of a different focus for the action.[8]

The second of these two plot points, between the second and third act, has several additional concerns: 'It speeds up the action. It makes the third act more intense than the other two. It gives a sense of urgency, or momentum, to the story. It pushes the story toward its conclusion.'[9] While individual screenwriting manuals provide additional guidelines for the placement of other distinctive events, such as 'mid-point scenes', 'action points', 'barriers', etc., these events tend to relate to more specialised narrative strategies. Consequently, they fall outside the scope of the current argument that proposes (for the moment) to deal solely with the broader, cardinal movements of the canonic screenplay.

Comparing the Two Structures

Referring to the operation of our cognitive faculties, E. H. Gombrich suggests that we only 'look' at something 'when our attention is aroused by some disequilibrium, a difference between our expectation and the incoming message.'[10] This occurs when we encounter something that is not immediately compatible with our way of seeing as embodied by our set of available schemas. Right away, we attempt to resolve this

discrepancy, to derive significance or meaning from the incompatible data. These data, once organised and expressed in terms of the observer's available schemas, are judged, hierarchised and either deemed of use (and retained as significant) or simply ignored (deemed irrelevant or of no significant value). However, during the actual perceptual process, there exists a dialectical state of epistemological conflict as, for a short period of time, we entertain the possibility that this new data formation might displace or revise one or more extant data formations already established as part of our way of seeing. In other words, there is always the possibility of learning something new or of changing one's opinion on a particular matter, of seeing something differently. In short, what we have here is the introduction of a challenge into a stable, ordered environment, the state of dialectical conflict that results and the inevitable *judgment* and *closure* that coincides with the integration or expulsion of the challenge.

A similar trajectory informs the progress of the canonic Hollywood narrative. The first act provides details of the prevailing epistemological framework or value-system of the diegetic narrative universe. A stable and harmonious *status quo* is articulated. Technically, the drama of the film (understood as a state of conflict) has not yet commenced (or so we are led to believe by the pundits) and this first act is given over predominantly to the creation of the norm by which the deviant state will be defined.

The 1st Plot Point functions to challenge this *status quo*. This plot point marks the transition from the first act to the second and is the locus of action in which the pre-established (harmonious) closure is ruptured. Through the introduction of values at odds with the established epistemological framework, the latter is 'opened up' to the possibility of reinterpretation i.e., a 'radical interpretive doubt'[11] is created. The battle between competing epistemologies then begins with each vying to affirm or expel the value-system of the first act, with each trying to 'close' the system once more to the advantage

of its own way of seeing. This competition of epistemologies creates the obstacles that, we have been assured, are the primary characteristic of the conflict of the second act. The third and final act describes a situation in which one epistemology begins to assert itself over the other, eventually dominating at the expense of either its opponent (expulsion) or elements of its own value-system (integration).

The following familiar either/or scenario can describe these two possible outcomes. Either the hero defeats the villain, in which case the representative of an aberrant value-system is expelled and the *status quo* is reaffirmed, or the hero fails to defeat the villain,[12] in which case the prevailing value-system is wholly displaced or simply enlarged to accommodate the transgressive value-system as a norm, i.e., a new or revised *status quo* is established. Either way, however, the system is once more at rest. Closure has been attained. Meaning is stable. There are fixed limits. The drama is concluded for the time being.[13] It is important for the moment simply to note that the eventual domination of one value-system over another (in both the canonic Hollywood narrative and the individual act of comprehension) is always coercive, i.e., closure results either from some simple (but authoritative) judgment or from the exercise of superior might (see below).

A Discrepancy in Dynamics?

One potential objection to the comparison of the individual act of comprehension and the canonic Hollywood narrative (as described above) is that the dynamics of the two structures appear to exhibit certain differences. On the one hand, the individual act of comprehension appears highly dynamic, coming into existence upon the discovery of a disequilibrium and ending immediately upon the restoration of balance. In other words, it only ever exists in a fully realised dialectical state. When there is no conflict, there is no

active perception and cognition. On the other hand, the canonic Hollywood narrative is rigidly compartmentalised. Its dialectical conflict is distinctly marked off by two extended periods of apparent closure, i.e., the introduction and resolution, periods that occupy approximately half the duration of the narrative. Therefore, the identity of the two structures can only be sustained by demonstrating that the rigid compartmentalisation of the canonic screenplay is illusory, a misguided attempt to systematise a dramatic narrative that is, in reality, as dynamic as the individual act of comprehension outlined above.

That the canonic screenplay is not a clearly partitioned structure is evident from the following simple observation: if an unclosed, dramatic state is initiated by a disturbance to the *status quo* and is later eliminated by the restitution of this *status quo* then, strictly speaking, the dramatic state or second act of the screenplay runs right from the 1st plot point or 'catalyst' (whichever comes first) to the very end of the final dramatic climax, a point that screenwriting pundits often recommend placing between five and ten minutes before the end of the film. The 'open', dramatic section of a screenplay, then, depending on the position of the catalyst, occupies almost the entire running time of the film. Also, from a practical point of view, there is much confusion in screenwriting manuals as to the specific difference between the 'catalyst' and the 1st plot point. The catalyst, as the name suggests, is regarded as an event or disturbance that initiates a dramatic situation. Seger writes: 'The catalyst is the first main 'push' that gets the plot moving. Something happens or someone makes a decision. The main character is set in motion. The story has begun.'[14] How this differs from the 1st plot point is never firmly established except for a vague admission that the 1st plot point treats of a more significant disturbance than did the preceding, (also) disruptive catalyst. Consequently, the catalyst appears simply to be the name given to a 1st plot point that occurs too early in the narrative to accord neatly with the proposed three-act paradigm. In light of this

conclusion, the proposed act divisions of the canonic screenplay become arbitrary segmentations that do not divide distinct movements in the drama so much as forcefully create them. It could be said that they reveal an industry in pursuit of a reliable industrial theory, seeking to satisfy a Neo-Platonic desire for a stable, aesthetically pleasing form.

It is also worth noting that everything in the canonic screenplay, by virtue of its inclusion in the narrative, is predicated on conflict. Writers of drama are often advised to 'take care only to include essential information.'[15] Richard Maltby and Ian Craven cite Eugene Vale: 'The execution of an intention… only becomes interesting if there is a possibility of its frustration... as he puts it, "in order to be permitted to show the execution of an intention, we must create an opposing difficulty."'[16] The primary criterion for the inclusion of material in a dramatic narrative is dialectical conflict. Furthermore, anything that appears to lack this necessary conflict is present by exclusive virtue of its later relevance to a state of conflict, i.e., as foreshadowing. In this manner, all elements of a dramatic narrative are in some way characterised by a state of dialectical conflict, either overt or implicit.

Too General a Structure?

Another possible objection follows from the resolution of the preceding objection. In other words, it could be suggested that by reducing the canonic Hollywood narrative to such a broad dynamic, I have abstracted a structure that is too general, capable of being applied to almost anything. In response, I would argue that the closed narrative dynamic is the underlying, determining structure of a realist epistemology, i.e., it can be discerned in everything because we apply it to everything on a daily basis through the operation of our rational cognitive faculties. It constitutes the basis of our way of seeing within the prevailing realist epistemology.

Other theorists have attempted to explicate something as apparently abstract as rational thought with similar three stage dynamics. For example, Hegel suggested that the most effective method of rational analysis was a dialectical operation in three parts, i.e., *thesis*, *antithesis*, and *synthesis*. Like the canonic Hollywood narrative and the individual act of comprehension, this process involved a challenge to the prevailing epistemological *status quo* (thesis) by a new and incompatible way of seeing (antithesis). This challenge, if successful, was to be resolved with an act of narrative integration (synthesis). Alternatively, if the antithesis proved erroneous, the thesis would remain intact, an eventuality that recalls the act of narrative expulsion.

SECTION TWO: AFFIRMING A REALIST EPISTEMOLOGY

In short, the closed narrative structure shared by the canonic Hollywood narrative and the individual act of comprehension assures us that our 'realistic' way of seeing and making sense of the phenomenal universe is unproblematic, that we can both interpret reality and communicate it to others.

Realism vs. Pragmatism

The prevailing epistemology or 'way of seeing' shared by modern, Western(ised) interpretive communities is essentially 'realist'. A realist epistemology, Jean-François Lyotard writes, 'conceives of representation as the reproduction, for subjectivity, of an objectivity that lies outside it.'[17] In other words, this epistemology presumes a reliable isomorphic correspondence between these two distinct ontological spheres, i.e., between real phenomena and their realistic representations. The presumed existence of a reliable, objective referent is indispensable to the meaningful operation of any realist epistemology. Our cognitive faculties, described above as acts of narrative

comprehension, are predicated on realist assumptions. In other words, we can only form reliable conclusions about the world around us if we accept that this external world exists in the first place and that the conclusions we are forming can accurately represent this external world.

However, this realist world view is not uncontested. For example, according to Jacques Derrida, since the Enlightenment the works of Western philosophy have been implicated in a 'logocentric "metaphysics of presence" as they perpetually and *falsely* imply or state... their own satisfactory relationship to the external world (my emphasis).'[18] Also addressing this fundamental ontological fallacy, Richard Rorty proposes a 'pragmatic' or 'antirepresentational' alternative. For Rorty, objectivity is illusory, a matter of solidarity and consensus. Pragmatism, he writes, 'does not view knowledge as a matter of getting reality right, but rather as a matter of acquiring habits of action for coping with reality.'[19] This post-Hegelian philosophical positioning denies to 'truth' its transcendent quality. What is true or real is simply the most functional hypothesis of a given community at a given time, a hypothesis that can only obtain *pro tempore*. Consequently, the external universe is predicated on a succession of adequately functioning models. In this respect, Newton did not 'discover' the law of gravity by peeling away the accreted layers of superstition and Scholastic science to reveal what was there all along, essential and true. He simply constructed a more efficient paradigm for interpreting the behaviour of the physical world he perceived around him.[20]

By recasting objectivity as a subjective positioning, pragmatism denies the existence of a reliable, objective referent, essential to realism. Realism's distinct, isomorphic correspondence between reality and representation is problematised, displaced by an unreliable, dynamic flux of unstable, provisional epistemological and ontological spheres. This suggests that rather than employ certain reductive, 'realistic' conceptual

categories as reality and representation, a more discerning dialectical approach recognises that any particular discursive event is comprised of neither and both at the same time. It acknowledges that individuals exist in a state of suspension, simultaneously aware of both the reassuring advantages of a dichotomised epistemology and the disparaging implications of a tentative, fluctuating dialectic.

Affirming the Prevailing Realist Epistemology

A pragmatic or antirepresentationalist world-view does not admit the validity or certainty of conceptual categories such as 'fact', 'truth', 'right', 'wrong', 'reality', 'representation', seeing them as subjectively derived and, thus, unverifiable. However, ideology, as we shall see, depends for its moral authority upon the veracity of these types of conceptual category. Consequently, the dominant ideology seeks to affirm the realist epistemology upon which these categories are based, i.e., it favours the conditions that ensure its reproduction.

A realist epistemology, it is crucial to note, is not influenced or determined by the dominant ideology. It is an inseparable part of it. Therefore, all of the processes described below are not necessarily discrete or consecutive, despite the sequential nature of their discussion. On the contrary, they are all part of an overlapping nexus of processes that is prone to fractures and ideological slippages. The separation of these processes below is purely for the purposes of discussion.

As noted, the main threat to a realist epistemology is the inability to prove conclusively the existence of an external referent, of an objective reality outside of subjective experience. Consequently, the closed narrative structures of the individual act of comprehension (and other similarly closed macroscopic expressions of it in other discourses and on other levels of discourse, such as the canonic Hollywood narrative), I

would suggest, interact with and echo each other not to reflect directly a pre-existing external reality but through the creation of an infinitely self-reflexive loop to suggest the mere 'effect' of such an external reality.

Central to this operation, like so many other ideological processes, is a paradox or fundamental contradiction. To elaborate, constant performances of the individual act of comprehension (and other similarly closed narrative structures) affirm the veracity of the realist epistemology because such structures regard the realist dichotomy between reality and representation as entirely unproblematic. At the same time, these narrative structures depend for their own legitimacy on realist precepts, the same precepts they serve to affirm. As I noted, this creates an infinitely self-reflexive loop, with all involved elements referring to other elements in the loop and never to a 'real' outside.[21] This mutual, self-reflexive interdependence of closed narrative structures, thus, affords no definite ontological status to the referent with the ironic (additionally paradoxical) result that, as a process, it implicitly denies the most fundamental element of the realist epistemology it is trying to affirm.[22]

White notes, when belief in the adequacy of current representational modes to reproduce reality is challenged: 'the entire cultural edifice of a society enters into crisis, because not only is a specific system of beliefs undermined but the very condition or possibility of socially significant belief is eroded.'[23] To sustain the possibility of socially significant belief, to preserve the realist epistemology upon which the conceptual categories essential to the reproduction of ideology are based, the central role played by this self-reflexive loop in sustaining the mere 'effect' of reality must be effaced, its central paradox denied. Otherwise, the (ideologically) undesirable alternative is the unresolved and irresolvable pragmatic dialectic (described above), an epistemology radically

incompatible with the essential realist/ideological evaluative categories of 'adequacy, accuracy, and truth itself.'[24]

Interestingly, the self-reflexive loop actually effaces itself, a result of the constant repetition of the similarly closed narrative structures that comprise it. The repeated use of these closed structures makes them and, importantly, the loop in which they participate, seem 'natural'. According to Roland Barthes, the constant reiteration of an artificial (ideological) form results in its internalisation by individual subjects. It becomes part of their 'natural' way of seeing, losing 'the memory that [it] once [was] made'. It becomes divorced from the material, historical context of its creation. This process of naturalisation 'abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, *it does away with all dialectics* (my emphasis).' In this manner, an otherwise artificial process becomes a given, 'what-goes-without-saying.'[25] The 'natural' quality of the individual act of comprehension, and also the realist epistemology upon which it is (presumed to be) based, dissuades us from examining its operations too closely (if at all) and, thus, prevents an easy discovery of it profoundly paradoxical character. In this manner, the mere 'effect' of reality becomes reality itself and the realist epistemological edifice is preserved.

Realism and the Dominant Ideology

The dominant ideology favours closed narrative structures, not only because they support the realist context it requires for its effective reproduction, but also because the closure of such structures is predicated on an act of force. To explain, as I noted above, the conclusion of the individual act of narrative comprehension occurs only after a judgment has been made between the various value-systems or epistemologies in conflict. However, this judgment can never be neutral, impartial or self-evident. It is always already determined by subjective (ideological) values. As Thomas Kuhn notes, in any

argument '[each] group uses its own paradigm to argue in that paradigm's defence.' He elaborates:

> Neither [group] will grant all the non-empirical assumptions that the other needs in order to make its case... they are bound partly to talk through each other. Though each may hope to convert the other to his way of seeing... neither may hope to prove his case. The competition between paradigms is not the sort of battle that can be resolved by proofs.[26]

If a conflict between value-systems is genuinely incommensurable (as opposed to a simple misunderstanding within a shared paradigm that can be resolved through a clarification of terms), there can be no resolution that is not in some way arbitrary and forceful. Inevitably, one side of any argument is suppressed either through an explicit use of force, by the physical oppression of its proponent, or through less overt forms of coercion, most commonly in the form of an appeal to some ideologically sanctioned authority. This ends arbitrarily the otherwise interminable play of meaning (what Derrida refers to as *différance*).[27] In other words, in the absence of 'external standards on which to base a choice between paradigms', [28] without a reliable objective referent by which the natural or apparent validity of any argument can be assessed, coercion becomes necessary.

As force plays a crucial role in determining what judgments are made and, hence, what values are reproduced, it is not surprising to note that it is the most powerful social groupings (or 'ruling class') that tend to determine (or, at the very least, to influence) the outcome of these value-judgments. Consequently, the closed narrative structure is an ideal medium for reproducing dominant or ruling ideological values. With closed narrative structures operating on almost all levels and in so many diverse discourses (including our most basic cognitive processes), these dominant values can be worked into the very fabric of our reality, becoming part of our most fundamental ways of seeing.

On a more superficial level, the closed narrative structure is also useful to the dominant ideology because it filters political content. For example, in a popular film, while undesirable ideas tend to be expelled during the resolution of the drama, discourses deemed appropriate to the reproduction of the dominant ideology tend to be affirmed by emerging intact. This selective operation remains the same even as the nature of what constitutes appropriate ideological content changes with the social and political climate. In the modern capitalist era, it is not surprising that the ideological content most consistently affirmed is capitalist in nature. However, it is not only important which particular values emerge intact in the end, but also that such a competition between value-systems appears possible in the first place. In this manner, the emerging values (typically the dominant values) seem more natural, emerging victorious from an actual challenge.

It is important to note at this point that the closed narrative structure is useful for the reproduction of *any* dominant ideology. In the various analyses that follow, the dominant ideology more frequently discussed only happens to be capitalist. This is to say that I do not claim there is some more intrinsic, mutually exclusive relationship between the closed narrative structure and the goals of a specifically capitalist ideology. While it is tempting to attempt such a connection, it would at best be strained and tenuous. For example, one could suggest that the evaluative project of the closed narrative, its sifting of social and political content, both real and imagined, establishes a hierarchised taxonomy of social experience, transforming the world into a 'market', a conceptual space in which any single phenomenon, according to a certain set of capitalist values, is considered more or less valuable than the next. However, the existence and use of similarly closed narrative structures in pre-capitalist and non-capitalist societies (as recorded by structural anthropologists such as Joseph Campbell and Claude Lévi-Strauss) stands as a simple indictment of any such attempt.[29]

Popularity and the Closed Narrative

It might be said that, in some instances, the very ideologicality of a process contributes to its popularity. This seems particularly true of the closed narrative structure. As it affirms our realist way of seeing, we cannot afford not to rely on it. Otherwise, we would not be able to make sense of the world around us. In other words, it can be argued that we participate in the reproduction of the ideology because we have to. It is the process by which we see and understand the world, by which we communicate with others, by which life has 'meaning' (within the prevailing ideological framework, of course). In addition to assuring us that the world makes sense, this hegemonic participation affords us a sense of solidarity, of belongingness to a group or group-identity (because we share a way of seeing with others). It is in this manner that the closed narrative structure constitutes us as (willing) subjects of the dominant ideology.

On a more specifically individual level, the closed narrative structure of the popular Hollywood film employs what has been described in spectatorship theory as a system of 'suture', the manner in which a viewer is 'stitched' into the filmic text. While Jean-Pierre Oudart's early conception of this process focuses quite narrowly on the shot/reverse-angle shot juxtaposition in film editing,[30] later modifications of the theory (especially the work of Stephen Heath and Kaya Silverman[31]) allow all levels of textual enunciation in cinema, including narrative structure, to factor into the process. Following from this, I would suggest that the closed narrative structure of the popular Hollywood film is pleasurable because, by 'stitching' the viewer into the closed filmic text, it imparts a sense of closure to the actual viewer who, as a result, regards him or herself as whole, complete and integrated (as opposed to fractured, disorganised or chaotic). In other words, the closed narrative structure can affirm a stable sense of self or personal identity. (I should note that while I claimed earlier that this thesis is less concerned with the

relationship between the text and the reader than with the relationship between the text and the ideology that informs it, when approaching, as I do here, the specific issue of why a certain narrative structure might be 'popular' or pleasurable, some consideration of spectatorship (or theories of spectatorship), however brief, is unavoidable.)

Thus, as far as popular cinema is concerned, it could be argued that the closed narrative structure is the most prevalent narrative form because it is so heavily implicated in the reproduction of the dominant ideology, because it accords on so many levels with the manner in which the world appears to operate, because it seems so 'natural' and because it provides such comfort and assurance to the viewer. From the point of view of industrial practice, the closed narrative structure is an important risk-minimisation strategy. It is the type of narrative considered (consciously or unconsciously) least likely to alienate a potential audience member. For this reason, it is interesting to note, the most popular films are also the most reactionary, providing this comfort primarily because they affirm what we understand to be true about the world at the same time as they implicitly validate the means by which we make sense of the world and ourselves, both of which are part of the overall ideological process.

CONCLUSION

The narrative structure of the 'popular' Hollywood film, like all other similarly-closed narrative structures, serves to affirm a realist epistemology, that is, the crucial organisation of knowledge that facilitates the reproduction of (the dominant) ideology. In this manner, such structures serve to sustain reality itself. It is a process in which we participate but also one with which we can have problems if and when its ideological nature becomes apparent (typically as the result of inevitable fractures and inconsistencies). We are not thoughtless dupes of a monologic process but rather the

sometimes-troubled participants of it. This is to say, the ideological processes described above are by no means flawless (as should be apparent when we consider the many complex processes that must interact and overlap to sustain the realist epistemology). Also, as this 'reality' is sustained by force and depends for its efficacy upon the willing participation of its subjects, it comes as no surprise that the process is unstable and prone to frequent failures. Many of the contradictions and paradoxes that result from (and, thus, evidence) the instability of this profoundly ideological process are discussed in the forthcoming analyses of certain 'popular' Hollywood films.

Notes

[1] Hayden White, The Content of the Form: narrative discourse and historical representation, London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987, p. xi.

[2] Edward Branigan, Narrative Comprehension and Film, London & New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 3.

[3] E. H. Gombrich, Art and Illusion: a study in the psychology of pictorial representation, London: Phaidon Press, 1977, p. 77.

[4] Edward Branigan, Narrative Comprehension and Film, p. 13.

[5] *ibid.*, p. 37.

[6] Linda Seger, Making a Good Script Great, 2nd ed., Hollywood: Samuel French Trade, 1994, p. 26.

[7] Syd Field, The Screenwriter's Guide to Problem Solving: how to recognize, identify, and define screenwriting problems, New York: Dell Pub., 1998, p. 29.

[8] Linda Seger, Making a Good Script Great, pp. 28-9.

[9] *ibid.*, p. 31.

[10] E. H. Gombrich, Art and Illusion, p. 148.

Notes (cont')

[11] Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science', in Paradigms and Revolutions, p. 56.

[12] In this instance, the failure to defeat the villain might also result in the defeat of the hero by the villain.

[13] One should regard the hero and the villain as the designated champions of their respective epistemologies. It is important to note, however, that the hero does not necessarily have to champion the diegetic *status quo*, that it is often the case that the villain operates in this capacity. However, the hero will always operate as the champion or representative of the prevailing values of the cinema audience irrespective of whether or not these values are reflected by the order that prevails in the world of the film.

[14] Linda Seger, Making a Good Script Great, p. 25.

[15] Sam Smiley, Playwriting: the structure of the action, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971, p. 65.

[16] Eugene Vale, cited by Richard Maltby & Ian Craven, Hollywood Cinema: an introduction, Oxford & Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995, p. 300.

[17] Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: a report on knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997, p. viii.

[18] Christopher Butler, Interpretation, Deconstruction, and Ideology: an introduction to some current issues in literary theory, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984, p. 60.

[19] Richard Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: philosophical papers, vol. 1, New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 1. Elsewhere, Rorty describes scientific objectivity as an 'automatic and empty compliment which we pay to those beliefs which are successful in helping us to do what we want to do [Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, Oxford: Blackwell & Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 10].'

Notes (cont')

[20] The 'truth' of gravity has already been brought into question, if not superseded by certain aspects of quantum mechanics. For a more detailed description of this succession of scientific paradigms, see Thomas S. Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1962.

[21] Jean Baudrillard suggests that this constant cycle of intertextuality leads to a sense of 'hyperreality', the 'generation of models of a real without origin or reality'. He adds: '[Representation] is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself [Selected Writings, ed. Mark Poster, Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1988, pp. 166-7].'

[22] It might appear that I am employing circular logic here. Unfortunately, this is unavoidable as I am describing a self-reflexive loop with no centre, no outside and no start or end point. Thus, if the logic seems somewhat circular, it is merely because the object under discussion is predicated on a paradoxical, circular logic.

[23] Hayden White, The Content of the Form, p. x.

[24] Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, p. viii.

[25] Roland Barthes, Mythologies, trans. Annette Lavers, London: Jonathan Cape, 1972, pp. 142-3, 11. This ideological process has been conceptualised in several different ways. For example, Lyotard describes *legitimation* as 'the process by which a legislator is authorised to promulgate... a law as a norm [The Postmodern Condition, p. 8].' Similarly, Rorty describes the ideological project of traditional philosophy as the 'attempt to find nonhistorical conditions of any possible historical development [Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, p. 9].'

[26] Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, pp. 93, 147.

Notes (cont')

[27] Accordingly, Butler cites Derrida: 'to appeal to [notions of God, man, telos, etc.] is to cut of by an illegitimate interpretative summary that perpetual play of linguistic differences of which all texts are constituted [Christopher Butler, Interpretation, Deconstruction, and Ideology, p. 61].' Similarly, Paul Feyerabend notes, when the argument of even 'the most puritanical rationalist' is failing to convince, he is: 'forced to stop reasoning and to use propaganda and coercion, not because some of his reasons have ceased to be valid, but because the psychological conditions which make them effective, and capable of influencing others, have disappeared [Paul Feyerabend, Against Method, 3rd ed., London & New York: Verso, 1993, p. 16].'

[28] Ian Barbour, 'Paradigms in Science and Religion', Paradigms and Revolutions, p. 225.

[29] Vladimir Propp recognised a closed structure in Russian fairy-tales (Morphology of the Folktale, trans. Laurence Scott, Austin & London: University of Texas Press, 1971); Joseph Campbell recognised the closed 'Hero's Journey' in the myths and legends of pre-modern tribes and civilisations (The Hero with a Thousand Faces, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); likewise, Claude Lévi-Strauss analysed the closed structures of ancient myths (Structural Anthropology, Vol. 2, Allen Lane VIII: Penguin Books, 1977).

[30] Jean-Pierre Oudart, 'Cinema and Suture', Screen, Vol. 18, No. 4, Winter 1977/78. This particular issue of Screen was dedicated to the concept of 'suture'. Oudart's essay was a translation of an essay originally printed in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 211-212 (April & May, 1969).

[31] Stephen Heath, Questions of Cinema, London: Macmillan, 1981, Kaya Silverman, The Subject of Semiotics, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.

CHAPTER TWO: ORIENTATION STRATEGIES

INTRODUCTION

As Althusser posited, ideology does not have a discrete existence but is always and only discernible in its material expressions. A similar relationship exists between the structure and content of narratives, in that the closed narrative structure does not have an existence separate from a particular deployment of certain concrete narrative strategies. For the closed narrative structure to affirm the prevailing realist epistemology (in the manner described in the preceding chapter) and, thus, to reproduce the dominant ideology, these concrete narrative strategies must make clearly legible its presence, progress and resolution.

It is only from a certain, specific 'subject position' that the progress and closure of this structure is legible. Consequently, it could be argued that one of the main ideological functions of a popular narrative's content is to orient readers to this certain, specific subject position. For this reason, I refer to these particular narrative strategies as 'orientation' strategies. Colin MacCabe noted that the 'classic realist text' could be defined as containing a 'hierarchy amongst the discourses which compose the text'. He argued that this particular hierarchy afforded to the narrative discourse itself a sense of unquestioned truth, i.e., its 'status as articulation'[1] was denied. By means of a similar hierarchy, the various orientation strategies of the reactionary popular film serve to force into undeniable presence (and naturalise) the closed narrative structure as an unbiased and unassailable means of representing reality, i.e., its status as articulation is denied. In the reactionary popular film, this hierarchy of narrative strategies can be divided (roughly) into two tiers, those that

actively index the progress and resolution of the closed narrative structure (by orienting us to the roles of hero and villain; the substance of this chapter) and those that contribute (passively) to an overall textual transparency, thus permitting an easier recognition of the closed narrative structure (this secondary set of orientation strategies is discussed in Chapter Three and includes the repeated use of a limited set of permitted discourses). It is important to note that these two sets of strategies (and their contents) work in tandem and have frequent and significant overlaps. In the following, they are separated solely for the purposes of discussion.

As I noted earlier, the progress and closure of the canonic Hollywood narrative is predicated on a conflict between (and forced resolution of) two incommensurable value-systems. In popular cinema, the figures of the hero and villain function as metonyms for each side of this conflict. A clear nomination of their respective roles is, thus, crucial not only to the initial recognition of the terms of the conflict but also to the terms of its resolution. Consequently, the orientation strategies employed by the reactionary popular film make more distinct these roles by synchronising a reader's subject position with the subject position of the hero while, at the same time, alienating him or her from the subject position of the villain. Chapter Two is divided into two sections. Section One describes the orientation strategies associated with the 'moral-causal economy', the wider context of this crucial polarised, Manichean hero-villain conflict. With this set of narrative strategies, the roles of hero and villain are identified by considering who is actively assisted or thwarted by the causal interventions of a partial physical universe. Section Two then examines the heroes and villains themselves and the manner in which readers are further oriented to their respective roles by the ascription of certain physical and behavioural traits.

It is crucial to note, that like the closed narrative structure, these orientation strategies are not transcendent or universal. I am not proposing the kind of timeless model for popular narratives (including the identification of certain recurring character 'types', i.e., mentor, trickster, threshold guardian, etc,) as was attempted by structural anthropologists such as Joseph Campbell and Claude Lévi-Strauss. On the contrary, throughout the following, when references are made to narrative strategies of popular 1990s films, if appropriate, I will note how the specific material context of contemporary American society has determined (if at all) the specific form of those narrative strategies. At the same time, though, it is important to note that many of the strategies discussed below have origins well before this modern period. In fact, some are so old and so persistently used as to appear timeless; but like all such strategies, they still have a material origin.

It is also worth noting that orientation to the roles of the hero and the villain can be effected by other strategies. For example, the role of the hero can often be established through a simple observation of who is favoured by the narrative apparatus, i.e., who is in the majority of the scenes, who is placed in the centre of frame compositions, who receives the most lines, the most lingering close-ups, etc. Also, certain types of music can herald the arrival of a heroic or villainous character. The sets of orientation strategies that I intend to discuss is, thus, limited and concerned in the main with how elements of the (diegetic) physical narrative universe orient readers to the roles of the hero and the villain, i.e., the ways in which ideology transforms the physical world to enforce its prerogatives. This delimitation is a necessary evil, reducing a vast range of potential subject matter to a manageable sub-set of orientation strategies to provide a representative discussion of orientation strategies in general.

SECTION ONE: THE MORAL-CAUSAL UNIVERSE

In many post-Enlightenment fictional discourses, the external universe is presented as an objective, level playing field upon which the 'principles of a superdrama',[2] the demi-urgic hero and villain appear to determine, by the consequences of their chosen actions, their own material destinies. However, this playing field is anything but level and, typically, the hero has the home advantage. As Section One will demonstrate, the supposedly cold, external universe actively shifts its terms of engagement, bending the laws of causality ultimately to ensure the success of the hero. Consequently, by comprehending whom this cooperative moral-causal economy (or MCE) supports and opposes, readers are oriented to the respective roles of hero and villain.

This section is composed of three parts. Part I explains the general post-Enlightenment MCE, both its origins and the manner in which as an ideological construction it influences our perception of reality. Following this is a brief discussion of the 'American dream', the culturally specific ideological construct that informs the particular operation in modern American society of this general post-Enlightenment MCE. Part II demonstrates how the MCE (both in its general and more specific American variations) functions as a concrete set of orientation strategies. Finally, Part III presents a detailed case study of Saving Private Ryan (Spielberg, 1998) in which the particular strategies outlined in Part II are identified and described.

Before I begin, it is important to note that in the following paragraphs on the nature of popular cinema in the 1990s, several supporting arguments, references and quotations are taken from certain critical works on 18th and 19th century stage melodrama. This intertextuality is possible (and productive) because the stage melodrama is recognised as a direct predecessor of the modern film narrative. In fact,

it could easily be demonstrated that in the transition from the stage to the early silent screen, while the technology of production and exhibition changed, the content of the diegesis, i.e., characters (heroes and villains), plot structures (closed narratives), etc., remained relatively consistent. Many cultural critics have remarked upon the debt the modern popular cinema owes to these earlier dramatic forms and it is remarkable to note just how accurately certain theories about stage melodrama appear to describe the operation of contemporary popular films (notable here is Peter Brooks' conception of the 'moral occult' and also much that has been written about the Manichean characterisation of heroes and villains).[3]

Part I: Towards a Moral-Causal Universe

Necessary Connections

David Hume maintains that what we typically regard as physical causality is actually a construction of the human mind. For him, like the pragmatists, relationships of cause and effect have no objective, referential existence. Accordingly, he writes: 'All belief of matter of fact or real existence is derived merely from some object, present to the memory or senses, and a customary conjunction between that and some other object.'[4] For Hume, causality is the name afforded to the 'principle of connexion' readers discern between: 'the different thoughts or ideas of the mind [that] in their appearance to the memory or imagination... introduce each other with a certain degree of method and regularity.'[5] Consequently, cause and effect are necessarily connected as result of a misrecognition of 'contiguity', 'succession', and 'constant conjunction'.[6] Contiguity is observed when two objects or events are recognised as spatially or temporally adjacent; succession refers to the observance of two such objects or events in a temporal order, in a relationship of priority, one after

the other, in which the former phenomenon is the designated 'cause', the latter the 'effect'; and constant conjunction is invoked by the recurrent observation of these two objects or events in just such a similar relationship to each other. The repetition of constant conjunction points to the ideological quantum of the necessary connection. As Hume writes, 'causes and effects are discoverable not by reason but by *experience*'.[7] Similar to Barthes' conception of 'naturalisation', this repetition ensures that certain necessary connections appear natural, as givens rather than as 'mind-dependent'[8] constructions.

Hume's perennial example of causality in operation is the action-reaction collisions of billiard balls. However, necessary connections are established not only on this more obviously physical plane but also on a metaphysical plane, a more imaginary level, where these connections are of a more overtly ideological character, more representative of human desire, i.e., the wages of sin is death. It is these more metaphysical necessary connections that tend to inform the specific operation of the MCE.

The Post-Enlightenment Moral-Causal Economy

In modern Western society, the general manner in which we determine these necessary connections is a mix of both moral and physical laws and can be explicated (preliminarily it should be noted) through a consideration of what Arthur Koestler calls the 'divided house'. He writes: '[In the modern world] neither faith nor science is able to satisfy man's intellectual cravings. In the divided house, both inhabitants lead a thwarted existence.'[9] This divided house exists as a consequence of an incomplete transition from medieval, Scholastic science to modern, post-Enlightenment science. Owen Chadwick warns that '[we] have sharply to distinguish

between the theory of a philosopher and the axioms of society.'[10] Although Enlightenment philosophers denied the agency of God in the causal operation of the physical universe, society as a whole neither fully understood nor consistently employed such a conclusion on a quotidian basis. In other words, while Berkeley made a convincing philosophical argument against the existence of objective reality, Dr. Johnson simply stubbed his toe against a wall to provide a counter-argument.

The lack of consonance between the 'truths' of rational science and the beliefs of the public is elided by the 'emergence narrative'. The emergence narrative is employed by any ideology that seeks to portray its origins as the natural and legitimate successor to the 'superstitious' order that it claims to abjure. Consequently, the emergence narrative is profoundly teleological and tends to mask the stuttering, piecemeal, stop-start character of historical progress. As Koestler writes:

> revolutions of thought which shape the basic outlook of an age are not disseminated through text-books - they spread like epidemics, through contamination by invisible agents and innocent germ-carriers, by the most varied forms of contact, or simply by breathing the common air.[11]

Koestler invokes the language of contagion to characterise the means by which knowledge is transmitted, suggesting a dynamic of dissemination less like a gradual, emergent learning curve and more like the rapid, indiscriminate, stochastic, mutative vectors of a virulent communicable disease.

While the Enlightenment emergence narrative glorifies a secular rationalism as the best and most reliable way of seeing, the social reality is different. Although science claims to have displaced religion 'its failure to provide the basic answers [produces] not only intellectual frustration but spiritual starvation.'[12] Consequently, the modern 'divided' mind employs the narrative schemas of both religious and scientific epistemologies to interpret reality. A sudden recovery from a debilitating

disease can be viewed as either a God-given miracle or a triumph of medical technology. What is 'true', I have already noted, is that which provides the best, most coherent means of 'coping with reality'. For some, solace lies in the conviction of revealed religion, for others in the illuminated, secular light of modern science. For many, however, it is a troubled combination of both.

Peter Brooks as good as describes this general post-Enlightenment MCE when he theorises the operation of the 'moral occult' in 18th and 19th century stage melodrama. The moral occult, he writes, is 'the locus of intense ethical forces from which man himself feels cut off, yet which he feels to have a real existence somewhere behind or beyond the facade of reality and which exerts an influence on his secular existence'.[13] This moral occult posits the human psyche as suspended between the secular and the divine, between the real and the ideal, between truth and representation.

Unwilling to relinquish either epistemology, the divided individual grasps onto salient features of both and can often hold, in alternation, views and opinions that are diametrically opposed. Consequently, the particular MCE operative in 'real life' and in popular Hollywood narratives is deduced from the governing principles of both Cartesian rationalist science and a pre-Enlightenment moral theology. This results in a conception of the universe not as a cold, neutral machine but rather as an environment that is eminently responsive to the moral quality of its inhabitants' actions, rewarding the good and punishing the bad according to the eschatological precepts of Christian providence.

The fact that we can avail of two incommensurable epistemological systems when interpreting our personal experiences and the fact that the dominant ideology must take into account these rival subject positions when granting hegemonic

concessions, stands as a good indication of why ideology is such a fragmented and contradictory process.

The American Dream

While the general precepts of the post-Enlightenment MCE prevail in most Western(ised), predominantly-Christian societies, as we move from community to community there will of course be local variations, certain supplementary constraints based on local social, political, economic and ideological concerns, variations that reflect the particular needs and desires of both ruling and subordinate groups. In contemporary American society, one ideological construct that exerts a significant influence on the perceived operation of the post-Enlightenment MCE is what both politicians and cultural critics have called the 'American dream'.

Edward Ashbee writes: 'The "American Dream"... suggests that the US is a meritocratic society in which individuals can become prosperous and climb the economic ladder through hard work, self-reliance and the adoption of entrepreneurial attitudes.'[14] This is not a simple suggestion or guideline for how one should best conduct oneself in life. Rather, the American dream establishes a powerful necessary connection between industriousness and personal (financial) reward. In America, it suggests that if you work hard you will succeed. This is offered as an immutable law and one whose immutability is protected by its inevitable caveat, namely that hard work must be combined with virtue for true success to follow. Typical of this association is the following declaration of former US president Bill Clinton (1992-2000): 'The American Dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one – if you work hard and play by the rules you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given ability will take you.'[15] By referring to 'God-given ability', Clinton

accepts a divinely ordained constraint on the personal advancement of certain individuals, implicitly those whom God has chosen not to bless with certain gifts or talents (or advantageous social position). It is this constant and implicit association of success with virtue (and failure with sin) that imports a necessarily moral-causal dimension into the equation. It suggests that some kind of higher (divine) moral authority is responsible for determining if one entitled to be successful or not.

Consistent with the divided nature of the post-Enlightenment MCE, the American dream attempts to efface any obviously divine role in the determination of personal affairs. Typically, this denial is attempted by expressing all matters of causal determination in terms of personal responsibility; the explicit message is that it is the individual and the individual alone that is capable of determining his or her future (financial) status. As we shall see, though, this secularisation is anything but complete, with the result that the American dream, like the more general post-Enlightenment MCE, is a highly troubled and contradictory ideological structure.

Like all hegemonic ideological structures, the American dream combines elements from various, incommensurable value-systems to create a social framework that, although contradictory, presents a greater comfort for those who participate unquestioningly than it does to those who seek to point out its obvious flaws. A modern capitalist ideology has much to gain from an implicit (or explicit) belief in the existence of a higher power but also from a denial of such an influence. For example, by placing responsibility for personal (financial) success or failure squarely on the shoulders of the individual, the American dream precludes such blame being placed on the ruling classes or certain social structures. More crucially, the American dream also encourages its subjects to distrust government intervention (typically in the form of welfare) for the insult it represents to each citizen's God-given right to virtuous

self-reliance. In other words, failing or failed individuals are actively discouraged from demanding assistance.

At the same time, a belief in some kind of higher power or divine influence allows those for whom the American dream does not appear to be working to consider as a matter of inevitability its proper resumption at some point in the future, i.e., 'In God We Trust'. Of course, if this does not happen, then the moral dimension of the American dream casts this individual as somehow sinful and, thus, excluded from its otherwise unfailing operation. Additionally, any MCE that encourages people to look for their ultimate salvation to a metaphysical realm discourages them from seeking to improve their lot in life by transforming the material conditions of their existence (a point made by Marx in A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right when he first described religion as the 'opium of the people').[16] This overall moral-causal context is, thus, highly favourable to the reproduction of the dominant ideology. It helps to preserve the *status quo*.

Of course, the American dream is not a recent development, having been in place since the earliest years of the republic. Benjamin Franklin (1706-90) is often regarded as a classic example of the 'dream' in action; growing up in a family that could not afford to send him to college yet still making a fortune from printing and publishing and eventually leading the noble life of scientist and statesman. In his own words to potential immigrants: 'If they are sober, industrious, and frugal, they soon become Masters, establish themselves in Business, marry, raise Families, and become respectable Citizens.'[17] However, despite its mature provenance the American dream is still very much alive today. Consider, for example, the following survey results. In 1983-87, the General Social Survey polled 1,420 people for their response to the statement: 'America has an open society. What one achieves in life no longer depends

on one's family background, but on the abilities one has and the education one acquires.' 40.3 percent 'strongly agreed', 44.7 percent 'somewhat agreed', 13.4 percent 'somewhat disagreed'; but only 1.6 percent 'strongly disagreed'. Also, in 1994, when Americans were asked to comment on the statement, 'In America, if you work hard, you can be anything you want to be', 74 percent agreed.[18] Such ongoing faith is remarkable, especially given the obvious lack of correlation between the tenets of the 'dream' and actual social conditions in America today. Towards the end of the twentieth century, overall social mobility has been in decline. According to the US Census Bureau in 2001, the richest quintile of the population earns almost half of the country's income while the poorest quintile earns only 3.7 percent.[19] There are still glaring disparities in income levels between men and women, between whites and minorities (especially African Americans), and so on. In fact, Jennifer L. Hochschild goes so far as to state that the American dream is in fact an impossibility. She writes: '[The American dream] is flawed at the core: in a capitalist economic system, a majoritarian political system, and a status-driven social system, not all Americans can achieve their dreams no matter how hard they try.'[20] The ongoing faith in the American dream despite these discrepancies is testament to its efficacy as an ideological structure. It illustrates starkly Eagleton's description of the study of ideology as 'an inquiry into the ways in which people come to invest in their own unhappiness.'[21]

Returning to cinema, the post-Enlightenment MCE and, more specifically, the American dream are understood to operate not only in what might be called 'real life' but also in popular film narratives. However, while in films certain morally-determined necessary connections tend to hold fast, like a set of indisputable physical laws, in real life there is always the possibility (or threat) that our personal experience

will fail to maintain an ideal standard for a morally responsive universe (certain consequences of which were outlined above). At the same time, this possibility of failure does not invalidate an ongoing belief in its operation. As David Grimstead writes of melodrama: 'this utopia [is] less a conscious imagining of what society might or should become than an ideal that [is] considered a kind of reality, experience not withstanding.'[22] In an inversion of the typical aesthetic relationship, reality becomes a poor copy of its own representation. Consequently, it might be suggested that we go to the cinema not to 'escape' the dismal material conditions of our existence but because we consider our quotidian lives as a kind of substandard imitation, because we are looking to spend time in the presence of the 'real thing'.

The American dream, like any ideological structure, has many highly particular material institutions that both reflect and reinforce its interests. Included amongst these are certain social and political institutions such as the right to private property, heterosexual love, the nuclear family and individualism. While this chapter focuses on the diegetic moral-casual universe and its morally-charged inhabitants, Chapter Three will discuss in greater detail these social and political institutions.

In the analyses that follow, unless otherwise stated, any references to MCE can be presumed to refer to the operation of the general post-Enlightenment MCE. Also, when appropriate, specific references will be made to local variations informed by certain precepts of the American dream.

Part II: The Moral-Causal Economy as Orientation Strategy

The MCE orients the reader to the roles of hero and villain in a number of related ways. It is to be understood that the following set of examples is representative (sufficient to establish my point) and does not constitute an attempt to exhaust the

category. These examples include: orientation by 'ultimate resolution', i.e., by engineering the eventual satisfaction of the hero's declared long-term goals; orientation by 'direct intervention', i.e., by using apparent coincidence to favour the progress of the hero; and orientation by creating situations of 'moral choice', i.e., by engineering situations in which obvious moral character can be revealed and, thus, the hero more clearly identified. In accordance with the tendency of the post-Enlightenment MCE (and the highly individualist American dream) to deny their overtly religious dimension, these orientation strategies often attempt to suppress or displace any real sense of external (divine) intervention, in order to affirm the individual responsibility or agency of the protagonist.

It is important to note that an MCE does not actively enact these orientation strategies, i.e., it does not have an agency of its own. It is simply a popular narrative construction employed by filmmakers. As participants of the cultural hegemony, filmmakers (usually unwittingly) assist in the reproduction of the dominant ideology by naturalising this idea that the universe responds actively to the morally weighted actions of its inhabitants. The MCE simply appears to have agency in the discussion that follows because, for simplicity, I describe its operations independently of the people responsible for making the films.

Orientation by Ultimate Resolution

Despite the vagaries of fate during the course of a film, one of the clearest means of identifying the hero is a simple recognition of who emerges victorious after the resolution of conflict. It is important to note that during a film, the MCE will often promote the short-term goals of both the hero and the villain, frequently placing the villain in an ascendant position. For example, in Independence Day (Emmerich,

1996), the human losses during the initial stages of the alien invasion of Earth are catastrophic. The world's major cities are laid waste, millions are killed and, to all appearances, there is no immediate prospect for human victory. At this point, it is the goals of the aliens that are favoured. However, after the hero-villain conflict has been sustained for a culturally determined period of time, i.e., basically the length of the film, a reversal inevitably occurs that places the hero on top. In short, the MCE's ultimate allegiance to the hero is revealed through the final expulsion of the villain. Returning to the example, despite initial losses, the humans eventually formulate an extravagant plan and rid themselves of the alien threat. Consequently, the manner in which the MCE orients readers to the roles of hero and villain is not necessarily through a recognition of whose goals it appears to favour during the course of the ongoing dramatic conflict, but rather through a recognition of whose goals it favours in the ultimate resolution of the conflict.

Orientation by Direct Intervention

Often in popular narratives, a particular event occurs, apparently out of the blue, to effect a dramatic reversal that frees heroes from situations of extreme jeopardy and places them in the ascendancy. It is important to note that such apparently unmotivated events can also affect negatively the plight of the hero. Ultimately, however, in pivotal or climactic situations, and certainly when life and death are involved, such interventions will favour the hero.

The film sample is redolent with examples of this kind of direct intervention. For example, during the battle to defend his house in Home Alone, Kevin (Macauley Culkin) is restrained by one of the burglars, Marv (Daniel Stern), who holds his leg. At this point, when it appears that Kevin has finally failed in his attempt to defend the

house, his brother's pet tarantula crawls by on the step in front of him. He grabs the animal, throws it at Marv and effects his escape. That the spider happened to pass by at that particular time and in that particular location, though not impossible, is highly improbable and constitutes a very favourable coincidence that advances the cause of the hero at the same time as it hinders the immediate goal of the villain. (Of course, in this instance, the hero is championing the cause of private property rights, crucial to the American dream. The manner in which a hero's actions almost always represent a defence of institutions that embody the ideology of the 'dream' is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three.) Also, in the climactic scene of Jurassic Park, when Dr. Alan Grant (Sam Neill) and the two children, Lex (Ariana Richards) and Timmy (Joseph Mazzalo) are cornered in the Visitors Centre by blood-thirsty velociraptors, the previously villainous tyrannosaurus-rex happens upon the scene and effects a last minute rescue. Again, we are oriented to the role of the hero, in this case a group of heroes, by a direct and favourable intervention.

Such interventions can be explained as either purely coincidental or perhaps the result of some higher (divine) influence. It is interesting to note that certain strategies are deployed in these narratives to downplay both these explanations. A high level of causal coincidence can strain the credibility of a narrative. The interventions in the examples described above would be considered highly coincidental if it were not for the use of foreshadowing, the narrative technique by which the coincidental quality of such coincidences is actively denied. Linda Seger describes foreshadowing as 'a visual clue or piece of dialogue that is used to set up an action, or a piece of information that is paid off at a later time in the story.'[23] Foreshadowing takes highly improbable, sometimes impossible events from outside the immediate scope of the narrative situation and makes them avenues of causal

progress. Thus, causal developments that might previously have been dismissed as unbelievable coincidence are made part of the natural operation of the local narrative environment; they do not surprise us like a coincidence might have. In Home Alone, the pet tarantula is made available to the local MCE by an earlier scene when it is released from its tank and, later, by several brief scenes in which it is revealed roaming the house. Similarly, in Jurassic Park, an earlier scene shows the tyrannosaurus-rex attacking a herd of stampeding dinosaurs, thus establishing its freedom to roam the park (and later the Visitors Center) in search of prey.

At the same time, foreshadowing also suppresses the superhuman dimension of such interventions. The otherwise direct intervention no longer seems like an intervention because it no longer arrives so obviously out of the blue. Thus, the individual agency and self-reliance of heroes (so essential to proponents of the American dream) are preserved. Readers cannot as easily ascribe their ultimate success to the benevolent assistance of a higher power (or governmental intervention). Of course, as I noted, this denial is not absolute, allowing a simultaneous ('divided') consideration of both divine and secular explanations, creating in these films what Ira Hauptman (describing melodrama) calls 'a kind of completely unironic *deus ex machina* without a visible *deus*.'[24]

Orientation by Moral Choice

The MCE orients readers to the roles of hero and villain by engineering specific dramatic situations in which characters can freely choose to behave in a virtuous or vicious manner. A moral action taken in such a situation is a much stronger index to the morality of a character than an action that is forced upon an individual. As Christopher Butler notes, from this Kantian perspective, 'the basis of

the moral law is to be found in the subject as capable of autonomous will... of the individual as isolated, rational and capable of asking what is right or ought to be done.'[25] In an earlier scene from Jurassic Park, the tyrannosaurus-rex examines the car in which the children are hiding. After watching the action unfold from a distance, Dr. Grant demonstrates both bravery and selflessness when he chooses to place himself in a position of jeopardy to save their lives. He ignites a flare and distracts the dinosaur from their hiding place. Quite obviously, he could have chosen to do otherwise, for example, to privilege his own interests or sense of self-preservation, as did the lawyer, Gennaro (Martin Ferrero), who flees the same scene, abandoning the children.

A frequent supplement to this orientation strategy, which serves to reinforce the idea that heroes have made a correct, ideologically approved choice, is the manner in which subsequent events in the narrative often preclude them from having to deal with the negative consequences of their (selfless) heroic actions. This phenomenon has predecessors in folk tradition (the fairy-tale) and is epitomised by the conclusions of narratives such as Beauty and the Beast (Trousdale & Wise, 1991). To explain, Belle chooses to love the Beast for who he is on the inside. As soon as she makes this decision, the Beast transforms into a beautiful prince. This kind of moral-causal manipulation creates a utopian world in which our sacrifices are almost always rewarded with the very thing that constituted the object of the sacrifice in the first place. Ironically, this undermines the moral commitment of such decisions after the fact.

For example, at the conclusion of Aladdin (Clements & Musker, 1992), Aladdin has one wish remaining and a very important decision to make. He can transform himself once again into Prince Ali and marry Princess Jasmine (who by

royal decree can only marry royalty) or he can honour a promise he made to the Genie to free him from bondage, in which case, he will not be able to marry the princess. In an act of tremendous self-sacrifice, he chooses the latter. Immediately, the MCE intervenes to create a situation in which this sacrifice and its consequences do not have to be endured, i.e., the Sultan immediately revokes the restrictive decree. The union between Aladdin and Jasmine is re-established and Aladdin is restored to the position of wealth and power he has just renounced. Also, in Jurassic Park, following his rescue of the children, Dr. Grant's act of self-sacrifice is rewarded by the very thing he chooses to put at risk, i.e., his own life. In other words, he survives the scene. Conversely, the lawyer Gennaro, in selfishly deciding to preserve his life, loses his in the maw of the dinosaur.

Part III: Saving Private Ryan

Saving Private Ryan (Spielberg, 1998) takes place on and immediately following the D-Day landing of US troops at Omaha Beach. It is the story of a squad of eight soldiers under the leadership of Captain John Miller (Tom Hanks) whose orders are to locate Private James Francis Ryan (Matt Damon), a soldier whose three brothers have recently been killed in action. The picaresque adventure follows the squad as they travel across Normandy encountering numerous hazards that cause them to call into question the value of their mission. After several incidents, they locate Ryan but, because he refuses to abandon his post, they remain with him to defend a bridge, a decision that proves costly and claims not only Miller's life but also the lives of all but two of his squad. The bridge, however, is defended successfully and Ryan is ultimately returned to his mother in Iowa to lead a long and worthy (not to mention fertile) life. This case study demonstrates the three

representative orientation strategies described in Part II: orientation by ultimate resolution, orientation by direct intervention and orientation by creating situations of moral choice.

Orientation by Ultimate Resolution

The ultimate goal of the film's narrative, i.e., the means by which we determine the success or failure of the heroes, is suggested not only by the title of the film but is also laid out in very clear terms as a specific mission objective. As Captain Miller explains to Sergeant Mike Horvath (Tom Sizemore):

> You and I are taking a squad over to Neuville on a public relations mission... Some private in the Hundred-and-First lost three brothers and he's got a ticket home.[26]

As expected, there is no obvious indication during the course of the film that this goal will be achieved. On the contrary, event after event in the narrative seems to militate against it. This is in keeping with the prerogative of the cooperative MCE to maintain a state of unresolved conflict for a certain portion of the narrative.

Several prominent necessary causal connections are established that demonstrate this initial opposition, an opposition sometimes so severe that the MCE punishes some actions that would otherwise be rewarded. For example, as a direct result of a compassionate attempt by Private Caparzo (Vin Diesel) to save a young French girl, he is shot and killed by a sniper. The massive casualties sustained by the squad further point to the lack of positive cooperation by the MCE. Of the eight soldiers who began the mission, two are killed before Ryan is found (Caparzo and Wade) and a further four die defending the bridge (Miller, Horvath, Mellish, and Jackson). This does not include the many other casualties sustained by the soldiers

already stationed at the bridge in Ramelle under Corporal Henderson (Max Martini). This loss of squad members during the early stages of the mission further aggravates the conflict and dissension within the group and, in the case of the death of T/4 Medic Irwin Wade (Giovanni Ribisi), precipitates a mutiny when Private Reiben (Edward Burns) refuses to continue on the mission. By the end of the film, however, not only is the mission to save Private Ryan successful but the defence of the bridge is also achieved. This is in keeping with the ultimate goal of the cooperative MCE of ensuring the final victory for the heroes.

Orientation by Direct Intervention

The most direct favourable intervention of the cooperative MCE occurs near the end of the film. Captain Miller and his soldiers have been fighting a valiant but losing battle against overwhelming German armour and infantry. Eventually, Miller sees no option but to retreat and destroy the bridge they have already lost so many lives attempting to protect. However, just when all seems lost, out of the blue, like the cavalry of the Old West, the advancing Allied ground forces arrive on the scene (with air support) to rout the enemy and save the day. Although Miller and most of his men are killed during this encounter, ultimately, their twin goals of defending the bridge and saving Private Ryan are ensured.

In order to reduce the coincidental nature of this event, to retain an adequate level of narrative credibility, this intervention is foreshadowed, i.e., Corporal Henderson has already explained to Miller (and the audience) that his men are charged with defending the bridge at Ramelle until these ground forces arrive. The otherwise arbitrary quality of this last-minute intervention is further mitigated a witty causal connection made in these final scenes. As the fatally wounded Miller lies

slumped against a motorcycle, he shoots blindly at an oncoming German tank. Miraculously, after several shots, the tank explodes. Although the explosion was actually caused by an overhead P-51 'Tankbuster' bomber, this causal link between Miller's ineffectual shooting and the massive explosion of the tank associates the former with the latter and situates it, if only indirectly, as the product of Miller's individual agency. The impression, it could be suggested, is not that Miller is saved by forces external to him but that he is somehow responsible for his own salvation. This is perfectly in keeping with one of the most basic axioms of the American dream, according to Ashbee, that '[individuals] should be self-reliant... [and] should not look to, or depend upon government provision.'[27]

Orientation by Engineering Revelation of Character

Several situations are engineered in this film in which the moral alignment of certain characters is revealed through the quality of their freely chosen actions. However, such occasions are relatively rare because of the specific contingency of all the film's apparently moral actions to the inviolable military 'order'. During an exchange on the way to Neuville, the squad discusses the nature of orders:

REIBEN
Do you want to explain the math of this to me? I mean, where's the sense of risking the lives of the eight of us to save one guy?

MILLER
Anybody want to answer that?

[...]

UPHAM
Ours is not to reason why. Ours is but to do and die.

MELLISH
La, la, la, la, la. What the fuck is that supposed to mean? Huh? We're all supposed to die, is that it?

MILLER
Upham's talking about our duty as soldiers.

[...]

We all have our orders and we have to follow them
and that supersedes everything...

This exchange establishes the imperative quality of the order. Whether or not one agrees with the specific content of an order, its status as order precludes meaningful debate. Later at the radar site, the imperative quality of the order is reiterated when Miller explains his specific understanding of their mission objective:

I don't know anything about Ryan. I don't care.
The man means nothing to me. He's just a name,
but if... You know, if going to Ramelle, and
finding him so he can go home, if that earns me
the right to get back to my wife, well then...
Then that's my mission.

As 'The Mission is a Man' (according to the film's promotional materials), not caring about the man, i.e., Private Ryan, is synonymous with not caring about the mission. That Miller has no regard for the specific content of an order and still obeys further demonstrates the imperative quality of the order *qua* order to which he is aligned. It follows that, within this military context, the only way an individual can freely choose to perform a moral action is if the action is performed during a hiatus from the network of orders, i.e., a temporary period during which the institutional consequences of a violation of orders are suspended. In Saving Private Ryan, the cooperative MCE engineers just such a temporary hiatus.

From the outset, Private Reiben questions the value of the mission. Following the death of Wade, sustained while attacking a German machine-gun position, both he and Private Jackson (Barry Pepper) take out their anger on the sole surviving German soldier, Steamboat Willie (Georg Staedler). When Miller prevents them from

executing the German, Reiben cracks and threatens to desert the squad. He reminds the audience of the serious consequences of denying an order, saying that he doesn't care if he spends the rest of his life in a stockade as a result of his mutinous behaviour. Miller responds:

> You wanna leave? You wanna go off and fight the war? Alright. Alright. I won't stop you. I'll even put in the paperwork.

Miller's offer allows Reiben to abandon the mission without the normal consequences of such an action, i.e., a court-martial. As a result, Reiben's decision can have meaningful moral content. Therefore, when he agrees to fall in and continue the mission to find Ryan, his act is especially selfless, his status as hero re-enforced.

That Reiben has made the correct, ideologically approved decision is soon made clear when his apparent sacrifice is rewarded with the very thing he gave up in the first place. In other words, as soon as he commits to the idea that his current mission is a purely humanitarian public relations exercise, the narrative universe alters its moral-causal fabric, transforming the mission into a crucial contribution to the ultimate success of the Allied war effort. In other words, Reiben gets to 'fight the war'. This transformation is effected when Private Ryan refuses to abandon his post and Miller resolves to remain and defend the bridge at Ramelle.

The importance of this bridge is established by three discrete pieces of foreshadowing dispersed across the narrative. Firstly, during an early conversation in Neuville between Captain Fred Hamill (Ted Danson) and Captain Miller, the connection between Cherbourg and the taking of Berlin is established as a linear chain of cause and effect:

HAMILL
You gotta take Caen so you can take Saint-Lô.

MILLER
You gotta take Saint-Lô to take Valognes.

HAMILL
Valognes, you got Cherbourg.

MILLER
Cherbourg, you got Paris.

HAMILL
Paris, you got Berlin.

MILLER
And then that big boat home.

Secondly, at an Allied rallying-point, Miller makes a further, more specific connection between an allied landing at Cherbourg and the town of Ramelle where Private Ryan is believed stationed:

MILLER
Ramelle is on the Merderet river, right here. Just to the south west of us.

[HORVATH]
You know anything about this bridge he was talking about.

MILLER
Yeah. The target has always been Cherbourg. We can't push on Paris unless we take a deep-water port. Rommel knows that. So he's gonna try and get his armor across the Merderet river anywhere he can. That way, he can hit our invasion forces in the flank.

[...]

That makes any village on that river with an intact bridge solid-gold real estate.

Thirdly, at Ramelle, Corporal Henderson explains to Captain Miller the specific importance of the bridge:

Sir, our orders are to hold this bridge. Now, our planes in the Eighty-Second have taken out every bridge across the Merderet with the exception of two. One at Valognes and this one here.

The importance of Ramelle as a location of strategic importance to both Cherbourg and Paris is also (if only momentarily) visually reinforced by the signs on the wall of the building Miller enters while planning the defence of the bridge (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Miller and Reiben prepare to defend the bridge at Ramelle.

These various, discrete pieces of information establish the bridge at Ramelle not only as important to the immediate aims of an Allied landing at Cherbourg, but also, by virtue of the connection made by Miller and Hamill, as potentially central to the success of the entire war effort. If the bridge at Ramelle is lost to the Germans, then Rommel can flank the Allied invasion forces on their way to Cherbourg, prevent the liberation of Paris and, consequently, the causally related fall of Berlin. Simply put, if Captain Miller and his men lose the bridge at Ramelle, the Allies may not win the war.[28] In the end, then, despite his apparent sacrifice, not only does the (ultimately) virtuous Reiben get to fight the 'Good War', he also participates in a mission established as central to the winning of the war itself. Consequently, our orientation to his role as hero is revealed both through his freely chosen decision to commit to a

humanitarian cause and through the *a posteriori* transformation of the mission into the very thing he was sacrificing in the first place.

SECTION TWO: HEROES AND VILLAINS

Peter Brooks describe the good and evil characters of melodrama as follows: 'they inhabit persons who indeed have no psychological complexity but who are strongly characterized. Most notably, evil is villainy; it is a swarthy, cape-enveloped man with a deep voice.'[29] This section examines the highly personalized heroes and villains themselves and the manner in which certain specific culturally determined physical and behavioural traits function as strong indices of their moral character. These orientation strategies tend to make the roles of hero and villain very obvious, effecting what Peter Brooks calls 'a clear nomination of the moral universe', sustaining the 'legibility of signs',[30] or as Christine Gledhill puts it, '[forcing] into aesthetic presence identity, value and plenitude of meaning.'[31] As these orientation strategies rapidly stack up, the narrative confirms and reconfirms what we already know. As Brooks writes: 'Nothing is *under*stood, all is *over*stated.'[32] This is to say, that in many popular film narratives, there is a high level of semantic redundancy.

The use of these kinds of orientation strategies condenses more immanent ideological forces into more obvious concrete manifestations, a process eminently compatible with the highly individualistic quality of the American dream. It is useful to consider this transformation in terms of the distinction Barthes makes between strong and weak myths: '[In] the former, the political quantum is immediate, the depoliticization is abrupt; in the latter, the political quality of the object has *faded* like a colour'.[33] Weak myths (or ideological structures) control effectively because they are largely unperceived. However, strong myths are highly visible, obvious, embodied

by the institutions we hold to be the primary sources of (oppressive) power, such as the police, army or government. In many popular 1990s films, for a number of related reasons, strong representations of heroism and villainy are favoured over weak representations. To begin with, strong representations assist the reader in an unambiguous recognition of the presence, progress and resolution of the closed narrative structure by making highly legible the ultimate expulsion of an obvious villain by an equally obvious hero. Also, repeated, naturalised representations of strong powers can lead readers to believe that injustice is manifested exclusively in the abuse of this kind of obvious power. This tends to preclude a more appropriate consideration of how their consent is more subtly and hegemonically manufactured by weak powers. As Eagleton writes:

> It is preferable on the whole for power to remain conveniently invisible, disseminated throughout the texture of social life and thus 'naturalized' as custom, habit, spontaneous practice. Once power nakedly reveals its hand, it can become an object of political contestation.[34]

In other words, strong representations of villainy euphemise the immanent operation of the weak powers they conceal.

Also, as it is difficult (and, as we have seen, undesirable) to enumerate the many disparate environmental factors that contribute to various social ills, readers often prefer to scapegoat discrete, obvious individuals. As Thomas Elsaesser writes: '[Popular culture] has resolutely refused to understand social change in other than private contexts and emotional terms... [This has] meant ignorance of the proper social and political dimensions of these changes and their causality.'[35] Through the use of certain orientation strategies, unfocused social forces are decontextualised, translated into villains; 'Complex social processes [are] simplified... by blaming the evil disposition of individuals'.[36] When villains are established as an effect or

symptom of a wider social problem, their actions necessarily constitute a criticism of this wider social milieu. The use of these orientation strategies elides this potential social critique by making villains objects of disapproval independently of the social and political context that may actually have prompted their actions. In doing so, readers can mistake the symptom for the cause, believing falsely that the mere elimination of the symptom constitutes a total solution to the prior social ill. Also, as they are no longer the products (or victims) of social circumstance, but apparently free and independent agents, strong villains are eminently more responsible for the moral quality of their actions. By establishing social ills as 'wholly a product of character rather than of situation or society',[37] villains now appear to derive their negative social behaviour from another, discrete, extra-social source, one often referred to as 'evil'.

This preference for strong representations of heroism and villainy over weaker ones is further evidenced (if only indirectly) by the tendency in many popular 1990s films for representations of the latter to regress into representations of the former. For example, certain otherwise-blameless, weak, natural evils, such as dinosaurs, icebergs or meteorites, are almost always displaced onto stronger, more obvious, human evils, i.e., villains. In Jurassic Park (Spielberg, 1993) the purely instinctive, rampaging dinosaurs are treated as a manifestation of humanity's presumption in the face of nature. In Twister (De Bont, 1996), a purely meteorological phenomenon is displaced by the interfering machinations of the rival storm-chasing team lead by Dr. Jonas Miller (Cary Elwes). In Titanic (Cameron, 1997), a similar translation occurs when the otherwise arbitrary tragedy of a collision between an ocean-liner and an iceberg is expressed in terms of human pride and professional negligence and blamed, respectively, on owner J. Bruce Ismay (Jonathan Hyde) and the ship's captain,

Edward. J. Smith (Bernard Hill).[38] Armageddon (Bay, 1998) goes so far as to afford a personality to the incoming meteorite. It makes certain animalistic noises, e.g., groans and roars. Also, when conditions on the surface of the meteorite suddenly become worse, Harry S. Stamper (Bruce Willis) comments: 'I don't think this thing likes us'; to which Charles 'Chick' Chapple (Will Patton) replies: 'That's because it knows we're here to kill it.' In addition to this anthropomorphism, the natural threat of the meteorite is further displaced by the human conflict between Stamper's team of Roughnecks and the NASA bureaucracy, a conflict that eventually collapses into even more human terms, i.e., a *mano a mano* fistfight between Stamper and Colonel William Sharp (William Fichtner). Finally, in Silence of the Lambs (Demme, 1991), it could be argued that the villain is not Dr. Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) or the serial-killer, Jame 'Buffalo Bill' Gumb (Ted Levine). Their respective evils can be explicated in terms of a natural evil, i.e., pathological mental illness. Consequently, the true villainy in the film is displaced onto Dr. Frederick Chilton (Anthony Heald), the director of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane in which Lecter is incarcerated. Chilton exhibits various villainous behavioural traits that would seem more appropriately applied to either Lecter or Gumb, i.e., sadism (he describes the sick actions of his patients with relish and joys in tormenting Lecter), lasciviousness (he invites FBI Agent Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) on a date), vengefulness (he jeopardises the FBI search for Senator Martin's daughter, Catherine (Brooke Smith), because Starling spurned his sexual overtures and, later, kept him out of the professional loop). Furthermore, the film's ending does not occur immediately after the material expulsion of Gumb or even Lecter but rather with the suggestion that Lecter intends to eat Chilton. It could be suggested that it is this final material

expulsion of Chilton as villain that provides the final (and, possibly, most satisfying) closure for the reader.

The representative orientation strategies relating to heroism and villainy discussed below are the act of 'nomination' and the ascription of certain physical and behavioural traits. These sets of strategies translate a single, general moral alignment into multiple, particular, culturally determined traits to create the traditional caricatures of the hero and villain.

Nomination (and Self-Nomination)

One of the most direct means of orienting readers to the role of hero or villain is the act of nomination. As Brooks writes:

> Saying one's own and one another's moral nature is an important part of melodrama's action and substance. This is particularly noticeable in the role of the villain, who at some point always bursts forth in a statement of his evil nature and intentions.[39]

Acts of nomination divide into two broad categories, i.e., when individuals declare the moral alignment of others and when individuals, most often villains, declare their own moral alignment.

Stating the moral alignment of another was actually systematised in the US film industry during the 1930s by Joseph Breen and the Studio Relations Committee (SRC). Breen believed that films must have a 'voice for moral behavior', a character who, according to Gregory D. Black, 'clearly told the criminal/sinner that he or she was wrong.' Breen himself noted:

> [Characters' choices] were either right or wrong. If they were wrong, they should be labeled as such. It should not be left up to the discretion of an immature mind to decide for himself or herself whether the character had acted rightly or wrongly...[40]

According to Lea Jacobs, discussing the representation of female sexual transgression in the popular films of the time, the SRC 'encouraged the studio to include... denunciation scenes, in which the heroine was chastized or reproached, and, in some cases, to specify the other characters as "good"'.[41] In a similar manner, in the popular films of the 1990s, a villain is characterised (usually by some authority figure) as either morally reprehensible, sadistic or crazy. In Silence of the Lambs, Dr. Chilton says of Lecter: 'Oh, he's a monster, a real psychopath'; in True Lies (Cameron, 1994), Albert 'Gib' Gibson (Tom Arnold) describes the villainous leader of the Crimson Jihad, Salim Abu Aziz (Art Mallik): 'This guy's really hardcore. Highly fanatical. The man's a real psycho'; and in Toy Story (Lasseter, 1995), Mr. Potato Head (voiced by Don Rickles) describes the kid next door, Sid Phillips (voiced by Erik von Detten): 'That ain't no happy child.'

When villains declare their own villainy it is usually in the form of an explicit rhetorical outburst or else a simple implicit awareness of their own evil nature (most often revealed by a self-conscious, sadistic pleasure taken in the performance of obviously evil actions). It's not hard to recall those instances in popular films when villains 'burst forth' with unequivocal declarations of the diabolical nature of their various dastardly plans for world domination; or when villains and their minions pause to contemplate their undeniable evilness, an act that more often than not segues into a bout of indulgent, whooping, self-congratulatory, 'evil' laughter. Obvious examples include Grand Vizier Jafar (voiced by Jonathan Freeman) in Aladdin and Sid in Toy Story; when he interrogates Buzz Lightyear, by virtue of a role-playing exercise, Sid aligns himself with the character of Darth Vader from the Star Wars

cycle. That Darth Vader is a well known, widely acknowledged cinematic villain suggests that Sid's role-playing, in this instance, constitutes an explicit identification on his part with the role of the villain.

However, while someone can nominate relatively unproblematically the villainy of another, an awareness or declaration of one's own villainy presents numerous logical difficulties. Simply put, outside of a fictional discourse, the self-nominating villain is an impossible figure. To explain, orientation strategies flatten out the complexity of human experience, reducing the dialectical implications of moral relativism to a Manichean dichotomy with an obvious positive and negative aspect. In this dichotomous moral universe, there are only heroes and villains. This polarisation establishes one subject position as the natural, heroic perspective from which to read the progress of the closed narrative structure. In other words, this privileged subject position is not regarded as partisan, as one side of a two-sided argument, but rather as singular and universal.

Consequently, these orientation strategies elide the incommensurability inherent in any genuine conflict between value-systems, recasting it instead as a conflict between the heroic champions of normalcy and anyone crazy or stupid enough to argue with their unquestionable righteousness. By announcing their villainy, villains assist in this elision of incommensurability. By demonstrating an awareness of the evil quality of their actions (and in such an obvious manner), villains represent themselves in the language of their opponent's ideological discourse, a discourse that posits their actions as unnatural, unjustified and, ultimately, irrational. Villains become complicit with their own denunciation.

The proper functioning of the self-nominating villain in fiction (like any other ideological construction) depends upon force for its effect, i.e., villainy is simply and

authoritatively stated. As is often the case in popular films, the demand for high levels of legibility takes priority over logical consistency. It is worth noting, if only in passing, that this paradoxical self-denunciation allows readers further to condemn villains as the latter can no longer claim ignorance of the evil quality of their deeds. That villains continue to be evil despite this awareness further confirms those villains' gratuitous commitment to evil for evil's sake.

The contradictory nature of such villains becomes clearer if we consider the ease with which they can be parodied. In Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me (Roach, 1999), much of the humour derives from the conflict between a self-denunciating villain, Dr. Evil (Mike Myers), and the complex social demands of the 'real' world in which he is clearly out of place.

Physical and Behavioural Traits

The use of certain physical traits as an index to morality has been more consistent through the ages than the use of certain behavioural traits, the former deriving from a source as consistently present and relatively unchanging as the physical human body. For this reason, many of the ways in which physiology is used to identify the hero or villain in the popular 1990s film have also been used, for example, in classical Greek comedy, in the works of Homer, the Bible, even in some of the earliest recorded myths. It is important to note, however, that just because the coding of certain physical traits seem to have been around forever, this does not mean that they are in any manner universal or transcendent. Each has a point of material origin, even if this origin has been lost in our earliest histories.

At the same time, this does not mean that certain new physical traits cannot emerge from more recent social developments. For example, what body type is

considered beautiful (and, thus, likely to be ascribed to heroism) undergoes constant revision. Consider the short-lived hard bodies of action heroes in the 1980s (such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone and Dolph Lundgren) or the rise in the 1990s of emaciated 'heroin chic'. In her analysis of Aladdin, Erin Addison notes that Princess Jasmine's almost imperceptible nose appears as 'the object of zealous cosmetic surgery' [42] and, thus, only 'beautiful' by relatively contemporary standards. Of course, certain physical traits have also fallen out of common use as moral indicators. Red hair or thin legs, for example, are no longer regarded as standard hallmarks of sexual promiscuity. The point being made here is that, although the culturally-determined meanings of certain physical traits is constantly evolving, there is still a sufficient number of physical traits that have been used (and continue to be used) with such persistence as to give the false impression that physiology as an index to morality is an acultural or transhistorical phenomenon; which it is not.

Social mores, on the other hand, are much more transient, changing from time to time, from place to place, and influenced by all forms of major and minor cultural and political vicissitude; with the result that the set of behavioural traits employed by a text to index morality provides a much more helpful reflection of the time and place in which the text was produced. In other words, the *specific* cultural and political life of a community is more likely to be legible in a character's behaviour rather than in his or her physical appearance. This is certainly true of contemporary America where depending on one's respective status as hero or villain, one's behavioural patterns can be read as either supporting or disrupting certain precepts of the 'American dream'.

Physical Traits

Sander L. Gilman notes that the 'identity of the Other, whether social outcast, marginal member of society, or sexual degenerate, is carried in his or her appearance.'[43] This belief accords with what has been theorised as the post-Enlightenment period's *hegemony of vision.*[44] It posits that the observation of external, empirical evidence can lead to an understanding of the internal operation of a system; and its necessary corollary, that the specific internal qualities of an organism will often manifest themselves in external signs. However, this explicit (and relatively arbitrary) correlation between internal psychology and external physiognomy is much older than the Enlightenment and can be discerned in texts as far back as the Bible.[45] Gilman, focusing on representations of the insane, traces its long history from some of its earliest proponents through to the modern era. He cites, among others, Aristotle (384-322 B.C.): 'when the character of the soul changes, it changes also the form of the body, and conversely, when the form of the body changes, it changes the character of the soul'; J. C. Lavater (1741-1801): 'an exact relationship exists between the soul and the body, between the internal and the external of man'; and Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860): 'the outer man is a graphic reproduction of the inner and the face the expression and revelation of his whole nature'.[46]

In popular Hollywood narratives, a character's physicality almost always functions as a material index to his or her individual moral alignment. James R. Keller writes: '[the misshapen individual's form] signified the breach of divine law, the moral order.'[47] Accordingly, these strategies present the villain's physicality as a set of deviations from an abstract, ideal conception of the human body that correlates directly with the extent of the villain's deviation from certain, specific moral norms.

Typically, this is achieved in either one of two ways; the tendency to idealise proportionately the physical characteristics of the hero while exaggerating and distorting the body of the villain; and/or the use of signs of bodily dissolution (often indexed by high levels of biological detail).

Exaggeration

Physical exaggeration and distortion are present in many live-action films but, due to the physical restrictions of live human physiognomy, such exaggeration tends to be limited to the representation of villains as either short and fat or tall and thin. Furthermore, the villain's typical countenance is ugly or, at the very least, less obviously beautiful than that afforded the hero. For example, in Home Alone, of the two burglars, Harry (Joe Pesci) is short and stocky while Marv is taller and thinner. They exist on opposite but complementary sides of the normally proportioned physicality most often afforded to the hero. Also, the exaggerated ugliness of Darth Maul (Ray Park) in Star Wars: Episode One - The Phantom Menace (Lucas, 1999) functions as a clear index to his villainy. Additionally, his red skin, luminescent eyes and horns are typical markings of the demon in Christian tradition (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: Darth Maul.

Nowhere, however, is physicality as an index to moral character more actively exploited than in animated films where the physical restrictions that limit exaggeration and distortion in live-action films do not obtain.

The eponymous hero of Aladdin is perfectly proportioned, his limbs and features roughly approximating those of a normal human being. His love-interest, Jasmine, is similarly proportioned. Her hour-glass figure, with extremely narrow waist, ample bosom and wide hips, points to a patriarchal model of female sexuality still regarded as 'normal' by dominant ideological standards ('[an] Arab Barbie doll in a belly-dancer costume'[48]). Furthermore, Aladdin and Jasmine's contours are smooth. Quite tellingly, they are the only two such evenly proportioned characters in the narrative. At the opposite extreme is Jafar, the villain of the film, with his unrealistically attenuated, tall, thin body with its harsher, sharp, angular contours (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: The physicalities of the main characters in Aladdin.

Certain common physical exaggerations originate in racial stereotypes with the notable consequence that popular films frequently enact an imperialist, ideological agenda. As Erin Addison notes, Aladdin is a 'deeply racist film'.[49] Although Addison traces this racism in many forms throughout the film, her discussion of heroic and villainous noses is representative. She writes: '[Aladdin] and Jasmine are the only human beings *with* American accents and *without* conspicuously aquiline noses (my emphasis).' Conversely, Jafar is coded as an Arab with his 'exaggerated, camel-like nose.'[50] The 'normal' body of the hero is most often a highly constructed, naturalised ideal that has no obvious correlative in reality. Given that the film's narrative is set in the Middle East, there is nothing natural or normal about Aladdin's relatively light skin. Furthermore, as noted above, there is nothing normal or natural about Jasmine's almost imperceptible nose.

Villainy in live-action films is often expressed in terms of a discourse of bodily dissolution. As James R. Keller writes: 'the absence of order and government in the body foreshadowed moral anarchy.' [51] The discourse of bodily dissolution translates moral disorder into a lack of physical order (closure, integrity, and consistency) and a pronounced (vulgar) biology. This relationship between 'moral anarchy' and the disordered body has its *locus classicus* in the carnival grotesque. As Stallybrass and White note:

> The openings and orifices of [the] carnival body are emphasized, not its closure and finish. It is an image of impure corporeal bulk with its orifices (mouth, nostrils, anus) yawning wide, and its lower regions (belly, legs, buttocks, genitals) given priority over its upper regions (head, spirit, reason).[52]

In certain popular films, the discourse of bodily dissolution is effected either by signs of physical corruption or by high levels of biological detail. Both these sets of orientation strategies either highlight (in the case of the villain) or deny (in the case of the hero) the embarrassing or disturbing realities of human biology. Like the carnival grotesque, they tend to establish the villain as 'of the body', presuming all the negative connotations of the Cartesian mind-body divide. Conversely, the hero tends to be situated as 'of the mind', assuming the more positive connotations that attend that alignment.

Signs of physical corruption, such as a missing eye or limb, point to the ongoing deterioration and eventual dissolution of the human body, the destruction of the self, to sickness and disease and, ultimately, to death. Signs of physical corruption align the villain with these negative themes (see Figure 5). Conversely, a healthy, proportioned, fully integrated body points to endurance, longevity and, by extension, to immortality or godliness.

A high level of biological detail, such as nipples, fingernails and facial hair, when foregrounded in representation, presents the viewer with an anatomical accuracy that implies the existence of yet other, very real bodily functions, such as defecation and reproduction, functions that announce the undeniable physicality of the human body and, by extension, point to its inevitable dissolution. At its outermost limits, the villain's body becomes the locus of *taboo* bodily functions. In short, while high levels of biological detail index the potential of the body for physical deterioration, actual corruption of the body, such as missing eyes, scars, etc., offers evidence of this deterioration in progress.

The discourse of bodily dissolution informs a narrative on other levels. Not only are villains themselves physically corrupted, but their methods and goals often involve the corruption and dissolution of the physical integrity of others. For similar reasons, heroes are often motivated by goals that involve the preservation of life, the restitution of health, the protection of hereditary blood-lines, i.e., family, etc.

Signs of Bodily Corruption

In Toy Story, Sid is (relatively) ugly and his need for dental braces points to the deteriorated condition of his teeth. Furthermore, his acts of villainy tap directly into anxieties relating to the discourse of bodily dissolution, i.e., he dissects and recombines toys to create unnatural biological juxtapositions, such as dolls with dinosaur heads. Other acts of cruelty involve the actual destruction of the body itself either through melting (in the case of Woody) or by explosives (in the cases of Buzz Lightyear and Combat Carl).

In Home Alone, moral alignment is revealed in the attitudes the various characters have towards their bodies. While the burglars are grubby and unkempt, Kevin is repeatedly revealed in hygienic situations, washing, deodorising and, though

painful (and unnecessary), using aftershave.[53] At one point in the narrative, he vocalises his newfound and strange enjoyment of personal cleanliness; later he asks a shop assistant if a particular toothbrush he intends to buy is certified by the Dental Association of America. Kevin's attitude towards his body is one of respect. He seeks to maintain its health and integrity and, thus, to forestall its dissolution. Also, as a growing child Kevin is even farther removed from the negative associations of old-age, i.e., deterioration and death, than are the older villains. Although the violence in this film is cartoonish, it is revealing to note that these villains carry, from scene to scene, the marks of their accumulated injuries, i.e., burnt hair, bruises, etc., thus pointing to the eminently destructible nature of their bodies.

In Jurassic Park, the villainous Dennis Nedry (Wayne Knight) is a mass of undesirable biological details, i.e., he is corpulent, sweaty and generally unhealthy. His gruesome death is also related to the discourse of bodily dissolution, i.e., he is first blinded, then (presumably) eaten by a poison-spitting dinosaur. Slight physical disability is also used in this film to point to moral flaws in characters that might otherwise be regarded as heroes. The creator of the dinosaurs, John Hammond (Richard Attenborough), uses a cane to compensate for a limp. Although he is ultimately aligned with the heroic camp, by virtue of his positive resolution, i.e., he survives the ordeal, his minor deviation from a fully integrated, fully functional heroic body is symptomatic of his early pride and presumption in the face of nature, his belief that he could play God by resurrecting long-extinct animals. From a psychological point of view, his rampaging Jurassic (and Cretaceous) creations can be read as external projections of this deeply repressed, normally villainous presumption, a presumption that he continually denies by displacing it onto the supposedly secular discourse of scientific positivism. His limp indicates to the audience that all is not

well with his character, that there might be something dangerous lurking just beneath the surface, threatening to break forth at any time; which is exactly what happens in this film, i.e., the spotless theme park veneer is penetrated by the 'monsters' that it tries desperately but vainly to control and repress.

In Forrest Gump, the young Gump (Michael Conner Humphreys) is physically handicapped. His back is, in his mother's words, 'as crooked as a politician'. At this early stage in the film, Gump's external physical deformity indexes his less visible, internal mental handicap. While this suggests the film might diverge from the dominance of the fully integrated, healthy, heroic body, ultimately it subscribes to this ideal and in a manner indicative of a discomfort, on the part of its creators, with the typical (negative) ideological implications of physical disability, i.e., the transition to the adult Gump (Tom Hanks) is marked by the dramatic shedding of his leg-braces. After this episode, not only is he fully able-bodied, he is also an incomparable athlete who demonstrates speed and stamina on the playing field and during the Vietnam War. It is as if his athletic achievements are intended to (over)compensate, *a posteriori*, for Gump's childhood as a less physically functional human being, i.e., to erase our memory of the time when Gump failed to satisfy the prevailing physical requirements of the hero.

The discourse of bodily dissolution is also employed as an index to the moral progress of Gump's friend, Lieutenant Dan Taylor (Gary Sinese). As a direct result of losing his legs in Vietnam, Lieutenant Dan becomes an alcoholic and a depressive. Eventually, with the help of Gump, he rebuilds his life. The resolution of the film sees Lieutenant Dan arrive at Gump's wedding with a new set of 'magic', titanium-alloy legs, his moral redemption indicated by his reconstitution (reintegration) as a proportional human being. As Peter N. Chumo II writes: '[In] the final scene, Dan has

new legs, which suggest both a restoration to his manhood and his reassimilation into American society.'[54]

Independence Day pits a largely formless alien physiology against an idealised heroic group-body distributed across a number of racially diverse characters. When we first see the aliens, they seem composed of a mass of tentacles and fleshy goo with no obvious holistic form. A lack of a fully integrated body is often characteristic of the villain. Noël Carroll notes that the 'monster' is that which is 'categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete, or formless.'[55] At the same time, the heroes are presented as healthy, fully-integrated human specimens drawn, rather conspicuously, from across a wide racial, religious and political spectrum, creating a multi-ethnic, American super-hero, i.e., Captain Steve Hiller (Will Smith) is an African-American, David Levinson (Jeff Goldblum) is Jewish, and President Whitmore (Bill Pullman) is a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant.[56] Significantly, the one heroic character in the film that diverges from this ideal is the drunken, overweight, unshaven crop-duster Russell Casse (Randy Quaid). Unsurprisingly, he is the only one of the four main heroes who dies.

In Saving Private Ryan, the discourse of bodily dissolution manifests itself in the film's numerous graphic, often-explosive portrayals of physical dismemberment and in its constant foregrounding of both limbless and rotting corpses. The horrors of war are expressed almost exclusively in terms of this literal dissolution of individual physical integrity. This explicit correlation between war and bodily dissolution accounts for the significance of the final images of Ryan as an old man, surrounded by his extended family, comprised entirely of healthy, able-bodied human beings. These images associate peace with bodily integrity, the very opposite of bodily dissolution.

In Terminator 2: Judgment Day, the portrayal of villainy is notable as much for its use of the discourse of bodily dissolution as for its conscious exploitation of it. The T-1000 (Robert Patrick), like the aliens in Independence Day, is threatening because its body lacks a consistent or recognisable form. As a 'mimetic poly-alloy' it has no fixed form or identity, no essential body. It is categorically indeterminate, neither one thing nor another, always transitional. As it is an excellent impersonator, readers can never be sure exactly who it is or readily identify it from its outer appearance. Consequently, it is additionally frightening as it denies readers their normal use of the body as a reliable external index to internal moral alignment. In fact, the T-1000 actively undermines the reliability of all orientation strategies predicated on physical considerations.

However, when the T-1000 first appears, it adopts the uniform of the policeman it incapacitates. At the same time, it does not assume that officer's facial features. Thus, the face of the T-1000 is something that it has brought with it from the future, part of a pre-existing identity. Furthermore, although it can adopt any form it wants, male or female, it returns constantly to the form of the policeman with the face of actor Robert Patrick. This is symptomatic of certain institutional demands of the Hollywood narrative. It allows readers more clearly to track the T-1000's physical progress, to focus enmity on a relatively consistent identity (so that readers can find satisfying its material expulsion during the climax of the film). This concession mitigates the terror originally invoked by the villain's apparent formlessness. The unfixed protean nature of the T-1000, that which makes it an incredibly effective and terrifying killer, it could be argued, is compromised by the audience's demand for a strong, legible villain.

Aladdin offers an excellent example of the way in which certain levels of biological detail not only point to the heroes and villains, but also index active and dynamic shifts in moral alignment. The villains in this film have a high level of biological detail. While the most positive, sympathetic characters in the film, i.e., Aladdin and Jasmine, have a single pure band of unindividuated teeth, the antagonists (Jafar, his Guards, Iago the parrot[57]) have fully-individuated teeth, are missing a few or have gold replacements (see Figure 5). In this film, pronounced facial hair is also a villainous attribute. Morally reprehensible characters are more hirsute than their virtuous counterparts, sporting either moustaches or beards or both. Other biological details function in a similar manner, such as nipples and fingernails; as a general rule, it seems, villains have them while heroes do not.[58]



Figure 5: The individuated and incomplete teeth of Jafar's guard.

There are, of course, notable exceptions to this rule. Abu (Aladdin's monkey sidekick) has fully individuated teeth. This, however, can be justified by his clear

exhibition of negative qualities such as jealousy and selfishness. Also, the benevolent Sultan has ample facial hair, i.e., a full white beard and moustache. Again, this can be justified as his character is naïve to the point of irresponsibility and frequently acts, albeit unwittingly, in the interests of the villains.

Varying levels of biological detail also index actual shifts in moral alignment. There are three different and distinct genie physiognomies represented in the film; (1) the Genie (voiced by Robin Williams) as he serves Aladdin, (2) the Genie as he serves Jafar and (3) Jafar himself who, after making his third wish, becomes a genie. Each of these genii is represented with different levels of biological detail. The Genie when he serves Aladdin has a disproportionate body (typical of villainy) but his contours are smooth (typical of heroism); he has a beard (typical of villainy) but, notably, no moustache (typical of heroism). Most tellingly, his teeth are only partially individuated (a half-length, grey-blue line divides them); and he has no nipples. This carefully considered combination of both heroic biological abstraction and villainous biological detail reflects the fundamental moral ambiguity that informs the character of the Genie, someone who can, depending on the morality of his master, serve the ends of good or evil. When the same Genie serves Jafar, an increased level of biological detail indicates his forced villainy. His eyes become blank (a sign of bodily corruption), he becomes much bigger (exaggerated proportions), his muscles become more strongly pronounced and he gains several extra ridges on his forehead.[59] Finally, when Jafar himself becomes a genie, his muscular structure is extremely pronounced, his proportions are immense and he has a prominent set of nipples (a feature conspicuously absent from the benevolent genie). The general correlation between heroism and villainy and varying levels of biological detail is affirmed by these

dynamic, morally-determined, physical alterations that occur in complete disregard for consistency in the representation of a single (albeit magical) species.

Behavioural Traits

In popular narratives, behavioural traits tend to be apportioned in a specific and relatively consistent manner. The hero is accorded ideologically approved, socially desirable personal attributes while the villain is accorded socially undesirable traits. In popular 1990s film, as I noted, these traits tend to accord with the precepts of the American dream. Furthermore, the hero often embodies contemporary, 'progressive' moral standards and attitudes while the villain embodies those attitudes that readers feel are outdated, that humanity has learned (or aspires) to overcome.

Racism is one such contemporary attitude. Regardless of glaring disparities in the incomes of whites and blacks in contemporary America, racism, especially in its more overt or violent forms, has no place in the American dream, where everyone is to be judged (allegedly) on their self-reliance and industriousness. Examples of racist villains in the popular film sample include certain Americans in Dances with Wolves (Costner, 1990) and Pocahontas (Gabriel & Goldberg, 1995), Governor George Wallace (briefly) in Forrest Gump, British ex-patriot (and imperialist throwback) Vincent Cadby in Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls (Oedekerk, 1995) and the misanthropic Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving) in The Matrix (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999).

It is interesting to note the extent to which racism as a trait (and also a theme) is typically evoked within historical narratives. Of course, within this context the demand that the hero exhibit progressive values can result in conspicuous anachronisms. At the same time, within an historical context racist villains can be

read as the simple products of their time (as in the case of the racism in Dances with Wolves and Pocahontas) and, thus, quite 'normal'. Modern readers, it could be argued, are often willing to elide this observation, preferring to praise social progress. Consequently, we can not only accord to contemporary (heroic) ideological standards a falsely universal, ahistorical quality, but also, in hissing the historical villain, we can celebrate, in the true spirit of an Enlightenment emergence narrative, how far humanity has (supposedly) advanced since such primitive, backward times. In short, by situating racism in the past, the egalitarianism of the American dream is preserved. The more or less absence in popular 1990s cinema of racism (either as a theme or villainous behavioural trait) outside of an historical context is surprising and stands as a remarkable instance of ideological avoidance, especially given the prominence of race issues during the decade; relevant events include the 1991 roadside assault of Rodney King by Los Angeles police officers and the LA riots that followed the officers' acquittal, the 1994 election (four years after his release from prison) of Nelson Mandela as the first black president of South Africa, the 1995 double-murder trial of O.J. Simpson, and so on.

It is also worth noting, if only in passing, the apparent double standard demonstrated by Hollywood in its use of racism as an index to villainy. At the same time as the Nazi or white supremacist is condemned, the Hollywood narrative employs a range of reductive cultural stereotypes as its villains. The crazy Arab is one such figure, employed to questionable effect in True Lies (Cameron, 1994) and Aladdin (Clements & Musker, 1992). Racism, it seems, is only racism if one discriminates against a political ally or a sizable, potentially unruly subsection of the domestic population.

What follows is a brief representative summation of the kinds of behavioural traits exhibited by certain heroes and villains in the popular film sample. It should be stated that, for the moment, I offer little more than a catalogue of these various traits with only occasional and brief references to their material origins or context. This is because a more detailed consideration of this context is reserved for Chapter Three, when the various recurring discourses and themes of the popular Hollywood cinema are discussed in detail. This later discussion of discourses provides the context for the following catalogue because, as we will see, the most frequently employed behavioural traits relate directly to the heroic affirmation or villainous disruption of these recurring discourses, e.g., the supreme value of life, heterosexual love, family or individualism (all crucial elements of the American dream).

In Home Alone, the burglars are wantonly destructive, disrespectful of the personal property of others (as they loot one of the neighbour's houses, Marv leaves the taps running); disrespectful of certain family institutions, i.e., Christmas (Harry unwraps the family's Christmas presents and plays with their toys); temperamental and disloyal (they constantly bicker and fight amongst themselves); presumptuous and over-confident (they underestimate the abilities and resourcefulness of their juvenile opponent). At the opposite extreme, Kevin's behaviour is dictated almost entirely by his attempts to reproduce the (American) capitalist discourses that the burglars are intent on disrupting. His incessant defence of property rights and nascent domestic skills testify to this goal.

In Terminator 2: Judgment Day, the T-1000 is, among other things, cruel to children (it roughly shoves them from its path) and animals (it slays John Connor's dog); disrespectful of the institution of family (it kills John's foster family); and disrespectful of human life in general (it shoots innocent bystanders). Again, at the

opposite pole is the heroic mother, Sarah Connor, whose every action is predicated on a maternal respect for familial bonds, geared towards protecting her son both from the immediate danger of the T-1000 and from a future of hardship (as the leader of the human resistance).

Aladdin's Jafar is a veritable laundry list of negative behavioural traits. He is hypocritical and deceitful (he uses covert, hypnotic black magic rather than honest persuasion to obtain his ends, uses secret passageways rather than the open hallways); sadistic (he relishes the telling of bad news); cruel to animals (a fact demonstrated periodically by his disregard for the physical safety of his parrot side-kick, Iago); he shirks personal involvement (often delegating his dirty-work to his guards, demonstrating an unwillingness to apply himself personally to the tasks at hand); he has scant regard for contractual agreements (he reneges on his agreement to reward Aladdin for obtaining the lamp); scantier regard for the sanctity of marriage, women and human life in general (he is willing to marry Jasmine for purely political reasons and, later, to kill her); he is vain, lascivious, vulgar and a messy eater (spitting chewed apple onto the face of Jasmine as he speaks with his mouth full).[60]

Like many villains, with respect to the American dream, Jafar's main flaw is an attempt to increase his wealth outside of the ideologically approved channels of hard work and personal virtue, an act that usually results in punishment (although sometimes the villain can be rehabilitated). For example, the burglars in Home Alone and the kidnappers in Ransom (Howard, 1996) are brought to justice, their behaviour clearly articulated as wrong. The consequences of unsanctioned self-aggrandisement are thrown into sharp (almost Biblical) relief in the conclusion of Ghost (Zucker, 1990) when the illegal (and murderous) business activities of the villain, Carl Bruner (Tony Goldwyn), result in a literal descent into hell. Alternatively, characters can be

condemned for their abuse of (or excessive commitment to) otherwise legitimate aspects of capitalism. This affirms a notion of proper conduct within a capitalist ideology (a restrained conduct, it should be noted, that finds very few adherents in the real world of big business). For example, in Pretty Woman (Marshall, 1990), Edward Lewis (Richard Gere) must regain his humanity by renouncing his all-consuming love of the deal. This type of rehabilitation affirms the highly individualist notion that it is not capitalism itself that is responsible for widespread social inequality but rather displaces the blame onto certain individuals that abuse the system, i.e., villains.

In Jurassic Park, Dennis Nedry is glutinous as opposed to frugal (a trait identified by Benjamin Franklin as part of the 'dream'); when we first encounter Nedry, he is feeding, finishing one plate of food and about to commence another). He is also incredibly self-interested (he betrays his boss, John Hammond, for purely financial reasons and, as a direct result, places his own interests over the safety and lives of others); greedy and miserly (he expects the envoy from the rival genetics company to pay for his lunch despite the fact that he has just received a huge payment in cash). He is the embodiment of greed, craving both food and cash with equal rapacity. He is also vain (he believes his technical skills to be beyond compare) and messy (his work station is covered in candy wrappers and half-eaten junk food).

In this film, the behavioural traits of the dinosaurs are interesting for a related reason. They cannot properly be conceived as villains as they are a combination of both human and natural evils. On the one hand, they are natural creatures with instincts and drives but, on the other hand, they are the result of humankind's folly, a projection of the unethical applications of genetic technology, of pride and presumption in the face of nature. As a result, they carry a secondary human villainy through this association with humanity's *hubris*. Consequently, their destructive

behaviour is simultaneously blameable and blameless. This moral ambiguity not only explicates why they are, with one early exception,[61] never killed by human means but only by each other, but also accounts for the fluctuating hero-villain positioning of the tyrannosaurus-rex, i.e., a villain early on (when she terrorises the heroes) yet a saviour in the conclusion (when she saves these same heroes from the velociraptors). It is because of this moral ambiguity on the part of the most obviously threatening forces in the film, i.e., the dinosaurs, that a more obvious *villainy* is displaced onto certain, more culpable humans, i.e. Dennis Nedry and, to a lesser extent, John Hammond. The same, I have noted, is true of the 'villainy' of the iceberg in Titanic, the meteorite in Armageddon, the weather patterns in Twister and mental illness in Silence of the Lambs.

One of the main reasons Titanic's villain, Caledon Hockley (Billy Zane), was not described in the section on physical attributes is that, like many villains, his external appearance simply does not reveal his profoundly villainous nature (although he is mildly 'swarthy', a typical trait of the melodramatic villain). He appears polished and refined, his features without apparent blemish. However, what he lacks in physical traits, he more than compensates for in behavioural ones. He is presumptuous and disrespectful of God (it is he who utters the famous line, 'God himself couldn't sink this ship') and unforgivably snobbish (he has no respect for the lives of those he considers his social inferiors, i.e., as the disaster progresses, he lacks a concern for the fate of the ship's lower class passengers). Cal's obvious subscription to a class system stands in complete opposition to the egalitarian American dream epitomised by the heroic character of Jack Dawson (Leonardo DiCaprio). Cal is also coercive and controlling. He controls intellectually when he claims he must keep an eye on the reading habits of his fiancée, Rose deWitt-Bukater (Kate Winslet). He

controls socially when he orders Rose's food for her and snaps cigarettes from her mouth. At one point, when Rose rises to leave a table and the other gentlemen stand up, Cal remains seated demonstrating both an arrogant disrespect of both women and social custom. He controls physically when he pins Rose to her chair as he chastises her. Furthermore, he is violent to women; he overturns the breakfast table on the private promenade deck and, later, slaps Rose across the face. He is sexist; he demands that his future wife 'honor' him, later referring to Rose as an 'it' and a 'slut'. He is psychologically unstable, swinging from one emotional pole to another in an instant. When be believes that Jack Dawson has sexually assaulted Rose, he is angry but, moments later, when it is discovered that Jack actually saved Rose from falling off the ship, Cal's emotions simply vanish and he ignores Jack. Cal is ungrateful; he has to be reminded by another gentleman to reward Jack for his life-saving efforts. He is disrespectful of family; he uses someone else's child to emotionally blackmail his way onto a lifeboat. He is jealous and vengeful; he gives up his place on a life boat in order to retrieve Rose (or kill Jack) and then, later, he runs amok like a lunatic, waving a gun, trying to kill them both. Last, but not least, he prefers to delegate important duties to his man, Spicer Lovejoy (David Warner), rather than apply himself directly the resolution of his problems; he gives up his attempts on the life of Rose and Jack, suggesting that Lovejoy complete that which he himself cannot be bothered to finish. This lack of personal agency or willingness to solve one's own problems is antithetical to the American dream of self-reliance.

Cal's attitude towards Rose's modern paintings offers a good example of the manner in which anachronism is employed in narratives to qualify the behavioural traits of the hero and villain. While Cal does not think much of these paintings by, among others, Degas and Monet (calling them 'finger-paintings' and suggesting that

Picasso '[will] never amount to a thing'), Rose is a paragon of contemporary art appreciation: 'They're fascinating. Like being inside a dream or something. There's truth but no logic.' In a later scene, Jack shares with Rose his similar love of this more modern art, in this case with an impressionist work of Monet: 'Look at his use of color here. Isn't he great?' The ignorance and stupidity we attribute to Cal after his various outbursts and the refinement and cultural sophistication we attribute to Rose and Jack both depend upon a contemporary, naturalised, late twentieth-century (bourgeois) perspective that views such works as unquestioned masterpieces. The respective heroic and villainous attributes of philistinism and art appreciation are only meaningful in this externally imposed, anachronistic hindsight.

Acts of Pure Evil

Acts of 'pure evil' are a specific subset of behavioural traits. They describe any action that is ateleological, that lacks any (meaningful) justification. For an act to be morally weighted, whether good or evil, it must result from a decision made in a situation when the individual will exists 'in equipoise, free to go one way or the other.'[62] (This recalls the earlier discussion of orientation to moral alignment by means of freely chosen actions.) Kant writes of the categorically moral act, 'that it does not determine an end, and the action is not governed by an end, but flows from the free will and has no regard to ends.'[63] Thus, the moral act, good or evil, lacks contingency. Similarly, Paul Oppenheimer notes that evil must possess 'the peculiar impersonality of great saintliness, bestowing itself everywhere easily, and with fearful indifference.'[64] Consequently, both the saint and the sinner must share the same unadulterated altruism, a selflessness approaching godliness, if their respective acts of good or evil are to seen as unqualified examples of moral rectitude or reprehension.

As the act of pure evil knows of no meaningful justification, it exists simply as an exercise or demonstration of one's evil character, as an announcement of one's moral status. The action signifies nothing beyond its own gratuitous cruelty. It is evil for evil's sake. Consequently, the act of pure evil is one of the most reliable and most direct behavioural means by which readers are oriented to the moral alignment of the villain.

A classic example of such a gratuitous commitment to evil for its own sake, openly parodied in the Austin Powers films, is the placing of the hero in a position of slow and agonising doom. Rather than simply execute the hero with a handgun, and accomplish with expedience a necessary goal, villains often prefer to employ elaborate, large-scale devices involving deadly piranhas or poisonous snakes. (In Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me (Roach, 1999), Dr. Evil (Mike Myers) finally gets the sharks with lasers on their heads he always wanted.) Such tactics, apart from providing the hero with an opportunity to escape, serve to reveal the sadism of pure evil villains and the vicious delight they take in unnecessary spectacles of cruelty.

In Home Alone, Marv's decision to flood the house that he and his partner, Harry, have just burglarised constitutes an utterly wanton act of destruction that serves simply to confirm his malign status. In Aladdin, when Aladdin retrieves the magic lamp from the Cave of Wonders, Jafar tries to kill him. At this point, as Jafar already has the lamp (and his disguise has not been penetrated), this action is completely superfluous to the attainment of this goal. It is an act without an end, performed with the sole objective of confirming Jafar's status as villain.

However, pure evil is a highly contradictory, ideological structure. Its defining contradiction centres on our presumption that villains can be held morally accountable

for their evil actions. Moral manicheism takes the relationship between good and evil impulses and externalises it, 'splitting character and endowing more or less trivial fragments with autonomy',[65] creating in the process heroes and villains. In so doing, it transforms a dialectical *polypathy* into a dichotomous *monopathy*.[66] This sense of 'undividedness', Robert B. Heilman remarks, is one of the defining characteristics of melodramatic narratives. Consequently, an awareness of the moral quality of one's actions, of which 'divided'[67] humans are capable, is denied to the melodramatic hero and villain because of their 'undividedness' of mind. As James L. Smith writes: 'the evil man who is wholly evil is prevented by his wholeness from the self-understanding that might curb his villainy, and the wholly good man who looks inward has nothing to contemplate but his own virtuous perfection.'[68] For the wholly evil character evil is automatic; there can no moral qualms to prevent its execution. The popular villain is 'free from the agony of choosing between conflicting imperatives and desires... [greeting] every situation with an unwavering single impulse which absorbs his whole personality.'[69] The wholly evil character is entirely obligated by an undivided psychology.

If villains are incapable of doing otherwise, they cannot be held responsible for their actions. As a direct consequence, villains lose their agency and readers lose the sense of culpability most often used to justify a villain's punishment. Even if we dismiss the idea of wholly evil villains, readers, I would argue, still expect to be able to describe villains as individuals more bad than good, rather than possessed of a perfectly equipoised balance of the two. However, even with this less absolute designation of villains, their will is still constrained, contingent to this predisposition to choose the evil alternative in any apparent situation of moral choice. If wholly evil villains are not responsible for their actions, it follows that they are not fully

deserving of their punishment, in which case, the material expulsion of the villain does not constitute a satisfactory closure of the epistemological conflict.

The 'myth of pure evil' is an ideological construction often employed to allay these potential logical and ethical difficulties. Using this myth, villains are made entirely culpable for their actions at the same time as they are considered wholly evil. Roy F. Baumeister outlines the presumed characteristics of the myth of pure evil:

> evil involves the intentional infliction of harm on people...
> evil is driven primarily by the wish to inflict harm merely for the pleasure of doing so...
> evil is the other, the enemy, the outsider, the out-group...
> evil has been that way since time immemorial...
> evil represents the antithesis of order, peace and stability...
> evil characters are often marked by egotism...
> evil figures have difficulty maintaining control over their feelings, especially rage and anger...[70]

This ideological construction is naturalised, offered as an ahistorical, transcendent given. It is a conception of evil that is based on a set of behavioural signs that is so potent and provocative that demands for logical consistency in the representation of villainy take second place to more immediate demands for emotional satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

As the ideological efficacy of closed narrative structure depends on the presence of a legible hero-villain polarisation, I conclude this chapter by demonstrating how this necessary polarisation is sustained in films whose *dramatis personae*s appear to lack clearly defined heroes or villains, films in which, at first glance, such titles seem grossly inappropriate (see Appendix B for a full breakdown of heroes and villains in the film sample).

In its most legible, undiluted form, the hero-villain polarisation is predicated on an epistemological conflict between a singular hero and a singular villain.

Examples of this include Aladdin (Aladdin vs. Jafar) and The Lion King (Simba vs. Scar). In many other cases, however, the hero or villain is not singular but rather part of a wider hero-group or villain-group. This permits three further variations on the hero-villain polarisation. A singular hero vs. a villain-group, e.g., Kevin vs. the burglars in Home Alone; a hero-group vs. a singular villain, e.g., the Terminator, Sarah Connor and John Connor vs. the T-1000 in Terminator 2: Judgment Day; and a hero-group vs. a villain-group, e.g., the humans vs. the aliens in Independence Day. Ultimately, as long as the ideological alignment of each side of the conflict is clear, it makes little difference to the operation of the hero-villain polarisation whether the 'hero' or 'villain' is singular or part of a wider group.

At the same time, there is a tendency in popular film to collapse the villain-group into a single, representative villain by the end of the narrative. Although these final villains are not personally responsible for initiating the original epistemological challenge, as they appear more villainous than their confederates, they become individual representatives of the narrative's more general villainy. The foregrounding of these 'representative' villains facilitates a more obvious, final material expulsion of the general epistemological threat and, thus, lends to a more satisfying closure. For example, in The Matrix, the computer programme called Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving) is not personally responsible for enslaving the human race. He is simply one of many agents tasked with policing the 'matrix', protecting it from infiltration by human hackers. However, he is more personalised than his colleagues (at one point, he expresses his deep hatred for humanity). Consequently, his material expulsion at the end of the narrative substitutes for the expulsion of all such agents. It is in this manner that a satisfying closure is facilitated despite the fact that many more agents like him still exist. (It is relatively rare that the villain-group remains incorporate or

bureaucratic by the end of the film. Saving Private Ryan and Independence Day are two rare examples of this.)

Of the 50 films in the sample, 32 employ a conventional hero-villain polarisation by opposing heroes and villains in either singular or group forms. The remaining 18 films appear to differ from this model in that they do not appear to have an obvious villain. However, a closer examination reveals they do in fact employ villainy in a displaced form.

In seven of these 18 remaining films, the epistemological challenge takes the form of a natural evil, e.g., meteorites, icebergs, violent weather patterns and dinosaurs. In these cases, the hero-villain polarisation is preserved by displacing natural evils onto more culpable and expellable human agents. As I have already noted, in Armageddon, the natural evil of the meteorite is displaced by an internal conflict between Harry Stamper and Colonel William Sharp; in Twister, the drama derives not only from the tornadoes themselves but also from the machinations of the rival team of storm-chasers led by Dr. Jonas Miller; and in Jurassic Park and The Lost World: Jurassic Park, the villainy of the dinosaurs is displaced variously onto presumptuous geneticists, big-game hunters and corporate goons.

The remaining 11 films in the sample are predicated on a central conflict between two characters or groups neither of whom seems obviously heroic or villainous; films such as Pretty Woman, Sleepless in Seattle or Liar Liar. In these kinds of films, there is no life or death battle between good and evil. The fate of humanity does not hang in the balance. In other words, although two epistemologies are in conflict, the melodramatic vocabulary of 'hero' and 'villain' seems grossly inappropriate. Consequently, I use these terms in a relatively arbitrary sense, to denote the respective proponents of the epistemologies the narrative affirms and expels. At

the same time, as we shall see, in many such films, through a process of displacement, a locus of obvious villainy is still created, facilitating the kind of expulsion typical of a more legible hero-villain polarisation.

For example, the epistemological conflict in Pretty Woman (Marshall, 1990) takes place between Vivian Ward (Julia Roberts) and Edward Lewis. While Vivian is compassionate and sensitive, Edward is less humane, aligned with a society of snobs and powerbrokers who value money and power over family, friends and relationships. Although Edward is not a 'baddie' in any traditional sense, his lack of humanity establishes him as the default villain of the narrative. As Vivian precipitates the change in Edward's character, remedies his personal dysfunction, she is the default hero in the hero-villain polarisation. In other words, it is her (more compassionate) way of seeing that wins out in the end; she convinces Edward to invest in (rather than break up and sell off) a family shipbuilding business.

That the default villain is not typically or obviously evil would dilute the legibility of the hero-villain polarisation in such films if it were not for a specific narrative strategy frequently employed in their closing scenes. After the default villain has been 'defeated', a more overt, classical villain emerges. This 'eleventh-hour' villain represents the worst excesses of the default villain's original (but now healed) failings. His emergence and subsequent defeat facilitates a more satisfying, material expulsion of the villainous epistemology to which the default hero was originally (but is no longer) aligned. This expulsion enhances the legibility of the hero-villain polarisation. In Pretty Woman, this role is performed by Edward's lawyer, Philip Stuckey (Jason Alexander). Notably, Stuckey is villainised in very traditional terms. He is short, plump, lascivious, temperamental, sadistic, etc. As soon as Edward regains his humanity, Stuckey bursts forth and, by attempting to molest Vivian,

demonstrates in very clear terms the very inhumanity that Edward has so recently rejected. Edward's subsequent material expulsion of Stuckey, then, constitutes not only an expulsion of this eleventh hour villain, but also a symbolic expulsion of his own villainous self.

Other examples of such a displacement include the final dramatic sequence of Beauty and the Beast, when Gaston (voiced by Richard White) leads the angry villagers in their assault of the Beast's castle; The Fugitive, when Dr. Charles Nichols (Jeroen Krabbé) is revealed as having been behind the murder of Dr. Richard Kimble's wife; and Toy Story, when the conflict between Woody and Buzz is replaced with the common aim of escaping from the clutches of Sid.

Notes

[1] Colin MacCabe, 'Realism and the Cinema: notes on some Brechtian theses', in Popular Television and Film, London: BFI, 1981, p. 217-8.

[2] Peter Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, melodrama, and the mode of excess, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1976, p. 205.

[3] For additional information on the commonalities of stage melodrama and popular cinema, see, for example, Melodrama: stage, picture, screen, ed. J. S. Bratton, London: British Film Institute, 1994. Other useful texts include Home is Where the Heart is: studies in melodrama and the woman's film, ed. Christine Gledhill, London: British Film Institute, 1987, and Thomas Elsaesser's seminal essay, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: observations on the family melodrama', Movies and Methods: volume II, ed., Bill Nichols, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985.

[4] David Hume, Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 46.

Notes (cont')

[5] David Hume, Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals, p. 23.

[6] These four categories belong to Tom L. Beauchamp & Alexander Rosenberg's reading of Hume. See Hume and the Problem of Causation, New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.

[7] David Hume, Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding, p. 28.

[8] Tom L. Beauchamp & Alexander Rosenberg, Hume and the Problem of Causation, p. 11.

[9] Arthur Koestler, The Sleepwalkers, London: Hutchinson & Co., 1968, p. 537.

[10] Owen Chadwick, The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 164.

[11] Arthur Koestler, The Sleepwalkers, pp. 147-148.

[12] *ibid.*, p. 537.

[13] Peter Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination, p. 202.

[14] Edward Ashbee, American Society Today, p. 33.

[15] Jennifer L. Hochschild, Facing Up to the American Dream: race, class, and the soul of the nation, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 18.

[16] Karl Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right (1843-44) at www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/index.htm.

[17] Benjamin Franklin, quoted by Edward Ashbee, American Society Today, p. 33.

[18] Cited by Edward Ashbee, American Society Today, p. 36.

[19] Edward Ashbee, American Society Today, p. 42.

[20] Jennifer L. Hochschild, Facing Up to the American Dream, p. 259.

[21] Terry Eagleton, Ideology, p. xiii.

[22] David Grimstead, Melodrama Unveiled: American theatre and culture, 1800-1850,

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Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968, p. 230.

[23] Linda Seger, Making a Good Script Great, p. 102.

[24] Ira Hauptman, 'Defending Melodrama', in Melodrama, ed. James Redmond, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 283.

[25] Christopher Butler, Interpretation, Deconstruction, and Ideology, p. 122.

[26] In many cases, the content of a (published or unpublished) screenplay will differ from the content of a finished film. Consequently, as I am analysing the ideological functions of films (and not their screenplays), unless otherwise specified, all film quotes are transcribed from close viewings of films on video-cassette or DVD.

[27] Edward Ashbee, American Society Today, p. 34.

[28] It is important to note that while there is a second intact bridge at Valognes, the greater strategic importance of the bridge at Ramelle is emphasised at the close of the film when it is to this bridge that the Allied forces arrive.

[29] Peter Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination, pp. 16-17.

[30] *ibid.*, pp. 17, 47.

[31] Christine Gledhill, 'The Melodramatic Field: an investigation', in Home is Where the Heart Is, p. 33.

[32] Peter Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination, p. 41.

[33] Roland Barthes, Mythologies, p. 144.

[34] Terry Eagleton, Ideology, p. 116.

[35] Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury', p. 170.

[36] *ibid.*, p. 169.

[37] David Grimstead, Melodrama Unveiled, p. 222.

[38] This euphemisation is more therapeutic than the more reasonable explication of the

disaster offered by Sir Robert Finlay, an official of the White Star Line:

> Winding up, he said that the accident was due to an extraordinary concatenation of circumstances, and that no blame could be attached to the company or to those responsible for the ship. It was one of those things that must happen every now and then, and does happen without any fault on the part of anyone [reported in the *Daily Sketch*, 29th June 1912, in The Titanic Disaster: as reported in the British national press, April – July 1912, compiled by Dave Bryceson, Yeovil: Patrick Stephens, 1997, p. 296].

[39] Peter Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination, p. 37.

[40] Joseph Breen, cited by Gregory D. Black, Hollywood Censored: morality codes, Catholics, and the movies, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 173-4.

[41] Lea Jacobs, The Wages of Sin: censorship and the fallen woman film, 1928-1942, Los Angeles & Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, p. 40.

[42] Erin Addison, 'Saving Other Women From Other Men: Disney's *Aladdin*', in Camera Obscura: a journal of feminism and film theory, No. 31,p. 23n.

[43] Sander L. Gilman, Difference and Pathology: stereotypes of sexuality, race, and madness, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 70.

[44] See David Michael Levin, ed., Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

[45] Nancy Weinberg and Carol Sebian write:

> [In the New Testament] physical illness and disability are punishments for some religious transgression. Jesus, upon healing a man said, 'See, you are well! sin no more, that nothing worse befall you' (John 5:14). In another instance of healing he said to a man with palsy, 'My son; your sins are forgiven' (Matt. 9:2). These teachings imply that the sick and disabled deserve to suffer as a punishment for having sinned. [cited by Martin F. Norden, 'Hollywood's Ableist Agenda', in Beyond the Stars 5: themes and ideologies in American popular film, eds. Paul Loukides & Linda K. Fuller, Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996, p. 219].

[46] Aristotle, J. C. Lavater, Arthur Schopenhauer, cited by Sander L. Gilman, Seeing

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the Insane: a cultural history of madness in the western world, showing how the portrayal of stereotypes has both reflected and shaped the perception and treatment of the mentally disturbed, as depicted in manuscripts, woodcuts, engravings, drawings, paintings, sculptures, lithographs and photographs, from the middle ages to the end of the nineteenth century, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1982, pp. 6, 62, 164.

[47] James R. Keller, '"Like to a Chaos": deformity and depravity in contemporary film', in Journal of Popular Film and Television, Vol. 23, No. 1, Spring 1995, p. 8. Similarly, George Henderson and Willie V. Bryan note: '[People] either consciously or subconsciously think that *disability* is a synonym for *bad*. More often than not, *able-bodied* is associated with *good*, Christ and the angels, cleanliness, and virtue [Cited by Martin F. Norden, 'Hollywood's Ableist Agenda', p. 219].'

[48] Erin Addison, 'Saving Other Women From Other Men', p. 12.

[49] *ibid.*, p. 19.

[50] *ibid.*, p. 9.

[51] James R. Keller, 'Like to a Chaos', p. 8.

[52] Peter Stallybrass & Allon White, cited by James R. Keller, 'Like to a Chaos', p. 9.

[53] One cannot help thinking of the similarities between Kevin and the Aryan physical and behavioural ideal described by Erik Hombuger Erikson, i.e., 'light, without hair on chest and limbs... passionately clean in his habits [cited by Sander L. Gilman, Difference and Pathology, p. 32]'. Kevin is conspicuously white, conspicuously blonde, conspicuously hairless and obsessed with hygiene. In fact, he shaves in spite of an obvious lack of need to do so.

Notes (cont')

[54] Peter N. Chumo II, '"You've Got to Put the Past Behind You Before You Can Move On": *Forrest Gump* and national reconciliation', Journal of Popular Film & Television, Vol. 23, No. 1, Spring 1995, p. 7.

[55] Noël Carroll, The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart, London: Routledge, 1990, p. 32. Later episodes in the film reveal this flesh and goo as bio-technological body-armour and the aliens themselves as similar in many respects to humans. This revelation, however, is little more than a footnote to the plot; the overwhelming impression created by the majority of the narrative is of large, slimy, tentacled aliens.

[56] For more comments on this 'new-deal-Great Society coalition of Jew, black and public spirited WASP', see Michael Rogin, Independence Day, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Enola Gay, London: British Film Institute, 1998, p. 50.

[57] It is interesting to note that this particular narrative demand results in an evil parrot with a bright set of individuated teeth that exist in complete disregard for avian biology.

[58] A notable exception to this are Princess Jasmine's painted nails. It seems the demand for feminine decoration was in this case stronger than the more typical, heroic absence of such details as fingernails.

[59] In the climax of the film, when the Genie serves Jafar, his eyes regain their pupils while he talks to Aladdin and expresses regret at have to perform evil deeds. This brief but highly dynamic change further confirms the veracity of using bodily integrity as an index to moral alignment.

[60] This latter instance is undeniably sexual, executed in a manner suggestive of a male ejaculation. Consequently, the disrespect that the incident represents is compounded.

[61] In the opening sequence of the film, the park warden, Robert Muldoon (Bob Peck)

executes a velociraptor after it attacks a park worker.

[62] Brian Masters, The Evil that Men Do, London: Transworld Publishers Ltd. 1996, pp. 122-123.

[63] Immanuel Kant, The Worlds of Hume and Kant, ed. J. B. Wilbur & H. J. Allen, New York: Prometheus Books, 1982, p155. Similarly, Alvin Plantinga writes:

> If a person |S| is free with respect to a given action, then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain; no causal laws and antecedent conditions determine either that he will perform the action, or that he will not. It is within his power, at the time in question, to perform the action, and within his power to refrain [Alvin Plantinga, cited by Kenneth Surin, Theology and the Problem of Evil, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986, p. 71].

[64] Paul Oppenheimer, Evil and the Demonic: a new theory of monstrous behaviour, London: Duckworth, 1996, p. 3.

[65] Ira Hauptman, 'Defending Melodrama', p. 284.

[66] Robert B. Heilman, The Iceman, the Arsonist, and the Troubled Agent: tragedy and melodrama on the modern stage, London: Allen and Unwin, 1973, p. 57.

[67] Not to be confused with Koestler's use of the term 'divided'.

[68] James L. Smith, Melodrama, p. 8.

[69] *ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

[70] Roy F. Baumeister, Evil: inside human violence and cruelty, New York: W. H. Freeman and Company 1997, pp. 42-74.

CHAPTER THREE: THE OSTENSIBLE CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the 'ostensible content' of the popular 1990s narrative, i.e., what it appears to be about, and the manner in which a particular use of certain popular discourses serves to sustain and reproduce the dominant ideology. I use the term 'ostensible' to qualify content because this content is consistently misrecognised as the most significant level of textual meaning, the level at which it is presumed a text's most important message is deployed. As I have already noted, however, as far as the ideological operation of the text is concerned, it is the closed narrative structure that effects the most significant textual function, i.e., an affirmation of the prevailing realist epistemology. At the same time, the themes and discourses invoked on the level of ostensible content still assist (if only in a secondary manner) this more basic ideological function.

The two main goals of this chapter, then, are to show how the repeated use of a limited set of permitted discourses functions as an orientation strategy (makes clear the progress and resolution of the closed narrative structure) and to provide a detailed analysis of the these discourses. This latter analysis reinforces the first of these two goals, i.e., it demonstrates not only the limited nature of this set of permitted discourses but also the frequency with which the same discourses recur consistently throughout the sample. Also, this latter analysis provides a more detailed picture of the popular 1990s film that will later be situated within the social and political context of America in the 1990s (see Chapter Four).

While certain orientation strategies (such as those described in the preceding

chapter) actively index the progress and resolution of the closed narrative structure, other, more passive orientations strategies make more visible the closed narrative structure by contributing to a greater textual transparency; so that the operation of these more direct, active orientation strategies is less impeded. It is in this manner that I discuss how the particular themes and discourses invoked by popular 1990s films function as orientation strategies, i.e., their repeated use affords them this important transparency. It is worth noting that in the popular 1990s film increased levels of spectacle also contribute to this textual transparency (a more detailed discussion of spectacle is reserved for Chapter Four).

A LIMITED SET OF PERMITTED DISCOURSES

Jean-François Lyotard states that an institution 'always requires supplementary constraints for statements to be declared admissible within its bounds'. These constraints, he continues:

> function to filter discursive potentials, interrupting possible connections in the communication networks: there are things that should not be said. They also privilege certain classes of statements (sometimes only one) whose predominance characterises the discourse of the particular institution. There are things that should be said, and there are ways of saying them.[1]

The Hollywood film industry is one such institution. Not only is the ostensible content of any popular film generally restricted to the representation of certain discourses but the manner in which these discourses can be represented is also limited. For a discourse to be permitted by an institution, more often than not, it must serve to perpetuate the set of social conditions that favour the interests of its most powerful proponents, i.e., it tends to reproduce the dominant (capitalist) ideology.

While this begins to explain the type of discourses employed by popular

(reactionary) films, most of the time the selection of discourses is not such a conscious or active process. Although official organisations have been established in the past, such as the Production Code Administration, to filter out certain unpermitted discourses, today the censorship of producers, directors and writers is less overt. Filmmakers participate in a more immanent cultural hegemony, using certain discourses and avoiding others for no clearly articulated reasons. Their films are what Marx and Engels called a 'symptomatic expression' of the dominant ideology. As Stefan Morawski notes: 'the artist may or may not be aware of having adopted a position.'[2]

It is crucial to note that the Hollywood film industry, in its constant drive to give audiences 'what they want', often makes films that appear to criticise certain fundamental elements of the capitalist ideology upon which the film industry itself depends. This hegemonic concession, however, is not as disruptive as it might initially seem. The institutional constraints on the specific manner in which certain subjects can be represented precludes these popular film texts from criticising dominant ideological institutions in any meaningful way. (A detailed discussion of how these threats are recuperated by the narrative form is reserved for the following chapter.) At this point, it is simply worth noting that I do not presume that the dominant ideology is simply prescribing or dictating what discourses are and are not allowed. This process is hegemonic, as much determined by the needs and desires of the masses as it is by those of the ruling classes, with the result that the films produced, when examined symptomatically, will often reveal significant internal contradictions and inconsistencies.

The use of certain ideological discourses in a narrative's content affords them a relatively superficial kind of validation, especially if the representatives of

these discourses survive some kind of dramatic challenge. However, the dominant ideology is more fundamentally affirmed by the *repeated* use of these permitted discourses. Frequently invoked discourses come to seem natural, part of a normal, unproblematic view of the world. In addition to the 'truth' or moral authority this confers on such discourses, these naturalised discourses eventually come to accord so precisely with our pre-existing narrative schemas that, like all naturalised structures, they become invisible, that which goes-without-saying. Thus, the repeated use of the same familiar discourses ensures a textual transparency that facilitates a more unmediated access to the content of the form, i.e., to a recognition of the presence, progress and resolution of the closed narrative structure, than if audiences' cognitive processes were dedicated to decoding the additional textual challenges that the introduction of certain unfamiliar or radical discourses might occasion. This suggests that the specific qualities of the discourses invoked in the ostensible content of individual narratives are entirely incidental, significant only in that they share this important transparency.

This repeated use of the same permitted discourses, it will be shown, also creates in the reader an expectation for the use of such familiar discourses, with the result that the potential disruptiveness represented by the introduction of a radical or unfamiliar topic is often diffused by reducing it to the more familiar terms of these permitted discourses.

Systematising a Discussion of the Set of Permitted Discourses

Abraham Maslow's theory of human motivation provides a useful means for systematising a discussion of the discourses most commonly invoked by popular 1990s cinema. He writes: 'the basic human needs are organized into a hierarchy of

relative prepotency.'[3] The five main needs he notes are physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness and love needs, esteem needs and the need for self-actualisation.[4] Human behaviour is governed by the satisfaction of these needs in the order mentioned above with the understanding that 'the most basic consequence of the satiation of any need is that this need is submerged and a new and higher need emerges.'[5] In other words, as soon as humans have sufficient food and water to satisfy their physiological needs, a need for safety emerges. Ultimately, the aim of all humans is the satisfaction of our highest psychological need, i.e., self-actualisation, the point at which one '[becomes] more and more what one idiosyncratically is... [becomes] everything that one is capable of becoming.'[6]

This theory cannot be used without some important qualifications. First and foremost, it should be noted that this hierarchy is predicated on certain scientific, structuralist assumptions. By this, I mean that Maslow offers it as a transcendent, universal model for human behaviour. In doing so, he fails (almost entirely) to account the vast array of potential social, political, historical or material contexts for any given situation in which a human 'behaves'. Simply put, his theory does not take into account the operation of ideology in the formation and transformation of human desire.

In deducing his hierarchy, Maslow appears simply to have studied human behaviour in modern, Western society (with a particular emphasis on American society). This context-specific study was then decontextualised and presented as an apolitical model for all human behaviour. (Whether or not Maslow's model is in any way applicable to non-Western or less modern societies does not fall within the scope of this thesis.) Therefore, while one might mistakenly suggest that the various ideological institutions discussed below are *a posteriori* expressions of pre-existing,

transcendent, Maslovian needs, it is perhaps more accurate to see any 'need' as a more general, depoliticised justification of these ideological institutions.

This significant qualification points towards the usefulness of Maslow's hierarchy. It is itself implicated in the reproduction of a modern, Western, patriarchal, capitalist ideology and, thus, provides an indication of what is considered of value to such a society. Furthermore, the inherent reductiveness of his hierarchy provides a useful means of segmenting and discussing the permitted discourses of popular Hollywood cinema as this institution (and the ideology that informs it) also tend towards the kind of reductionism that Maslow performs.

This hierarchised segmentation of human motivation explains why certain permitted discourses are invoked with greater frequency than others. Like the needs themselves, the discourses that relate to these needs are also arranged in a hierarchy of relative prepotency. Accepting that 'any conscious desires... are more or less important as they are more or less close to the basic needs',[7] the ideological institutions associated with the lower, more potent needs form the basis of a wider human experience and (from an industrial point of view) a larger potential audience. Thus, for purely commercial reasons, it is rare that a popular film will represent the ideological institutions associated with higher needs in isolation from a representation of those institutions associated with more basic needs; and, typically, when such higher institutions are invoked, they are displaced onto the terms of the lower, more potent ideological institutions.

For example, the ideological institution of individualism (associated with the higher esteem and self-actualisation needs) is often invoked in conjunction with the lower institutions of private property rights or the nuclear family (associated, respectively, with safety and belongingness and love needs). In terms of plot, this

simply means that heroes often achieve their highest, most abstract levels of individualism or self-determination as a direct result of a material defence of the home or family from an external, physicalised threat. This occurs in Home Alone and in both Jurassic Park films (see below).

In the following analyses, I attempt to reintroduce the specific material context that Maslow excluded from his analysis (or, at least, to acknowledge its influence). More specifically, when appropriate, I will attempt to identify those aspects of contemporary American society that Hollywood's most frequently invoked discourses seem to ignore. Mike Cormack describes these 'avoidances' as those 'elements which might have been expected to be in the text but which are missing from it.'[8] Of course, one problem with describing not what is in a text but what may (for whatever reasons) have been excluded is that it involves a certain level of subjective judgment. Consequently, in the following, in order avoid drawing certain unprovable or unjustifiable conclusions, I restrict comment on avoidances to those instances when an omission is particularly obvious or glaring.

Discussing the Set

It is important to note from the outset, that the following discourses were identified from an analysis of only the most popular films of each year during the 1990s. This is to say that it in no way represents an attempt to exhaust the list of discourses permitted in popular films in general. It is a descriptive analysis of the discourses invoked by the film sample (organised after the fact using Maslow's hierarchy). In other words, it is not intended or offered as a prescriptive account of the discursive limits of some abstract model for reactionary popular film production.

At the same time, one can still get a reasonable idea from a consideration of the following analysis what discourses you could expect to find in most popular texts.

Ideological Institutions Associated with Physiological Needs

The physiological needs relate to the preservation of a functional human biology, of human life itself. Given the obvious and fundamental indispensability of being alive to the later satisfaction of any other higher needs, those that elect to take a life outside of certain ideologically sanctioned channels (such as war or justified self-defence) are considered villains of the greatest enormity. To murder someone is not simply to deny them a functional biology but to deprive them of the ability further to participate in ideology. Consequently, the supreme importance of 'life' is a central and determining ideological institution.

As the physiological needs, according to Maslow, are the most prepotent, the similarly prepotent institution of life almost always displaces representations of higher, less potent ideological institutions with the significant consequence that most discourses invoked by the popular film narratives examined are articulated, in the first instance, in terms of violent threats to life, i.e., as matters of life and death.

While most of the films in the sample involve situations in which the lives of an individual or hero-group are placed in mortal jeopardy, many involve lethal threats to larger groups. Obvious examples include Batman Returns (the population of Gotham City), True Lies (the population of Florida), Twister (entire towns), Titanic (countless passengers), The Lost World: Jurassic Park (the population of San Diego), Saving Private Ryan (the allied forces) and Star Wars: Episode One (the population of Naboo).

Even more telling is the prevalence in certain popular films of genocidal

situations, threats to the very future of humankind. Examples include, Terminator 2: Judgment Day, Independence Day, Men in Black and Armageddon. In fact, of the 50 films in my sample, only eight do not involve a pronounced life-threatening situation, i.e., Pretty Woman, Mrs. Doubtfire, Sleepless in Seattle, The Santa Clause, Jerry Maguire, Liar Liar, There's Something About Mary and The Waterboy.

Ideological Institutions Associated with Safety Needs

Maslow describes the safety needs as follows: 'security; stability; dependency; protection; freedom from fear, from anxiety and chaos; need for structure, order, law, limits; strength in the protector; and so on.'[9] These needs are satisfied by certain societal structures that make 'members feel safe enough from wild animals, extremes of temperature, criminal assault, murder, chaos, tyranny, [etc.]'[10]

State Bodies

A threat to safety takes the form of any attack on the means by which society purports to protect its members. Such institutions include obvious state bodies such as the government, the army, the police, the judicial system, and so on. It is interesting to note, however, that the efficacy of any state body or similar institution is almost always predicated on the extraordinary efforts of an individual working for that state body and, quite often, the state body impedes the progress of its typically heroic representative. For example, in Mission: Impossible, Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) is pursued by his own agency. In Armageddon, the government's attempt to destroy the meteorite is jeopardised by the US President's decision to detonate the nuclear devices before Stamper's drilling team has reached a certain

minimum depth.

A distrust of government intervention, some cultural critics have noted, is a feature of the American character. Edward Ashbee identifies what he considers to be the two main axiomatic beliefs of the American dream:

> Individuals should be self-reliant. They have a responsibility to provide for themselves and their families. They should not look to, or depend upon government provision.
>
> The role of government should be confined to functions such as national security; the upholding of the law and the preservation of order.[11]

So, while some level of government intervention is acceptable, the more obviously governmental (hence authoritarian) aspect of any such intervention is suppressed by focusing on the actions of an individual agent. In this manner, individual self-reliance (on the part of the hero) is still regarded as central.

Of course, any lasting negative opinion of a state body is often mitigated by certain immunising exigencies. For example, the state body can be revealed to be in the hands of incompetent bureaucrats or corrupt politicos. The implication here is that it is not the state body itself that is at fault but individual villains. Alternatively, the state body can be seen to learn a valuable lesson from the actions of its maverick representative, suggesting the possibility of reforms that can only improve its efficacy in the future.

At the same time, even if the success of the state body is ascribed solely to the efforts of an individual agent, in the event that the state body has not been revealed as corrupt or ineffective, the success of the individual still affirms (if only implicitly) the organisation on whose behalf he or she operates. In this manner, state bodies still demonstrate their ability to contain social threats. When these agencies, both real and fictitious, are successful (and unsullied at the close of the narrative),

they carry with them the implicit and reassuring promise that the state is working constantly both in front of and behind the scenes to keep the world safe from all manner of catastrophes.

The implicit efficacy of certain governmental agencies is demonstrated throughout the sample, i.e., the police in Lethal Weapon 3, the army in Independence Day and Saving Private Ryan, the FBI in Silence of the Lambs, the JAG Corps in A Few Good Men, the US Marshals in The Fugitive and NASA in Apollo 13. The capacity of state bodies to contain any social threat is further demonstrated by the large number of purely fictitious government agencies that also perform this function, i.e., Omega Sector in True Lies, the élite, unnamed US intelligence group in Mission: Impossible, INS Division 6 in Men in Black and the Jedi Knights in Star Wars: Episode One – The Phantom Menace. Even an overt parody of such agencies, the British Ministry of Defence in Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me, is successful in its ultimate containment of villainy.

Rights

Our safety needs are also ensured by additional, less obviously material institutions such as the rights to private property, free-enterprise and self-defence (including the bearing of arms). In any capitalist society, the most fundamental of these institutions, it could be argued, is the right to private property, a fact made clear by a film like Home Alone whose narrative insists that when the protection and comfort of all the other institutions of capitalism are stripped away, i.e., the nuclear family, community, state bodies, etc., it falls to the individual to defend their personal belongings, to exercise the self-reliance so central to the American dream.

The opening scenes of Home Alone establish Kevin as lazy, dependent and

incompetent. Following an altercation in which he is unfairly victimised by his extended family, he wishes them out of his life. A subsequent concatenation of circumstances results in the fulfilment of this wish and Kevin is left 'home alone' when his family travels to Paris for Christmas. At first, Kevin is overjoyed at his family's absence and exercises his newfound freedom in traditional forms of juvenile misbehaviour, i.e., jumping up and down on the parental bed, eating junk food and watching trashy videos. However, he soon tires of his freedom and admits that he would like to have his family back, that he didn't actually mean it when he wished them away. The purported message of the film, then, appears to be that regardless of what we might think of them, we all need the emotional support of the family unit. This specific sentiment is expressed in a conversation between Kevin and his neighbour, Old Man Marley (Roberts Blossom):

KEVIN
I really like my family. Even though sometimes I say I don't. Sometimes I even think I don't. Do you get that?

MARLEY
I think so. How you think about your family is a complicated thing... Deep down you always love 'em.

At the same time, why Kevin needs his family is never clearly established. In fact, this supposed need is belied by the positive character development he experiences as a direct result of the family's absence. Kevin becomes more independent; shopping for himself (using coupons), learning to wash his own clothes, even felling and decorating his own Christmas tree. It is not until the morning following Kevin's (almost) single-handed victory over the burglars that his family returns. In this manner, Kevin's personal growth is not predicated on the restoration of the nuclear family, but on his recognition and subsequent violent defence of the institution of

private property. Consequently, Home Alone stands as a remarkable example not only of the displacement of the institution of the nuclear family by this more prepotent institution, but also of the ultimate role of violence in the articulation of one's rights.

To this end, Home Alone employs several of the narrative tropes of the classical Western. Societal law is portrayed as utterly ineffectual. Like the tin-starred lawman, it offers only the appearance of authority and safety while remaining impotent in the face of any real threat. The police officers in this film are variously portrayed as overweight, bungling, uncouth and distracted. The support of the surrounding community is also stripped away. There are no neighbouring families to which Kevin can go to for help. They are all on holiday. More distant communities are also cut off as a result of damaged telephone lines. Kevin's house stands isolated in the middle of a lawless, suburban wilderness. Without family, community or the law to protect him, Kevin must rely on his own law (his own personal resourcefulness) to repel his attackers. In this manner, he performs the archetypal role of the besieged frontiersman, rifle in hand, ready to defend the homestead, represented here as the repository of his family's material belongings, their accumulated wealth, his inheritance (see Figure 6). In these basic terms Kevin's defence of his private property rights is all that stands between civilisation and chaos.



Figure 6: Rifle in hand, Kevin prepares to defend his property rights.

The ideology of the classical Western is informed by the foundational American myth of the frontier. Richard Slotkin writes:

> [The Myth of the Frontier] represented the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or 'natural' state, and *regeneration through violence.*[12]

Unsurprisingly, Kevin's crucial awakening to his inviolable property rights is complemented by a similar awakening to the use of violence as a means of self-expression. Initially, Kevin is scared of violence (even the sanitised violence of the mock *film noir*, 'Angels with Filthy Souls', that he watches on video). His first attempt to repel the burglars is remote and detached. As they attempt to force entry through the basement door, he switches on a light then hides under his parents' bed. The burglars, fearing that the house is inhabited, retreat immediately. However, his later defensive measures are more applied, more violent, and involve burning, bludgeoning and several point-blank shootings. Kevin's new-found maturity, responsibility and independence are consummated not in a feminine ability to make

food or launder clothes, as the narrative initially suggests, but in a masculine ability to defend the patriarchal homestead with violent force (and the blessing of the Second Amendment), to defend his sacred property rights against those who would attempt to deny or infringe upon them. The burglar is the ideal villain in this kind of narrative, defined almost exclusively by the function of taking another's material goods and, thus, representing the ultimate sacrilege that can be committed in a culture of fetishised accumulation.

Ideological Institutions Associated with Belongingness and Love Needs

According to Maslow, the individual who lacks a satisfaction of belongingness and love needs will 'feel sharply the pangs of loneliness, of ostracism, of rejection, of friendlessness, of rootlessness... [will feel] the need to overcome [his] widespread feelings of alienation, aloneness, strangeness, and loneliness'.[13] Certain popular discourses that relate to the satisfaction of these needs are informed by the related patriarchal institutions of heterosexual love and the nuclear family.

Heterosexual Love

There are very few films in the sample in which the hero or hero-group are not directly involved in a heterosexual coupling. However, in most of these films, the discourse of heterosexual love is still invoked, if only indirectly, either through the related discourse of the nuclear family or by the heterosexual relations of the supporting characters. For example, in Home Alone, Terminator 2: Judgment Day, and Home Alone 2: Lost in New York, although the hero is romantically unattached, the importance of strong family relations is heavily foregrounded; in The Silence of the Lambs, most of the interference experienced by Starling during

her work with Lecter results from her rejection of Dr. Chilton as a prospective heterosexual lover (she refuses his offer of a date); in The Fugitive, Richard Kimble is falsely accused of murdering his heterosexual partner; and in Saving Private Ryan, although war has literally displaced the possibility of romance, members of the squad regale each other with tales of red-blooded heterosexuality.

In other films in the sample, the importance of heterosexual love can be discerned in the extent to which the figure of a love-triangle serves to frame the action of their narratives. For example, love-triangles are employed in Ghost (Sam Wheat/Molly Jensen/Carl Bruner), Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves (Robin of Locksley/Maid Marion/The Sheriff of Nottingham), Beauty and the Beast (The Beast/Belle/Gaston), Aladdin (Aladdin/Jasmine/Jafar), Batman Returns (Batman/Catwoman/Penguin), Jurassic Park (Alan Grant/Ellie Sattler/Ian Malcolm), Sleepless in Seattle (Sam/Annie/Walter), True Lies (Harry Tasker/Helen Tasker/Simon), Toy Story (Woody/Bo Peep/Buzz Lightyear), Twister (Jo Harding/Bill Harding/Dr. Melissa Reeves), Titanic (Jack Dawson/Rose deWitt-Bukater/Caledon Hockley), and There's Something About Mary (Ted Stroehmann/Mary Jensen Matthews/Pat Healy). The conventional, patriarchal love-triangle allows readers to gauge the ultimate success and superior power of the hero over the villain terms of his ability (and not his opponent's) to consummate a heterosexual relationship with the heroine. In such an equation, Erin Addison notes: '[the woman] becomes the legal tender, the currency traded in the economy of male relationships.'[14] The ideological institution of heterosexual romantic love, then, serves to mystify patriarchal power-relations.

The centrality in popular narratives of both heterosexual relationships, and the marriages to which they often lead, has been frequently noted and theorised. For

example, certain psychoanalytical approaches suggest that the closed narrative of Hollywood cinema can be characterised by an Oedipal trajectory, the narrative concluding upon the attainment by the hero of a 'normal' sexual identity, typically by consummating a heterosexual relationship or through a marriage ceremony. The prominence of heterosexuality as a discourse in popular narratives has the necessary consequence of establishing other sexual identities as somehow deviant. A valid, central homosexual relationship is a notable avoidance in the popular films I examined. There are very few homosexual characters in the sample; and they tend to occupy their own separate and distinctly homosexual spaces, such as the swishing sissy, Marty (Harvey Fierstein), in Independence Day or the transvestite, Jame 'Buffalo Bill' Gumb, in Silence of the Lambs. An informal consideration of a wider range of popular films suggests a number of further permitted representations of homosexuality. Either they are romantically unattached or, if they do have a partner, the relationship is underplayed, ostensibly platonic and never of central concern to the resolution of the narrative. More frequently, the very idea of homosexuality is a source of amusement, especially in cases when two professed heterosexuals discover themselves in a potentially homosexual and, hence, embarrassing or shameful situation. Alternatively, homosexuality (typically reduced to a camp femininity) is employed as a villainous trait. Instances of homosexuality in certain popular films will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four. For the moment, however, it suffices to note that although the relatively small number of homosexual characters in popular films may (although I consider this unlikely) be proportionally accurate in terms of the overall population, the manner in which they are (obviously and excessively) portrayed is hardly representative (nor would I suggest is it intended to be) of actual homosexual identities.

The possibility of a nuclear family is always implied when a narrative resolves around a newly formed or reconstituted heterosexual coupling. However, many films in the sample foreground more directly the importance of the ('white, bourgeois, patriarchal') nuclear family by invoking its three 'natural' elements; according to Karen Schneider, the 'heroic father, [the] supportive mother, [and] vulnerable children.'[15] Nuclear families are foregrounded in the following films in the sample: Home Alone, Terminator 2: Judgement Day, City Slickers, Home Alone 2: Lost in New York, Mrs. Doubtfire, Sleepless in Seattle, Jurassic Park, The Lion King, Forrest Gump, True Lies, The Santa Clause, The Flintstones, Apollo 13, Independence Day, Jerry Maguire, Ransom, The Lost World: Jurassic Park, Liar Liar, Air Force One, Armageddon and Saving Private Ryan. The central action of films like these, according to Schneider, 'puts families at risk only to bring about their salvation'.[16] They often begin with the fragmentation of the nuclear family unit or, alternatively, such a fragmentation is already in place before the narrative commences. The action of the film concludes upon the reconstitution of a nuclear family unit (but not necessarily the original one). Schneider also notes that the most popular means of restoring the nuclear family is through the use of violence (see Chapter Four).

I noted previously that certain popular narratives tend to displace representations of higher institutions onto the terms of lower, more prepotent (and hence more widely popular) institutions. I also noted the tendency of popular film narratives to reduce certain apparently diverse and unfamiliar subjects to the more familiar terms of permitted discourses. Both of these operations are demonstrated by the extent to which the events of films such as Independence Day, Jurassic Park and

Saving Private Ryan are predicated on challenges to the integrity of the nuclear family and only incidentally concerned with very particular (and potentially unfamiliar or alienting) discourses of invading aliens, rampaging dinosaurs or the horrors of war. It is worth noting that this use of apparently varied subject matter as the occasion for the treatment of the same limited set of familiar ideological discourses mirrors, on the level of the plot, the more general, ongoing use of ostensible content as the occasion for fulfilling the ideological prerogatives of a narrative's form.

In Independence Day, all the major characters are, in the first instance, defined by their familial bonds. Thomas J. Whitmore (Bill Pullman) first appears on the phone to his loving career-wife, Marilyn (Mary McDonnell), with his young daughter, Patricia (Mae Whitman), beside him on the bed, establishing him as a member of a complete nuclear family unit before he is established as the President of the United States. Captain Steve Hiller (Will Smith) first wakes up in bed with his girlfriend, Jasmine (Vivica A. Fox), moments before his surrogate son, Dylan (Ross Bagley), pops his head through the door to complete the picture. Later in the film, Steve marries Jasmine and their family that in appearance already had all the elements of the familiar nuclear unit, is finally sanctioned by an official institutional authority. Drunken crop-duster Russell Casse (Randy Quaid) is first depicted in an altercation with his alienated son, Miguel (James Duval). By the end of the film, however, as the sober, suicidal hero of the human counter-offensive, Russell once more becomes an admirable father-figure, reconstituted albeit posthumously as part of an ideologically approved father-son relationship. Finally, cable-repairman David Levinson (Jeff Goldblum) is introduced playing chess with his father, Julius (Judd Hirsch), who specifically notes that they are spending too much time together

because of his son's recent separation from his wife, Constance (Margaret Colin). Later, as witnesses for the wedding of Steve and Jasmine, a symbolic remarriage between David and Constance takes place. The closing scene of the film visually reconstitutes all of the families (with the explicable absence of Russell and the First Lady) abstracted against the pure white canvas of the Nevada Desert. Thus, all the major characters are introduced primarily within the context of family and their individual stories resolve exclusively along these lines.

The action of Jurassic Park is structured around Dr. Alan Grant's gradual accommodation to the related roles of father and (nuclear) family man. Early in the film, his partner, Ellie Sattler (Laura Dern), expresses an interest in having a child. At this point, Alan's dislike of children is firmly established. This dislike is compounded shortly afterwards when he terrifies a young child with graphic details of the pack-hunting habits of the velociraptor. Later in the narrative, a love-triangle is established when Dr. Ian Malcolm (Jeff Goldblum) is introduced as a rival for Ellie's attentions. With his black leather jacket and declared history of failed marriages, he epitomises the single life of the uncommitted bachelor, the antithesis of the family man that Dr. Grant will eventually become. The narrative charts the manner in which Grant overcomes his dislike of children. Through protecting Lex and Timmy, he comes both to love children and respect their sensitive natures. In the final shots of the film, in the departing helicopter, there is a moment of quiet recognition between Ellie and Alan as he is placed in the paternal role of a framed image of family, with Lex and Timmy asleep on either side of him (see Figure 7 below). Grant's life-threatening experience with rampaging dinosaurs has remedied his dysfunctional apathy towards children and, thus, paved the way for his participation (with Ellie) in a possible family of his own. In other words, the

progress and resolution of this narrative is dedicated to an affirmation of the institution of the nuclear family.



Figure 7: Dr. Alan Grant, (nuclear) family man.

The same discourse is employed in the film's sequel, The Lost World: Jurassic Park, except this time it is the turn of bachelor Dr. Ian Malcolm to confront his parental responsibilities to his estranged daughter, Kelly (Vanessa Lee Chester). Again, the violence of rampaging dinosaurs provides the occasion for this necessary abjuration of paternal dysfunction.

Finally, within the framed narrative of Saving Private Ryan, the institution of the nuclear family announces itself less by its presence than by its conspicuous absence. In this film, war has literally displaced family from the narrative, made it a practical impossibility. The soldiers' personal stories are repeatedly phrased in terms of their eventual restoration to their particular family structures that the war has deferred. The central mission of the film, identified clearly by the film's title, is that of saving the last surviving son of Margaret Ryan (Amanda Boxer) and, thus,

preventing the complete extinction of a family line. Captain Miller understands the war as a series of simple orders, conditions that must be fulfilled before he can go home to his wife. T/4 Medic Wade calls for his mother when he is dying (as do many other soldiers during the course of the film).

There are two images of integrated nuclear families in the film, i.e.; the French family in Neuville that try to give their young daughter to the American soldiers and the extended, modern-day family of the older James Francis Ryan. The opening and closing scenes of the film establish Ryan as the patriarch of a large, healthy, good-looking family, with a wife, their son, the son's wife and their four children (including three daughters that perhaps mirror the three lost brothers of the war narrative).[17] Relatively early in the film, Miller expresses the potential value of his mission in terms of the important contribution he hopes Ryan will make to the future well-being of all humankind, i.e., he posits Ryan, albeit cynically, as finding a cure for cancer or inventing a longer-lasting light-bulb. Before Miller dies, he asks Ryan to 'Earn this'. By 'this', he means the many sacrifices and deaths that have been endured in order to save his life. With this comment Miller makes Ryan responsible for the horrible slaughter around him, insisting that he must somehow spend the rest of his life atoning for it. That Ryan's atonement is not expressed in terms of a valuable contribution to the ongoing Enlightenment project (he does not invent a longer-lasting light-bulb), but rather in terms of his ability to sire a large family, all of whom are loving and respectful, points to the pre-eminent regard in which this narrative holds the values of family life and the inalienable right of all individuals to propagate their bloodline. By opening and closing the action of the film with the spectacle of the older Ryan's almost dynastic family, the narrative reduces the many horrors of World War Two to the familiar terms of a simple,

general discourse on the importance of the nuclear family.[18]

The violence of an alien invasion, rampaging dinosaurs or WWII, then, simply provide an occasion for the affirmation of familial bonds. As Schneider notes, the male heroes of these films 'salvage their relationships through decisive heroic action that simultaneously quells a catastrophic threat to the community.'[19] The ideological ends of the above films could as effectively been achieved by any other, similarly violent series of events, e.g., an Islamic fundamentalist nuclear threat (True Lies), a mid-air terrorist hijack (Air Force One) or a cataclysmic meteorite (Armageddon).

It is interesting to note that, contrary to what many popular narratives would seem to suggest, the nuclear family is neither an eternal or transcendent figure, nor is it a formation with any significantly mature historical provenance. Rather, it was the specific product of the boom years that followed WWII, enjoying prominence for only a short period of time (1950s and 1960s); and it has been in decline ever since. By 1990, only 15 percent of households conformed to the nuclear model: 'Instead, were significant numbers of working couples, single parents, stepfamilies, cohabitants and gay partnerships.'[20] By the 1990s, approximately half of marriages ended in divorce (and this does not take into account that at this stage far fewer people were getting married in the first place).[21] The number of working mothers has also been growing steadily, from 18.6 percent in 1960 to 61.7 percent in 1994.[22]

The 'norm' for the family in 1990s America, then, is a far cry from the traditional nuclear family. Interestingly, a brief glance at the sample of popular films seems to confirm this. Out of 50 films, only 30 have a focus on a particular family structure; but out of that 30, only eight have fully integrated nuclear families (Home Alone, City Slickers, Home Alone 2: Lost in New York, Lethal Weapon 3,

The Flintstones, Apollo 13, Ransom, Air Force One); and, although technically complete, several of these families are still marginally dysfunctional. The remaining 22 films comprise a veritable laundry list of variations on fragmented family structures: Beauty and the Beast (Belle is in a single father family), Terminator 2: Judgment Day (John Connor is in single mother family), Silence of the Lambs (the distressing death of Starling's father is an ongoing narrative trope), Aladdin (Jasmine is in a single father family, Aladdin is an orphan), Batman Returns (the Penguin is abandoned by his parents), Mrs. Doubtfire (the parents are separated), Sleepless in Seattle (Sam is a single father), Forrest Gump (Betty Gump is a single mother, Jenny Curran is a single mother and, later, Forrest is a single father), The Lion King (the death of Simba's father is a determining narrative event), The Santa Clause (the parents are divorced), True Lies (Harry Tasker is an absent working father), Toy Story (Andy lives in a single mother family), Independence Day (Jasmine is a single mother, the First Lady is an absent working mother and, later, the President becomes a single father), Jerry Maguire (Dorothy Boyd is a single mother), Saving Private Ryan (almost all of Mrs. Margaret Ryan's sons are killed), Armageddon (Harry Stamper is a single father), The Waterboy (Bobby Boucher lives in a single mother family), Star Wars: Episode One – The Phantom Menace (Annakin Skywalker lives in a single mother family), The Sixth Sense (Cole Sear lives in a single mother family), Titanic (Rose deWitt-Bukater lives in a single mother family, Jack Dawson is an orphan), The Lost World: Jurassic Park (Dr. Ian Malcolm is an absent father), Liar, Liar (Fletcher Reede is divorced from his wife).

In 1990s American society, and in its popular representations, broken families are the norm, not whole or reconstituted families; but these films also take a strong position on this issue, clearly establishing that although broken families

may be the norm, they are not considered *normal*, even less so ideal. Inevitably, the films in the sample tell stories about reconstituting dysfunctional families, replacing deceased or absent family members or beginning new families to compensate for a personal lack of familial structure in the past (typically by becoming involved in a heterosexual relationship). In fact, so absolutely sacred is the integrated nuclear family when it does appear that characters that attempt to split it up or deviate from its format end up dead. In Saving Private Ryan, Private Caparzo is shot by a sniper when he attempts to take a little French girl away from her parents, a death that illustrates the consequences of attempting to dissolve this rare nuclear family unit. In Independence Day, the First Lady is a career wife, away on assignment when the White House is attacked by aliens. She too dies. In fact, she even gets to make a last-minute, death bed apology for her apparently delinquent behaviour, saying to her husband (soon to be a single father): 'I'm so sorry I didn't come home when you asked me to.' In this single phrase, she resumes the normal role of 'supportive mother', acknowledges her 'rightful place' in the family home, subordinate to her working husband's will. It is a redemption scene that could have been lifted straight out of a 'fallen woman' film of the 1930s or 1940s.

Beginning with the Carter administration (and continuing under Reagan), a strong, conservative family values movement emerged which attempted to blame the many ills of contemporary American society on 'irresponsible' parenting. People were encouraged to look back to the 'golden age' of the 1950s when everything, they were assured, was perfect in suburbia. Of course, this was not the case at all. In fact, during the post-WWII heyday of the nuclear family, according to Furstenberg, 'many observers were bemoaning the disappearance of more extended and complex family forms… fearing that the nuclear family was becoming isolated

from the network of kin and the larger community.'[23] However, despite the prominence and volume of such moral campaigns, the nuclear family continued (and continues) to deteriorate in importance; and yet, at the same time, it continues to appear as a central discourse of popular 1990s films. It could be suggested that this is because it is still considered of great importance to the ruling groups that the dysfunctional (dis-integrated) family be blamed for almost everything. In this way, attention is distracted away from the material social and economic conditions that cause many of these families' problems in the first place. By placing responsibility for social (and economic) salvation on the reintegration of the nuclear family (as do many of the most popular films of the 1990s), it falls to the single parent to solve *her* own problems (caused in the first place, it is typically suggested, by reckless attitudes towards sex, motherhood or marriage). In other words, a single mother should find a husband and provider rather than depend on welfare.

Ideological Institutions Justified Associated with Esteem and Self-Actualisation Needs

Maslow describes individuals' need for esteem as follows:

> [the] desire for a stable, firmly-based, usually high evaluation of themselves, for self-respect, or self-esteem, and for the esteem of others... the desire for strength, for achievement, for adequacy, for mastery and competence, for confidence in the face of the world, and for independence and freedom... the desire for reputation or prestige... status, fame and glory, dominance, recognition, attention, importance, dignity, or appreciation...[24]

Also, he describes the need for self-actualisation:

> What a man *can* be, he *must* be. He must be true to his own nature... This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one idiosyncratically is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming.[25]

These two higher needs provide a combined justification for the ideological institution of individualism or, as Erin Addison more keenly describes it, 'naïve

individualism'. She characterises this institution as follows:

> To be 'free' is not only to 'do what you wanna do,' but to 'be who you are.' The long alliance of Enlightenment philosophy, Protestant doctrines of innate grace, and crude social Darwinism has crafted for Americans the deep sense that... our worth as humans may be quite different from what either our circumstances *or our actions* indicate.[26]

It is this American bourgeois conception of individualism that is perpetuated not only in Hollywood films (and American popular culture in general), but also, more aggressively, in the various expressions of US foreign policy. It is this kind of individualism that informs the self-image of the US as the world's police. As Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner write: 'individualism is founded on the notion that one's private intuitions are sufficient for social action... In its extreme form self-leadership... assumes the form of authoritarianism, of leadership over others.'[27] On the microcosmic level of the popular film narrative, to become individuals, heroes must remedy several related character dysfunctions, i.e., a lack of self-confidence, an unwillingness to take charge, to be a leader of people, to take chances or to make important active decisions that will directly influence their own destiny and the destinies of others. The hero must become what Marx called the 'independent man':

> A *being* only considers himself independent when he stands on his own feet; and he only stands on his own feet when he owes his existence to himself. A man who lives by the grace of another regards himself as a dependent being.[28]

In Titanic, Jack Dawson enters the narrative a fully self-actualised, independent individual, the self-reliant hero of the American dream. He is comfortable with both who he is and what he is doing with his life. As his character cannot develop any further, i.e., become more of an individual, his primary function, it seems, is catalysing the individualisation of the people around him, in

particular, Rose DeWitt-Bukater. Rose feels trapped in the upper-classes. She longs to express herself in many different ways but as a woman and, more specifically, as a 'lady', she simply cannot. With his free and easy, 'tumble-weed' life-style, Jack represents everything to which Rose aspires. He espouses his individualist philosophy at the first class dinner table:

> Well... it's a big world, and I want to see it all before I go. My father was always talkin' about goin' to see the ocean. He died in the town he was born in, and never did see it. You can't wait around, because you never know what hand you're going to get dealt next. See, my folks died in a fire when I was fifteen, and I've been on the road ever since. Somethin' like that teaches you to take life as it comes to you. To make each day count.

Rose tells Jack that she is terrified by the powerful 'inertia' of her life, the idea that everything for her is determined by outside forces. This determinism is crystallised in the narrative by the fact of her engagement to a man with whom she is not in love. She is not marrying for herself but because of her dependence on money, to save her family name, to prevent her mother from becoming a seamstress. She wants to make her own decisions, choose her own destiny. She wants to be an individual. 'Why can't I be like you, Jack?' asks Rose. In response, Jack assures her that, like all true Americans, she can be whatever she wants to be.

The conflict of the dramatic narrative depicts Rose's growing sense of (naïve) individualism. As is to be expected, this higher growth is displaced onto the terms of more prepotent ideological institutions, most notably, heterosexual love, i.e., it is through her heterosexual relationship with Jack (and, ultimately, a life or death situation) that she is emancipated. Jack allows her to transcend the suffocating, 'proper' social boundaries of her (un-American) aristocratic heritage by having good old-fashioned pre-marital sex in the back of a car. The full extent of

her subsequent transformation is revealed at the close of the film as the camera tracks along a series of sepia-toned photographs that reveal Rose in various, free-spirited situations, i.e., riding a horse, flying a plane, as a movie-actress, etc.

However, the institution of individualism is inherently paradoxical, simultaneously defined in terms of a liberation from and a conformity to established social norms. Noël Carroll notes this contradiction:

> ideology functions to reproduce capitalist *subjects*. The ambiguity of the notion of a *subject*, here, is crucial... [It] refers *both* to one's belief in oneself as a unity, an autonomous 'I,' the center of one's own experience, and as the source of free action; *and* it refers to one who is subservient to some system of domination...[29]

Titanic is exemplary of the tendency of popular narratives to elide this latter, negative definition of subjectivity. Rose's nascent individualism is to be understood exclusively (and naïvely) as a liberation from domination, not a subscription to it. However, the use made of individualism in other popular narratives more clearly reveals this fundamental contradiction. The narratives of Toy Story and Forrest Gump are exemplary in this respect.

In Toy Story, Woody the Cowboy (voiced by Tom Hanks) must accept that he has been displaced by Buzz Lightyear (voiced by Tim Allen) as the favourite toy in Andy's room. At the same time, Buzz must cease believing that he is real Buzz Lightyear of Star Command. Only when the two heroes both recognise and dispel their respective 'false relations' and accept the restrictive contingencies that result from their status as toys will they be capable of becoming individuals. By the end of the film, Woody accepts his displacement, acknowledges that he is subject to the political whims of an external power that, although cruel and arbitrary, cannot be changed or questioned. At the same time, Buzz accepts that he not a unique individual, i.e., the real Buzz Lightyear, but rather one of thousands, if not hundreds

of thousands of identical copies. Paradoxically, these two heroes become liberated individuals by acknowledging a set of material conditions that make such a liberation impossible and, more significantly, by conceding their subjection to them. Cosmo Landesman regards this profound contradiction as a specific, consciously-evoked theme of both Toy Story and Toy Story 2. He writes:

> you start out believing you're a superhero who can fly to 'infinity and beyond' or that you're the fastest-shooting, most rootin'-tootin' cowboy in the west. Then you awake from the dreams of youth and realise you're just somebody's plaything, passing time, till it's time for you to get passed by.[30]

Ryan and Kellner describe the 'new' hero of popular cinema as '[an] individualist who combines three essential components of the contemporary conservative social agenda; he is a warrior, an entrepreneur, and a patriarch.'[31] On a purely biographical level, Forrest Gump is this ideal hero; he fights in the Vietnam War, he establishes a multi-million dollar business empire and he marries a dependent female and fathers a male child. He seems to be the American dream made flesh. However, Gump is the ideal individualist hero for another significant reason, that is, his character appears to be an externalisation of the very paradox that lies at the heart of capitalist subjectivity. Quite conspicuously, he is both a leader and a follower, an active agent for change and a passive, reactionary conformist. On the one hand, Gump appears to know exactly what he wants from life, i.e., to marry Jenny Curran (Robin Wright). His personal philosophy is simple and unchanging, assembled from a collection of phrases he picked up from his 'Momma', i.e., 'Life is like a box of chocolates', 'Stupid is as stupid does', etc. He has no internal demons to resolve and, consequently, seems fully at peace with himself. As a fully self-actualised individual, like Jack Dawson in Titanic, he becomes a catalyst for change in his environment. The film follows this individualist principle through to

its various logical and, at times, absurd conclusions. Not only does Gump precipitate the individualisation of Jenny Curran and Lieutenant Dan Taylor, he also becomes a force for significant wider social and cultural change, inspiring everything from Elvis Presley's characteristic pelvic gyrations to the bumper sticker slogan 'Shit happens!'. On the other hand, however, Gump lacks many of the qualities considered indispensable to the individual hero of popular narrative. He is utterly passive, failing consciously or actively to initiate any change, i.e., his effect on others is largely incidental and often unintentional. His behaviour can be reduced to an action-reaction formula governed by a few simple, immutable guidelines, e.g., if someone harms Jenny, he harms them, or, if someone tries to harm him, he runs away. Apart from his declared intention to marry Jenny, Gump does not have any focused ambitions; in his own words, he's 'just floating around accidental-like on a breeze.' For example, as soon as he graduates from Alabama State University, he is invited to consider joining the army. He does so without hesitation.

Gump represents the confluence of these two incompatible interpretations of capitalist subjectivity, i.e., liberated individualism and dominated subjectivity. While this combination of traits would normally create certain irreconcilable psychological contradictions, in Gump their co-existence is strategically situated within the irrational context of his pronounced mental dysfunction. Peter N. Chumo II describes Forrest Gump as a 'fantasy' in which 'national tensions and conflicts are transcended through a figure whose unspoiled innocence and decency have a cleansing effect on a divided country.'[32] Gump's 'unspoiled innocence' is presented as the means by which he and, by extension, audiences can transcend divisive political issues such as racial inequality and the Vietnam war. However, Gump's innocence is actually ignorance. The implication is that many of the symptomatic

contradictions of a modern capitalist society can be elided in much the same way as Gump himself transcends the contradiction of his capitalist subjectivity, i.e., by becoming like Gump, an intellectual child, someone who does not question the vagaries of an inequitable, contradictory *status quo* because he is incapable of sophisticated political thought. In this manner, Gump is the ideal (double) subject of ideology, capable of living a contradiction because he has no desire or, better yet, no ability to question it.

Institutional Threats

When ideological institutions are threatened, the source of the threat is inevitably someone or something that is also ideologically determined, i.e., an institutional threat. The set of institutional threats informs an additional category of permitted discourses in popular film and comprises of both contemporary threats (fundamentalist terrorism) and also more traditional social bug bears (such as dangerous technology; which is as old, if not older, than the Prometheus myth). A consideration of the sources of conflict in the film sample suggests what some of these institutional threats might be.

Self-aggrandisement, understood as pure and simple personal greed (or alternatively as abuses and subversions of sanctioned capitalist methods), informs the actions of the villains in eight of the 50 films in the sample: Home Alone, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Home Alone 2: Lost in New York, Lethal Weapon 3, The Lion King, Mission: Impossible, There's Something About Mary, A Bug's Life and Toy Story 2. Typically, the selfish aims of the villains in these films are implemented through criminal acts. Criminality, thus, is one popular institutional threat. Self-aggrandisement motivates the villain in an additional eleven films.

However, in these cases, although the villains are obviously criminal, they are also (and obviously) representatives of other institutional threats, i.e., corrupt government (Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves, Aladdin and A Few Good Men) or big business (Ghost, Pretty Woman, The Fugitive, The Firm, The Flintstones, Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls and Star Wars: Episode One - The Phantom Menace).

Other institutional threats are imperialism or racism (Dances with Wolves, Pocahontas, Independence Day, Men in Black and Saving Private Ryan); dangerous technology (Terminator 2: Judgment Day, Jurassic Park, Apollo 13, Titanic, The Lost World: Jurassic Park and The Matrix); insanity or dysfunctional psychology (Silence of the Lambs, Batman Returns, The Santa Clause, Batman Forever, Toy Story, Ransom, Liar Liar, The Sixth Sense and Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me; angry nature (City Slickers, Twister and Armageddon); and terrorism (True Lies and Air Force One). The remaining six films deal with threats to either heterosexual love or the nuclear family; Beauty and the Beast, Forrest Gump and The Waterboy (a shallow society that judges individuals by appearances), Sleepless in Seattle (death of a loved one), Mrs. Doubtfire (divorce), Jerry Maguire (an inability to commit). While other films represent threats to the institutions of heterosexual love and the nuclear family, in these six films the threat is not superseded by a threat to a more prepotent ideological institution.

Many villains simultaneously represent a number of institutional threats. For example, Salim Abu Aziz (Art Malik), the Arab terrorist in True Lies, is also a representative of the threat of insanity (a common conflation of institutional threats, especially when Islamic fundamentalism is involved); the dinosaurs in Jurassic Park and The Lost World are not only the products of dangerous technology, but also of big business and angry nature. For the purposes of illustration, I have characterised

(somewhat reductively, it should be admitted) each of the above films by its most immediately perceptible institutional threat.

As the specific contents of the set of institutional threats depend not only on certain traditional social fears but also on the vicissitudes of the prevailing social and political climate, the above list can point only to the social and political anxieties of the 1990s. In this limited respect, it provides a relatively comprehensive picture of the period (which shall be analysed in the following chapter). For the moment, however, for reasons of brevity, I conclude this section with a discussion of a single representative institutional threat.

The Discourse of Dangerous Technology

The discourse of dangerous technology establishes a hierarchy of importance that places humanity over technology. Its many variations include a similar privileging of nature over the machine and tradition over modernity. The most commonly invoked version of this hierarchy involves a privileging of personal human agency over remote detachment or automation. Many villains tend to rely on methods that dilute their personal involvement in the consequences of their decisions. In a cold and machine-like manner they delegate their agency, issuing executive orders to subordinates while they themselves resist active, applied participation. On the other hand, heroes are not afraid to get involved, to get their hands dirty, to apply themselves directly to the solution of theirs and others' problems, to demonstrate the kind of self reliance central to the American dream.

However, at the same time that readers are positioned to admire the applied agency of heroes and to denounce the machine-like detachment of villains, they are also pledged to revere the technological achievements of the ongoing Enlightenment project, the fruits of humanity's intellectual excellence. Ryan and Kellner note this

contradiction: '[While the dominant ideology] requires technology for its economic program... it fears technological modernity on a social and cultural plane.'[33] This problematic confluence of technological pride and technophobia leads to profound inconsistencies and ambiguities in the treatment of technology in certain popular films.

This contradiction presents a good example of how certain highly ideological texts can actually criticise institutions upon which the dominant ideology depends for its reproduction, a hegemonic concession motivated in the first instance by the need to give the audience what they want. However, while these films appear to engage with their social and political context, these critiques are treated in such a manner as to have no meaningful or lasting effect. This is apparent from the preliminary discussion below (and is a point that is returned to in greater detail in Chapter Four).

Terminator 2: Judgment Day literalises the conflict between humanity and the machine and posits a clear victor. However, this simple dichotomy, when closely examined, is anything but simple. The film often represents humans using forms of technology to further their own cause, i.e., weapons and explosives, automobiles, ATMs, etc. This suggests a further distinction: technology in the control of humans is good while technology in control of itself or, worse, technology controlling humans, is bad. This further distinction allows us to accept the benevolent Terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger) as a force for good as he has been reprogrammed to serve the interests of humanity rather than the interests of other machines (as in the case of the T-1000).

However, even this qualified dichotomy is prone to inconsistencies. It is abundantly clear from the start of the film that artificially intelligent machines are to

be feared. This technology is obviously demonised, i.e., the robots have glowing red eyes and death's-head skulls. At the same time, later sections of the narrative represent the benevolent Terminator's growing sense of individualism. As the film progresses, he becomes more self-aware and less automated, more human and less like a machine. In fact, the message of hope offered at the close of the film is predicated on the idea that this machine has proved capable of learning the value of human life. At this point, it is important to recall that this was the main problem in the first instance and the source of the film's entire dramatic content, i.e., humans had invented just such an intelligent machine, i.e., Skynet, a machine that could learn, that was self-aware and that also recognised the value of human life. The only notable difference was that the Skynet computer placed a very low value on such life and decided (in an act of self-defence, it should be noted) to wipe it out. Thus, the narrative suggests that autonomy is a good thing as long as the autonomous agent is not free to come to certain undesirable conclusions. This, of course, denies the very essence of autonomy and mirrors the manner in which a capitalist ideology situates its subjects as free and independent individuals as long as these subjects agree to subscribe to its own restrictive rules.

Jurassic Park employs a popular variation on the discourse of dangerous technology, namely a *hubris* narrative, i.e., the presumption that human science can conquer and control nature with impunity. In this film, the inevitable clash between nature and technology is crystallised in the notion of the zoo or theme park, a place in which unpredictable natural animals are expected to perform for humans within the prescribed, limited format of an entertainment package. Furthermore, the 'animals' in question are long-extinct dinosaurs reconstituted from fragments of DNA contained in the blood-sacs of prehistoric mosquitoes. The film's ostensible

attitude towards this endeavour is made very clear by Dr. Ian Malcolm. He castigates John Hammond for his presumption: 'The lack of humility before nature that's being displayed here staggers me.' He accuses Hammond and his technicians of acquiring their knowledge without discipline and, as a result, having no real sense of responsibility. He further characterises the project as 'the rape of the natural world.' Following Malcolm's lead, the two consulting palaeontologists, Alan Grant and Ellie Sattler, further criticise the ethics of the project. In the end, the ethical issue is clearly polarised, with the young, healthy, good-looking heroes representing humility and responsibility before nature while the mildly disabled Hammond and the 'blood-sucking' lawyer epitomise the *hubris* of modern science and big business. However, as in Terminator 2, this apparently simple attitude is actually highly ambiguous. The collapse of the park's security systems that stands as the most prominent consequence of humanity's presumption was an entirely avoidable situation. All technical difficulties are directly attributable to the villainous activities of the computer programmer and industrial spy, Dennis Nedry. It is his plan to steal dinosaur embryos and, more specifically, the computer program he implements to accomplish this plan that causes all the park's main difficulties. The discourse on dangerous technology is irrevocably displaced, individualised in the character of the villain. Thus, while the narrative appears to offer a critique of technology and the capitalist motivations behind it, at the same time it performs no legitimate criticism at all.

An additional inconsistency surfaces regularly in many of these films, not within the diegesis, but on the level of industrial practice. At the same time as we are encouraged to fear technology, the very apparatus of cinema that conveys this message is highly technological. In fact, the history of cinema is often described in

terms of the development of cinema technology and our increasing enjoyment of the cinematic 'experience' is frequently expressed in terms of the deployment of newer and more impressive technologies, e.g., sound-systems, special-effects techniques, etc.

The recent development (and now common use) of computer generated imagery (CGI) offers a particularly interesting example of this contradictory attitude towards technology. Most of the time, CGI is used to imitate nature, to substitute for it when the real thing is impossible or else simply too impractical, dangerous or expensive to film. Such technological manipulation is exploited for financial gain, in the form of direct exhibition, television and video sell-throughs, related merchandising and tie-ins, etc. Basically, it could be suggested that CGI exploits the natural world for financial gain, an extra-diegetic operation that runs counter to the hubristic themes that many of these films actively condemn within their narratives. For example, in Jurassic Park, the realism of the computer-generated dinosaurs was the film's main selling point. In this film, then, the hubristic discourse of dangerous technology invoked on the level of plot is contradicted by the film's technologically-advanced ability to bring long-extinct animals back to life for human consumption.

Notes

[1] Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, p. 17.

[2] Stefan Morawski, cited by James Kendrick, 'Marxist Overtones in Three Films by James Cameron', Journal of Popular Film & Television, Vol. 27, No. 3, Fall 1999, p. 39.

[3] Abraham H. Maslow, Motivation and Personality, New York, Evanston, & London: Harper & Row, 1970, p. 38.

Notes (cont')

[4] Maslow posits other needs, i.e., the 'Desires to Know and to Understand' and the 'Aesthetic' needs. He characterised the former as follows:

> This process has been phrased by some as the search for meaning. We shall then postulate a desire to understand, to systematize, to organize, to analyze, to looks for relations and meanings, to construct a system of values [p. 50].

Of this set of needs and the latter, 'aesthetic' needs, he issues the following caution:

> Much overlapping with conative and cognitive needs makes it impossible to separate them sharply. The [aesthetic] needs for order, for symmetry, for closure, for completion of the act, for system, and for structure may be indiscriminately assigned to *either* cognitive, conative, or aesthetic, or even to neurotic needs [p. 51].

As this thesis attempts to establish the importance of narrative in structuring our perception and understanding of the world around us, it might be suggested that these additional sets of needs inform the manner in which humans both initially recognise and subsequently tend to the satisfaction of the other, more obviously conative personality needs.

[5] Abraham H. Maslow, Motivation and Personality, p. 60.

[6] *ibid.*, p. 46.

[7] *ibid.*, p. 47.

[8] Mike Cormack, Ideology, p. 31.

[9] Abraham H. Maslow, Motivation and Personality, p. 39.

[10] *ibid.*, p. 41.

[11] Edward Ashbee, American Society Today, p. 34.

[12] Richard Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation: the myth of the frontier in twentieth century America, New York: Atheneum, 1992, p. 12.

[13] Abraham H. Maslow, Motivation and Personality, p. 43-4.

Notes (cont')

[14] Erin Addison, 'Saving Other Women from Other Men', p. 8.

[15] Karen Schneider, 'With Violence if Necessary: rearticulating the family in the contemporary action-thriller', Journal of Popular Film and Television, Vol. 27, No. 1, Spring 1999, p. 4.

[16] *ibid.*

[17] Although images of this same family open the film and, thus, serve as a framing device, it is not until the close of the film that we realise that the Old Man is actually the modern day Private Ryan. If anything, the transition from the opening scenes to the D-Day landing on Omaha Beach suggests that this Old Man might actually be Captain John Miller.

[18] It is interesting to note that almost all of Spielberg's films have as their central narrative discourse the institute of the nuclear family. Either he is heavily immured in the dominant ideology and, thus, perpetuates the various institutions he regards as important, natural and immutable, or else, more likely, he is an incredibly astute commercial filmmaker seeking actively to engage the prevailing ideological needs of his mass-audience.

[19] Karen Schneider, 'With Violence if Necessary', p. 5.

[20] Edward Ashbee, American Society Today, p. 90.

[21] *ibid.*, p. 90-1.

[22] Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., 'Family Change and Family Diversity', in Diversity and its Discontents: cultural conflict and common ground in contemporary American society, p. 152.

[23] *ibid.*, p. 147-8.

[24] Abraham H. Maslow, Motivation and Personality, p. 44.

Notes (cont')

[25] Abraham H. Maslow, Motivation and Personality, p. 46.

[26] Erin Addison, 'Saving Other Women From Other Men', p. 17.

[27] Michael Ryan & Douglas Kellner, Camera Politica: the politics and ideology of contemporary Hollywood film, Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 237.

[28] Karl Marx, cited by James Kendrick, 'Marxist Overtones in Three Films by James Cameron', p. 42.

[29] Noël Carroll, Mystifying Movies: fads and fallacies in contemporary film theory, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, p. 58.

[30] Cosmo Landesman, 'Toys will be Toys', The Sunday Times, 6th February, 2000, 'Culture' supplement, p. 17.

[31] Michael Ryan & Douglas Kellner, Camera Politica, p. 219.

[32] Peter N. Chumo II, '"You've Got to Put the Past Behind You Before You Can Move On", p. 3.

[33] Michael Ryan & Douglas Kellner, cited by J. P. Telotte, '*The Terminator*, *Terminator 2*, and the Exposed Body', Journal of Popular Film and Television, Vol. 20, No. 2, Summer 1992, p. 33n.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE POPULAR 1990s FILM IN CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is divided into two sections. The aim of Section One is to situate the popular 1990s film within its material (social, political, economic) context. One can begin such a task by identifying certain significant characteristics of these films, then investigate in what manner (if at all) these characteristics are exceptional, specific or distinct to the popular films of this period, i.e., to what extent (and in what manner) are these films the distinct social, political and/or economic products of their time? After concluding that the popular 1990s film lacks any meaningful distinguishing qualities, a case is made for the popular 1990s film as a simple continuation (and extension) of certain production and marketing practices established by the 'blockbuster' format in the mid-1970s and consolidated during the 1980s, practices that actually result in a more reactionary film.

That the necessarily reactionary quality of the blockbuster film provides a meaningful basis for establishing a continuity between the films of the 1980s and 1990s is demonstrated in Section Two by showing the central and determining importance in these reactionary films of their primary ideological function (performed, as I noted in Chapter One, by the closed narrative structure). To do this, I show how certain contradictions and inconsistencies on the level of content are the direct result of the primary need in these films to satisfy the ideological prerogatives of the closed narrative structure (by using the orientation strategies that assist in a recognition of its presence, progress and resolution).

It is important to note that I am trying to demonstrate continuity not between popular film practice of the 1990s and 1980s *in toto*, but only between those popular films that have performed well, proved the 'most popular' with audiences during these periods. I am aware that there are certain popular films made every year that are very different from each other (discussed in Chapter Five), but these films have never been as 'popular' as the films that display this continuity. In other words, I am not trying to say that all popular films perform the same ideological function on the level of narrative structure, just that, with few exceptions, the films that audiences go to in the greatest numbers are very similar on this fundamental ideological level.

SECTION ONE: THE POPULAR 1990s FILM IN CONTEXT

A crucial preliminary critical pitfall to avoid is the tendency to exaggerate the importance of any potentially distinct features of the films in question in order simply to make clearer and more definitive statements about the 1990s popular cinema as a unique and separate period in film history. In other words, as Murray Smith recommends, we should avoid making too swift judgments about 'fundamental shifts' in film history as such studies of 'superficial changes are likely to obscure our view of underlying continuities'.[1]

Certain continuities become especially apparent when one examines only the 'most popular' films of each year. Using this objective sampling technique, I hope, has allowed me to avoid the potential subjectivity of personally choosing or filtering a sample of 'representative' films in order simply to bear out a predetermined thesis formed about the social-political context of a particular era. For example, certain accounts of American filmmaking in the late 1960s and early 1970s emphasise its revolutionary or counter-cinematic character, its engagement with troubling social and

political issues of the time. However, if one is to accept these accounts as representative of the American film industry at the time, one is almost forced to concede (erroneously) that during this period there was only about half a dozen directors making a few dozen films. As Geoff King writes: 'Relatively small groups of films that stand out from the mainstream have always tended to attract more critical attention than might strictly be merited in terms of their broader significance.'[2] In other words, the studies of film history that characterise the late 1960s and early 1970s in terms of the 'Hollywood Renaissance' ignore the broader ideological (economic) context; ignore the totality of filmmaking practice at the time; ignore the fact that the major box-office successes and, hence, the most 'popular' films of this period included The Jungle Book (Reitherman, 1967), The Love Bug (Stevenson, 1968), Love Story (Hiller, 1970), Airport (Seaton, 1970), Fiddler on the Roof (Jewison, 1971), The Poseidon Adventure (Neame, 1972), The Sting (Hill, 1973) and The Towering Inferno (Guillermin & Allen, 1974). It is only when a more objective criterion for sample selection is employed (in this case based on performance at the box-office) that the apparent differences between films of certain periods begin to fade and the more fundamental basis of their similarity becomes clearer, i.e., a consistent use of a closed narrative structure, a reliable moral-causal economy and the consistent deployment of certain typical physical and behavioural traits to index heroism and villainy.

Also, with cinema celebrating its centenary during the 1990s, there was certainly pressure to view 1990s films as somehow representative of the 'state of the art', as the culmination (or, for some, the end-point) of the 20th century's great popular medium. This resulted quite often in laments and calls for a return to variously identified 'golden ages', such as the 'Hollywood Renaissance' or American

'New Wave' of Bonnie and Clyde (Penn, 1967), The Graduate (Nichols, 1967) and Easy Rider (Hopper, 1969), or the long vanished, presumed dead 'art' cinema of 'auteurs' such as Jean-Luc Godard, Robert Bresson, Jean Renoir, Yasujiro Ozu, etc.[3] Often, then, the cinema of the 1990s is assessed not as a specific product of its material context but rather compared to the declared (and canonised) 'best' the history of the medium has to offer, with the frequent result that the films of the 1990s are dismissed as a dismal and embarrassing low or terminal point in cinematic production. (It was not uncommon to hear declarations of the 'end of cinema'.[4]) Again, the objective sampling technique employed in this thesis, it is hoped, avoids these kinds of subjective, evaluative statement, offering instead an unbiased and dispassionate account of popular 1990s cinema in its appropriate material context. In other words, it is not my aim to figure out if the films of the 1990s were better or worse that the films of any other period, but simply to describe them and their relationship to the dominant ideology.

In what follows, I will introduce and investigate certain specific claims about the popular 1990s film in its social and political context. In each case, I will examine whether or not the specific claim is accurate before asking whether or not it is distinct or unique to the popular films of the 1990s. In dispelling a number of received notions about the alleged distinguishing features of popular 1990s films, I hope to highlight the defining continuity that exists between these films and those of preceding decades.

The Popular Films of the 1990s are Apolitical

To begin with, it could it be suggested that the most popular films of the 1990s do not engage directly with the social and political context of the US during this period. While this certainly seems true (and is demonstrated below), it is important to

mention that although these films do not actively address the more obvious social and political 'issues' of the time, this does not mean that the films do not reflect passively (and reinforce) crucial elements or institutions of their wider ideological context, discourses such as heterosexual love, the nuclear family, and so on.

A cursory chronology of events of (possible) relevance to the social and political context of America (and the wider world) during the 1990s might go as follows. The decade opened with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the US-led Gulf War military campaign against Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. In 1992, four Los Angeles Police Department officers were acquitted for the roadside beating of Rodney King, prompting severe rioting in South Central Los Angeles. International terrorism hit American shores with the first bombing of New York's World Trade Center in 1993. Elsewhere that year, agents from the bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms laid siege to the Waco, Texas compound of David Koresh and the Branch Davidians. In 1994, the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City was bombed, not by a terrorist group as initially suspected, but by US Army veteran Timothy McVeigh. Also that year, four years after being freed, Nelson Mandela was elected the first black president of South Africa; while elsewhere in Africa, the Rwandan genocide began. 1995 was the year former American football star and sometime actor O.J. 'The Juice' Simpson was arrested for double homicide. In 1997, Hong Kong was returned to China, the 'Pathfinder' probe landed on Mars and scientists managed to clone the first complex organism: 'Dolly' the sheep. In 1998, India and Pakistan began to test nuclear weapons. This was also the year that US President Bill Clinton was impeached for lying about his frequent sexual misconduct with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. Furthermore, from 1996 to 1999, there were at least 14 school shootings in the United States, the most brutal of which occurred on 20 April 1999 at

Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, when 14 students and one teacher were slain by alienated teenagers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. Over the course of the decade, the US military had foreign operations in Somalia (1993), Haiti (1994), Bosnia (1996) and Kosovo (1999); not to mention the bombings of the Sudan, Afghanistan and Iraq ordered by Clinton during the run up to his impeachment proceedings. The 1990s also saw the birth and rapid growth of the information technology sector, in particular the internet, a radically new form of communication technology that quickly altered the manner in which many people interacted; making on-line purchases rather than leaving the house, sending emails rather than letters, and gathering with relative ease information about almost every imaginable subject, from bus schedules to celebrity biographies. This was also the decade of Y2K, which promised (albeit in certain more alarmist instances) nothing less than the end of civilisation as we know it. At the same time, the 1990s was also considered a period of great economic boom, with the US economy going from strength to strength, suggesting the prospect of eradicating the national debt.

This brief (and highly elliptical) synopsis of the decade is intended to demonstrate in the broadest terms that the 1990s, in both the US and around the world, was a time of significant social, political and cultural upheaval. It remains to examine whether or not these many events and, more importantly, their social repercussions, are reflected in the most popular films of the decade.

To begin with, a brief consideration of the various threats represented by the villains of the popular 1990s films reveals an obvious lack of engagement with specific political realities (see Chapter Three for a detailed list of these 'Institutional Threats'). In addition to being socially and politically non-specific, threats like mental illness, dangerous technology and angry nature have their origins in much older, pre-

1990s discourses. One potential objection here might be that end-of-the-world narratives such as Independence Day and Armageddon reflect a culturally specific, late 1990s millennial angst. While this may certainly have been a factor contributing to the ultimate appeal of these kinds of films, the ongoing popularity of such 'disaster' movies, beginning in the early 1970s, goes some way to mitigate the significance of the approaching millennium as the main determinant of these films' success. Racism as a threat is present in a few popular films, but it is always framed within an historical context and with the implicit message (as I noted above) that humanity has advanced greatly since such ignorant and backward times. Other threats, such as big business and corrupt government might have been socially or politically relevant, if it were not for the specific manner in which they are treated; and this is a crucial point to make. As Section Two will demonstrate, on those relatively rare occasions when certain dominant economic or political structures come under attack, it is always within the narrow context of 'hero versus villain', a conflict that can only be resolved in individual terms and, at the end of which, although the 'evil' villain may be exorcised the economic or political structure remains unchallenged.

It is this specific lack of direct or meaningful social or political engagement on the part of popular 1990s films that allowed me to delimit the decade in such an arbitrary manner, i.e., as simply 1990 to 1999. A study of a discourse that more obviously intersects the social and political context of the decade might have chosen to characterise the 1990s as framed by two significant or defining political events such as the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall and the September 11th terrorist attacks of 2001; but in the absence of meaning political engagement, no such segmentation seemed appropriate.

Rather than engage in a specific political discourse, as I noted, the films in the sample focus on more abstract social (ideological) discourses such as the importance of heterosexual love, the nuclear family and individualism. In this manner, the popular films of the 1990s do actually represent certain prevailing attitudes towards the social structure, discourses, it might be suggested, prompted by fears of imminent social and moral dissolution. Indeed, the 1990s was seen by many as a time when the principles upon which American was thought to be founded were believed to be very much in decline. As Edward Ashbee notes, during this period:

> [There were] claims, particularly from those associated with the conservative right, that family life had been undermined by moral laxity. For others, the US was being pulled apart – or Balkanised – by cultural diversity. A common American identity had given way to a multitude of conflicting identities structured around factors such as race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality.[5]

However, it is important to note that these sentiments were not unique to the 1990s, but rather had been first expressed during the 1980s; and, of course, many of these concerns were precipitated by the social, political and sexual counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. So, the discourses invoked by the popular 1990s film do not necessarily reflect specific or distinct social and moral concerns of the 1990s. Rather, they invoke certain highly individualist, ideological discourses that relate to crucial 'myths' about the American dream and about what it is to be an American, myths that were in use long before the 1990s. In other words, popular 1990s films invoke, first and foremost, discourses that serve to reproduce the dominant ideology.

The most popular films of the 1980s (see Appendix A) follow a similar pattern of non-engagement, if to a slightly lesser extent; also substituting a direct engagement of the social and political realities of the day with more generalised ideological discourses expressed in highly individualist terms. The 1980s was also a period of significant social and political upheaval. It was the decade in which AIDS was first

identified (1981). It was also the time when Cold War paranoia prompted the 'Star Wars' strategic defence plan (1983). The US embassy in Beirut was bombed (1983); famine ravaged Ethiopia (1985); the hole in the ozone layer was discovered (1986); there was a massive nuclear accident at Chernobyl (1986); the Iran-Contra affair was brought to light (1986); the US bombed Libya (1986); the New York Stock Exchange collapsed (1987); and the Berlin Wall fell (1989). Regardless of these momentous events (and their social repercussions), the most popular films of the 1980s also focused on generalised ideological discourses; heterosexual love (examples include Coming to America (Landis, 1988), Moonstruck (Jewison, 1987), Top Gun (Scott, 1986), Crocodile Dundee (Faiman, 1986), Tootsie (Pollack, 1982), An Officer and a Gentleman (Hackford, 1982) and Superman II (Lester & Donner, 1980)); the importance of the (nuclear) family (examples include Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade (Spielberg, 1989), Look Who's Talking (Heckerling, 1989), Honey, I Shrunk the Kids (Johnston, 1989), Rain Man (Levinson, 1988), Big (Marshall, 1988), Twins (Reitman, 1988), Three Men and a Baby (Nimoy, 1987), Back to the Future (Zemeckis, 1985), Return of the Jedi (Marquand, 1983), Terms of Endearment (Brooks, 1983), E.T.: the Extra-Terrestrial (Spielberg, 1982) and On Golden Pond (Rydell, 1981); etc.).

Also, the institutional threats represented by the villains of the popular films of the 1980s (again like those of the 1990s) tend to avoid direct political engagement, falling back on certain traditional categories: dysfunctional psychology (examples include Batman (Burton, 1989), Rain Man, Who Framed Roger Rabbit (Zemeckis, 1988), Fatal Attraction (Lyne, 1987) and Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom (Spielberg, 1984)); dangerous technology (examples include Honey, I Shrunk the Kids, Back to the Future and WarGames (Badham, 1983)), etc. Racism or issues of

racial identity are present in several films but again these discourses lose much (if not all of their) potential social or political relevance either by their situation within historical narratives (The Color Purple (Spielberg, 1985) and Out of Africa (Pollack, 1985)), or by reducing the treatment of racism to a few cursory (humorous) encounters and a highly individualised villain, e.g., Lethal Weapon 2 (Donner, 1989).

Of course, there are also several very successful films from this period that appear to engage directly certain threats relating to the Cold War atmosphere. The most obvious of these are Rambo: First Blood Part II (Cosmatos, 1985) and Rocky IV (Stallone, 1985), both starring Sylvester Stallone. However, although the villains in these films are Russian, the manner in which the Cold War conflict is represented is so hyper-individualistic that any meaningful or realistic engagement with the issues at stake during the period are supplanted by a reductive, highly moralised hero-villain opposition. In Rambo, not only does troubled war veteran engage with the Russians, it might be said that he also single-handedly (albeit belatedly) 'wins' the Vietnam war for the US. In these films, the Russians bear little or no connection the realities of the wider political situation, performing pure, simplistic villainous roles, very much like the Nazis do in Raiders of the Lost Ark (Spielberg, 1981) and Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade. (It is worth suggesting, if only in passing, that the fall of communism may have precipitated something of a crisis in terms of the availability of ready-made villains. In the 1990s, villains seem to be drawn from across a wider spectrum of 'evil' sources. It might even be suggested that the lack of an obvious cultural villain in the 1990s led to an increase in films that dealt with natural evils, disasters, meteors, dinosaurs, etc.)

While the most popular films of the 1980s and 1990s both lack any direct engagement with the social and political issues of their time, we can still chart a

gradual increase in this sense of political detachment as we progress through the two decades. As a simple illustration, a film such as WarGames in 1983 is certainly *more* political than, say, Armageddon or Titanic. However, as this progress is gradual, that is to say, as there is no radical break or substantial jump in levels of political detachment (initiated, for example, by a significant social and political event such as the fall of the Berlin Wall), it is realistic to claim that the films of the 1980s and 1990s, from this point of view of political engagement, are part of a continuous and ongoing development in recent film history.

A Decline in the Importance of Narrative

It could be suggested that a distinct feature of popular 1990s films is an apparent decline in the sophistication and importance of narrative, with a related increased in spectacle. An oft-cited culprit for this perceived decline is the acquisition of film studios by massive corporate conglomerations. Such mergers include Matsushita Electrical Industrial Company's purchase in 1990 of the Music Corporation of America (MCA), the parent company of Universal, for $6.9 billion (and subsequent 1995 sale of 80% of MCA to Canadian drinks and chemicals manufacturer Seagram, who in 2000 merged with French giant Vivendi), Sony's 1989 acquisition of Columbia Pictures for $3.4 billion, and the recent, if now much troubled merger of Time-Warner with America On-Line (AOL), creating a company worth $327 billion (at the time of the deal).

However, I would argue that the sheer scale (and hence high visibility) of these landmark purchases in the 1990s (especially the Time-Warner AOL merger), can lend to the false impression that this kind of industrial expansion is distinctly characteristic of (or, indeed, unique to) the 1990s. To conclude this is to ignore the

extent to which these deals are the culmination of industrial processes already in play in the 1980s, processes that had their genesis in the mid-1970s when a new industrial model for filmmaking and marketing was suggested by the success of 'blockbuster' films such as Jaws (Spielbery, 1975) and Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope (Lucas, 1977). For example, in 1985, Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. acquired a controlling interest in Twentieth Century Fox for $600 million. In two years, starting in 1985, MCA (the parent company of Universal) spent $650 million acquiring toy companies, music companies, a major independent television station and half of Cineplex Odeon Theatres. Warner originally merged with Time Inc. to form Time-Warner in 1989, creating the then largest media conglomeration valued at $14 billion.[6] Indeed, it was the *laissez-faire* attitude of the Reagan administration during the 1980s towards anti-trust issues that allowed such mammoth deals to take place (including the acquisition of cinema chains by studios); and that allowed the creation of massive, fully-integrated conglomerations capable not only of film production, distribution and exhibition, but also capable of capitalising on many profitable ancillary markets (video, DVD, cable, satellite and broadcast television, music publishing, electronics, apparel, etc.). These monopolistic corporations were (and continue to be) much more vertically (and horizontally) integrated than were any of the major studios before the Supreme Court-Paramount decision of 1948 originally forced them to divest themselves of their exhibition companies.

A related claim about the quality of 1990s popular film production resulting from this corporate *re*integration is that the increase in the importance of ancillary markets has reduced the importance and centrality of the films themselves; they are now seen merely an excuse to sell other, ultimately more profitable products. While there is certainly some truth to this, I would not go so far as to suggest that the films

themselves are no longer important or, more significantly, that less care is taken in their production. I noted above that in the late 1990s, the portion of overall revenue generated by the theatrical exhibition of a film can be as low as 26%.[7] At the same time, to suggest that this has led to a decline in the efforts of production companies to make the best film they can ignores the crucial central function of the film as the main marketing device for these ancillary markets (especially video/DVD and cable, satellite and terrestrial television sales). Simply put, the film is the most significant advertisement for the other products. As Geoff King notes:

> Release in the cinema remains the biggest stage on which to display Hollywood's wares. It is the most prestigious part of the life-cycle of Hollywood entertainment. Success in the cinema is what usually translates into the greatest levels of success further down the chain.[8]

It could also be suggested that the global expansion of markets (especially into Eastern Europe following the 'official' fall of communism) has led, among other things, to an increase in levels of action and spectacle and a related decline in the importance of narrative. Richard Maltby notes between in the period between 1984 and 1989, the world market for film doubled in size.[9] This was due in the main to the increasing importance of foreign markets to the recently consolidated 'blockbuster' film with its necessarily broad marketing, distribution and exhibition strategies. The importance of these markets continued to grow and in 1994, foreign returns surpassed US domestic revenue for the first time; by 1999 the foreign-domestic split for some studios (particularly Fox and Disney) was 60:40.[10] Selling to a global market has some significant implications in terms of product standardisation. In the cinema, this process tends to be described in terms of an increase in the importance of recognisable 'stars' and an increase in levels of action and spectacle. The latter increase, it is frequently presumed, lends to a more internationally accessible product, as

commercially viable in the cinemas of the American Mid-West as it is in downtown Paris or Tokyo. While this gradual increase in spectacle is undeniable (due in part to the increasing availability and affordability of CGI and other computer-assisted technologies), its presumed corollary, i.e., a decrease in the importance of narrative, is not as necessary or obvious a consequence as many make out. In fact, I would argue that the opposite is true, that narrative has become more important (at least as far as ideological reproduction is concerned).

Geoff King insists that '[narrative] is far from being eclipsed, even in the most spectacular and effects-oriented of today's blockbuster attractions.'[11] Likewise, according to Murray Smith, '[reports] of the death of narrative in Hollywood filmmaking' are either much exaggerated, highly subjective or based on a very small sample of films.[12] This conclusion is born out by the detailed analyses of 1990s popular narratives performed in the preceding chapters and a consideration of the central importance accorded in these films to a legible, closed narrative structure. If anything, because of the increase in action and spectacle, there is during the 1990s a greater pressure during those rarer moments of narrative exposition to advance the story as simply, clearly and legibly as possible. So, while you could argue that there has been an ongoing decrease in narrative sophistication, this is not to be construed as a lack of narrative integrity or decline in the ideological efficacy of the closed narrative structure. It is, of course, important to note here that this increase in spectacle did not occur overnight but was, as is the case with the other oft-presumed distinguishing features of popular 1990s cinema, a gradual process that had its genesis in the mid-1970s. Furthermore, it is also worth noting that the standardisation of films for foreign markets is not a new development either, but rather an extension in scope

and scale of earlier similar standardisations enacted to maximise the profits of films across the many diverse regions of the United States.

An Increasingly Reactionary Cinema

The popular films of the 1980s and 1990s, I have argued, exist on an uninterrupted continuum that had its genesis with the blockbuster film of the mid-1970s; with the films of the 1990s representing an extension of the industrial principles developed and consolidated during this earlier period. In the following paragraphs, I hope to show that, for almost purely economic reasons, the popular cinema of the 1980s and 1990s has become increasingly reactionary.

Richard Maltby notes that the Hollywood film must, in the first instance, be regarded as a 'commercial commodity': 'Only by acknowledging the explicit primary purpose of every act of cinematic production within Hollywood -- to make money -- can we properly place the subsidiary intentions or incidental consequences of any particular film.'[13] Therefore, any meaningful discussion of popular 1990s films must be situated, first and foremost, within this fundamental economic context. More importantly, this context should inform any attempt to account for the continuity between the popular films of the 1990s and 1980s.

Hollywood film producer Don Simpson claimed in his 'Paramount Corporate Philosophy' (written with the assistance of Jeffrey Katzenberg and David Kirkpatrick) that:

> The pursuit of making money is the only reason to make movies... We have no obligation to make history. We have no obligation to make art. We have no obligation to make a statement. Our obligation is to make money, and to make money, it may be necessary to make *history*. To make money, it may be important to make art, or some significant *statement*.[14]

The implication of a declaration like this is that the actual type of film made by Hollywood is utterly contingent to this pre-eminent economic prerogative. I would argue that this is true even when discussing just how complicit a film is with the dominant ideology. This is to say that a film will reproduce dominant ideological values only to the extent that such a reproduction might be profitable. It is interesting to consider the 'Hollywood renaissance' of the late 1960s and early 1970s from this economic perspective, a period of 'relative experimentation' that, according to Murray Smith, was:

> made possible by the economic insecurity of Hollywood, still casting around for forms of durable and predictable appeal after the massive post-war decline in audiences, and the more immediate problems of overproduction in the mid- to late 1960s.[15]

In other words, this was a brief period during which films critical of the dominant ideology, films experimenting with form, content and style were not only made by the major studios but also distributed by them; but only because it was thought that such films might be profitable. Of course, this short-lived experimental period came to a close as soon as Hollywood developed the more reliable blockbuster format.

Since the mid-1970s, the highly ideological closed narrative structure (and its related sets of narrative strategies) has remained consistently important to popular filmmaking. In fact, it could be argued that the Hollywood film has in recent years become more reactionary. This becomes apparent when you consider the blockbuster film not just as a certain type of film, i.e., 'high concept', but as one part of an entire nexus of interlocking industrial strategies designed to maximise its profits.

With massive amounts of money at stake (especially considering the effect a film's positive or adverse performance at the box-office can have on ancillary sales), the goal is increasingly to make a film as accessible as possible to as many as

possible, or, to put it more accurately, to make that film least likely to alienate as broad an audience as possible. (This is what the term 'blockbuster' means, i.e., a film that has an appeal that transcends or 'busts' the typical demographic groups or 'blocks'.) This, I noted, has resulted in a standardisation of popular film product. Narratives have become simpler, villains more obvious, themes and discourses more familiar (and, hence, less challenging); all of which, it could be argued, actually increases (focuses, distils) the ideological efficacy of the films (as described in previous chapters). In other words, the economic demands of the blockbuster film (with all its crucial ancillary markets) has led, if only indirectly, to an increasingly reactionary narrative.

While this necessary standardisation of film product leads (indirectly) to a more reactionary film, it also makes sound economic sense for a Hollywood film to engage consciously and more *directly* with the dominant ideology. In this respect, textual accessibility does not just mean textual simplicity, but also active ideological complicity. The particular stories told by reactionary films and the manner in which they are told both seem 'natural' and unambiguous. Films of this kind simply make more sense to those that participate within the dominant ideology. In Hollywood, film producers want to give audiences 'what they want' and audiences appear to want highly reactionary texts. As a result, less alienating discourses are employed, ones which are regarded as 'universal', ones which draw upon 'transcendent' aspects of the American dream; ones which invoke the myths familiar to Americans and, it is often presumed, Wester(ised) audiences. As Geoff King observes: 'At times when the industry is more stable Hollywood has managed largely to ignore substantial 'real world' threats to its favorite mythologies'.[16] I would qualify this statement by suggesting that, in the period following the mid-1970s, the more a film adheres to the

economic, industrial practices (and restrictions) required of the blockbuster film, the less socially and politically relevant (and the more reactionary) a film becomes.

While certain specific, superficial aspects of the ostensible content of popular films might appear to have changed as we move from the mid-1970s to the 1990s, the more fundamental (ideological) narrative strategies, and especially the central ideological function of the closed narrative structure, have remained relatively consistent. I would argue that it is this reactionary quality, i.e., these films' increasing levels of ideological complicity (due specifically to the economic requirements of the blockbuster industrial model), which provides the most meaningful basis for an assertion of continuity between these films.

The following section attempts to demonstrate that this basis for continuity (informed by economic/ideological considerations) is indeed meaningful and significant. To do this, I must demonstrate the central and primary importance in the popular reactionary film text of the ideological function performed by the closed narrative structure. This can be achieved by showing the extent to which the ostensible content of a popular text is fragmented, inconsistent and contradictory as a direct result of the greater ideological importance of satisfying the narrative prerogatives of the closed narrative structure. This achieves two goals: it shows that the content-based grounds upon which difference is often established between the films of the 1980s and 1990s is largely superficial (secondary), thus reinforcing my thesis that the popular 1990s film is not representative of a specific, unique or distinct mode of film production; and it also affords an opportunity to reveal further the highly ideological character of popular 1990s cinema through further detailed symptomatic analyses of the sample.

SECTION TWO: THE SECONDARY IMPORTANCE OF OSTENSIBLE CONTENT

In this section, I investigate further the ideological nature of the popular film text in the 1990s. The discussion below of inconsistencies and contradictions in the texts demonstrates their inability fully to deny the fundamental social contradictions that they attempt to conceal. More significantly, however, as I indicated at the end of the previous section, these inconsistencies and contradictions are shown here to be symptomatic of the secondary importance of the ostensible content; inconsistencies and contradictions are caused by the primary need to satisfy the global narrative prerogatives of closed form ahead of the secondary, local narrative prerogatives of the ostensible content. This hierarchy of narrative prerogatives can be elucidated in terms of a useful distinction that Noël Carroll makes between 'macro-questions' and 'micro-questions'. He conceives of narrative as a cohesive network of questions and answers. Within this network, certain salient narrative developments create for the reader certain expectations that the narrative will later either meet or disappoint. While micro-questions are a means for organizing scenes and events in a narrative, macro-questions are a 'means for organizing whole narratives'. He continues: 'Most movies are animated by macro-questions which organize the large movements of the bulk of significant action in the film and the micro-questions are generally *hierarchically subordinate* to the macro-questions (my emphasis).'[17] An adequate ideological functioning of the closed narrative structure depends upon the imposition of closure. In popular narratives, the macro-questions that serve this imposition tend to take the form, 'Will the heroes succeed in the achievement of their goals?' or 'Will the villain be defeated, his evil plans foiled?' The supreme ideological importance, in the closing scenes of any popular film, of answering these macro-questions with a resounding 'YES!', leads to certain, subordinate micro-questions being pushed to the periphery or

overlooked entirely.

On a very rudimentary level, this can result in causal gaps or 'holes' in a plot. For example, in Terminator 2: Judgment Day, the need is so great to answer the macro-question of 'Will the heroes defeat the T-1000 and prevent the destruction of the human race?' that the narrative all but ignores a significant previous micro-question, i.e., 'Will the pursuing authorities capture and arrest the heroes?' This oversight is especially acute because of the manner in which the final victory of the heroes is ensured. The benevolent Terminator insists that all future technology be destroyed, including himself, in order to prevent the possibility that the scientific community will go on to develop the artificially intelligent Sky-Net super-computer, a system inspired by the anachronistic technological remains of the cyborg from the first film. However, in doing so, Sarah and John Connor systematically erase any evidence that might convince the authorities that the massive amount of personal and property damage they perpetrated was anything other than a mindless, violent rampage (or an act of terrorism). Conveniently, the film ends before this issue is resolved.

However, more significantly, by prioritising the narrative strategies related to the achievement of a definitive closure, certain other aspects of the ostensible content become highly problematic. For example, certain unintended textual implications result from the repeated use of certain familiar (naturalised) discourses. Also, the importance to an obvious resolution of clearly delineated heroes and villains can often void a discourse of any meaningful social or political content. These and other textual contradictions and inconsistencies are discussed below, in addition to the coercive closure strategies (performed on the level of film style) that are employed to check our ongoing concern with these textual anomalies (that is, of course, provided we have noticed them in the first instance).

The Repeated Use of Familiar Discourses

Unintended Textual Implications

The repeated use in popular film texts of certain familiar (naturalised) discourses, I noted in the preceding chapter, lends to a greater textual transparency and, thus, an easier recognition of the progress and resolution of the closed narrative structure. However, the consistent, repeated use of the same familiar discourses, I would suggest, also instils in both the producers and spectators of popular films certain expectations as to how a popular narrative should perform. These mostly unconscious expectations can lead audiences to make inappropriate demands of narratives, often resulting in certain unintended textual implications.

These unintended textual implications are symptomatic of the secondary importance of ostensible content in that they exist only because it is of greater importance to the dominant ideology that this limited set of familiar discourses be used over and over again; to make the closed narrative structure as obvious and visible as possible (and, thus, to promote the more fundamental ideological function of popular film texts performed on the level of narrative structure).

The Incongruous Use of Violence

One obvious practical advantage for a popular film of reducing its central narrative conflict to a matter of life and death is a potential broadening of appeal. The importance of 'life' is a more commonly shared cultural value than, say, the importance of finding love or becoming a successful sportsperson. However, through repeated use, this most prepotent institutional discourse of 'life' (and the necessarily violent threats that periodically endanger it) can come to seem so normal and natural a part of the popular narrative universe that, frequently, violence is *expected* to figure in

the resolution of a narrative conflict. As Peter Parshall notes, in its most basic terms, the 'solution to the presence of human evil is to find the villain and gun him down.'[18]

More specifically, the prevalence of violence as solution often leads to the incongruous expectation that it should figure in the restoration of purportedly non-violent (or even anti-violent) institutions, such as the nuclear family or heterosexual love. Karen Schneider comments on this unintended textual implication in relation to the discourse of the nuclear family in the action-thrillers of the late 1990s:

> [In these films] fractured families are rearticulated within a context of extreme violence of one sort or another. Furthermore, violence is the catalyst for and the means of rearticulation. The intimate causal relations between violent action and the family's reconstitution lead to a logical and ethical morass.[19]

A violent threat to life rearticulates the family in, among other films, Terminator 2: Judgment Day, City Slickers, Jurassic Park, True Lies, Independence Day, Twister, Ransom, The Lost World: Jurassic Park, Air Force One, Armageddon and Saving Private Ryan. Schneider writes of Dante's Peak (Donaldson, 1997), that the narrative effects 'the rearticulation of the family only through the violent death of incidental bystanders.'[20] This comment is certainly true of Saving Private Ryan, a notable example of the type of 'logical morass' engendered by this restorative use of violence. In this film, like the soldiers in Miller's squad, we must surely question the problematic rationale (or, as Private Reiben puts it, the 'math') of prioritising the preservation of a single family over the integrity of many others.

It is interesting to note, if only in passing, that if a violent or otherwise abnormal or extraordinary situation is one of the most common contexts offered in popular 1990s films for the rearticulation of the nuclear family, then these films offer very little in the way of social or practical guidance to audiences as to how they too might attempt to rearticulate their own fractured family structures (except, of course,

with some kind of violence). In other words, such films simply declare the importance of cohesive family structures as a given, abdicating any responsibility for suggesting a realistic solution. In this manner, a film which appeared to deal meaningfully with a social concern does not in fact engage that concern in any meaningful way.

The Centrality of Heterosexual Love

The repeated use of the discourse of heterosexual love as a central determinant of a narrative's causal progress makes its ongoing presence in popular narratives seem not simply normal but almost mandatory. This can result in the tendency to interpret all narrative events within the wider context of a centrally determining heterosexual romance (even when such an interpretation is inappropriate, incongruous or even impossible).

Preliminarily (and somewhat anecdotally), this tendency is illustrated by a temptation James Cameron claimed he had consciously to resist when writing Titanic, namely making the central heterosexual relationship the cause of the disaster itself. In the scene immediately following the consummation of their sexual relationship (in the back of a car), Jack and Rose embrace on the deck below the lookout nest. The two men on duty (Fleet and Lee) peer down at them. The scene continues as follows:

FLEET
Cor... look at that, would ya.

LEE
They're a bloody sight warmer
than we are.

In the final version of the film, they resume their surveillance of the horizon before the iceberg comes into view. Originally, however, according to film historian Randall Frakes, Cameron had 'intended [this] embrace to distract the lookouts and prevent them from seeing the iceberg in time, an ironic twist coming at the very moment Rose

exercises her will to change her life.'[21] Although Cameron chose not to use this idea, his very consideration of it illustrates quite clearly the centrality of heterosexual love as a major causal determinant.

In the almost exclusively-male preserve of the 'buddy' or war film, the (un)conscious demand for a centrally-placed, determining heterosexual romance can result in homoerotic subtexts. In Independence Day, Michael Rogin notes the 'homoerotic byplay' between Steve Hiller and his 'buddy' Jimmy (Harry Connick, Jr.) in the locker-room of the air force base. He writes:

> Urging Hiller to break off with the stripper if he wants to be accepted into NASA, Jimmy kneels down and mimes kissing his buddy's ass. Discovering the engagement ring Hiller plans to give his girlfriend, Jimmy, still on his knees – seizes it and pantomimes his own gay marriage proposal.[22]

It is not difficult to recall occasions in popular films when ostensibly heterosexual males 'bond' with each other, hugging, tussling, sharing shower scenes, and so on. How many times have two male heroes fallen to the ground (accidentally, it should be noted) to enact a momentary tableau of the missionary position; and how many times has this tableau been followed by a recognition, on the part of the two male heroes, of its possible homosexual misinterpretation, leading to an immediate dismissal of it with an over-compensatory 'Get off me, faggot!'? Describing the 'male buddy film' and 'most male action genres', Tom Waugh writes:

> I'm not saying such films have consciously touched on any truths about homosexual components of male-to-male relationships, but the fear of such truths is usually clearly articulated; those films show the *repression* of such truths, whatever they might be (my emphasis).[23]

In other words, the potential for homoeroticism in popular film is also indicated by the very vehemence of its denial. As Kellner and Ryan write: 'it is in the very nature of conservative reaction to be indicative of the power of forces which threaten

conservative values and institutions.'[24] The extent to which certain narratives take active steps to preclude audiences from unconsciously interpreting a same-sex relationship in romantic terms indexes a keen awareness (or unconscious fear) on the part of these films' producers that such an interpretation is not only possible but almost inevitable.

This denial can manifest itself in the form of male heroes that are either aggressively heterosexual or profoundly homophobic, if not both. In Independence Day, the traditionally heterosexual institution of marriage firmly establishes the 'straight' sexual credentials of the film's heroes. As Rogin puts it, the symbolic double-marriage of Steve to Jasmine and David to Constance '[inoculates] the black-Jewish buddies against queering.'[25] Also, Toy Story takes particular care to establish, if only briefly, that Woody the Cowboy is involved in a heterosexual relationship with Bo Peep before he departs on his all-male (and highly-physical) adventure with Buzz Lightyear.

A character's heterosexual credentials can also be established by references to absent heterosexual partners. For example, Cynthia J. Fuchs notes that 'contemporary cop-buddy movies emphatically heterosexualize their homosocial protagonists (through off-screen ex-wives or girl friends who die on screen)'.[26] In a similar manner, in Saving Private Ryan, the soldiers affirm their 'normal' sexuality by telling typically male, red-blooded anecdotes, i.e., Reiben's story of the older, buxom woman in the tight-fitting brassiere or Ryan's tale about his brother's abortive sexual misadventure with local 'ugly' girl Alice Jardine. Despite the co-existent elements of homoeroticism, these various pre-emptive scenes assure audiences that 'the guys we're dealing with are regular fellas; all-American boys who may pal around together and grab ass in the showers, but not faggots.'[27]

The heterosexuality of the male hero can also be affirmed by the clear demarcation of an obvious homosexual space. In Independence Day, one of David's office colleagues is Marty (Harvey Fierstein), a 'swishy, hysterical, helpless mama's boy.'[28] While the inclusion of such a stereotype also functions to universalise the threat of the alien invasion, suggesting that 'we're all in this together', gay or straight, black or white, Christian or Jewish, etc., an additional and undeniable consequence of this reductive characterisation is the type of declaration identified by Vito Russo: '"Here!" the film is saying, "this is what a real queer looks like - and he's definitely not one of the inner circle of shit-kicking heteros with whom we are meant to identify."'[29] The inclusion of homosexual characters in popular Hollywood films is often presented as an indication of a growing tolerance in contemporary US society for 'alternative lifestyles'. However, in most popular films, the 'homosexual' character performs a supporting role and, almost always, the homosexual aspect of their character is distinguishing, i.e., these characters are homosexuals before they are anything else (see Chapter Three).

High Levels of Spectacle

The frequent and intense use of spectacle in mainstream cinema is also symptomatic of the secondary importance of ostensible content. Eugene Vale writes, in classical narrative 'in order to be permitted to show the execution of an intention, we must create an opposing difficulty'. He adds:

> If a man and a woman with perfect affinity and no obvious difficulties meet each other, there is no doubt that they will attain their goal. The picture would have to show their marriage in the next shot, since we have no doubt of the fulfillment of their intention. All love scenes in between are without any interest. In order to show these love scenes, we must give the spectator a knowledge of some difficulties to prevent him from concluding to the goal.[30]

Thus, spectacle can be understood as any event or sequence of events that takes place during a period of hiatus from an efficient representation of dramatic conflict, anything that could have been elided or abridged without damaging the causal integrity of the narrative. Invoking the terminology of the musical drama, Scott Forsyth refers to instances of spectacle in the blockbuster film as 'special effects numbers':

> the special effects sequence does *stop* the film: it marks a qualitative change in the film and its reception, a moment we can isolate as having exactly the location and status of the 'number' in a musical... a disturbance of the classical narrative...[31]

Of course, this is not to deny to spectacle a valid function. It is simply to establish that the function performed by spectacular scenes (exhilaration, titillation, etc.) exists outside the strictest causal or expository requirements of dramatic narrative.

A high level of spectacle is symptomatic of the secondary importance of ostensible content because spectacular sequences consume portions of a film's running time, bringing us proximately closer to the all-important point of closure without either complicating the plot or introducing new, radical or challenging material. Like the repeated use of familiar discourses, the semantic vacuity of spectacle affords to the popular film narrative a transparency that allows readers more clearly to discern the progress and resolution of the closed narrative structure and, thus, facilitates the ideological ends of the content of the form.

The Impossibility of Committed Discourses

A committed discourse or 'issue' is any discourse consciously invoked by a narrative for the apparent purpose of meaningful social commentary. As I have noted earlier in this chapter, an obvious or direct engagement with contemporary political

events is rare. Rather, popular films have of late become increasingly restricted to more abstract humanist, individualist discourses such as man's inhumanity to man, the importance of relationships and family or being all you can be. I also noted, though, that there are still instances when more apparently political discourses are invoked, such as issues of racial or sexual discrimination, political corruption, the misdeeds of corporate capitalism, the dangers of violent crime or drug-use. However, as the following paragraphs hope to establish, whether the discourse invoked by a popular narrative is abstract or more obviously political, any apparent commitment to social and political reform is illusory, rendered impossible by certain narrative requirements indispensable to the more important ideological function performed on the level of narrative structure. This contradiction, i.e., the lack of commitment of committed discourses, is symptomatic of the secondary importance of the ostensible content; it exists (as I shall demonstrate) because the use of highly individualised heroes and villains is considered indispensable to an obvious recognition and resolution of the closed narrative structure.

The Reduction of Dramatic Conflict to Matters of Live and Death

Before discussing how individualised heroes and villains disempower any potentially political discourses, it is worth considering briefly the disempowerment of committed social commentary that results from the frequent tendency in popular films to reduce the terms of dramatic conflict to its most prepotent expression, i.e., to a matter of life and death.

For example, Independence Day, at certain points in the narrative, appears to comment on racial and religious discrimination. In addition to the interracial, multi-denominational hero-group of the African-American Steve and the Jewish David, the

film also presents images of Arab and Israeli soldiers preparing to fight side by side against the alien invaders. The rather heavy-handed message appears to be that in the face of a common (violent) threat, humankind will transcend 'petty' differences and bond together. While Maslow's theory of human motivation certainly supports this eventuality,[32] it also points out that, ultimately, such a 'brotherhood of man' is meaningless. He writes:

> The merely surviving man will not worry much over the higher things of life, the study of geometry, the right to vote, the good name of the city, respect; he is primarily concerned with more basic goods. It takes a certain amount of gratification of lower needs to elevate him to the point where he is civilised enough to feel frustrated about the larger personal, social, and intellectual issues.[33]

During the alien invasion, a consideration of higher needs, such as racial, ethnic, religious or political differences, is temporarily suspended. The alliances formed are irrevocably contingent to an external situation that renders them meaningless. When the general situation improves, when the parties involved are once again capable of higher, more sophisticated thoughts, their 'larger personal, social, and intellectual issues' will most likely resurface. In a similar manner, at the end of the film, David and Connie reconcile their marital differences without actually addressing their differences. As Karen Schneider writes:

> They originally split up because the wife would not forego the opportunity to be the president's chief-of-staff, thus 'abandoning' her husband for her career. By the end, the husband has implicitly won her back, but the film silently fails to resolve the carefully established conflict between the woman's marriage and her job, as if the husband's heroism simply renders it moot.[34]

The displacement of the discourse of heterosexual love onto the more prepotent discourse of 'life' vacates a need for such an address. They are simply happy to be alive and together. In this manner, the return of the career wife to the heroic husband affirms the patriarchy in a manner that seems both natural and inevitable.

Accommodationism

The impossibility of committed social discourse in popular films can be understood in terms of the political concept of the 'accommodative' ideology. Frank Parkin identifies three main ideologies, the 'dominant', the 'accommodationist' and 'opposition'.[35] While the dominant ideology reflects the beliefs and ideas of the ruling order and the opposition questions the fundamental structure of these ideas, the accommodationist ideology occupies an unchallenging middle ground, simply highlighting and pruning the uglier outcroppings of the social superstructure while leaving the fundamental (capitalist) political base intact. Ira Katznelson and Mark Kesselman write, an 'accommodative ideology':

> perceives a host of problems, deficiencies, and evils... The weakness of the accommodative perspective, however, is that it does not add these problems together. The various difficulties are perceived as separate and unrelated, each requiring its own solution... The accommodative ideology accepts the basic structure of inequality as natural and inevitable. At the same time, it offers an acceptable way for the discontented to express grievances. Thus, although the accommodative ideology may raise issues that prove unsettling to established arrangements, it does so in a way that permits adjustments to be made and discontent to be defused without structural change.[36]

In Toy Story, the opening scenes suggest that the toys live in an ideal society. Woody the Cowboy is their unquestioned leader, his rule both compassionate and benevolent. Woody was not elected to this office but rather sanctioned by a higher executive power, i.e., Andy Davis (voiced by John Morris), the boy who sleeps in the room in which the toys live. In short, Woody is Andy's favourite toy. Woody is displaced from his position of power when Buzz Lightyear becomes Andy's new favourite toy. Faced with a sudden loss of power that occurs without any ostensible change in his own person or belief in his ability to rule, Woody becomes frustrated. The higher power that arbitrarily established his rule has suddenly and arbitrarily replaced him. A governmental system that had originally seemed both natural and eternal has suddenly

been revealed as profoundly artificial, even capricious. Woody assumes the role of political malcontent reacting with initial contempt and subsequent violence to the rising social order.

The film charts Woody's increasing sense of rejection, resolving itself only when he confronts and accepts his displacement as leader and, as a result, accepts the arbitrary, almost whimsical political vicissitudes that are contingent to his status as a toy. On a parallel journey of self-discovery (and demystification), Buzz learns to accept his status as a toy, abandoning the delusion that he is, in fact, the real Buzz Lightyear of Star Command. In this accommodationist manner, Woody and Buzz negotiate their power conflict within the circumscribed limits of the dominant ideology and without challenging the basis of these limits. Although the conflict of the narrative stems entirely from the general inequity of the prevailing political order, their conflict is resolved along discrete, purely individual lines, i.e., between Woody and Buzz themselves, through an explicit acknowledgment and acceptance of the very unfair conditions that prompted their conflict in the first place.[37]

The closed narrative structure of the popular film text is particularly suited to the ends of an accommodationist ideology. It is more or less incapable of representing issues in any manner other than the highly individualised terms of a legible hero-villain polarisation. It needs a Manichean clarity in order for the reader clearly to recognise the terms of the dramatic conflict and, also, its obvious resolution (closure). Consequently, it is almost entirely incapable of challenging the wider social and political *status quo*. Social problems will always be resolved within the prevailing social framework. This becomes especially clear if we consider the ideological implications of both the ultimate expulsion of the villain and the exclusively palliative function of the hero.

The Ultimate Expulsion of the Villain

The ultimate expulsion of the villain reduces the treatment of any issue to purely individual terms. In the process, it refigures general social problems as particular, localised ills (rather than as related symptoms of more fundamental social inequality). As Maltby writes: 'By a concealed but false logic, [the popular narrative] moves from the statement of a general issue to a particular manifestation of it, and from the resolution of that manifestation to the proposal of a general solution'.[38] Readers, it could be suggested, are not prompted to seek social reform because they witness a reform effected through the expulsion of a singular, culpable villain. This is certainly in keeping with what Hochschild identifies as a central and determining characteristic of the mindset associated with the American dream. She writes: '[It] is highly *individual*, in that it leads one to focus on people's behaviors rather than on economic processes, environmental constraints, or political structures as the causal explanation for social orderings.'[39] In The Lost World: Jurassic Park, a corporation intends to capture a number of dinosaurs to use as the main attractions at a theme-park. This corporation's greed results directly in the rampage of a tyrannosaurus-rex through the streets of San Diego. Such events might represent a critique of big-business if it were not for the excessive villainisation of the corporation's agents. As Schneider notes, 'the offending capitalists of *Lost World* are depicted as so rapacious and contemptible that viewers are reassured that extraordinarily bad, stupid people and not the system are at the root of the problem.'[40] In fact, highly individualised villainisation strategies are so antithetical to committed social commentary that they can be employed as a means of avoiding the invocation of a social agenda considered inappropriate to certain popular entertainment genres. For example, in Home Alone and Home Alone 2: Lost in New York, the burglars' actions are arbitrarily villainous,

lacking any realistic social motivation. They are so utterly divorced from the dismal circumstances that often motivate such crimes that at no point could readers construe this children's action-adventure comedy as a commentary on the social origins of criminal property theft. In this manner, highly individualised villainisation strategies consolidate the film's generic status as 'harmless entertainment'.[41]

The Palliative Function of the Hero

Due to the restrictions of an accommodationist ideology, the hero of the canonic screenplay can only ever perform a palliative function. As Parshall writes: 'the problems [the hero] faces are symptoms of a sickness in the heart of society, which he can at best contain and cannot remedy.'[42] For example, both Batman Returns (Burton, 1992) and Batman Forever (Schumacher, 1995) centre on the actions of a vigilante (caped) crusader who is accepted by the law enforcement agencies as valuably contributing to the ongoing safety of the city (if, indeed, he is not entirely responsible for it). Whenever there is unrest in Gotham City, the police use a massive floodlight to alert Batman. In other words, when a state of lawlessness exists, the law defers to an individual who operates outside the law. As a vigilante, Batman can ignore due process. He can administer justice in ways prohibited by the laws and regulations originally established by civilised society for the protection of the innocent. In this typically accommodative manner, society calls upon a superhero to right its wrongs after the fact rather than institute social reforms that might prevent such wrongs from emerging in the first place. It follows that the very concept of the superhero (and hero for that matter) is predicated on the accommodative acceptance of two very negative social realities. Firstly, that the law is incapable of maintaining order through the use of its own legally sanctioned institutions and, secondly, that the social conditions that produce lawlessness are somehow 'natural and inevitable'.

Of course, the accommodative ideology denies its accommodative nature by denying the palliative function of the hero. Through the use of a highly-individualised, eminently-culpable villain, a mere symptom of social inequality (the villain) is mistaken as its cause and, as I noted above, his or her material expulsion by the hero is interpreted as a more fundamental cure.

Committed Discourses as Homeopathy

The invocation of committed social discourses in popular narrative, I would argue, is *homeopathic*, a small dose of an illness voluntarily admitted into a thoroughly ill system in order to immunise the whole. Jean Baudrillard describes this process in relation to the ideological function of infantile theme parks such as Disneyland:

> Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America, which *is* Disneyland (just as prisons are there to conceal the fact that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, which is carceral).[43]

The use of committed discourses or 'issues' can be seen as a strong and visible criticism of the dominant ideology. However, this apparent criticism taking place on the level of content, it could be claimed, prevents audiences from recognising the more insidious (and, hence, more powerful) operation of less obvious ideological functions taking place on a structural level. In this manner, overt ideology is sacrificed on the altar of content in order to ensure the survival of covert ideology on the level of form. As a result, a more damning, deconstructive reading of the ideological function of the closed narrative structure is somewhat averted.

This mere appearance of committed social commentary, I would suggest, leads certain audiences to believe that, as they can identify an obvious ideological (political) content, they can actively resist its influence. This tactic is exemplified in

the critical reception of Forrest Gump. Critical readers of this film felt eminently capable of discussing and dismissing the film's conservative political agenda, i.e., its reductive, nostalgic historical reinvention (recuperation) of subjects such as the 'groovy' drug counterculture and the Vietnam War. For example, Jennifer Hyland Wang examines how 'political conservatives used the film to articulate a traditional version of recent American history and to define their political ground in the 1994 congressional elections.' She further notes the inherent patriarchy of the film, how it 'highlights the feminine as the site of cultural chaos.'[44] Peter N. Chumo II reads the film as 'a fantasy in which national tensions and conflicts are transcended through a figure whose unspoiled innocence and decency have a cleansing effect on a divided country.'[45] Many other cultural critics have also attempted to dissect the apparent political discourses of the film.[46] By consistently foregrounding in discussion the superficial political content of the film, the more conservative ideological function of the content of the form remains undetected and, thus, unmolested by negative critical attention.

The Need for Coercive Closure Strategies

Robert McKee insists that a closed ending results from a 'Story Climax of absolute, irreversible change that answers all questions raised by the telling and satisfies all audience emotion.'[47] This typical understanding of closure is highly problematic. As Hayden White writes: 'we cannot say, surely, that any sequence of real events actually comes to an end, that reality itself disappears, that events of the order of the real have ceased to happen.'[48] As I explained above, all genuine epistemological conflicts are incommensurable, all final meaning arbitrary, the result of a judgment or the use of superior strength. In other words, closure is always forced.

Therefore, the absolute satisfaction required by the closed ending described by McKee, is possible but not as the result of a natural or inevitable resolution of all outstanding narrative questions. Rather, the use of a conventional closure strategy forces readers simply to presume this sense of satisfaction.

Richard Neupert asserts that: 'secure closure involves the achievement first, of a definite sense of completeness, and second, a structurally determined stylistic closure.'[49] More accurately, I would contend, it is the specific function of the latter to force into presence the illusion of the former. In other words, certain culturally determined (and naturalised) closure strategies serve to terminate arbitrarily the dialogue between the audience and the narrative, in the process creating the mere appearance or effect of closure. The coercion inherent in the use of conventional devices becomes apparent only when we deny their conventional character and analyse the individual logic behind their specific forms. In this final section, I demonstrate that there is nothing in the particular forms of certain popular closure strategies that naturally or inevitably suggest closure. In fact, many closure strategies do the exact opposite, i.e., they open up the narrative.

The anxieties of the dominant ideology can often be discerned in the measures it adopts to deny them. As Kellner and Ryan note: '[what conservative films] designate in a sort of inverse negative is the presence of forces that make conservative reactions necessary.'[50] This logic suggests that coercive closure strategies attempt to deny the artifice of the popular narrative, the inability of the popular narrative accurately or reliably to represent the material conditions of our existence. As Richard Neupert writes:

> solid closure in conventional narratives and histories satisfies individual and social desire for moral authority, a purposeful interpretation of life, and genuine stability, all of which stand in sharp contrast to the chance and alterity in the world around us.[51]

The imposition of closure is indispensable to the effective ideological operation of the closed narrative structure. It serves to deny with force the numerous ideological inconsistencies that result from its ultimate prioritisation over the secondary narrative prerogatives of the ostensible content, e.g., certain unintended textual implications and the impossibility of committed discourses. This denial is necessary to preserve the moral authority of the text. It is in this manner that the need for coercive closure strategies is (indirectly) symptomatic of the secondary importance of the ostensible content. It is a measure required to hide the textual inconsistencies and contradictions that result from necessary (ideological) prioritisation of form over content.

The End-Title

The use of an end title, most commonly 'The End', states authoritatively that the narrative is over. It is a simple declaration that exists independently of the preceding representation of narrative events. It orders readers to cease their otherwise interminable interpretation of events. As Seymour Chatman writes: 'No end, in reality, is ever final in the way "The End" of a novel or a film is... It is strictly an artefact of composition, not a function of raw story-material (whatever its source, real or invented).'[52] As there is absolutely nothing in the specific form of this strategy that intrinsically suggests closure, it is inevitably used in conjunction with other less-obviously arbitrary devices. For example, in Aladdin it is combined with, among other strategies, an iconographic image of heterosexual love and a physical recession of the main characters into the distance.

From the Particular to the General

In a reversal of the gradual inward movement of the establishing shot, the end of a narrative can also be indicated by a shift in focus from the particular to the general, either physically in space (in the *mise en scène*) or symbolically. Physically, this shift can be accomplished through the use of a receding crane-shot or by having the protagonist walk off into the distance, the end of the narrative suggested by the departure of the narrative apparatus from the hero or the hero from the narrative apparatus. However, Maltby and Craven write: 'put the camera on the other side of the mesa toward which Henry Fonda rides at the end of *My Darling Clementine* and you have the opening shot of another Western'.[53] In other words, any such ending, with a simple shift in POV, can also be read as a beginning, an observation that points to its highly conventional character. The conclusion it affords to the narrative is entirely relative, contingent to its being read from a single, specific subject position. The coercion inherent in this closure strategy lies in our being asked to regard as concluded a series of events despite the obvious possibility that life continues (albeit in the absence of the narrative apparatus).

A symbolic movement from the particular to the general involves the use of a culturally determined iconography. The particular images (kisses, embraces, weddings, etc.) that conclude, for example Pretty Woman, Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves, Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin, Sleepless in Seattle, True Lies, Twister, Titanic, Armageddon (see Figure 8 below) and There's Something About Mary function as symbols or metonyms of the general institutional discourse of heterosexual love. Similarly, the particular images of family in the closing shots of Jurassic Park, Forrest Gump, The Lion King, Independence Day, Jerry Maguire, The Lost World: Jurassic Park and Saving Private Ryan offer iconographic images of the

general institutional discourse of the nuclear family.

Such conclusions denote the accomplishment, on the part of the hero, of a cardinal event in an ideologically sanctioned biographical time-line that includes goals such as finding a heterosexual partner, getting married, building a family, and so on.[54] In this respect, again, such an ending is also a beginning, suggesting a whole new period of activity in the lives of the characters involved. In the case of Dr. Grant in Jurassic Park or Jerry (Tom Cruise) in Jerry Maguire, this is simply the beginning of the adventure of raising a family.



Figure 8: Grace Stamper kisses A.J. in the closing shot of Armageddon.

Additionally, the potent emotional content of such symbols may displace readers' attentions from certain outstanding narrative inconsistencies. For example, the closure of Independence Day, effected by the iconography of heterosexual love and the nuclear family, i.e., David/Constance and Steve/Jasmine/Dylan, it could be argued, precludes readers (if only temporarily) from considering how President Whitmore is going to feel when he stops smiling and remembers the recent disintegration of his own family, that his wife is dead and that his child no longer has

a mother (see Figure 9). Fortunately for the President (and the audience) the final credits roll before the intensity of this spectacle has a chance to wane.

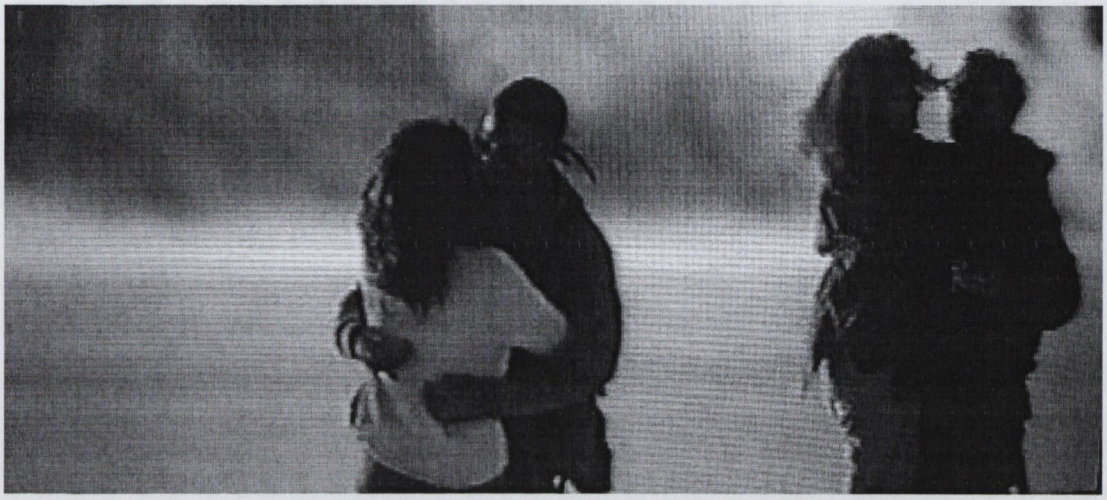


Figure 9: The iconography of heterosexual love in Independence Day.

The father-and-son imagery at the close of Forrest Gump attempts a similar displacement, perhaps inviting the reader to ignore a profound inconsistency in the central message of the film, i.e., if raw intelligence is not the exclusive determinant of one's personal success and happiness, then why it so important to Gump, Sr. that his son is clever and, thus, quite unlike his valorised father? Film critic Jerry Adler feared that younger viewers of Forrest Gump were 'in danger of getting the idea that it doesn't matter in life whether you're smart.'[55] Gump's clever child can be seen as an attempt to pre-empt or diffuse such an allegation. Alternatively, the child offers proof of Gump's capacity to participate fully within the institution of the nuclear family, i.e., he is capable of fathering healthy, intelligent (fully-functional) offspring. Either way, this clever child contradicts a central message of the film, i.e., that intelligence is not as important as having a good heart. The touching closing images of father and son cue us to ignore this inconsistency, inviting us to displace our otherwise ongoing

concerns with narrative consistency onto a reassuring, 'natural' image of patriarchal reproduction.

The Freeze-Frame

The freeze-frame arrests the flow of time and halts movement through space. Its use suggests that the narrative universe can, upon concluding the dramatic trajectory of the hero, simply stop. As there is nothing more of immediate dramatic interest to say, the narrative universe simply ceases to exist in time. The freeze-frame attempts to discourage viewers from wondering about the ride home in the car after the victorious karate bout, preferring to deny the existence of such anti-climactic realities by stopping the universe in its tracks, forever frozen on this image of success and achievement, an image that cannot be touched or degraded (except, that is, for the purposes of a sequel).

As the freeze-frame attempts directly to deny the existence of post-narrative events, it presents a possible solution to the sense of narrative irresolution that invades a use of certain other closure strategies described above, in particular, those that relate to a movement from the particular to the general. However, in attempting such a specific and overt denial of post-narrative events, the freeze-frame actually announces the need for such a strong denial in the first place and, as a result, ultimately acknowledges, if only indirectly, the presumed existence of the very post-narrative events it set out to deny. The freeze-frame enacts no real closure at all. In fact, as with the other closure strategies outlined above, when we ignore its conventional quality, it can be revealed to do the exact opposite; it can be read as a symbol of pure narrative potential, not the exhaustion of it as we would expect from a discursive strategy intended to suggest closure.[56]

Violent Spectacle

A glorious spectacle, often in the form of a fireworks display, is frequently employed at the close of the popular film. While a previous discussion of spectacle investigated how it facilitated a clearer recognition of the closed narrative structure, here I discuss the sheer violence of spectacle and its ability coercively to curb an audience's cognitive activities. Spectacle dazzles, creates a coercive momentum that can carry viewers along. It could be suggested that viewers are less likely to notice inconsistencies in the narrative when the spectacular effects establish a visual and aural dominance that relegates almost all other elements of the diegesis firmly to the background. Ian Grey describes his experience of Dante's Peak as follows:

> the theater rumbles with extraneous SDDS™/Dolby™ Stereo sound, helping to keep the viewer in a special-effected stupor... [putting] the audience in the advertiser's dream profile of what an ideal consumer should be: malleable, semi-insensate, *unquestioning*... (my emphasis)[57]

It is only after the film is over, after one has time to recover and reflect (presuming that one is inclined to such reflection in the first place), that the dazzling immediacy of the spectacle may lose its hold and the inconsistent plot logic that facilitated so many impressive pyrotechnical displays might more readily be discerned.

For example, in Independence Day, after pilot Russell Casse destroys one of the alien's giant spacecraft by colliding his fighter jet with its 'primary weapon', an order goes out around the world informing all humankind about this newfound means of defeating the enemy. The massive spectacle of human victory that follows, it could be argued, serves to displace our attention from a consideration of the very specific manner in which this first victory was achieved, a success that was contingent to a number of unique circumstances. Firstly, Russell was capable of colliding with the spacecraft's primary weapon only because it was exposed, i.e., it was preparing to fire

upon the humans' underground refuge at Area 51. Ordinarily this weapon is protected within the thickly armoured underbelly of the craft. Secondly, the weapon was preparing to fire at the exact moment that Russell's fighter jet impacted against it, causing what appeared to be a catastrophic internal chain-reaction that destroyed the entire craft. It is extremely improbable that these two specific conditions would be satisfied at any of the other sites around the world where other such alien crafts were under attack. However, the spectacle of destruction that concludes the film, i.e., a series of computer-generated composite shots revealing various giant alien spacecraft in fiery ruins in and around several famous world landmarks, is accompanied by a loud and rousing orchestral score that provides additional extra-diegetic testimony to humanity's complete global triumph. This spectacular audio-visual assault is of such immediacy and intensity that it is likely that viewers will not immediately question the almost impossible set of contingencies necessary to this sudden victory.

Other Closure Strategies

The various other closure strategies employed by popular films suffer from similar problems. The final 'fade to black', for example, is simply another way of declaring the departure of the narrative apparatus from the characters, another way of shifting focus from the representation of vibrant, particular details to a more general absence. A sense of closure can also be augmented by the use of a musical crescendo, an arbitrary strategy that would be non-sensical if it were not for an acquired set of rules regarding the role of non-diegetic music in popular film. By gradually building up the music, an audience can be brought to a point of emotional or visceral intensity that inevitably coincides with the use of another closure strategy. As with spectacle, the closing crescendo can render the audience temporarily insensate, incapable of

questioning the many unresolved ambiguities still very much present at the end of the film.

CONCLUSION

The initial goals of this chapter were a situation of the popular 1990s film within the social, political and economic context of the US during this period and a related attempt to discern what qualities (if any) are distinct to the popular movies of this period. Having posited that the popular films of the 1990s, are more than anything else, a continuation of the reactionary blockbuster film format consolidated during the 1980s, I suggested that one of the most meaningful ways of considering this continuity is in terms of the similar (reactionary) ideological function of these films performed on the level of narrative structure. This hypothesis was strengthened by considering certain inconsistent and contradictory aspects of the ostensible content that indicate its secondary importance (in ideological terms) to the narrative prerogatives associated with these films' primary ideological function, i.e., the deployment of orientation strategies that make more legible the progress and resolution of the closed narrative structure. In the end, hopefully, I have made a case for considering narrative structure as a meaningful basis for establishing continuity between the popular films of the 1990s and preceding decades over the more typical (and less ideologically relevant) consideration of aspects of superficial content as a means of establishing difference.

Notes

[1] Murray Smith, 'Theses on the philosophy of Hollywood history', in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema, p. 14.

Notes (cont')

[2] Geoff King, New Hollywood Cinema, p. 47.

[3] Jonathan Rosenbaum is particularly critical of this kind of comparison, revealing its artifice and (elitist) presumption in Movie Wars: how Hollywood and the media limit what films we can see, London: Wallflower Press, 2002.

[4] Typical of this kind of account is The End of Cinema as we know it: American film in the nineties, ed., Jon Lewis, which contains essays such as Paul Arthur's 'The Last Four Things: history, technology, Hollywood, apocalypse' and Wheeler Winston Dixon's 'Twenty-five Reasons Why It's All Over'.

[5] Edward Ashbee, American Society Today, p. 2.

[6] Cited by Tino Balio, '"A major presence in all of the world's important markets": the globalization of Hollywood in the 1990s', in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema, p. 62-3.

[7] Geoff King, citing Screen Digest in New Hollywood Cinema, p. 73.

[8] Geoff King, New Hollywood Cinema, p. 73.

[9] Richard Maltby, 'Nobody knows everything': post-classical historiographies and consolidated entertainment', in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema, p. 35.

[10] Geoff King, New Hollywood Cinema, p. 61.

[11] Geoff King, Spectacular Narratives, p. 2.

[12] Murray Smith, 'Theses on the philosophy of Hollywood history', in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema, p. 13.

[13] Richard Maltby, Harmless Entertainment, p. 10.

[14] Cited by Charles Fleming, High Concept: Don Simpson and the Hollywood culture of excess, London: Bloomsbury, 1998. p. 192.

Notes (cont')

[15] Murray Smith, 'Theses on the Philosophy of Hollywood history', in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema, p. 10.

[16] Geoff King, Spectacular Narratives, p. 11.

[17] Noël Carroll, Mystifying Movies, pp. 177-8.

[18] Peter F. Parshall, '*Die Hard* and the American Mythos', in Journal of Popular Film & Television, Vol. 18, No. 4, Winter 1991, p. 136.

[19] Karen Schneider, 'With Violence if Necessary', p. 11.

[20] *ibid.*, p. 5.

[21] Randall Frakes, Titanic: James Cameron's illustrated screenplay, London: Boxtree, 1999, p. 83n.

[22] Michael Rogin, Independence Day, p. 65.

[23] Tom Waugh & Chuck Kleinhans, 'Gays, Straights, Film and the Left: a discussion', in Jump Cut: Hollywood, politics and counter-cinema, ed. Peter Steven, New York: Praeger, 1985, p. 283.

[24] Michael Ryan & Douglas Kellner, Camera Politica, p. xi.

[25] Michael Rogin, Independence Day, p. 66.

[26] Cynthia J. Fuchs, 'The Buddy Politic', Screening the Male: exploring masculinities in Hollywood cinema, eds. Steven Cohan & Ina Rae Hark, London & New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 196.

[27] Vito Russo, The Celluloid Closet: homosexuality in the movies, revised ed., New York: Harpers & Row, 1987, p. 252.

[28] Karen Schneider, 'With Violence if Necessary', p. 9.

[29] Vito Russo, The Celluloid Closet, p. 258. Russo is discussing the narrative function of Andrew McCarthy's overtly gay neighbour in St. Elmo's Fire (Schumacher, 1985).

Notes (cont')

[30] Eugene Vale, cited by Richard Maltby & Ian Craven, Hollywood Cinema, p. 300.

[31] Scott Forsyth, 'Capital at Play: form in the popular film', CineAction!, Nos. 3/4, January 1986, p. 93.

[32] Maslow writes:

> The safety needs can become very urgent on the social scene whenever there are real threats to law, to order, to the authority of society. The threat of chaos or of nihilism can be expected in most human beings to produce a regression from any higher needs to the more prepotent safety needs... This tends to be true for all human beings, including healthy ones, since they too will respond to danger with realistic regression to the safety need level, and will prepare to defend themselves [Motivation and Personality, p. 43].

[33] *ibid.*, p. 70.

[34] Karen Schneider, 'With Violence if Necessary', p. 8.

[35] Frank Parkin, cited by Ira Katznelson & Mark Kesselman, The Politics of Power: a critical introduction to American government, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, & Atlanta: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1975, p. 356.

[36] *ibid.*, p. 358.

[37] As a popular narrative, Toy Story is atypical in that it appears to be aware of its accommodative resolution. The unpredictable contingencies of life as a toy, as the subject and plaything of fickle children, is a theme strongly invoked by this film and developed in Toy Story 2. It is interesting to note that both of these films received a significant amount of critical acclaim. For example, of Toy Story 2, Cosmo Landesman writes:

> The kid in me is convinced that this is just a wonderful film about how our old friend Woody is stolen by a ruthless toy-collector called Al. Yep, Toy Story 2 is just a joyous, life-affirming, feelgood film about friendship and how love makes life worth living. On the other hand, the pretentious pseud in me is certain Toy Story 2 is a film that deals with such issues as the myth of love, the seduction of

> celebrity and the conformity of mass-consumerism, in a neo-Marcusian, Fight Club sort of way. Yep, Toy Story 2 is just a bleak tale about how, sooner or later, we all get dumped by the one we love ['Toys will be Toys', p. 17].

[38] Richard Maltby, Harmless Entertainment, p. 187.

[39] Jennifer L. Hochschild, Facing Up to the American Dream, p. 36.

[40] Karen Schneider, 'With Violence if Necessary', p. 11n.

[41] This term is borrowed from the title of Richard Maltby's Harmless Entertainment.

[42] Peter F. Parshall, '*Die Hard* and the American Mythos', p. 135.

[43] Jean Baudrillard, Simulations, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton & Philip Beitchman, New York: Semiotext(e), 1983, p. 27.

[44] Jennifer Hyland Wang, '"A Struggle of Contending Stories": race, gender, and political memory in *Forrest Gump*', Cinema Journal 39, No. 3, Spring 2000, pp. 92-7.

[45] Peter N. Chumo II, '"You've Got to Put the Past Behind You Before You Can Move On": *Forrest Gump* and national reconciliation', p. 3.

[46] Notable analyses, according to Jennifer Hyland Wang, include Thomas Byers', 'History Re-Membered: *Forrest Gump*, postfeminist masculinity, and the burial of the counterculture', Modern Fiction Studies, Vol. 42, no. 2, Summer 1996, and Robert Burgoyne's Film Nation: Hollywood looks at U.S. history, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 104-22.

[47] Robert McKee, Story: substance, structure, style, and the principles of screenwriting, London: Methuen, 1998, p. 48.

[48] Hayden White, The Content of the Form, p. 23.

[49] Richard Neupert, The End: narration and closure in the cinema, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995, p. 13.

[50] Michael Ryan & Douglas Kellner, Camera Politica, p. 14.

Notes (cont')

[51] Richard Neupert, The End, p. 35.

[52] Seymour Chatman, Story and Discourse: narrative structure in fiction and film, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1978, p. 47.

[53] Richard Maltby & Ian Craven, Hollywood Cinema, p. 355.

[54] This idea has already been suggested by Mikhail Bakhtin with his concept of 'Adventure Time' in the novel. Clark and Holquist write: 'Time and space are always intertwined, but some of the ways they combine are more significant than others for revealing the specific world view from which they spring [Mikhail Bakhtin, Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 280.' One such space-time configuration or 'chronotope', according to Bakhtin, is this Adventure Time. Events in a narrative characterised by Adventure Time take place during an 'extra-temporal hiatus between two moments of biographical time', between any two consecutive cardinal events in the hero's normal, ideologically sanctioned personal and social development [Mikhail Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, p. 90.]. In the absence of obstacles or disruptions, the representations of any two such biographical events will be contiguous. The kiss, as it were, will be followed immediately by the marriage. Bakhtin writes:

> The first meeting of hero and heroine and the sudden flareup of their passion for each other is the starting point for plot movement; the end point... is their successful union in marriage. All action in the novel unfolds between these points. These points - the poles of plot movement - are themselves crucial events in the heroes' lives; in and of themselves they have a biographical significance. But it is not around these that the novel is structured; rather, it is around that which lies (that takes place) *between* [The Dialogic Imagination, p. 89.].

These 'crucial events' in the lives of the hero, it could be argued, are the appointed occasions when he or she participates within the institutions sanctioned by the dominant ideology.

Notes (cont')

[55] Jerry Adler, in Peter N. Chumo II, '"You've Got to Put the Past Behind You Before You Can Move On"', p. 3.

[56] David Bordwell encourages his readers to '[compare] the narrative resolution of the freeze-frame in *Les 400 Coups* with its powerful closure in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.*' In the former film, the freeze-frame is 'the very figure of narrative irresolution ['The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice', Film Criticism, Vol. IV, No. 1, p. 61]'. François Truffaut himself noted the ambiguity of this ending: 'My film could end on neither an optimistic nor a pessimistic note. I avoided solving the problem... Instead I took advantage of widescreen and froze the image of my hero [cited by Richard Neupert, The End, p. 75].' The simple fact that the same narrative strategy, i.e., the freeze-frame, can be employed to diametrically opposed ends, that its meaning depends entirely on its particular narrative context, i.e., alternative or Hollywood film, stands as a clear indictment of its highly conventional character.

[57] Ian Grey, Sex, Stupidity and Greed: inside the American movie industry, New York: Juno Books, 1997, pp. 175-6.

CHAPTER FIVE: A PROGRESSIVE REALIST CINEMA

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I continue my examination of narrative strategies (and their ideological implications) by examining certain alternatives to the more dominant strategies described in earlier chapters. In doing so, I hope to present a broader, more complete picture of narrative use in commercial film practice, more complete because not only do dominant and alternative narrative strategies depend each other for their difference and meaning and not only because many of the (ironic) alternatives further illustrate the shortcomings and inconsistencies of the dominant strategies from which they deviate, but also because, as I shall demonstrate, the alternative or 'art' cinema (which tends to employ the alternative narrative strategies discussed below) is just as much a part of the overall commercial film industry as the more obviously mainstream cinema (large media conglomerations are increasingly responsible for the production and distribution of 'art' films).

It is important to note that I am not beginning below with the question 'what is political cinema?' in order simply to conclude that the only meaningful political cinema is of the kind I discuss below, i.e., a 'progressive realist' cinema. If anything, my approach in what follows is the exact reverse. A general, informal survey of a wide range of contemporary commercial films revealed a number of films that employed 'alternative' narrative strategies that do not appear to conform to certain theorised reactionary norms. This suggested the importance of an inquiry into whether or not these films, considered as a set, constituted a distinct film practice within the Hollywood mainstream and, more importantly, whether or not the use in these films

of certain alternative narrative strategies has political implications. Any such investigation requires some preliminary consideration of what might be important to any political film practice, i.e., 'what is political cinema?' The point I am making here is that this chapter does not represent an attempt to *prescribe* a model for political cinema. Rather it is an attempt to *describe* a certain apparent subdivision of commercial film practice (and some of the alternative narrative strategies it employs). This observed film practice is then examined as simply one possibility for a political cinema.

SECTION ONE: TOWARDS A VIABLE POLITICAL CINEMA

Before any discussion of alternatives to dominant narrative paradigms can proceed, there are some important questions to ask, perhaps the most important of which is in what manner does the subversion of dominant narrative strategies necessarily constitute a political act? The term 'subversive' is frequently used to describe occasions when a narrative strategy represents a deviation from a mainstream norm. However, the term is often too casually invoked, used to identify simple difference or alterity and, thus, fails to accommodate fully the necessarily political connotations of the word. In other words, to subvert something suggests a conscious political intention, a challenge not just to the dominant norm but to the ideology that informs it. A more responsible approach, then, should acknowledge that any act of narrative subversion must be considered within a wider social and political context. It is not enough simply to presume that an alternative use of narrative form automatically constitutes a *politically* subversive act.

To begin with, the term 'political' is relatively meaningless as an evaluative category unless it takes into account some kind of interaction with a relevant public.

For a text to be political, then, it must take into consideration certain practical realities relating to the dissemination of texts. In the film industry, this involves confronting the often-restrictive economic realities of production, distribution and exhibition. Then, even if a relevant audience is secured for a text, for it to be 'subversive', presumably it must have some kind of (socially) disruptive effect on the reader. Of course, no matter how intentionally politicised a text is, this kind of effect is never guaranteed. Readers have many (often unconscious) ways of recuperating potentially radical or disruptive textual elements. All this is to say that, in my opinion, the 'political' or 'subversive' film does not exist as a distinct and discrete textual entity but rather its political or subversive quality depends upon its appropriate positioning within the economic modes of distribution and exhibition and upon the specific conditions of its reception. What follows, then, is an abstract conception of what might be required of any potentially political cinema, followed by a consideration of how these political goals can (or cannot) be realised within the practical (economic) constraints of the overall contemporary commercial film industry.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s certain French film journals, most visibly *Cinéthique* and *Cahiers du Cinéma*, addressed the possibility of cinema as political practice, as a means of challenging the dominant ideology by subverting the dominant modes of representation. Following from Brecht, both of these journals recognised that it was not sufficient for films to offer a political message within existing narrative modes, but that films must subvert these modes themselves.

According to Thomas Elsaesser, *Cinéthique* believed in a 'proletarian' filmmaking, suggesting that people should make films that 'refuse either to entertain or to "say" anything, but instead have as their primary aim to exacerbate, alienate and irritate the spectator.'[1] In this manner, *Cinéthique* condemned in its entirety the

narrative cinema, seeing it a means of replacing a concern for the actual, oppressive material conditions of existence with the gratification of imaginary desires. For them, the cinema should be a highly self-referential medium, a 'meta cinema' that has always as its central topic the very issue of 'What is the cinema?'[2] Their approach, however, was somewhat utopian in that it fails realistically to take adequate account of the practical realities of cinema production and distribution, i.e., the means by which their professed 'proletarian' cinema could actually reach a proletarian audience. An illustration of this detachment is highlighted by Maureen Turim, who notes that the journal 'went so far as to praise films for including sequences that were aesthetic failures, arguing that they served to reduce the marketability of the film.'[3] While this is certainly an interesting idea (and its rationale is somewhat justifiable), as a possible mode of political cinema practice it is extremely naïve. It offers a political film practice that actively militates against a wide engagement by the *polis*. It is a political cinema that is detached, highly abstract and overly prescriptive. According to Turim, 'Cinéthique had pushed itself off the deep end and was treading water, anticipating the appearance of a positive revolutionary cinema with which to align.'[4] This brief discussion of *Cinéthique* in the early 1970s is a good example of a certain type of allegedly political filmmaking that refuses to engage a relevant mass audience and, as a result, becomes little more than formal experimentation to be viewed by a select, already highly political audience, an exercise in preaching to the converted.

Cahiers, although sharing with *Cinéthique* many of the same Marxist presuppositions, was less utopian in its approach to the idea of a political cinema. While both periodicals recognised the economic nature of film production, i.e., film as commodity, they differed in their application of this presupposition. While *Cinéthique* saw the film with a political form as they only kind of political film, *Cahiers* saw it as

simply one of many possible political cinemas. In this manner, they diverged from the scientific formalism of *Cinéthique*, offering are more practical, materialist approach.[5] Early on, Comolli and Narboni suggested seven different categories of cinema, ranging from fully ideologically complicit films to overtly experimental and political works, to certain types of documentary filmmaking. Along the spectrum of (potentially) political cinema, they also they allow for works with obviously political content that are disempowered by over-reliance on reactionary narrative strategies and also films that appear at first to conform to a reactionary model, but which still disturb the dominant ideology in subtle and ambiguous ways. Of this latter category (e) cinema, they write:

> An internal criticism is taking place which cracks the film apart at its seams. If one reads the film obliquely, looking for symptoms, if one looks beyond its apparent formal coherence, one can see that it is riddled with cracks: it is splitting under an internal tension which is simply not there in ideologically innocuous film.[6]

Following their 1973 conference at Avignon, Serge Daney reassessed the critical position of *Cahiers*. George Lellis notes the crux of the new positioning: 'It is not enough to say that every film is motivated by the bourgeois ideology; one must specify how each film does this'. More specifically, Daney acknowledged the existence of 'progressive' films, those films that are 'critical of capitalism but still made under it.'[7]

Colin MacCabe uses the same term to describe the possibility of a 'progressive realist text', that otherwise realist text that contains certain (often intentional) 'moments of subversion': 'These *moments* are those elements which escape the control of the dominant discourse in the same way as a neurotic symptom or a verbal slip attest to the lack of control of the conscious subject.'[8] More significantly, he allowed for intentional 'strategies of subversion' that systematically refuse to conform

to certain dominant discourses.[9] Well aware of the practical, economic realities of the film industry, he writes that 'the revolutionary artist may practice certain strategies of subversion but must finally content himself with the production of a progressive realist text.'[10] In these various (but similar) conceptions of a certain type of political cinema, Comolli and Narboni, Daney and MacCabe all acknowledge the inevitable economic constraints of the commercial film industry yet still allow for the possibility of a film that can engage critically the (realist) ideology that informs these constraints.

This particular conception of the political film is useful for a number of reasons, but mainly because it conceives of a political cinema as an actual social and economic *praxis* (as opposed to the writers of *Cinéthique* whose approach was far too abstract and idealistic). As Steve Neale writes:

> a socially progressive cinema is not simply a matter either of films or of new relations between form and content, but... also a matter of production practices, modes of distribution and exhibition, and new relations between films and their audiences.[11]

Simply put, cinema is an expensive medium in which to work and, thus, it is very difficult make a film outside of certain capitalist modes of production. To an extent, then, all filmmaking, however revolutionary, is implicated in the reproduction of the dominant capitalist ideology. Thus, any potentially political film must negotiate carefully its status as product and also its place within the economic superstructure.

If a film is too experimental in its approach to narrative structure, it is unlikely to be distributed (and exhibited) to a significantly wide audience. On the contrary, it is more likely to circulate (if at all) on a relatively narrow (perhaps entirely private) circuit, shown mainly for specialist film clubs or small groups of enthusiasts. Wolfgang Staudte, one of the most respected German directors of the postwar period, commented (during the 1960s) on the inherent limitations of this kind of experimental

filmmaking. Describing the difficulties he had, in 1955, working with Brecht on the DEFA film version of Mother Courage, he wrote: 'I believe that spreading the idea, the work, one's thoughts and one's political message is more important than putting together something or other in a little room for connoisseurs.'[12] Staudte believed that the political purpose of any text is disempowered by being so obscure and alienating that its eventual audience is too small and élite to have any meaningful impact.

At the same time, it could be argued that the existence of the 'art house' cinema circuit provides a means for disseminating alternative or experimental films. This is true, but only to a certain extent, and to presume that art house cinemas (and also festivals) provide an automatic or easily accessible outlet for more experimental fare is to ignore the extent to which the art house (as a conceptual category and as a set of industrial practices) is a part of the overall commercial film industry and, thus, subject to many capitalist constraints.

There is a popular tendency to reduce the entire diverse field of cinematic discourse to a discrete binary opposition between Hollywood and non-Hollywood films. However, this separation is increasingly illusory. In reality, these opposite extremes of a single contiguous (commercial) discourse are declared as the normative, median qualities of two (falsely) separated categories.[13] As Steve Neale observes:

> Art Cinema functions and has always functioned in terms of a conception of film as commodity. Art Cinema, fundamentally, is a mechanism of discrimination. It is a means of producing and sustaining a division within the field of cinema overall, a division that functions economically, ideologically and aesthetically...[14]

Art cinema, Neale continues, is a commercial enterprise that capitalises upon a niche market. As a result, it is not a cinema that can threaten in any lasting manner the prevailing capitalist *status quo* as it depends upon capitalist structures for its survival. Also, the discourses it offers tend to perpetuate certain ideologically sanctioned

notions of 'high' art and culture while 'radically avant-garde and insistently political practices have been persistently relegated either to its margins or else to a different social and cinematic space altogether.'[15] The simple (and contradictory) reality is that there are certain types of films for which the alleged 'non-commercial' Art cinema does not perceive a commercial appeal and, consequently, does not distribute or exhibit.

The unavoidably commercial nature of the art cinema is demonstrated by the increasing extent to which major Hollywood production (and distribution) companies have incorporated alternative film production and distribution into their overall business practices, not only as a means of capitalising on certain profitable niche markets, but also as a means of finding mainstream cross-over hits (and earning the massive profits such hits would entail). During the 1980s, for example, 'classics' divisions were established by several major studios for the purposes of distributing less mainstream film product; examples include Columbia's Triumph Films and Twentieth Century Fox International Classics, both set up to market and distribute specialised product.[16] Also, during the 1990s, certain independent companies were purchased by large media conglomerations; in 1993, Disney purchased Miramax and New Line Cinema was acquired by Turner Broadcasting Corporation (later merging with Time-Warner, then with AOL). Furthermore, many commercial production companies established subsidiaries for the express purpose of producing and distributing smaller 'art' films; New Line Cinema (the company responsible for the Nightmare on Elm Street films) launched Fine Line Features in 1990 and enjoyed early successes with releases like The Player (Altman, 1992). At the same time as Fine Line was releasing more 'independent' films, New Line continued to produce more mainstream fare: Dumb and Dumber (Farrelly & Farrelly, 1994) The Mask

(Russell, 1994), and so on. Twentieth Century Fox established Fox Searchlight (and its experimental Searchlab filmmaking programme). In a similar, if somewhat inverse move, Miramax established Dimension Films for the purpose of distributing more obviously commercial fare. It was under this company that Miramax profited from both the Scream films (and the Scary Movie series that parodied them). By the end of the 1990s, the production and distribution of alternative films has become so integrated into the operation of the media conglomerations that it comes as little surprise to mention that 'alternative' films such as Boys Don't Cry (Peirce, 1999) and Election (Payne, 1999) were made (ultimately) by News Corp. and Viacom respectively. Of course, as noted in the preceding chapter, the Hollywood film industry has always proved extremely open in terms of what avenues it is willing to pursue in order to make money; consider the experimentation of the late 1960s and early 1970s (discussed above).

The domination by these major companies of alternative film production and distribution performs a number of important functions. In addition to capitalising on niche markets (mentioned above), it also allows the major companies to decide exactly what constitutes and delimits a conception of the art cinema. By choosing what they will and will not distribute, they exclude certain types of political discourse, often relegating them to 'different institutional spheres of circulation: the avant-garde, agit-prop, pornography, and so on.'[17] For example, the 'independent' film company Good Machine had to set up their own distribution company (October Films) to release Todd Solondz's Happiness (1988) because Universal refused to have anything to do with it; it had received an NC-17 rating from the MPAA, unsurprising given that its plot contains, according to Kenneth Turan:

> murder, rape, suicide, possible dismemberment, masturbation, vomiting, visible ejaculation, obscene phone calls and, in a coup de grace that caused parent company Universal to insist that October Films drop distribution, the sexual assault of a drugged child.[18]

Also, Miramax, despite their protests of independence, ran into similar difficulties with Disney when they tried to distribute the controversial films Priest (Bird, 1994) and kids (Clark, 1995).

Given the current state of the commercial film industry and, especially, its almost complete domination of the means of cinematic distribution, the 'progressive realist text' (to borrow MacCabe's term) seems to present one practical way in which to approach the concept of a meaningful political cinema. This is to say that in order to gain access to a significant audience (indeed, in order to get a film financed in the first place) it is becoming increasingly necessary to make certain concessions to the commercial film industry (seen as including both obviously mainstream *and* 'art' filmmaking). In other words, any potentially viable political cinema must acknowledge the factors that normally exclude a relevant audience and take active measures to prevent this exclusion. As Robin Wood writes:

> To 'make a film politically' one must forget theory and be realistically aware of one's audience and how they can be reached - the form of address to which they might be expected to attend. If you wish to address, not just a tiny revolutionary elite, but a vast and heterogeneous general public, then you make *Salvador*... [not] *Tout Va Bien*.[19]

The progressive realist films I discuss in this chapter, I believe, have made such concessions. (It is worth repeating at this point that I am not suggesting that the progressive realist film represents the *only* possibility for a political cinema, just that it certainly seems like a suitable means of negotiating the strict economic (institutional) constraints of the contemporary commercial film industry.)

The most effective way, I would argue, of attracting a larger audience to a

progressive realist film and, thus, also one of the most reliable means of getting the film made in the first place, is by employing certain familiar 'marks' of mainstream Hollywood cinema (this set of marks is more or less the same as the set of 'risk minimisation' strategies discussed in the Introduction). The use of 'stars' is the most obvious example of this. By casting famous or popular actors, certain films that might otherwise be classed as alternative or 'art' films have gained higher budgets (often from major studios) and also wider release patterns than they might normally have anticipated. Examples include using Brad Pitt in Fight Club (Fincher, 1999), Jeff Bridges and John Goodman in The Big Lebowski (Coen, 1998) and John Malkovich, John Cusack and Cameron Diaz in Being John Malkovich (Jonze, 1999). While casting a popular star will almost certainly ensure distribution on the art house circuit, it can also enhance greatly the possibility that the film will be a cross-over hit, in which eventuality it receives a significantly wider release pattern and, hence, a much larger potential audience. A good example of this is American Beauty (with Kevin Spacey). This film opened on in September 17th 1999 in 13 theatres in New York and Los Angeles, expanding to 429 theatres (September 24th), then to 706 theatres (October 1st) and eventually to 1,226 theatres (October 18th).



Figure 10: The One-Sheet for Fight Club.

The theatrical one-sheet for Fight Club indicates this general tendency to foreground selectively the marks of the Hollywood film, in this case the star cast, in selling an potentially political film. Simultaneously, the marketing campaigns of these films (especially in the trailers) avoid invoking the marks of the alternative or art film. For example, in 1992, when Miramax marketed The Crying Game (Jordan, 1992) to North American audiences, it positioned the film as a thriller with a big 'secret'.[20] *Variety* described the commercial advantages of Miramax's marketing campaign, noting that '[if the film] had been realistically pegged as a relationship film with gay connotations, it might never have broken beyond the major cities.'[21]

The marketing power of these apparently-superficial marks becomes even more clear if you consider the manner in which certain otherwise highly commercial films, when they exhibit (sometimes unintentionally) certain marks of the alternative or art cinema are restricted to narrower release-patterns. This is particularly

pronounced in the case of non-English language films; subtitles are typically regarded as a mark of the art cinema. Examples of this include Japanese *anime* films, Hong Kong action cinema and most national cinema product. The French film Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc (Besson, 1999) was performed in English using many famous American and British actors specifically to counter this tendency to dismiss the subtitled film. More recently, the producers of the Mandarin-language Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (Lee, 2000) actively urged audiences to overcome their adversity to subtitles and attend this (relatively) mainstream film. At the same time, the film was still released on video in two versions, one of which was dubbed into English. [22]

Of course, getting an audience to come watch a film is immaterial if the film itself proves too inaccessible or alienating on a textual level. (I noted in Chapter One the powerful effect negative word of mouth can have on audience attendance levels.) If a narrative accords predominantly with a reductive conception of the non-Hollywood film, if it contains a high level of radical or overtly challenging material, then this material can be recuperated as 'art', as *avant-garde*, as 'experiment' or, more drastically, as mere nonsense. If, however, a narrative accords sufficiently with certain recognisable elements of the Hollywood film (or if there are insufficient clues by which the text can be categorised as either a Hollywood or non-Hollywood film), then such a dismissal of the film is not as easily effected.

In this manner, it could be suggested that the progressive realist film makes certain concessions to the dominant paradigm of the Hollywood film by employing certain popular narrative strategies. At the same time, it is important to note, the specific manner in which certain of these narrative strategies are employed prevents (or at least problematises) their recuperation (disempowerment) by the reductive

terms of the dominant cinema. Thus, the progressive realist film simultaneously accommodates two incommensurable prerogatives, negotiates a tightrope between the alien and the familiar. It effects, according to Brad Stevens, the 'simultaneous distancing and involvement which [characterises] the finest Hollywood films'.[23]

It is worth considering for a moment exactly how a text might have a political effect on a reader. By this I mean, how might an element of a potentially political film effect a lasting alteration of a reader's social or political consciousness? This process can be considered in narratological terms. During the individual act of comprehension, if incoming data prove adequately or sufficiently compatible with a pre-existing schema, the schema itself can be modified (but only ever so slightly) to accommodate the data. However, excessively alienating data formations are unlikely to effect such an adjustment. As E. H. Gombrich observes, during comprehension:

> individual features... are entered, as it were, upon a pre-existing blank or formulary. And, as often happens with blanks, if they have no provisions for certain kinds of information we consider essential, it is just too bad for the information.[24]

Gombrich suggests that when an adequate or sufficient fit between incoming sensory data and our available narrative schemas is problematic, the mind can compromise the data themselves and not the schema into which they are being slotted. This can result in a tendency to modify, truncate or simply ignore overtly challenging elements of a data formation in order to align it with existing (typically dominant and reactionary) schemas. In other words, if a reader is successful in the application of a dominant narrative schema, the potentially political element of a narrative can be ignored in order to make it fit.

One possible strategy for negotiating this potential problem is a certain, carefully judged use of 'irony and an overly-stated use of aesthetic conventions' to

'[produce] a discontinuity, an estrangement, [to ask] the reader to question the representation.'[25] Ironic variations on popular narrative strategies pre-empt the kinds of reflex reaction that occur when something is utterly unfamiliar; because they appear to offer the familiar. At the same time, it is hoped, these ironic variations cannot *completely* be accommodated by the dominant narrative schemas of popular film.

Of course, at this point a reader could modify, truncate or ignore the apparent discrepancies and force the data to conform to an existing (reactionary) paradigm or schema. The likelihood of this happening, I would suggest, can be reduced by establishing an *irresolvable* inconsistency, by placing ironic or excessive versions of popular narrative strategies in structurally central positions. Consequently, ironic and reactionary elements of the narrative become mutually dependent. In such cases, if the ironic narrative strategies are either modified, ignored or denied, other important, ideologically comforting aspects of the narrative become destabilised. As the reader, then, cannot easily dismiss the ironic elements of the narrative, in order to resolve this apparently irresolvable inconsistency, he or she can either adopt multiple (ideologically contradictory) positions in relation to the text or, better, he or she will modify (expand) an existing narrative schema to accommodate the anomaly. In this manner, the 'political' element of the narrative can actually become part of the reader's way of seeing, part of his or her social and political consciousness.

If we accept that this process is possible, then we must also accept that the individual progressive realist film cannot effect a revolutionary or cataclysmic change in a reader's political consciousness. Rather, we must accept that it is just one part of a particular mode of film practice that engineers the consent of readers gradually, through a series of subtle disruptions dispersed over a wide range of films. In this

manner, certain films can augment incrementally a reader's sense of political awareness, a sense of dissatisfaction with the prevailing modes of representation. In cognitive terms, by gradually modifying the prevailing narrative schemas typically employed by readers to interpret reactionary Hollywood films, progressive realist films can dismantle in stages the 'supplementary constraints' that determine what representations are permissible within the institution of popular cinema. In Fight Club, Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt), in his job as a projectionist, splices single frames of pornography into family movies. In doing so, he upsets an otherwise consistent mode of representation with brief inconsistent intrusions, disrupting normal modes of reception on an almost unconscious level, creating an unfocused *malaise* that audience members experience but cannot readily explain. As the Narrator (Edward Norton) explains: 'Nobody knows that they saw it but they do.' This 'splicing' provides a useful metaphor for the use of subtle inconsistencies in progressive realist texts rather than easily identifiable and, hence, eminently dismissible intrusions.

Of course, it is possible that a reader will simply refuse to participate in this process, or care so little about narrative inconsistencies that he or she simply ignores apparent contradictions in the text. Alternatively, a narrative inconsistency can be explained away a mere bad filmmaking. What these other reading options illustrate is that any potential 'political' effect a text might precipitate depends entirely on the individual reader. In other words, the potentially political nature of a film depends upon the agency (or apparent lack thereof) of the reader.

Contemporary popular cinema and its audiences are so flexible in their reception strategies that it is hard to imagine that certain alternative or 'subversive' narrative strategies previously believed to upset the dominant modes of representation can still have the effect with which they were initially credited. For example, simply

'exposing the machine' in a contemporary popular film in and of itself does not seem sufficient to elicit a 'political' response from an audience member. By now, this has become an accepted (even expected) narrative strategy in the mainstream, particularly in comedies such as Airplane! (Abrahams, Zucker & Zucker, 1980) or The Naked Gun: From the Files of Police Squad! (Zucker, 1988). For such a narrative strategy to retain any effect, one must take account of the various ways in which such a strategy can be recuperated. In the preceding example, this is achieved by designating the films as an absurd or mad-cap comedy. (This immediately suggests that an instance of exposing the machine might retain a meaningful quality of disruption if it was to take place in a film genre in which it seemed entirely inappropriate, such as a serious period costume drama.)

Also, in this purportedly 'postmodern' age, with its 'cut and paste' attitude towards montage and pastiche, there is an increasing sense that in the media in general almost anything goes; and this includes deviations from dominant narrative strategies. More and more, both formal or substantial experimentation fails to surprise us because, to a certain extent, it could be suggested that we live under a general and continuous expectation that we are always going to be surprised; and, thus, we are never truly surprised. Furthermore, within this climate, even the most cleverly positioned textual disunities can be transformed into higher unities (as the 'art' or 'vision' of a certain author) or simply dismissed as one of those 'crazy' postmodern experiments that no one understands because it is not actually *meant* to make sense. Increasingly, it seems, formal and substantial textual subversion can be recuperated in purely aesthetical terms.

Any meaningful political effect a text might have is further jeopardised by the extent to which social responsibilities (such as volunteerism or one's political

affiliation or opinions on current affairs) have become commodified, as much a style choice to be made as deciding what brand of khakis to wear. (This phenomenon is discussed below in conjunction with To Die For and Fight Club). Simply put, there has been a marked decrease in civic participation in the US in the decades since World War II, with political participation amounting more and more to occasional voting and liberal debates on current issues in lieu of any meaningful action. In this climate of increased cultural and political apathy, a political response to a film text seems more and more unlikely.

In short, audiences are not a simple monolithic entity. As participants in the cultural hegemony, readers are capable of differentiated responses and of holding multiple (sometimes contradictory) subject positions. As to what exactly these responses or positions are, or whether or not they lead to shifts or modifications in political consciousness, remains a matter of pure speculation. I am simply asserting that such responses are actually possible (although, it seems, increasingly unlikely). Consequently, what follows is a discussion of certain *possible* ideological implications or effects of alternative narrative strategies. In other words, at no point during the following should these speculations be regarded as descriptions of definite or actual audience responses. Audience response, especially when dealing with intangible, protean phenomena such as political or ideological effects, is difficult to gauge with any accuracy and almost impossible to generalise. To even attempt such a task, I would imagine, would be critically irresponsible or, at best, constitute the work of another thesis entirely. Here, I simply mean to suggest certain possibilities about how a progressive realist film might be interpreted (should a reader be inclined to do so). These possible interpretations (and the possible effects they might precipitate) are deduced from a consideration not of any available empirical audience reaction data

but rather from a consideration of how certain alternative narrative strategies deviate from established norms and how this deviation might subvert the posited ideological effect of this norm (as described in previous chapters).

It is also worth noting at this stage that any subsequent description of a (possible) political or ideological effect of an alternative narrative strategy should not be taken to imply that the makers of the film themselves had a consciously political agenda. While some writers and directors (such as Oliver Stone) have a declared interest in the political implications of their work, others exploit and subvert dominant narrative strategies for ostensibly non- or apolitical reasons; in order to seem fresh or original, in order to expand the vocabulary and grammar of mainstream film, in order to be playful or mischievous, even in order to be funny (the humour of alternative narrative strategies is almost always predicated on our knowledge of the dominant paradigms from which they deviate). Regardless, however, the author has little or no control over how his or her text will be interpreted and, for this reason, I do not concern myself too greatly with the motivation behind their uses of certain textual strategies, but rather focus on how those strategies might be interpreted. At any rate, I would like to believe that in much the same way that a text can affirm the dominant ideology without the conscious intention of its authors, a text can also subvert the dominant ideology without any such conscious or declared intentions.

SECTION TWO: ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

Part I treats of formal alternatives, i.e., challenges to the orientation strategies that normally ensure the progress and resolution of the closed narrative structure. Part II relates to alternative versions of ostensible content (discourses, etc.). As any challenge to the dominant (realist) ideology also represents a challenge to the realist

conceptual categories of reality and representation, it is not surprising that the blurring of these ontological categories surfaces repeatedly as an explicit theme of many progressive realist films. This theme is discussed separately in Part III.

Before I continue, it is necessary to explain the technique employed to compose my sample of progressive realist films. When compared to my earlier selection of 'popular' films (based on the relatively objective criterion of financial performance at the box-office), the following sample of films may seem somewhat selective. However, as there is no criterion as consistent as box-office performance upon which to base this latter sample of films, this selectivity is to a certain extent inevitable. I have attempted to mitigate this by establishing a general (heuristic) set of criteria for candidacy as a progressive realist film, i.e., a specific conjunction of characteristics that I feel is common to all such films. Consequently, the progressive realist film must contain potentially subversive narrative elements while, at the same time, it must have demonstrated some (relatively broad) level of popularity, i.e., it must have had a (relatively) wide release-pattern (judged by the number of screens) and a (relatively) solid performance at the box-office.

Ultimately, however, there is no systematic way to compose this sample. While certain of the films I examine exhibit a marked categorical indeterminacy (are they 'art' or Hollywood films?), e.g., Fargo (Coen, 1996), To Die For (Van Sant, 1995), The Big Lebowski, The Player (Altman, 1992), etc., there are also many otherwise highly complicit films that contain notable isolated moments of potential narrative subversion, e.g., Seven (Fincher, 1995), Shakespeare in Love (Madden, 1998), The Sixth Sense (Shyamylan, 1999), etc. As a result, the sample employed in the following analyses is in no way exhaustive but rather represents a significant cross-section of the alternative narrative strategies I observed within the commercial

film industry. (See Appendix A for a full list of the films discussed, including their box-office statistics.)

Part I: The Subversive Use of Orientation Strategies

In reactionary narratives, I suggested that the global prerogative of orientation strategies is to point to the presence, progress and, most importantly, the resolution of the closed narrative structure. Progressive realist narratives can disrupt this process of orientation and, thus, destabilise the realist epistemology that the closed narrative affirms. In the following, I describe alternatives to the MCE and the hero-villain polarisation. As the ultimate goal of a reactionary use of these strategies tends to be the resolution or closure of a clearly polarised conflict, I conclude Part I with an examination of how closure itself may be subverted.

Alternatives to the Moral-Causal Economy

Alternatives to the cooperative MCE of more reactionary narratives include the following: its moral aspect can be exaggerated (made to appear contrived, coincidental), denied (interventions seen purely impartial, arbitrary) or inverted (the heroes suffer at the hands of an actively cruel world or, *vice versa*, the villains are rewarded). Alternatively, the expediency or economy of plot that the MCE normally ensures (by engineering a prioritisation of the certain global narrative prerogatives over more local concerns) can be troubled by increasing the presence of these local narrative prerogatives, sometimes to the point that they overwhelm (defer, postpone or, at times, preclude) the global progress and resolution of the narrative. One significant expression of this inversion of formal priorities is a pronounced use of irrelevance.

Exaggeration of the Moral-Causal Economy

Causal interventions can be exaggerated to the point that their intrusive, contrived character becomes strongly apparent. In Shakespeare in Love, the money lender, Mr. Fennyman (Tom Wilkinson), is concerned over the closure of the theatres due to plague. He fears for his investment in the Rose. Theatre manager Philip Henslowe (Geoffrey Rush) explains to him the nature of theatrical production:

HENSLOWE
Mr. Fennyman, allow me to explain about the theatre business. The natural condition is one of insurmountable obstacles on the road to imminent disaster.

FENNYMAN
So what do we do?

HENSLOWE
Nothing. Strangely enough, it all turns out well.

FENNYMAN
How?

HENSLOWE
I don't know. It's a mystery.

Henslowe's comments seem as much about the arbitrariness of the MCE as they are about the practical realities of the theatre business. As soon as he has uttered these words, a city official marches by announcing the reopening of the theatres. The proximity of his comment on the outstanding problem to its immediate, *deus ex machina* resolution foregrounds its relative artifice. Unlike the popular film in which the otherwise coincidental, last minute arrival of the cavalry is justified by some kind of foreshadowing, the progressive realist film often denies such foreshadowing, admitting to the purely coincidental (contrived) nature of the intervention.

A Denial of the Moral Aspect of the Moral-Causal Economy

The moral aspect of the divided house mentality is often denied by the alternative narrative. Bad things can happen to good people and *vice versa* because, as the narrative implicitly insists, this is the arbitrary nature of reality. In these films, there is no benevolent divine power to ensure that rewards and punishments are allocated on the basis of a benign eschatology or moral meritocracy.

In The Player, for example, screenwriter Tom Oakley (Richard E. Grant) demands a sad ending for his proposed film, *Habeas Corpus*, because, he insists, 'That's reality.' In the following exchange Oakley has just informed producer Griffin Mill (Tim Robbins) that, as the hero of the film has arrived just minutes too late with news of the heroine's innocence, she has died in the gas-chamber:

> MILL
> She's dead?
>
> OAKLEY
> She's dead. She's dead because that's reality. The innocent die.

Moments later, Oakley meditates on the nature of his proposed film:

> OAKLEY
> If I think about this, this isn't even an American film.
>
> MILL
> It's not?
>
> OAKLEY
> No, no. There are no stars. No pat happy endings... No terrorists. This is a tough story. A tragedy in which an innocent woman dies. Why? Because that happens.

While such a conception of reality appears largely unproblematic, true to our quotidian experience of the world, it still risks alienating a popular audience as it ignores the extent to which an audience's sense of reality is also predicated on

internalised popular representations in which a benign MCE obtains. By the end of The Player, Oakley comes to realise this and he revises his conception of reality. After the ending of *Habeas Corpus* is changed (made 'happy'), he argues with script-supervisor Bonnie Sherow (Cynthia Stevenson):

> BONNIE
> You sold it out. I can't believe it. How could you let [Mill] sell you out? What about truth? What about reality?
>
> OAKLEY
> What about the way the old ending tested in Canoga Park? Everybody hated it. We reshot it. Now everybody loves it. That's reality.

Oakley suggests not only that an audience is capable of altering a film's ending by practical interventions such as recorded responses to test screenings, but also that the public at large creates its own sense of reality based on a pragmatic consensus of desire.

An Inverted Moral-Causal Economy

This alternative to the MCE goes one step further than an admission of the indiscriminate nature of the causal universe to promote an inverted MCE in which the good are punished and the bad rewarded with a consistency and overtness that suggests the active intervention of a malign higher power. In other words, it appears to propose an intentionally cruel universe. For example, in The Big Lebowski, the only character to die is Donny (Steve Buscemi). Following a fight with a troupe of Nihilists (at which he is only an observer), he is the victim of a freak heart attack. As he is the least morally culpable, most socially excluded and victimised member of the film's *dramatis personae*, it is difficult to read his unmotivated death as anything other than a cruel joke at the expense of the audience's normal moral expectations.

Similarly, in The Player, the single 'good' character is obviously and viciously punished while the generally wicked majority is rewarded in abundance. As a result of defending the original, downbeat ending of *Habeas Corpus*, Bonnie Sherow is fired. In the scenes that follow, she is shunned by her co-workers as if unclean and ends up wandering pathetically around the studio lot. Robert Altman specifically notes that Sherow is the only character in the film with any 'touch of compassion and morality' and that she is 'destroyed... because there's no place [in the film industry] for anyone like that.'[26] Conversely, the murderous producer Griffin Mill is not only spared punishment for his crimes but gloriously rewarded. This ending proves especially ironic given the extent to which the operation of a more traditional MCE is discussed throughout the film. Mill has the following exchange with June Gudmundsdottir (Greta Scacci), the girlfriend of the writer he killed:

JUNE
In the movies, you can't have thieves as heroes, can you?

MILL
Well, I don't know about that. We have a long tradition of gangsters in the movies.

JUNE
Oh, yes. But they always have to suffer for their crimes, don't they?

MILL
We should pay for our crimes, shouldn't we?

The only punishment Mill receives for his criminal acts is a promotion to the position of studio head, a huge house, the love of the dead writer's girlfriend and a future nuclear family, i.e., June is pregnant with his child. The exaggerated happiness of this conclusion and, in particular, the specific manner in which it is executed (discussed below), make Mill's reward more pointedly perverse.

Also, the ending of Seven inverts the normal ramifications of the happy ending, in this case the material expulsion of the villain. When Detective David Mills (Brad Pitt) executes serial killer John Doe (Kevin Spacey), it could be suggested that it is Doe who wins because his own execution completes his villainous design. At the same time, if Mill refused to execute Doe, Doe would still win as he would have evaded a material punishment for his decapitation of Mills' wife, Tracy (Gwyneth Paltrow). The narrative of this film seems structured in such a way that the events of the closing scenes simply cannot satisfy traditional audience expectations. Consequently, Mills' dilemma at the end of the film can be read as about not only the incommensurability of his duties as a policeman and aggrieved husband, but also his incapacity to resolve the narrative to the satisfaction of prevailing audience expectations.

In both The Player and Seven, audiences are given the much-desired happy ending but at the expense of our normative expectations of a benign eschatology. Two classical demands come into conflict; and in both cases, to demand the punishment of the villain entails sacrificing an upbeat ending. The result, it could be suggested, is an inconsistency that creates a lasting sense of ambiguity about the ending, one that hopefully causes audiences consciously to examine their conventional expectations.

The Use of Irrelevance

In reactionary narratives, one function of the cooperative MCE is to engineer a causal universe in which the progress and resolution of local narrative prerogatives (microquestions) inform and advance the ultimate progress and resolution of global narrative prerogatives (macroquestions). To this end, the MCE ensures that the narrative universe is uncluttered, devoid of quotidian distractions and obstacles that might impede the expeditious execution of the central dramatic conflict. Typically,

the hero of the reactionary film does not postpone a crucial action in order to visit the bathroom, does not stand on the sidewalk for hours trying to hail a taxi, does not miss a pivotal meeting because he can't find parking. On the contrary, the MCE posits a universe in which the hero is denied an unpredictable bladder, in which an available taxi is always twenty yards away and in which the parking space directly in front of City Hall is always vacant.

The progressive realist film often deviates from this hierarchy of narrative prerogatives. In these instances, not only can local concerns (minor obstacles) receive just as much, if not more, attention than certain global prerogatives, but often they can overwhelm the global through a specific use of irrelevance, i.e., the representation of tangents and digressions. 'Irrelevance' here describes portions of a narrative that are either devoid of conflict or, if conflictual, bear no lasting relevance to the central conflict of the narrative. From the point of view of the closed narrative structure, such scenes interrupt or postpone the progress and resolution of the dramatic plot.

In The Player, Robert Altman employs minor moments of irrelevance. He lingers on certain scenic details after principal characters have exited the frame, i.e., after the causally relevant action has concluded. It could be suggested that this has the effect of subtly interrupting the exposition, of postponing, however briefly, the progress of the global narrative, creating an almost imperceptible *malaise* that unsettles the audience if only below their threshold of awareness. In Fargo, however, this type of interruption is augmented. Often scenes start earlier and end later than is considered necessary to a cogent exposition (epitomised by the eternal screenwriting maxim of 'Enter late, get out early'). In this movie, these moments of excess are occupied with domestic irrelevancies, e.g., Sheriff Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand) and her husband, Norm (John Carroll Lynch), having breakfast before

she begins her criminal investigation, or Jean Lundegaard (Kristin Rudrüd) and her son, Scotty (Tony Denman), talking about his sub-standard high school grades before Jerry has a crucial telephone conversation with his father-in-law, Wade (Harve Presnell).

Certain alternative narratives foreground irrelevance in even more obvious ways, with the inclusion of entire scenes or scene sequences with no discernible bearing on the central plot. Examples of this include, in Fargo, Marge's meeting in Minneapolis with former high school acquaintance Mike Yanagita (Steve Park) and, in The Big Lebowski, the extended episode in which the Dude (Jeff Bridges) and Walter Sobchak (John Goodman) visit the house of a boy, Little Larry Sellers (Jesse Flanagan), whom they incorrectly suspect has some bearing on the central kidnapping plot. That both of these scenes are redolent with involving details affords them a false significance; in Fargo, Mike talks earnestly about his wife's struggle with leukaemia while in The Big Lebowski, the boy's father (Harry Bugin) is not only confined to an iron lung, but also identified as Arthur Digby Sellers, the retired writer of the television series *Branded.* It is only in retrospect that we realise that these scenes are utterly irrelevant to the resolution of the plot. Joel and Ethan Coen, it appears, locate a disproportionate share of their narratives in what would normally constitute the interstices of the canonic plot, i.e., most of the film takes place *between* the events that a more conventional popular narrative would foreground.

This tendency receives its most overt treatment in the extended musical sequence of The Big Lebowski. In classical *film noir* style, when the Dude is drugged, he falls unconscious and has a fantasy (but in the wrong genre). This eclectic sequence blends elements of an elaborate Busby Berkeley musical routine, pornographic movies (he wears overalls and a tool-belt), Wagnerian opera (Maude

Lebowski wears armour and a horned helmet) and certain contemporary political events (the shoe attendant is Saddam Hussein). According to Scott Forsyth, the musical number effects a 'disturbance in classical narrative'; it is, literally, a 'show-stopper'.[27] It could be suggested that this ironic musical sequence constitutes a focused celebration, in the most overt terms possible, of the prominent, spectacular time wasting that informs the progress of the film's narrative as a whole.

Further implications of this specific use of irrelevance become clear when we consider the following final example from Fargo. Marge receives a phone-call informing her about the triple homicide that, as sheriff, it is her responsibility to investigate. Before she departs, ostensibly to commence her participation in the 'plot', her husband Norm insists that she eat a proper breakfast, after which Marge prepares to depart:

```
Marge gets up from the breakfast table.

                          MARGE
          Thanks, Hon. Time to shove off.

                          NORM
          Love you, Margie.

                          MARGE
          Love ya, Hon.

She puts on her coat, exits the back door, gets into her car. Pauses.
Gets out of the car, comes back to the door.

                          MARGE
          Hon?

                          NORM
          Yeah?

                          MARGE
          Prowler needs a jump.
```

The obstacle created by her malfunctioning car is of no lasting significance. It does not foreshadow a subsequent, related complication in the plot, such as the car failing to start at a crucial moment, i.e., it is not a narrative 'plant'.[28] In a certain respect, the

presence of this scene can be read as highly ironic, amounting to a facetious obeisance to classical screenwriting rules, i.e., a *reductio ad absurdum* of the demand that all conflict or obstacles be represented. At the same time, the inclusion of this irrelevant scene points to the cluttered nature of daily life, rife as it is with minor setbacks and inconveniences. More importantly, however, it could be argued that it establishes a locus of tension between the manner in which causality operates in 'real life' and the manner in which this reality is portrayed in popular, reactionary narratives, possibly prompting us to question the reliability of less-cluttered Hollywood films as accurate representations of reality.

It also points to the extent to which mainstream films do not simply represent with elliptical efficiency an otherwise cluttered existence but the extent to which the MCE actually creates a narrative universe in which minor inconveniences do not (and cannot) actually take place, in which certain such events are rendered impossible by virtue of an irrelevance determined by the global narrative prerogatives of the MCE. That the realist narrative in this manner actually creates the conditions of the phenomenal universe it purports merely to represent after the fact presents a fundamental ontological difficulty. In doing so, it contradicts the most basic presupposition of a realist epistemology, i.e., the *a posteriori* representation of an *a priori* external reality. (This contradiction is especially paradoxical because, as I have shown, popular narrative forms are employed by the dominant ideology to validate this realist epistemology.)

The Sixth Sense (Shyamylan, 1999) actively exploits this contradiction. The twist in the film works only because readers presume that the events represented by the narrative constitute the entire (relevant) world of child-psychologist Malcom Crowe (Bruce Willis). Like Crowe, they base their conclusions on Crowe's limited

perspective, denying the very existence of interstitial events that would make his 'dead' status much clearer both to him and to the reader. For example, in one scene Crowe sits in silence opposite Lynn Sear (Toni Collette), the mother of disturbed youngster Cole (Haley Joel Osment), awaiting his return. When Cole enters the scene, Lynn rises and exits without saying a word. In order not even to begin to question whether or not Crowe is alive or dead, the audience must presume that this scene commenced either during a natural pause in a presumed conversation between Crowe and Lynn or, perhaps, after such a conversation had concluded. If this scene had begun any earlier, for example, upon Crowe's initial arrival at the house, the impossibility of both these presumptions would become glaringly obvious as he cannot interact with living humans. That Crowe does not base any of his actions or conclusions on events excluded by the ellipsis of the classical narrative suggests that he inhabits a bizarre temporal continuum that is informed by the precepts of classical continuity editing, a process ultimately informed by the selective determinations of a classical MCE.

Alternatives to the Hero-Villain Polarisation

Chapter Two noted the extent to which almost all aspects of popular narrative content are geared towards sustaining an obvious hero-villain polarisation, the conflict that must be initiated and resolved in order to achieve the closure that validates a realist epistemology. Consequently, a subversion of any aspect of narrative that normally assists in the recognition of the hero and the villain also has the capacity to destabilise this realist epistemology. In my consideration of certain progressive realist narratives, I have observed several related ways in which the dominant, reactionary hero-villain polarisation can be modified. For example, certain culturally determined

physical and behavioural traits typically ascribed to the two roles can be inverted, i.e., heroes made unattractive and, *vice versa*, villains made glamorous, in order to blur the traditional distinction between the two. Alternatively, the 'myth of pure evil', often essential to a recognition of the villain, can be replaced by a less absolute moral standard, i.e., a more relative conception of evil, informed by what Hannah Arendt's calls the 'banality of evil'. (This substitution, I would suggest, problematises the comforting displacement of genuine, widespread social ills onto a single culpable, punishable entity.) Also, characters can be revealed as incapable of performing to the established high standards of the classical hero and villain, hopefully revealing the artifice of these roles.

The Inversion or Misapplication of Physical and Behavioural Traits

An alternative use of physical and behavioural traits includes the use of traits considered atypical of certain roles. For example, in Fargo, Sheriff Marge Gunderson is seven months pregnant. This physical trait is strongly atypical of the hero as, within a patriarchal framework, it renders her both vulnerable and dependent, both of which are antithetical to the dominant conception of the individualised hero as both *in*vulnerable and *in*dependent.[29] However, the fact that her advanced pregnancy does not effect the quality of her police work or her willingness to put herself at personal risk also serve as an indictment of the patriarchal ideology that equates pregnancy with vulnerability.

The misapplication of physical and behavioural traits can also blur the distinction between the roles of the hero and the villain, possibly resulting in a similar blurring of the terms of the central conflict and, hence, legibility of the narrative. For example, in Three Kings (Russell, 1999) certain otherwise heroic traits are accorded to the enemy troops. As J. Hoberman notes, this film 'does not consign the Arab foe

to absolute cultural otherness.'[30] While Troy Barlow (Mark Wahlberg) is being tortured, one of the Iraqi torturers exhibits compassion; he cannot bear to watch the painful consequences of his actions. Also, the main interrogator, Captain Said (Said Taghmaoui), demonstrates a love of family; his 'evil' actions are mitigated by the fact that the US bombing of Baghdad resulted in the death of his infant son (crushed in his cot) and the maiming of his wife (who lost both her legs in the same incident). This humanisation of the enemy is not typical of the popular war film (one simply has to consider certain characterisations of the Nazis as shrieking sadists) and points towards the idea that evil is an ideological construct often invoked in a political context to euphemise (and justify) otherwise reprehensible actions, in this case the actions of ruthless capitalist imperialism.

At the same time, the subversion of physical and behavioural traits is not simply a matter of reversing their traditional assignation. The existence of the anti-hero in the Hollywood film, i.e., the hero with negative physical or behavioural traits, indexes the need for more carefully considered uses of such traits if they are to retain any quality of subversion. Typically, in the Hollywood film, the negative traits of the anti-hero are superficial. Furthermore, almost always, they are rendered insignificant in the conclusion of the narrative by some superior demonstration of positive moral behaviour on the part of the anti-hero. In other words, at any crucial moral juncture, the apparent 'villainy' of the anti-hero crumbles like a mask or façade to reveal the more fundamentally heroic character beneath. For example, in the opening scene of Three Kings, Troy Barlow is established in a morally ambiguous light. In this scene, he sights an Iraqi soldier and, because he is unsure of the status of the cease-fire, asks, 'Are we shooting?' When he fails to get an answer from his distracted colleagues, in a questionable act of self-defence, he fires and kills the Iraqi. It is questionable because

it remains unclear whether the distant Iraqi soldier is turning to fire upon Troy or (more likely) simply turning. Although Troy is clearly distressed by this violent act, his remorse is short-lived and, shortly afterwards, he is carried about on the shoulders of partying soldiers. However, in typical Hollywood fashion, the negative moral implications of Troy's actions are displaced by his later, 'greater good' of risking his own life to bring Iraqi rebels across the Iranian border.

For the inversion of physical and behavioural traits to retain their potential for subversion, no such kind of recuperation can be allowed. Subversive heroes must be unrepentant, must evince no obvious moral *catharsis* as a result of their involvement in the plot. This certainly seems the case with the Dude in The Big Lebowski. In the opening of the film, the narrator (Sam Eliott) says of the Dude that he is 'not a hero... because what's a hero?' In the film that follows, the Dude exhibits a veritable laundry list of negative physical and behavioural traits. He is overweight and unkempt. He is extremely lazy (he writes a cheque for 67 cents). He is disrespectful; he fails to use the 'preferred nomenclature', to use Walter's term, for certain communities, calling Asian-Americans 'Chinamen' and the disabled 'crippled'. He is dull, bereft of an incisive wit; when Jesus Quintana (John Turturro) insults them at the bowling alley, he responds with a pronounced, almost childlike petulance: 'Yeah well, that's just, ya know, like, your opinion, man.' Furthermore, he lacks a keen acumen, frequently complaining that the 'case' in which he is involved has too many ins and outs for him to keep it straight in his head. He is dishonest and hypocritical, unwilling at one point to admit to his losing the ransom money, preferring instead to blame the kidnappers, accusing them of greed and deceit. Also, he indulges in casual uncommitted sex, uses drugs and drinks excessively (he almost always has a White Russian in his hand). However, unlike Troy Barlow in Three Kings, the Dude remains completely

unchanged by the events of the narrative. As the film closes, his life of bowling, drinking, smoking and bickering with Walter continues, despite the recent death of his team-mate Donny. Such a conclusion, it could be argued, invites readers to consider how the hero is constructed in more reactionary narratives, the extent to which certain expectations for moral behaviour (and physical appearance) are arbitrarily imposed on individuals by exclusive virtue of their centrality in the plot. It points to the artifice of the popular heroic role and also to the glaring disparity that exists between the expected standards for heroic behaviour and the actual, reasonable capacities of ordinary human beings. (The specific inability of certain characters to perform to these heroic standards is discussed below.)

The Banality of Evil

Adolph Eichmann once claimed: 'I am not the monster I am made out to be. I am a victim of a fallacy.'[31] While I in no way condone Eichmann's actions on behalf of the Nazi government of Germany, the report written by Hannah Arendt on his trial in Jerusalem drew several unwelcome conclusions about the nature of evil that illuminate its status as a political construct, as a 'fallacy'. She writes:

> [It] would be very comforting indeed to believe that Eichmann was a monster... The trouble with [him] was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal.[32]

His general comportment and ideological outlook were so ordinary that Arendt concluded the existence of 'the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*.'[33] As Eichmann did not appear to draw upon some absolute principle of evil or *summum malum* (such as the Devil) to justify his actions, he failed utterly to conform to the received stereotype of the villain and, thus, staggered belief. Arendt notes:

> Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III 'to prove a villain.' Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all.[34]

If we accept Arendt's conclusions, evil, or rather the capacity to perform morally reprehensible acts, becomes a potential of every individual's very ordinary psychological inner-life, something of which we are all to some extent capable. The thought of ordinary people committing monstrous acts is particularly terrifying because the banally evil individual is not sufficiently different to us to permit his or her recuperation as an obvious and separate 'other', i.e., as a villain.

The banality of evil exists in opposition to the myth of pure evil. It denies the markings by which the latter is typically recognised. It denies the clearly legible appearance of evil. In other words, the expected physical and behavioural traits normally used to reinforce the presence of evil are absent, the most conspicuous absence being the tendency to take sadistic pleasure in one's cruelty. Without these supplementary traits, 'strong' villains becomes 'weak' villains. They are not sufficiently distinguished as principles of evil to displace (or substitute for) the social problems they represent. Consequently, their individual expulsions do as easily effect a therapeutic general solution to these social problems. These weaker villains can come to be read as mere symptoms of greater social ills rather than their causes, in which case, society is implicated.

At the end of Fargo, Marge cannot understand the violent actions of Gaear Grimsrud (Peter Stormare). They lack sufficient apparent motive to justify their enormity. While bringing in Grimsrud, she expresses this bewilderment:

> So that was Mrs. Lundegaard on the floor in there. And I guess that was your accomplice in the wood-chipper. And those

> three people in Brainerd. And for what? For a little bit of money. There's more to life than a little money, you know. Don't you know that? And here you are. And it's a beautiful day. Well... I just don't understand it.

Grimsrud's actions are all the more unnerving because he seems so banal. He is docile. He barely ever speaks, spending most of his time watching television. His acts of violence are completely unannounced and executed with complete clinical detachment, with 'diligence'. More importantly, he neither feels remorse after, nor appears to take sadistic pleasure from such acts. His capture at the end of the film reads as the simple conclusion of the investigative process, not the exorcism of an embodied social ill. Consequently, by the close of the film, all Marge (and possibly the reader) can do is worry about the depressing state of contemporary society, 'wonder at the saddening, mystifying inhumanity of man.'[35]

In To Die For, Suzanne Stone (Nicole Kidman) is a highly-driven, aspiring television professional who decides to take charge of her career, actively to seek the advancement of her personal position. To all appearances, her enterprising motivation accords with the approved discourses of determined individualism as she appears to be pursuing the American dream. She knows what she wants and she will stop at nothing to achieve it. She is in control of her destiny, making necessary decisions and solving problems. Unfortunately, her chosen strategies eventually necessitate the murder of her husband, Larry Maretto (Matt Dillon). The banality of her evil becomes apparent when we consider, firstly, that her consistently polite and upbeat demeanour offers little indication of her capacity for evil and, secondly, that her motives for engineering Larry's death are grossly superficial, inadequate to the magnitude of the transgression. While Larry wants to start a family, Suzanne sees children as a hindrance to her career plans. When Larry refuses to back down on the issue, Suzanne

resolves to have him murdered rather than get a divorce because of the adverse effect such a separation would have on her celebrity profile. Suzanne sees her husband's murder as a simple, logical extension of her entrepreneurial drive, an ideology instilled in her by the competitive and superficial culture about her. As she does not exhibit the typical traits of the villain that would normally permit the audience to dismiss her a 'strong' villain, as an evil agent acting independently of her social context, she can be read as the victim of this social context. In which case, our society of competition and appearances is implicated.

The Failure to Perform the Role of Hero or Villain

I noted above that the reactionary narrative establishes certain strict standards for the behaviour of the hero and villain. Consequently, I would argue that one of the most effective means of subverting these roles is by demonstrating the patent inability of most ordinary human beings to live their lives according to these high standards. The specific characterisation of heroes and villains in certain alternative films certainly seems to bear out this hypothesis. Devin McKinney describes Fargo as a meditation on 'the quotidian horrors visited upon those who would commit the grave error of living out not the lives they have been given but the lives they envision in their own master-narratives.'[36] This is certainly true in the particular case of Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy), whose complicated web of intrigue collapses about his ears due to his pronounced inability to perform the role of criminal mastermind. However, in a more general sense, McKinney's reading of Fargo informs an understanding of a much larger group of progressive realist films in which both heroes and villains simply cannot operate according to the rigorous demands and exigencies of the reactionary Hollywood film. By revealing the absurdity of such standards, readers are invited to question the realism of such characters and also,

possibly, confront the false presumption that such standards actually obtain in the real world.

In addition to the failed villainy of Jerry Lundegaard, Fargo provides an example of an individual failing to perform the expected role of the hero. Although Sheriff Marge Gunderson leads the investigation into the triple homicide, she is not instrumental in its final solution. While she spends a large proportion of her time in the movie asking the right questions, the specific clue that leads directly to the apprehension of the villains is introduced relatively late in the narrative by a random third party and does not relate directly to any of Marge's previous police-work. She simply stumbles across the villains during a routine follow-up. While this may be more typical of actual police-work, it takes away from her status as an active, decision-making hero whose actions determine the course and resolution of the narrative. Her inadequacy as a hero, in this instance, has less to do with her own personal deficiencies and more to do with the manner in which a less-idealised narrative environment, i.e., a more 'real' world, can hinder a typical performance of the heroic role.

A highly concerted effort to reveal the impossible standards of the traditional roles of hero and villain can be found in The Big Lebowski. Several pronounced intertextual references establish this film as a variation on the hard-boiled detective narrative, leading readers (if they are so predisposed) to form certain focused, generic expectations for the behaviour of its principal characters.[37] As we shall see, these expectations are raised, then ignominiously deflated. In the process, it could be suggested, the narrative reveals the artifice of the classical functions its various characters fail utterly to fulfil.

Ethan Coen comments on 'the conceit of the movie': 'it just seemed

interesting to us to thrust [the Dude] into the most confusing situation possible... the person, it would seem, on the face of it, least equipped to deal with it.'[38] The Dude fails to conform to the expected role of hero because he is almost entirely *re*active. He is content simply to complain about the soiling of his rug, approaching millionaire Jeffrey Lebowski (David Huddleston) for a replacement only after Walter makes this suggestion. Also, whenever he is confronted with some new difficulty, he defers to the obviously deranged Walter for advice. When his car is stolen, he doesn't take matters into his own hands. He calls the police. In short, throughout the film, he is bounced about by certain developments in the plot, none of which occur as a direct (or even indirect) result of his own actions or decisions. In this respect, he represents the antithesis of the kind of individualism celebrated by the American dream.

But the Dude is more than simply passive. At times, he consciously avoids participation in the foregrounded 'plot'. In fact, it could be said that he is *actively passive* (if this oxymoron can have any useful meaning). In the bowling alley, after the ransom transfer has gone awry, his mobile phone rings over and over again, as if to call him back to the plot, to resume the chain of cause and effect from which he is currently on hiatus; but the Dude refuses to answer, choosing instead to quibble with Walter over the moral implications of playing a league game on *shomer shabbas*, the Jewish day of rest. In this particular instance (and in many others like it) the Dude actively chooses to prioritise local over global narrative prerogatives.

Although the Dude begins to perform the expected role of the detective hero near the end of the film, his belated attempts are utterly unsuccessful. During a meeting with pornographer Jackie Treehorn (Ben Gazzara), he zeroes in on a potentially relevant note Treehorn scribbles down while on the phone, then crumples. As soon as Treehorn exits the room, the Dude leaps up and rubs a pencil over the

remaining notepad to discern the imprint of the preceding page, only to be disappointed by a childish drawing of a stick figure with a huge erect penis. At this crucial first moment when the Dude appears, finally, to be playing by the rules of the genre, he is rewarded by a crudely pornographic illustration of no value whatsoever.

At the same time, in the end, the Dude does actually solve the crime, an event that might normally read as a concession to the traditional conception of the hero if it were not for the ironic manner in which this solution comes about. Late in the film, the Dude realises he was selected for the initial ransom transfer because he was presumed by his employer, Lebowski, to be an idiot and a bum, someone incapable of figuring out what was really going on behind the kidnapping plot. It is only when the Dude acknowledges his presumed inadequacy to figure meaningfully in the central intrigue or 'plot' of the film that he finally sees how it all fits together, i.e., he 'solves' it. In other words, the Dude only becomes the hero of the film by acknowledging his patent inability to be this hero. This is a good example of the use of an irresolvable inconsistency. Readers get the expected resolution of the plot but only at the expense of their traditional conception of the hero. This ironic version of the hero, it could be argued, cannot easily be ignored or dismissed because to do so could destabilise the closure of the wider narrative. Consequently, this more subversive hero is retained and the potential political content of the film, the idea that the 'hero' of the reactionary narrative is an artificial construct, survives readers' attempts at a more reductive analysis.

The Dude's utter inability to perform the role of the hero, to advance the plot by making proactive decisions and taking determined actions, has an interesting side effect. The main responsibility for the progress and resolution of the reactionary narrative is displaced onto Walter. In fact, a close reading of the film reveals that all

of Walter's ostensibly crazy actions serve to configure the film to the structural demands of the canonic plot. He creates the instigating incident when he encourages the Dude to go to Lebowski for redress over his soiled rug; he is responsible for the 1st plot point, about one half-hour into the film, when he thwarts the ransom transfer, i.e., the plot would have concluded prematurely if it was not for his disruptive actions; and, finally, he attempts to effect a traditional (melo)dramatic closure when he tries to unmask Lebowski as a criminal mastermind, i.e., he claims that Lebowski's physical disability is faked and tries unsuccessfully to drag him into a standing position. In doing so, he tries to reclaim the typical villain that the narrative also expressively denies. In this manner, Walter can be seen as the unconscious manifestation of a more reactionary MCE, of the institutional demand that the popular film narrative behave in a certain manner, a manner impeded by the inadequacy of the Dude as hero. That this role is given to Walter, an obviously crazy character, and someone who, most of the time, acts in an irrational manner, could be read to imply the patent absurdity of the notion of an active MCE as a believable element of quotidian existence.

A failure to perform the role of hero or villain (and the various other alternatives to the hero-villain polarisation described above), it could be argued, point to the artifice of these reductive roles, suggesting that pure good and pure evil, and the heroes and villains that embody them, are abstract conceptual categories that can have no credible existence in a world populated by real, psychologically-complex human beings. In other words, these films implicitly acknowledge that far from existing as discrete moral principles, '[good] and bad are, on the contrary, co-existent and part of one another, and [that] harmony emerges from the correct and decent balance kept between the two.'[39] Fight Club addresses directly this more realistic conception of good and evil by making its hero and villain the product of a single fractured psyche,

a creative decision that Charles Whitehouse describes as 'a brilliant solution to depicting the divided self as a protagonist.'[40] Initially, this film establishes a classical opposition between the Narrator as hero and (ultimately) Tyler Durden as villain. The presentation of events fully accommodates readers to this ostensibly classical opposition only to invalidate it utterly in the final act of the film when the Narrator and Durden are revealed as the same person, split personalities that arose from a 'lack of integration' of the Narrator's 'psychic elements'.[41]

Jeffrey Burton Russell notes that Melanie Klein 'viewed the tendency to divide the cosmos between God and Devil as a fixation of the *immature tendency to split* rather than to recognize ambivalence (my emphasis).'[42] In Fight Club, the Narrator is established as the passive dupe of a virulently consumerist society that promotes and sustains his state of emotional immaturity. His position is epitomised by his almost infantile need for immediate (consumer) gratification through the wholesale purchase of IKEA furniture and other merchandise. At one point, he even states explicitly: 'I can't get married. I'm a thirty year old boy.' In an attempt to advance beyond the stultifying bounds of consumer society, the Narrator goes in search of more authentic experiences and becomes addicted to the horrific sufferings of support-group members. However, he soon realises that he is a 'tourist' at such events, i.e., converting the genuine experiences of others into commodities for his own personal consumption. Following this realisation, his emotionally immature mind 'splits', 'endowing more or less trivial fragments with autonomy.'[43] The villain, Tyler Durden comes into existence, a projection of his darker side. Thus, the film could be seen to imply that the villain and, by extension, the hero can only exist as mental projections, the products of immature minds incapable of acknowledging the moral ambivalence that characterises the human psyche. It is for this reason that the

narrative resolves itself only when the Narrator develops the emotional maturity to recognise this split and reintegrate his ambivalent personality. In other words, the end of this film occurs as soon as the Narrator abjures a naïve Manichean model of good and evil, typical of reactionary Hollywood films, and replaces it with a more reasonable, dialectic conception of good and evil as co-existent elements of the individual human psyche. This leaves the reader with an irresolvable inconsistency. The film offers us a happy ending, i.e., the declaration that the hero has healed a significant psychological dysfunction; but in order to accept this as a happy ending, we must also accept on some level the discomforting reality that the human mind is morally divided.

Alternatives to Reactionary Closure Strategies

By inscribing a finite space in an otherwise undifferentiated chaos, the act of closure, transforms a meaningless dialectic into a meaningful dichotomy, making possible a distinct separation of subjectivity and objectivity, of representation and reality. In short, it ensures the effective operation of a realist epistemology. A denial or disruption of closure, thus, constitutes a potential disruption of this realist epistemology. It can blur the distinction between reality and representation and, thus, question the reliability of the act of representation itself. Rather than presume an unproblematic correlation between the structures of quotidian reality and those of the reactionary narrative, the unclosed narrative invites readers to acknowledge both the profoundly unclosed, disorganised nature of the former and also the falsity of the latter. In refusing the judgment that necessarily precedes closure, the unclosed narrative can also question the moral authority of the dominant ideology, i.e., the text does not defer to certain established, naturalised 'truths'. Confronted with an

unresolved dialectical conflict, often readers must impose their own resolution. In which case, they become active thinkers rather than passive receptacles for ideological content.

It is only when closure is denied that we realise the extent to which, in the reactionary narrative, it is taken for granted. Ironically, then, the absence of closure ensures its visibility; with the possible result that it is de-naturalised, revealed as an arbitrary (coercive) narrative device, and not the inevitable, organic conclusion it purports to be. Its ideology is laid bare. As Eran Preis writes: 'an open ending doesn't confirm or reassure existing ideology; it questions ideology and demystifies it.'[44] In the terms of suture, it could be argued that the unclosed text will not as efficiently stitch the spectator into the operation of the film, resulting in a sense of alienation or detachment (not unlike a Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt*). Likewise, the unclosed narrative does not confer on the spectator the comforting sense of wholeness and closure conferred by a more obviously resolved narrative structure.

In practice, a simple denial of closure can alienate a reader and can result in a text's dismissal as 'art' or nonsense. As one's cognitive faculties can be very reductive, often altering or ignoring certain aspects of the incoming data in order to come to a predetermined conclusion, it becomes the prerogative of the progressive realist film to prevent this contingency by employing ironic variations on traditional, familiar closure strategies. Richard Neupert notes:

> When a film ends suddenly, or without resolving major plot lines or giving clues of closure, viewers may nonetheless continue their production process of weaving various story events together in order to finish off their interpretation of the narrative.[45]

An ironic closure can preclude readers habituated to dominant narrative strategies from imposing their own highly conventional closure. The progressive realist film

often offers the appearance of closure, by making sufficient concessions to established conventions. In this manner, it is hoped that readers' immediate needs to impose their own terms of closure are foreclosed by this apparent closure, a closure that in the long term may prove problematic. Consequently, in certain of the progressive realist films I examine, closure is announced in terms sufficiently conventional to signal the end of the film. At the same time, the proffered closure appears grossly inadequate to the task of resolving the outstanding plot lines or discourses of the preceding narrative. Neupert identifies such films as 'Open Story' narratives; although these films declare their conclusion, they 'lack any tight "tying together" of the minor satellite plots, while major ellipses abound that fragment, withhold, or even eliminate story events.'[46] A locus of tension is established between the closure of the 'telling' and the openness of the 'told', between the resolution of the form and the irresolution of the content. This tension not only foregrounds the untidy nature of quotidian reality but, it is hoped, also points to the arbitrary, coercive nature of closure and, by extension, the inadequacy of many popular narrative strategies to an accurate representation of life.[47]

In the ending of Shakespeare in Love, the final tragedy of Viola deLesseps (Gwyneth Paltrow), i.e., her going to Virginia with Lord Wessex (Colin Firth), is somewhat mitigated by the representation of a shipwreck that implies she might have escaped her marital prison to make a new beginning on a virginal tropical island. As William Shakespeare (Joseph Fiennes) notes: 'Not for her a watery end, but a new life beginning on a stranger shore.' At the same time, however, this sequence is situated as the imagined opening to the play Twelfth Night. Thus, Viola and, by extension, the audience is afforded a type of conventional 'happy ending', but it is one of uncertain ontological status. If we accept Viola's escape as a satisfactory 'happy ending', it must be afforded an objective existence, posited as having actually happened.

However, such an operation is irrevocably troubled by its possible status as Shakespeare's subjective fantasy. Alternatively, if we elect to ascribe the shipwreck sequence entirely to Shakespeare's imagination, i.e., deny its actual occurrence, we do so at the expense of this 'happy ending'. This establishes an irresolvable inconsistency, a locus of tension between the normally distinct levels of objective reality and subjective representation and invites readers to question the sense of resolution and emotional satisfaction they may have drawn from this narrative that closes on a purely fictional event.

In the closing scenes of The Player, producer Griffin Mill listens to an anonymous writer pitch the recent events of his life, i.e., the contents of the preceding narrative, as an original screenplay. Mill, recognising that he is being blackmailed, insists that the 'screenplay' will have the ending the writer has promised:

> WRITER
> (on the phone)
> He gets away with it. Absolutely, it's a Hollywood ending, Griff. He marries the dead writer's girl, and they live happily ever after.

Immediately following this telephone exchange, Mill pulls up in front of a flower-bedecked house and, in a soft-focused idyll, meets June, his pregnant girlfriend (wife?), on the doorstep. In addition to invoking this iconography of heterosexual love and the nuclear family, as Mill and June enter the house, on the soundtrack, glorious orchestral music swells; and if this were not enough, as the camera cranes out and up over the scene, the title 'The End' appears. In a very self-conscious manner, Altman employs a catalogue of traditional closure strategies. The effect of this overtly complicit conclusion is not, as one might expect, an increased sense of closure, but rather an increased awareness of the artifice of such closure devices. The ending

becomes a parody of the very idea of closure. As it does not address the outstanding moral issue of Mill's culpability for the death of writer David Cahane (Vincent D'Onofrio), according to the terms of a traditional MCE, it is grossly inappropriate. By forcing a premature formal closure on the as-yet-unresolved moral content, the ending, and the closure devices it employs, both seem extremely arbitrary and highly coercive.

The final scene in Fight Club ironises the symbolic movement from the particular to the general by invoking a highly inappropriate and inconsistent image of heterosexual love. The Narrator and Marla Singer (Helena Bonham Carter) hold hands and he offers her the following assurance: 'Trust me. Everything's going to be fine. You met me at a very strange time in my life.' Normally, this would suggest that, after a period of conflict and adventure, they can now move on with their lives. However, this otherwise conventional closure is undercut by a number of outstanding, unresolved narrative threads. As far as the law is concerned, the Narrator (who is also Tyler Durden) is a criminal, responsible not only for countless minor acts of terrorism, but also for the destruction of the city's financial district, an event which takes place in front of (and direct contradicts) this final 'happy' image of heterosexual love. As a result, both the Narrator's words of assurance, and the closure strategies that accompany it, ring false. The final frame of the film, a brief spliced shot of a penis, compounds this feeling of incertitude, further destabilising the reality of the representation. That a traditional happy ending is even possible after the events of the preceding narrative seems like a cruel joke at the expense of popular audience expectations for a more conventional operation of the MCE.[48] In this manner it is similar to the conclusion of The Player.

Fargo ends on an image of heterosexual love (and an implied nuclear family),

moving symbolically from the particular to the general. While this symbolic invocation would normally lend to a satisfying conclusion, in this film this satisfaction is disrupted. Firstly, the conclusion of this film fails to resolve certain outstanding elements of narrative content, i.e., the disintegration of young Scotty Lundegaard's family (his mother and grandfather are dead and his father is, most likely, going to prison), the fate of the money Carl Showalter (Steve Buscemi) buried in the snow, etc. Secondly, this symbolic movement from the particular to the general is contradicted by an opposing physical movement from the general to the particular, i.e., the camera begins with a medium two-shot of Marge and Norm in bed, then moves in slowly. By placing these two dynamics in conflict, our attention remains very much on the level of particular details. In this manner, it could be argued, the film betrays a lack of confidence in the ability of closure devices to resolve a narrative. As if to compound this sentiment, the ending is stripped of all the other usual trappings of closure. There is no swelling musical reprise, no fireworks, not even the passionate embrace or kiss that normally punctuates a symbolic heterosexual conclusion. Instead, we have an extraordinarily banal situation, a discussion of postage stamps that segues into a possible moment of doubt about their future, implied by Marge's need to assure her husband (and perhaps herself) that they are doing just fine: 'Heck, Norm. You know we're doing pretty good.' This last minute injection of doubt, I would argue, provides scant assurance to an audience accommodated to the more exuberant conventions of the dominant cinema, creating an understated and uncertain closure.

At the other end of the spectrum, The Big Lebowski exhibits a tremendous (over)confidence in a closure it has, quite obviously, *failed* to achieve. This false confidence is predicated on the film's prominent framing device, the Stranger as

narrator. In the opening of the film, he introduces us to the film's main character and promises a significant story, a tale that is worth the telling; or else why would he take the time and trouble to *re*count it? In the end, he returns, behaving as if the film has delivered on its promise of significance in spite of his obvious failure to provide any meaningful insight into the preceding action. He simply lingers on the Dude's last words as a moral, i.e., 'The Dude abides', claiming to take comfort from this mindless quip. In doing this, he raises the Dude's words to a level of significance disproportionate to their ostensible (vacuous) semantic content. He then offers the following, equally impenetrable summation of the narrative:

> That about does her, wraps her all up. Things seem to have worked out pretty good for the Dude and Walter, and it was a pretty good story, don't you think? Made me laugh to meet the man. Parts anyway. I didn't like seeing Donny go, but then I happen to know that there's a little Lebowski on the way. I guess that's the way the whole durn human comedy keeps perpetuating itself down through the generations, Westward in the wagons, across the sands of time until we... Ah, look at me, I'm ramblin' again. Well, I hope you folks enjoyed yourselves. Catch you all later on down the trail.

This strongly foregrounded framing device, it could be argued, serves to highlight the coercive nature of closure. The Stranger tells us that the story is over, that we have learned a valuable lesson, that all our stimulated expectations have been satisfied despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, i.e., the film is redolent with unresolved narrative threads. Neupert describes the function of framing devices as follows: 'Bracketing a film works much like placing stylistic bookends around the story; it signals both the ending and the film's programmatic form.'[49] The framing device in The Big Lebowski signals confidently the presence of a conventional ending

that, at the same time, it refuses to deliver. The film uses the popular cinema's 'programmatic form', i.e., closure by means of a framing device, in complete isolation from that same cinema's demand for narrative resolution. By divorcing these two functions of the framing device, the ending of The Big Lebowski can be read to reveal that traditional closure devices do not possess a natural or innate ability to close or resolve a narrative, but rather that they are arbitrary conventions, naturalised by ideology, employed to terminate with force the otherwise ongoing act of interpretation.

Part II: The Subversion of Ostensible Content

Part II is divided into three sections. The first discusses briefly the importance of complementing an alternative (possibly subversive) use of content with some kind of formal subversion. The second uses examples from progressive realist films to show certain alternatives treatments of established popular themes and discourses. Finally, the third section discusses one specific discourse that appears to come up again and again in progressive realist films, namely, the artifice of popular modes of representation. The invocation of this specific discourse seems restricted to the progressive realist film (and, of course, more obviously experimental or avant-garde films) for the simple reason that more overtly reactionary mainstream films tend to offer the dichotomous ontological distinction between reality and representation as entirely unproblematic, a given that the specific narrative strategies of the popular film are tasked with maintaining, i.e., naturalising.

The Importance of Formal Subversion

The alternative or ironic use in a film of certain aspects of ostensible content does not automatically ensure that the film as a whole will be subversive. The most radical content can often be recuperated by reactionary formal strategies. Consequently, a subversion of reactionary themes or discourses, if it is to retain its political potential, must be employed in conjunction with some subversion of reactionary forms or, at the very least, the film should try to avoid making too great a concession to certain dominant forms. To illustrate this important interdependence, the following several examples are drawn from films whose subversion of popular content is disempowered by specific but significant concessions they make to reactionary forms, with the result that their alterity becomes almost entirely superficial. Comolli and Narboni identified these types of film, 'which have an explicitly political content... but which do not effectively criticize the ideological system in which they are embedded because they unquestioningly adopt its language and its imagery.'[50]

In Being John Malkovich, the use of both a conventional closed narrative structure and a highly consistent causality recuperates its most obviously radical content. As a consequence, despite the claims made for its subversive alterity, the film is actually highly complicit with the goals of the dominant realist epistemology. The central premise of the film is established early on, i.e., there exists a tunnel that allows people to enter the head of actor John Malkovich, to experience his life from a first-person point-of-view. This absurd premise, however, once established, is explored in a highly consistent manner. In fact, late in the narrative it is strongly rationalised, its mechanics revealed in detail through the use of extended explanations, even books with illustrative diagrams. Thus, the film depends upon and supports a realist

epistemology, i.e., it affirms the ideological distinction between reality and representation by positing a prior objective reality (however weird) that can be represented reliably and consistently. Consequently, the alterity of film is no more subversive than, say, a science-fiction film that establishes and then consistently treats of equally fantastic subjects, such as time-travel or alien invasion.

American Beauty is another purportedly alternative film whose subversion is largely disempowered by certain specific concessions it makes to popular narrative forms. Similar to Fight Club, this film addresses and complicates the reactionary popular discourse of individualism by advocating self-actualisation outside of the established, restrictive, consumer-driven rules of the dominant ideology. After beating him brutally, Colonel Frank Fitts (Chris Cooper) reprimands his son, Ricky (Wes Bentley):

> THE COLONEL
> You can't just go around doing whatever you feel like, you can't - there are rules in life...
>
> RICKY
> Yes, Sir...
>
> THE COLONEL
> You need structure, you need discipline...[51]

This exchange establishes the Colonel as the voice (and later agent) of the dominant ideology. His status as a highly disciplinarian army-man reinforces this position. Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) transgresses the established ideological structure, i.e., he does what he wants in (almost) complete disregard for prevailing social norms. While the inevitable punishment of his transgression initially appears conventional, the manner in which it occurs and, more specifically, the agent chosen to effect it, is (potentially) subversive. By having the Colonel shoot Lester, the film suggests that Lester is punished not for his rebellion against conformity, but rather for his potential

ability to expose the profound contradiction that informs the Colonel's character, i.e., his simultaneous homophobia and (repressed) homosexuality. By extension, the film can be read to imply that when the dominant ideology reasserts itself in the close of certain narratives (such as the 'fallen woman' film), it does so not only to punish those that do not adhere to its repressive codes, but also in order to deny its own fundamentally contradictory, ideological character.

However, this potentially subversive content is disempowered by two significant concessions the film makes to the demands of the popular reactionary film. The first involves Lester's failure to commit to the full implications of his rebellion. By refusing to sleep with the teenage object of his affection, Angela Hayes (Mena Suvari), it becomes clear that Lester recognises that there are indeed some social boundaries that should not be crossed, that there are still certain limits to his burgeoning self-expression. Thus, his rebellion, like carnival, takes place within certain prescribed limits. The second (more significant) concession to the dominant ideology is formal and involves the use of a highly reactionary framing device and 'happy ending'. The film opens with a voice-over narration in which Lester informs us of his impending death.[52] By so doing, not only does Lester's death cease to be a surprise, but also, as he is speaking from beyond the grave, there is the implicit and reassuring suggestion of an afterlife. Also, at the moment of Lester's death, we are shown the various (clichéd) images of his life that, according to the Lester, '[flash] in front of [his] eyes,'[53] i.e., visions of clouds, falling stars, leaves in autumn, his grandmother's hands, his wife and child, etc. Then, in a reversal of the opening of the film, the camera moves up and out over the street, taking us from the particular to the general. In a voice over, Lester offers the following assurance that he is 'happy':

> Although it would be easy to be pretty pissed off about what happened to me... it's hard to stay mad, when there's so much beauty in the world.

By closing American Beauty in such a reassuring manner, it could be argued that readers are relieved of any ongoing concern for both the causes and consequences of Lester's rebellion.

At this point, it is useful to recall the distinction MacCabe makes between 'moments' of subversion in the progressive realist text and a more conscious use of 'strategies of subversion'. In films like Being John Malkovich and American Beauty, the broader (potentially) subversive narrative strategies are disempowered by certain obvious concessions they make to very fundamental elements of the reactionary narrative. However, this does not mean that certain sporadic or isolated 'moments' of subversion are still not present in these (and other similar) texts. As the following paragraphs will hopefully demonstrate, there are still instances in both these films that are potentially subversive. (Of course, it could be suggested that the concessions made by these films to dominant narrative strategies, especially the happy ending in American Beauty, contributed to the crossover success of both these films.)

Alternative Variations on Popular Discourses

The progressive realist film, it seems, employs certain versions of popular discourses because in order to prevent alienating a relevant mass audience it must preclude its audience from dismissing the film as either unrealistic or irrelevant, i.e., because familiar, internalised/naturalised discourses were not used. In other words, the progressive realist film does not have to subvert all of the popular discourses it invokes. An audience's interest and attention can be sustained by some apparent concessions to popular content; not unlike the manner in which the dominant ideology

makes hegemonic concessions to its subjects.

I have already noted this tendency in Three Kings, in relation to the character of Troy Barlow as anti-hero. This film also invokes a very conventional conception of the strong individual hero. After the Iraqi rebels complain that the United States has abandoned them, Major Archie Gates (George Clooney) and his team make amends by helping them in an immediate, hands-on manner, i.e., they escort them to a refugee camp. Here, an individual heroic solution addresses and resolves a greater, more general injustice of American foreign policy. It suggests that bad political decisions are in the hands of insensitive, detached bureaucrats. Gates' team acts as a surrogate through which an American audience might ease its political conscience and experience vicariously a more immediate, applied solution to the problem. Near the beginning of the film, while interviewing a group of US soldiers about the recent cease-fire, NBS reporter Adriana Cruz (Nora Dunn) says: 'They say you exorcized the ghost of Vietnam with a clear moral imperative.' In this manner, Three Kings can be seen to attempt to exorcise the ghost of the Gulf War with its own individualised 'clear moral imperative'. However, the potentially subversive element of this film does not lie in its conventional treatment of the individual hero but rather, in a subsequent subversion of traditional closure that actually undermines the veracity of the conventional narrative strategies that precede it (see below). It should be noted, then, that the progressive realist film often employs certain reactionary discourses in an apparently complicit, unironic manner to sustain an audience at the same time as it subverts other discourses.

The following analysis of the subversion of popular discourses is also subdivided for the purposes of discussion (as in Chapter Three) according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Alternative Variations on Discourses Associated with Physiological Needs

The progressive realist film often challenges the popular discourse of 'life'. In certain of these films, life is not the sacred principle (and the taking of it not the cosmic transgression) it is in more popular films. For example, The Player devalues the importance of life by inverting the moral causal economy, by refusing to punish Griffin Mill for his killing of writer David Cahane. Fargo displays an even more reckless disregard for the value of life, filling its narrative with unnecessary, coincidental or inadequately motivated deaths, e.g., the two passers-by who happen upon Carl and Grimsrud as they attempt to dispose of the State Trooper's body, Grimsrud's killing of Jean Lundegaard because she was making too much noise or the slaying of the parking lot attendant. Furthermore, this latter film is (falsely) posited as a true story, possibly to demonstrate that outside a fictional MCE, the supreme value of life and the punishment of those that do not respect its sanctity are in no way natural or inevitable.

Alternative Variations on Discourses Associated with Safety Needs

In more reactionary film narratives, I noted, the various discourses associated with the safety needs, i.e., the secure home, the well-policed neighbourhood, etc., tend to be displaced onto the capitalist discourse of private property. In this manner, our ultimate safety is predicated on the acquisition of goods and services that will prevent us from coming to harm. According to Maslow's hierarchy of prepotency, once we have satisfied our safety needs, we are freed-up to pursue the satisfaction of higher needs, such as love and belongingness, esteem and, ultimately, self-actualisation.

However, in Fight Club, Tyler Durden says: 'The things you own end up owning you', undermining Maslow's hierarchy and pointing to its ideological nature.

Later, Durden elaborates his essentially communist attitude towards private property when he encourages the Narrator to '[reject] the basic assumptions of civilisation, especially the importance of material possessions.' Durden suggests that in satisfying our safety needs through consumer acquisition we are not freed-up to advance towards individual, personal self-actualisation but rather we are trapped, restricted to a single path that precludes our self-actualisation in terms other than those sanctioned by the prevailing capitalist ideology. We become the slaves of consumerism.

This slavery, and the impossibility of escaping its bonds, also constitutes an explicit theme of American Beauty, a film in which all the typical trappings of consumer culture, i.e., nice house, nine-to-five job, etc., prove profoundly unsatisfying to its protagonist. The futility of attempting to escape consumerism is signified not only by Lester's ultimate punishment (death) but also by characterising his attempt to do so as a regression to an immature state of teenage irresponsibility that is still predicated on principles of consumer acquisition, i.e., the purchase of a sports car, toys (a remote-controlled car) and his abandonment of steady employment only to take up yet another job (in a fast-food franchise).

Alternative Variations on Discourses Associated with Love and Belongingness Needs

In The Big Lebowski, the discourse of heterosexual love and the nuclear family are challenged by foregrounding the Dude's exclusion from a meaningful relationship with a member of the opposite sex. His sexual congress with Maude Lebowski (Julianne Moore) is reduced to the singular function of conceiving a child. Unlike the traditional reactionary hero, the Dude is posited as uniquely qualified for this exclusion, i.e., Maude chooses him to impregnate her because he lacks both the will and ability to be involved in a meaningful (nuclear) family unit:

MAUDE
Look, Jeffrey, I don't want a partner. In fact I don't want the father to be someone I have to see socially, or who'll have any interest in rearing the child himself.

Again, in American Beauty, a wife and family do not afford any sense of security for Lester Burnham. On the contrary, they are positioned as the sources of his unhappiness, the very structures that actually stunt his growth as an individual. In this manner, the film suggests the patent failure of participation in the ideologically sanctioned structures of heterosexual love and the nuclear family to lead to the ultimate self-actualisation of the hero.

Alternative Variations on Discourses Associated with Esteem and Self-Actualisation Needs

In To Die For, I noted, Suzanne Stone is prepared to do anything and everything to achieve her individual (American) dream. The film is potentially subversive because for Suzanne to achieve this goal she must *violate* the ideologically approved institutions associated with lower needs categories rather than satisfy them. She refutes the institution of the nuclear family when she refuses to have a child with her husband, Larry. When he persists, she denies the importance of (faithful) heterosexual love, sleeping with local teenager Jimmy Emmett (Joaquin Phoenix) in order to convince him to violate yet another popular institution, i.e., the sanctity of life, i.e., she wants Jimmy to kill Larry. Suzanne's actions also reveal the patriarchal nature of Maslow's hierarchy. As a woman, her need for self-actualisation is utterly incompatible with her husband's more prepotent need to become a nuclear family-man. (Most frequently, the subversion of individualism is treated in terms of 'self-mediatisation'. Consequently, the current discussion of individualism is continued under this heading in the following section.)

Part III: The Artifice of Popular Modes of Representation

In addition to offering alternative or ironic versions of certain reactionary discourses, the progressive realist film often has as its implicit subject the artifice of popular modes of representation. A use of this specific discourse has the potential to demystify readers, to reveal the inability of popular narrative strategies reliably to represent the material conditions of their existence. The introduction of this discourse on the level of ostensible content, as a conscious theme of the progressive realist film, can serve to reinforce the destabilisation of the realist epistemology performed on other levels of the text. All of the narrative strategies discussed below, it is worth noting, share a quality of self-reflexivity, i.e. they demonstrate an awareness of the textuality of the text. This has a number of potential ramifications. On a practical level, when audiences cannot suspend their disbelief, they have difficulty empathising with the personal situations of the fiction's characters. After the manner of a Brechtian alienation technique, this can encourage audiences to intellectualise the dramatised issues rather than simply to displace their social and political responsibility onto the proffered individual situation by means of a reactionary *catharsis*. In which case, they are precluded from seeing the individual expulsion of the villain as a satisfactory general resolution of a social problem. Villains, thus, become the symptoms of social dysfunction rather than their cause and the social structure itself is implicated. More significantly, on an epistemological level, a pronounced self-reflexivity highlights the non-existence of the stable realist referent. As the text is not only about its ostensible subject matter but also about its own textuality, readers can have difficulty confidently identifying the ontological reality to which the text is intended to refer.

Overt Textuality

One of the simplest means of demonstrating the artifice of the film narrative is by highlighting its status as text, as product, by refusing to efface the material conditions of the film's production. A potential result of such an exercise is that the text is de-naturalised, revealed as a construction, i.e.; it regains 'the memory that [it] once [was] made.'[54] When the truth or moral authority of the text is denied, there can be a reduction in its ability to shape or condition our social behaviour.

In Fight Club, Tyler Durden points to the 'cigarette burn' in the top right-hand corner of the film screen, the editor's indication of an impending reel-change. It is an impossible action, explicable only if one accepts that the characters in the film are somehow aware of their ontological status as characters in a film. This awareness constitutes a violation of the normally distinct division that obtains in popular, realist narratives between the narrative universe of the film and the universe of the reader, between representation and reality. A similar ontological rupture occurs later in the same film. This time the artifice of narrative conventions is revealed through an impossible manipulation of time. The narrative begins *in medias res* with the Narrator held hostage by Durden. His gun in the Narrator's mouth, Durden asks him if he has anything to say. The Narrator replies: 'I can't think of anything.' Near the end of the film, after we have seen the events that led up to this situation, we return to the exact point at which the narrative began. Again (but still for the first time), Durden asks the Narrator if he has anything to say. This time, he mutters, 'I *still* can't think of anything.' Durden replies: 'Hmm. Flashback humor.' How are we to interpret Durden's response? Upon which ontological reality is he commenting? Durden would not have been in a position to say this if he were not somehow aware of the fact that he inhabits a temporally manipulated narrative, if he had not somehow experienced

this particular moment before (as only the viewer and Narrator have). As a character in a realist narrative, Durden cannot possibly respond to the conditions of the narrative. That he does so places him in an ontologically indeterminate position that has the potential to destabilise both the representation from which he has escaped and the reality into which he has intruded.

Robert Altman notes about The Player: 'This is a movie about movies. And we're going to do it the way they do movies.' Altman employs the conventions of mainstream cinema in such an obvious manner that their artifice is often undeniable. The film opens on a mural of classical Hollywood production. A clapperboard is held into the frame and an off-screen voice yells 'Action!' In this very first instance, the film is announced as a fiction, a manufactured product of the very film industry depicted in the mural. This initial disruption is followed by an extended tracking shot of various activities taking place throughout the studio lot during which the head of studio security, Walter Stuckel (Fred Ward), discusses the merits of the extended tracking shot that opened Touch of Evil (Welles, 1958). With this opening Altman both announces (and mocks) his presence as the director or fabricator of a constructed fiction. He observes of this tracking shot: 'It was a very pretentious thing and I was making fun of myself and people who make films and think [sic] those kinds of things are important.' Also, at the end of the film, as the blackmailing writer pitches his idea for a film called *The Player*, about a producer who murders a writer and gets away with it, viewers might realise that (it is possible) they have just seen the actual film that is being pitched to Mill *at the end of the film*. Altman compares the structure of the film to a snail's shell, constantly turning in on itself, to the point that '[it] kinda turns into itself and becomes itself', i.e., the reality becomes the representation and *vice versa*. He notes, 'The mirrors start reflecting each other.'[55] The objective

narrative reality to which the film appeared to refer, i.e., the objective referent in the normal process of realist representation, vanishes in this infinitely self-reflexive loop (see Chapter One). Thus, it could be argued, the conventional reality-representation dichotomy is displaced by an interminable dialectic that effectively denies the objectivity of the popular narrative mode, that reveals not only the inadequacy of this narrative mode reliably to represent the external world, but also its ideological role in positing and sustaining the belief that this external world exists in the first place.

Alternating Modes of Address

The progressive realist film can also destabilise the realist epistemology by shifting modes of address, for example, between the narrative strategies of documentary and fiction. Such a shift calls upon a varied and often inconsistent range of reading strategies, some intended for reportage (and, hence, seen as carriers of 'truth') and some intended for fictional discourses (and, hence, seen as the carriers of 'untruths'). Using both of these modes of address in a fictional film can disrupt the normal distinction made between reality and representation.

The Use of Text

Dramatisations of true stories often conclude with lines of text that inform viewers of events that transpired after the represented narrative. Certain overtly fictional films, such as Three Kings, use text in this manner. Alternatively, the 'truth' of the narrative can be established by prefacing a film with a title such as 'Based on a true story'. For example, Fargo opens with the following declaration:

> This is a true story. The events depicted in this film took place in Minnesota in 1987. At the request of the survivors, the names have been changed. Out of respect for the dead, the rest has been told exactly as it occurred.

Some time after the film's release, this declaration was discovered to be entirely false. A similar strategy was employed by The Blair Witch Project (Myrick & Sánchez, 1999). The opening text of this film declares: 'In October of 1994, three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittesville, Maryland, while shooting a documentary. One year later, their footage was found.'[56] When fictional films use this kind of text, their narratives can assume a dubious quality of 'truth', of documentary realism. In which case, the film becomes ontologically indeterminate. Is it truth or fiction, reality or representation? The referent is destabilised. It becomes both real and unreal at the same time. Additionally, the facility with which readers can alternate between these two modes of address points to the ease with which a fiction can (falsely) lay claim to 'truth' and *vice versa*. Both the fictional and the real can seem less certain as a result, constructions that depend as much upon the chosen reading strategy of the individual reader as they do upon inherent qualities of the narrative itself.

The Use of Reportage

To Die For combines techniques of documentary reportage with more traditional third-person scenes. Both these registers are established from the outset with each shift between the two clearly recognisable. However, after these registers have been established, the film problematises them. The contemporary documentary scenes of the film often lead into scenes and sequences shot from an objective, third-person perspective. As the audience often sees, in certain flashbacks introduced by Suzanne's to-camera addresses, details that would directly implicate her in the murder of her husband and, hence, would not likely be included in her confessed version of events, it seems clear that the film's documentary scenes serve simply to punctuate a more reliable, objective account of past events rather than to introduce the subjective

recollections of individual characters.

However, at several points during the film, the objective reality of these flashbacks is problematised. For example, one morning, Suzanne watches her husband leave their home. Then, in a continuous shot, she stretches, yawns and turns on the spot. By the time she has completed her turn, without a cut, dissolve or other editing technique that would suggest the passage of time, the lighting scheme has changed to 'night' and the doorbell rings. The objective 'reality' of the flashback scenes, that up until this point had seemed reliable, has now been disturbed by a representation that defies normal temporal progression. Readers might ask, if this temporal lapse is to be motivated by character subjectivity, then who is narrating the scene? If it is not a personal recollection, then in what 'reality' does this scene belong? Alternatively, if it is motivated as part of the director's subjective vision, his authorial voice, its objectivity is further destabilised.

Later, these flashbacks include moments of more overt subjectivity. For example, when Suzanne exits the courtroom after her acquittal, the scene is interspersed with first-person shots, understood as Suzanne's POV as she glances about the pressing crowd of reporters. These subjective intrusions are accompanied by an intense, non-diegetic audience-applause sound-effect. Again, reality and representation are confused as Suzanne's highly mediatised conception of the world erupts into an otherwise objective representation of reality. By the end of the film, readers cannot be wholly sure of the ontological status of the flashback scenes.

A similar narrative strategy occurs in the closing scenes of The Usual Suspects (Singer, 1995) when it becomes clear that most, if not all of the story related by Verbal Kint (Kevin Spacey) to Detective David Kujan (Chazz Palminteri) has been composed from details in the room around him. Again, readers are invited to reassess

how much of the preceding narrative is to be trusted. In both these instances, it could be argued, by foregrounding the ease with which an otherwise reliable account of past events can be brought into question, the profound ontological instability of the popular narrative mode is revealed.

Destabilising the Actor-Character Distinction

Another means of alternating modes of address that can potentially blur the distinction between reality and representation is the simultaneous use of an individual as both actor and character. While in documentary programmes, i.e., interviews, specials and events such as awards-shows, actors are seen mainly as a 'real' human beings, when actors appear in (conventional) fictional films they pretend to be characters, i.e., 'representations' of human beings. However, when actors play themselves in obviously fictional discourses, these otherwise distinct roles are conflated with the result that their ontological status becomes somewhat vaguer. They are both real (actor) and unreal (character) at the same time. While this strategy is employed sporadically throughout The Player, in which many famous actors and writers play themselves, often as caricatures, in Being John Malkovich, the inherent instability of the actor-character distinction functions as the central narrative conceit. On some level we are always implicitly aware of this instability, conscious of the fact that, for example, the character of Lotte Schwartz in Being John Malkovich is also the actor Cameron Diaz. An essential part of the viewing process (the willing suspension of disbelief) is a forced suppression of this duality, i.e., the identity of the actor is (mostly) subsumed by the character. In this manner, we deny the inherent artifice of the representation. Being John Malkovich problematises this temporary subsumption of actor by character in a specific manner, i.e., the actor John Malkovich plays the character John Malkovich. Malkovich behaves in both expected and unexpected ways,

alternating between stereotypical outbursts of the pretentious master-actor and moments of profound normalcy (at one point ordering towels for his bathroom). With Malkovich performing both this character (or caricature) of Malkovich at the same time as he is, undeniably, the actor Malkovich, it is not as easy to isolate the referent in the usual, realist actor-character dichotomy. Malkovich is ontologically indeterminate, neither and both at the same time. This absence of a clear referent, as I have noted, has the potential to undermine the realist epistemology.

Mediatisation (and Self-Mediatisation)

Films such as To Die For, The Big Lebowski, Fight Club, Three Kings and The Truman Show (Weir, 1998) foreground the uncertain, unstable dialectic that often informs our mediatised understanding of both reality and representation and, ultimately, our inability reliably to distinguish between the two.

In To Die For, Suzanne Stone espouses her theory of the modern mediatised society:

> You're not anyone in America unless you're on television. On television is where we learn about who we really are. Because what's the point of doing anything worthwhile if nobody's watching. And if people are watching, it makes you a better person.

This comment reveals not only Suzanne's personal attitude towards the media, but also the general operation of media in a society of which she is simply a symptom. According to Suzanne's logic, in modern society we have no identity that is unmediated. Who we are is predicated on how we believe we appear to others. Our morality is also mediatised. In dismissing the moral value of actions performed without witnesses, Suzanne inflates the social exchange-value of personal acts to the

exclusion of their use-value. The moral act is worthwhile only if it leads others to conclude that you are a moral person, i.e., if it makes you appear moral in the eyes of others. Morality becomes a commodity, a tool for social advancement. In Suzanne's world, the moral action becomes a selfish means to a selfish end, the diametric opposite of Kant's conception of the moral act as a categorical imperative, i.e., a selfless act that recommends itself. The logical extension of this belief, suggested by Suzanne's closing phrase, is that the only guarantee of moral behaviour is the knowledge that we are being watched and judged (a view that recalls Michel Foucault's discussion of Bentham's *Panopticon*[57]). When the identity and morality of individuals exist only in their mediatisation by a third party, when their sense of reality exists only in the representations of others, the normal, realist ontological distinction between reality and representation becomes somewhat problematic.

We also use certain popular modes of representation to understand our place in the world. This is one of the ways in which we exist meaningfully within the dominant ideological framework. In other words, sometimes we actively mediatise our own existence. This self-mediatisation in certain progressive realist films has both overt and more subtle manifestations. In The Big Lebowski, for example, disabled millionaire Jeffrey Lebowski consciously fashions himself after the classical, melodramatic patriarch of *film noir* (epitomised by General Sternwood in Raymond Chandler's hard-boiled detective novel The Big Sleep and Howard Hawks' 1946 film). After his wife, Bunnie (Tara Reid) is 'kidnapped', he sits in his wheelchair in front of a roaring fire, reflecting on such grandiose topics as what 'makes a man' while Wagner's *Lohengrin* plays on the soundtrack. His posturing becomes apparent when the Dude leaves the room and the opera music is revealed as diegetic, i.e., on Lebowski's stereo, the personal soundtrack of his affected despair, and not, as we

might have initially presumed, an emotive non-diegetic score. The falsity of such self-mediatisation, i.e., Lebowski's inadequacy to his chosen role, is revealed after Walter fails ultimately to reveal him a criminal mastermind and he ends up crying on the floor, a figure of extreme pity. Similarly, in To Die For, at her husband's funeral, Suzanne expresses her emotion by placing a stereo on her husband's coffin and playing the popular tune 'All by Myself.'[58] Suzanne, it seems, can only express her emotional state by introducing into the diegesis the kind of music that would ordinarily occur on the non-diegetic soundtrack. Her strongly mediatised understanding of reality compels her to transform her life into a trite movie/TV drama.

Fight Club, it could be suggested, also addresses this issue of self-mediatisation, seeing it as an extension of the consumerisation of modern society. In this film, the Narrator comments on his sleeping disorder, noting that: '[with] insomnia... everything's a copy of a copy of a copy.' For him, nothing seems authentic. It could be said that in his world of recirculated reproductions, he has lost the subjective referent, his sense of self or identity. He has become Adorno's passive dupe, the self-mediatised product of an insidious consumer culture, 'prone to the manipulative persuasions of the mass-media, submissive to the appeals to buy mass produced commodities made by the mass-culture, supine before the false pleasures of mass consumption'.[59] The Narrator defines himself through the purchase of goods and services, such as IKEA furniture, creating his identity by enhancing his appearance to others. As Tyler Durden notes:

> We are consumers. We are by-products of a lifestyle obsession. Murder, crime, poverty, these things don't concern me. What concerns me are celebrity magazines, television with 500 channels, some guy's name on my underwear, Rogaine, Viagra...

The absolute proliferation of this superficial consumer aesthetic is radically exteriorised when the Narrator strolls through his apartment and new pieces of furniture magically appear with descriptive sales-text and prices floating beside them. Durden is explicitly aware of this self-mediatisation. He tells the Narrator:

> You are not your job. You're not how much money you have in the bank. You're not the car you drive. You're not the contents of your wallet. You're not your fucking khakis.

While the Narrator is on the phone to the police about his destroyed apartment, Durden says: 'Tell them the liberator has destroyed my property, has realigned my perception.' Durden posits an escape from consumer society as involving a necessary realignment of perception, a new way of representing things that exposes previous modes of representation as false ideological structures. He observes: '[people] see themselves as they'd like to be.' According to Durden, the individual must acknowledge that everything, including the self, has been mediatised.

This discourse on self-mediatisation in consumer culture can be read as a specific subversion of the popular discourse of individualism. Rather than posit individuals as leaders, as active decision-makers and problem-solvers, here they are reduced to passive participants in a society where leadership, decision-making and problem-solving are simply commodities acquired to increase one's status and appearance to others. Individualism is no longer a matter of becoming self-actualised, of becoming, according to Maslow, 'more and more what one idiosyncratically is... [becoming] everything that one is capable of becoming,'[60] but rather a matter of conforming to the homogenised expectations of others, of conforming to the prevailing images of success and achievement. This self-mediatisated individualism is achieved by subscribing to fashions, trends, even passing fads, through the

accumulation of consumer products that signal this conformity, i.e., three-piece suits, fancy furniture, fast cars, good-looking sexual partners, etc.

Durden can be seen as a projection of how the Narrator thinks he wants to be, i.e., his ideal mediatised image. As Durden puts it:

> You were looking for a way to change your life. You could not do this on your own. All the ways you wish you could be, that's me. I look like you want to look. I fuck like you want to fuck. I am smart, capable but, most importantly, I am free in the ways that you are not.

Ironically, the inescapability of ideology is made clear by the end of the film when the Narrator realises that both his desires and the projected, mediatised version of himself, i.e., Durden, are false ideals engendered by a society of appearances. Durden is not 'free' as he claims, but simply another manifestation of certain desirable, socially sanctioned attributes. His denial (killing) of Durden constitutes a return to the very ideology that his creation of Durden was attempting (albeit in vain) to transcend. This return to conformity is explicitly signified by his eventual (if ironic) positioning as one half of a conventional heterosexual couple in the penultimate shot of the film.

The dramatic trajectory of this film, then, comprises of a failed attempt to move from one conception of subjectivity to another. The Narrator recognises that he is the subject or slave of consumerism. He attempts to regain the idiosyncratic identity that his subjectivity to consumerism suppresses. He tries in vain to become another kind of subject, the 'autonomous "I", the centre of one's own experience [and] source of free action.' The film closes with his acknowledgment of the inescapability of his initial position of subjectivity. His ultimate acceptance that he is 'subservient to some system of domination'[61] constitutes a conscious comment on the pessimistic inevitability of the prevailing accommodationist ideology.

Three Kings and The Truman Show take this mediatisation of reality and employ it as a specific discourse. Three King's criticism of the financial motives for the Gulf War is contained within a general discussion of the dialectic tension between reality and representation. Reporter Adriana Cruz says to Walter Wogaman (Jaime Kennedy):

> The war is over. I don't fucking know what it was about. What was this war about? I was managed by the military. I tried to be substance based. Not style-based.

On a superficial, dramatic level, the heroes of the film make a journey from style to substance, from the mediatised reality or representation of the war to a recognition of the genuine humanity of the situation, the reality that the 'managed' representations of the war suppressed. This narrative trajectory would seem to suggest that behind the lies and falsehoods of intentionally deceptive representations is always a more honest human reality. If this is the case, then the film actively subscribes to the classical realist fallacy, Derrida's 'metaphysics of presence', the presumed existence of a reliable, objective referent. However, after offering this apparently conventional discourse, the film problematises it, revealing its artifice in subtly disturbing ways. This destabilisation occurs in the highly inconsistent closure of the film in which several brief vignettes inform the audience of the future careers of its protagonists. Major Archie Gates and Chief Elgin (Ice Cube) work in Hollywood as military advisors to the film industry and Troy Barlow is shown managing a carpet store in Torrance, California. Gates and Elgin are now active participants in the Hollywood machine, the epitome of deceptive representation. They are right back where they started, in a world predicated on materialism, appearances and the priority of style over substance, the very things that the preceding narrative appeared to condemn.

Also, Troy is situated within an excessive image of smiling, middle-class, ideological conformity, i.e., the white-collar American dream of private enterprise and family. He has become the ideal participant in the same capitalist ideology that, in its wider imperialist manifestation, motivated the war against Iraq. Thus, the film's closure can be read to comment on the ultimate inescapability not only of capitalism, but also of a mediatised reality.

The Truman Show also appears to comment on this inescapability. The central dramatic conceit of the film is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to discern the ontological difference between what is real and what is represented. Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey) is unable to make this distinction because his 'reality', the island town of Seahaven, is a representation, an elaborate hoax that takes place in the world's largest television studio. Truman's world functions as a radical externalisation of Adorno's theory of the Culture Industry. Every aspect of his existence is mediatised, accorded an exchange-value determined by the industrial, commercial and aesthetic considerations of television entertainment. As the show's creator, Christof (Ed Harris), notes to an interviewer: 'Everything on the show is for sale. Actors' wardrobes, food products, to the very homes they live in.'

The film's narrative can be read as charting the progress of Truman's ideological demystification, his movement from representation to reality, his recognition of the false relationship that has for 30 years prevented him from recognising the genuine material conditions of his existence. This reading, however, is based on a vulgar reduction of Adorno's theory. As Simon Jarvis notes:

> If Adorno's theory of the culture industry presented us with dupes on the one hand and conspirators on the other it would indeed be trivial, because the trick would only need to be exposed to be brought to an end.[62]

In The Truman Show, as in The Matrix (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999), a neat dichotomy is established between representation and reality, between an obviously 'fake' world and the 'real' world that lies outside it.[63] In both films, the protagonist is first made aware of the deceit, then simply transcends it. By positing the existence of an external authentic reality, both films affirm the very ontological categories of the realist epistemology that, initially, they seemed to challenge. Furthermore, by focusing on a successful escape from a clearly demarcated 'fake' world, any concern for the problematic ontological status of the 'real' into which the protagonist has escaped is displaced. The potentially subversive quality of both films is further mitigated by identifying certain agents, i.e., Christof in The Truman Show or the 'machines' in The Matrix, as responsible for the initial deception rather than suggesting that the false relationship is the product of an intangible nexus of hegemonic ideological forces.

The potential subversion of The Truman Show, I would suggest, lies elsewhere. A closer, more decentralised reading of the film reveals that it is not Truman himself but the audience of 'The Truman Show' and, it could be argued, the audience of the film itself, that are the true Adornian dupes. In the film, the various representative audiences of the show include a man in a bathtub, the patrons of the Truman Bar and two security guards. These people would rather immerse themselves in the false experiences of others rather than live their own less ideal lives. For these audiences Truman's mediatised existence is a kind of reality. As Christof says to the activist Sylvia (Natasha McElhone): 'I have given Truman a chance to live a normal life. The world. The place you live in… is the sick place. Seahaven is the way the world should be.' The strongest indictment of such audiences comes in the closing scenes of the film. As the 'real' world into which Truman escapes is composed almost

entirely of people glued to their television sets (watching 'The Truman Show'), it is significant that the penultimate scene of the film does not show him emerging into this 'real' world but rather disappearing into darkness. In the absence of Truman's show, i.e., the 'reality' that for so long informed the 'reality' of its viewing public, the 'real' world can be no more than a void. However, it is a void that is immediately filled. In the final shot of the film, after transmission of 'The Truman Show' has ceased, the two security guards contemplate their next move:

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                    GUARD #1
What else is on?

                    GUARD #2
Yeah, let's see. Where's the
T.V. Guide?
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That the film closes on these two minor characters suggests that, ultimately, this film has been as much about audiences (and spectatorship) as about Truman himself. While Truman can leave his obviously fake world, audiences remain trapped in front to their televisions. They simply change the channel, displacing their attention onto whatever new false reality they can discover. This almost whimsical coda demonstrates the extent to which Truman's escape from representation to reality is simply another piece of entertainment. His authentic experience is reduced by television audiences to its exchange-value, qualitatively indistinguishable from the many other inauthentic life experiences that preceded it. In the end, the show's audiences remains immured within the kind of hyperreality from which Truman has just escaped and, ironically, into which he is about to emerge, a 'reality' from which, unlike before, there is no obvious, material escape. As Christof notes: 'Listen to me, Truman. There's no more truth out there than there is in the world I created for you. Same lies. The same deceit.'

CONCLUSION

The progressive realist film attempts to challenge the narrative conventions of Hollywood cinema from within. Typically, these challenges are discursive, i.e., contained in the text itself. Beyond the text, however, in order to reach a relevant mass audience, I noted how certain practical realities of commercial filmmaking necessitate the use of certain established modes of distribution and exhibition. However, as the cultural (and technological) landscape changes, it is inevitable that the alternative film will also evolve. Therefore, by way of a conclusion, I would like briefly to discuss certain implications of 'extra-textual' subversion, i.e., challenges to the conventional means by which films are distributed and exhibited and the effect such challenges might have on the future of alternative cinema practice. Recently, this kind of extra-textual subversion has been facilitated by advances in digital technology and the rise of the Internet.

The aesthetic content of cinema has always been intimately connected to the development of film technology. For example, the advent of synchronised sound, the development of colour film processing, wide-screen projection, CGI, etc., have all had an impact on various aspects of popular narrative discourse. More recently, the increasing affordability of high-quality digital filmmaking equipment and the relatively low (often negligible) costs of using the Internet as a means of distribution and exhibition has had an important democratising effect on film production. As one cultural commentator observes: 'There really is no stopping the horde of film-makers armed with digital cameras, non-existent crews and actors willing to work for nothing but possible acclaim. Fact is, the 'box' isn't as impregnable as Hollywood would have you believe.'[64] Whether or not the Internet will develop into a realistic mass forum for alternative film exhibition remains to be seen. At the same time, the implications of

such a development are still worth contemplating. When the economic restrictions of film production, distribution and exhibition are loosened, there is a commensurate reduction in the strength of the 'supplementary constraints' of the Hollywood film institution. In other words, when less money is at stake, risk is reduced, with the obvious consequence that the need for certain 'risk minimisation' strategies is also reduced. The overall result is that the digital filmmaker is permitted to make certain creative decisions that the economic realities of non-digital film production frequently preclude.

In the future, as new modes of production, distribution and exhibition alter viewing practices, the progressive realist film (in the specific form described above) may no longer exist. That is to say, if the Internet becomes a viable means of mainstream exhibition, i.e., provides access to a relevant mass audience, the alternative narrative may not have to make as many concessions to dominant narrative conventions as mainstream industrial practice makes necessary today. It could be argued, then, that in the use of this new technology there exists the potential for a more uncompromising political cinema.

Notes

[1] Thomas Elsaesser, 'French Film Culture and Critical Theory: Cinéthique', Monograms, Vol 2 (summer), 1971, p. 34.

[2] *ibid.*, pp. 36-7.

[3] Maureen Turim, 'The Aesthetic becomes Political: a history of film criticism in *Cahiers du Cinéma*', Velvet Light Trap, 1973, vol. 9 (Summer), p. 15.

[4] *ibid.*, p. 16.

Notes (cont')

[5] George Lellis citing the opinion of Thomas Elsaesser in George, Bertolt Brecht, 'Cahiers du Cinéma' and Contemporary Film Theory, p. 75.

[6] Jean Louis Comolli & Jean Narboni, 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism', p. 63.

[7] George Lellis, Bertolt Brecht, 'Cahiers du Cinéma' and Contemporary Film Theory, p. 78.

[8] Colin MacCabe, 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on some Brechtian Theses', p. 228.

[9] *ibid.*

[10] *ibid.*, p. 230.

[11] Steve Neale, 'Art Cinema as Institution', Screen, 22, No. 11, 1981, p. 38.

[12] Quoted by Hans-Bernhard Moeller, 'Brecht and "Epic" Film Medium: The cineaste playwright, film theoretician and his influence', Wide Angle, Vol. 3, No. 4, p. 6.

[13] As Pamela Falkenberg writes: '[in] this way, a process is reified as separate textual entities ['"SHollywood" and the "Art Cinema" as a Bipolar Modeling System: *A bout de souffle* and *Breathless*', Wide Angle, Vol. 7, No. 3, p. 52].'

[14] Steve Neale, 'Art Cinema as Institution', p. 37.

[15] *ibid.*

[16] Justin Wyatt, 'The Formation of the Major Independent: Miramax, New Line and the New Hollywood', in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema, p. 84.

[17] Steve Neale, 'Art Cinema as Institution', p. 15.

[18] Kenneth Turan, '"Happiness" is All Relative', Los Angeles Times, October 16, 1988 (www.calendarlive.com/movies/reviews/cl-movie981016-10.story).

[19] Robin Wood, 'Radicalism and Popular Cinema: the Films of Oliver Stone', CineAction!, No. 23, Winter 1990-91, p. 68.

[20] The initial November 1992 tag-line for the film was: 'Play it at your own risk. Sex. Murder. Betrayal. In Neil Jordan's new thriller nothing is what it seems to be.' By

Notes (cont')

January of the following year, it had been replaced by: 'The movie everyone is talking about but no one is giving away its secrets.' [Justin Wyatt, 'The Formation of the Major Independent', p. 80-1.]

[21] Michael Fleming & Leonard Klady, '"Crying" all the way to the bank', *Variety*, March 22, 1993, p. 68, cited by Justin Wyatt, 'The Formation of the Major Independent', p. 81.

[22] *Daily Variety*, March 27, 2001, p. 24.

[23] Brad Stevens, 'Postmodern Times: popular American cinema and the critical climate', CineAction!, No. 34, 1994, p. 54.

[24] E. H. Gombrich, Art and Illusion, p. 63.

[25] Florence Jacobowitz 'Critical Realism: subversive commercial art', CineAction!, Nos. 19/20, May 1990, pp. 10, 9.

[26] Robert Altman, in 'One on One with Robert Altman', prods. Denise Farley & New Line Home Video, New Line Home Video, 1993.

[27] Scott Forsyth, 'Capital at Play', p. 93.

[28] Sam Smiley describes the 'plant' as 'an item of information, one that the [writer] inserts early in the play and that turns out to be significant later [Playwriting: the structure of the action, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971, p. 66].'

[29] It is worth considering, if only in passing, that one established synonym for 'invulnerable' is 'impregnable'. This (patriarchal) semantic correspondence suggests a corollary that equates 'vulnerability' with 'pregnancy'.

[30] J. Hoberman, 'Burn, blast, bomb, cut', in Sight and Sound, February 2000, p. 20.

[31] Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil, New York: Penguin Book, 1976, p. 248.

Notes (cont')

[32] Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem, p. 276. Elsewhere, Arendt reiterates this point: 'The deeds were monstrous, but the doer - at least the effective one now on trial - was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic or monstrous [The Life of the Mind, Vol. 1: thinking, London: Secker & Warburg, 1978, p. 4].' Arendt also describes the reactions of expert psychologists and members of the clergy to Eichmann:

> Half a dozen psychiatrists had certified him as 'normal' – 'More normal, at any rate, than I am after having examined him,' one of them was said to have exclaimed, while another had found that the whole psychological outlook, his attitude towards his wife and children, mother and father, brothers, sisters, and friends, was 'not only normal but most desirable' - and finally the minister who had paid regular visits to him in prison after the Supreme Court had finished hearing his appeal reassured everybody by declaring Eichmann to be 'a man with very positive ideas' [Eichmann in Jerusalem, p. 25-6].

[33] Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem, p. 252.

[34] *ibid.*, p. 287.

[35] Devin McKinney, 'Fargo', Film Quarterly, Vol. 50, No. 1, Fall 1996, p. 32.

[36] *ibid.*

[37] The title of the film points to associations with Raymond Chandler's The Big Sleep and its filmed adaptations. Wheelchair-bound millionaire patriarch Jeffrey Lebowski recalls Philip Marlow's austere patron, General Sternwood in the same way that the sexual activities of his tearaway wife, Bunnie, have parallels with the pornographic misadventures of the General's daughter, Carmen.

[38] Ethan Coen, The Making of the Big Lebowski, prod. & dir. Richard Leyland, Polygram Filmed Entertainment, 1998.

[39] Brian Masters, The Evil that Men Do, p. 187.

[40] Charles Whitehouse, review of Fight Club, Sight and Sound, December 1999, p. 46.

Notes (cont')

[41] Jeffrey Burton Russell, The Prince of Darkness: radical evil and the power of good in history, London: Thames and Hudson, 1989, p. 224.

[42] *ibid.,* p. 245. He adds:

> Splitting arises from the desire to preserve the absolute goodness of a beloved object by denying that there is any imperfection in it. Any evil or imperfection must be transferred from the beloved object to something else... As the normal person develops, he or she gradually accepts ambivalence and progressively restricts the spheres of absolute goodness and absolute evil.

[43] Ira Hauptman, 'Defending Melodrama', p. 284.

[44] Eran Preis, 'Not Such a Happy Ending: the ideology of the open ending', Journal of Film and Video, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Fall 1990), p. 18.

[45] Richard Neupert, The End, pp. 180-1.

[46] *ibid.,* pp. 75-6.

[47] It is worth noting that in popular cinema certain alternatives to a neat closure have been institutionalised, their subversive qualities negated. This conventional lack of closure is present in films that conclude with a title such as 'To be continued', or in which a shocking reversal is employed, i.e., the camera reveals an undiscovered clutch of monster eggs or the conspicuous absence of the villain's presumed dead body. Such modifications not only suggest the possibility of a sequel, but also create a general need for further consumption. This kind of closure, according to Maltby and Craven, 'releases the viewer from the movie in full awareness that the story never really ends, and thus arouses, satisfies, and, crucially, reawakens the desire to be entertained [Hollywood Cinema, p. 355].'

[48] While this final 'happy' image of heterosexuality is inconsistent with traditional expectations of the operation of the MCE, when viewed in terms of the film's own

anti-consumerist message, the positioning of this Edenic couple as witnesses to the dawn of the post-capitalist age is entirely appropriate.

[49] Richard Neupert, The End, p. 22.

[50] Jean Louis Comolli & Jean Narboni, 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism', p. 62.

[51] Alan Ball, American Beauty, Basingstoke & Oxford: Film Four Books, 2000, p. 97.

[52] This is similar to the opening of Sunset Boulevard (Wilder, 1950) in which the narrator, Joe Gillis (William Holden), comments on the body of the dead writer lying face down in Norma Desmond's swimming pool. In many ways, this opening is more subversive than American Beauty because it is not until later in the narrative that audiences discover that the dead writer is also the narrator and that this otherwise conventional introductory voice-over is, in fact, highly unconventional.

[53] Alan Ball, American Beauty, p. 144.

[54] Roland Barthes, Mythologies, p. 142.

[55] Robert Altman, 'One on One with Robert Altman'.

[56] This false sense of documentary reality was compounded by an elaborate use of the Internet, with entire sites dedicated to the history and mythology of the area in which the film is set.

[57] Cited by Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison, trans. Alan Sheridan, London: Allen Lane, 1977. Foucault writes: 'the major effect of the Panopticon [is] to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power [p. 201].'

[58] 'All by Myself,' wr. Eric Carmen & Sergei Rachmaninof, perf. Eric Carmen.

[59] Dominic Strinati, An Introduction To Theories of Popular Culture, London: Routledge, 1995, p. 12.

Notes (cont')

[60] Abraham H. Maslow, Motivation and Personality, p. 46.

[61] Noël Carroll, Mystifying Movies, p. 58.

[62] Simon Jarvis, Adorno, p. 74.

[63] It is important to note that the simple dichotomy offered by The Matrix is complicated by the film's sequel The Matrix Reloaded (Wachowski & Wachowski, 2003), in which it is suggested that the 'real' world into which the hero escaped in the first film is still part of the computer-generated 'matrix'.

[64] Johnny Angel, 'Out of the Box: breaking the mold in Hollywood', Fade In:, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 84.

CONCLUSION

As I stated in the introduction, the central purpose of this thesis is an investigation of the relationship between ideology and narrative structure in popular Hollywood cinema during the 1990s. This involved, first, the supposition, description and qualification of the main ideological function of these films, i.e., an affirmation of the prevailing realist epistemology (and, hence, the dominant ideology) and, second, an examination of the manner in which these texts execute this function both directly and indirectly, consciously and (more often) unintentionally, on the levels of form and content. This investigation allowed me to paint a relatively broad picture of American reactionary film practice during the 1990s; not only its formal structures, but also the kinds of themes and discourses it invokes (and disempowers), its inconsistencies and contradictions. It also required me to place these films within their material (social, political and economic) context and to ask what (if anything) makes these films distinct products of their time, representatives of a unique mode of contemporary popular film production. Finally, this investigation into ideology and popular Hollywood cinema suggested the importance of examining what alternatives are available to the more reactionary narrative strategies employed and in what manner the use of certain alternative narrative strategies might contribute to a viable political cinema. Consequently, while Chapters One through Four described and examined the 'reactionary' popular films of the 1990s (both their ideological functions and also the manner in which these functions are actualised), Chapter Five posited and qualified the possibility of a 'progressive realist cinema' as a practical means of criticising the dominant ideology of the Hollywood film industry from within.

CHAPTER BY CHAPTER

In Chapter One, I compared the individual act of comprehension and the canonic Hollywood, three-act narrative structure (as theorised by many screenwriting pundits) and, by isolating their common dynamic, I attempted to establish their relative structural identity. Both, I argued, are based on a familiar closed pattern: a challenge or disruption is introduced into an otherwise stable epistemological system and then that challenge is resolved. It is crucial to note this final resolution could only be achieved by means of a judgment (handed down from some moral authority) or by the simple exercise of superior strength; both of which are arbitrary and coercive.

I continued by hypothesising the main ideological function of this (closed) narrative dynamic, namely the affirmation of the prevailing realist epistemology (a way of seeing that makes a simple but important distinction between the ontological spheres of reality and representation, of objectivity and subjectivity). This realist epistemology, I insisted, was indispensable to the reproduction of the dominant ideology as it accepts as unproblematic (and, thus, reinforces) conceptual categories such as 'fact', 'truth', 'right', wrong', 'reality', 'representation', etc., categories upon which any dominant ideology depends for its moral authority. This crucial affirmation performed on the level of narrative structure, I argued, takes precedence over all other narrative concerns, including the ostensible content (which by default is only of secondary importance to the main ideological operation of the text).

I then theorised the specific manner in which the structural identity of the individual act of comprehension and the canonic Hollywood narrative (established in the previous section) affirms the prevailing realist epistemology (and, hence, the conditions favourable to the reproduction of the dominant ideology): their similarly closed structures are reflected versions of each other that interact with other similarly

closed narrative structures in other discourses and on many other levels of experience to create an infinitely self-reflexive loop in which these closed structures all refer to each other rather than to any real outside. The result is an 'effect' of reality that, paradoxically, affirms the ontological categories of the realist epistemology without actually making any direct reference to (or even requiring the provable existence of) an external, objective reality.

I concluded the chapter by suggesting that the specific manner in which this affirmation is achieved (through the repeated use of closed narrative structures) is additionally favourable to the goals of the dominant ideology because any closed narrative system (and any actual 'meaning' in the case of the individual act of comprehension) is always the result of an act of force; which means the most powerful (ruling) groups can more effectively influence or determine the results of these signifying practices. I also noted that the closed narrative structure is popular with audiences because it accords with our realist ways of seeing (in which case it seems natural and reassures us not only that certain things make sense, but that things can and do make sense in general), it affords us a sense of solidarity or group identity (with those groups that share this particular way of seeing) and it also affords us a sense of individual identity and wholeness (the closed narrative confers on us a similar sense of closure or wholeness by means of a process of 'suture').

Chapter Two reinforced the main argument of Chapter One. It suggested that if the popular 1990s film can only participate in an affirmation of the realist epistemology if its closed narrative structure is both obvious and legible, then the implicit goal of most (if not all) of the narrative strategies employed by these films is to force into stark presence the progress and resolution of this closed narrative structure. Observing that the resolution of popular films almost always coincided with

the resolution of a conflict between heroic and villainous factions, I suggested that if these heroes and villains were both highly legible, then the resolution of the conflict between them (and hence the closed nature of the narrative) would also be highly legible. Consequently, I theorised that the main goal of most popular narrative strategies was to orient us to roles of the hero and villain.

I then separated my discussion of these 'orientation strategies' into two groups; those that use a morally-responsive physical universe (or 'moral-causal economy') to index the roles of heroes and villains and those that more directly index the heroes and villains themselves by ascribing them certain ideologically determined physical and behavioural traits.

The prevailing moral-causal economy in popular 1990s films, I suggested, is generally the product of the popular mind in the post-Enlightenment period (and its incomplete separation of religious and scientific epistemologies). However, I also noted that during the 1990s, and especially (though not exclusively) in popular American cinema, this moral-causal economy is further determined by certain precepts of the American dream (an ideological structure that establishes a necessary connection between hard work, virtue and personal financial success). This structure, I noted, is profoundly ideological and, by virtue of its focus on individual responsibility, precludes placing any meaningful or lasting blame for personal failure on the economic superstructure, instead expressing such failures in terms of sin. The specific orientation strategies relating to the moral-causal economy that I discussed were orientation by ultimate resolution (where the hero and villain are recognisable by virtue of whose goals are actively favoured in the conclusion of the conflict); orientation by direct intervention (where the heroes tend to be favoured by coincidences, the (divinely) interventionist nature of which is inevitably denied in

order to retain the sense of individual agency and self reliance indispensable to the ideological function of the American dream); and orientation by engineering situations of apparent moral choice. This is when the moral-causal economy alters its physical fabric to create situations in which heroes can make choices without any contingent external pressures; in which case, according to a Kantian moral logic, the choice has genuine moral content. I further noted that a typical corollary to this particular orientation strategy is that after making an approved moral choice, heroes tend to be rewarded with the very thing they elected to sacrifice in the first place.

In the section on physical and behavioural traits, I was careful to note that although some of these traits may appear universal, they all have a material origin (even if that origin is neither recent nor immediately evident). Physical traits, I proposed, tend to relate to issues of bodily integrity and the idealisation of the human physique, with heroes being healthy and intact while villains are aligned with bodily dissolution, sickness and death. Positive and negative behavioural traits, I posited, tend in the main to be determined respectively by which kinds of actions or behavioural patterns serve to affirm or disrupt certain significant institutions of the dominant ideology (such as the nuclear family, heterosexual love, individualism, etc.). The 'myth of pure evil' was invoked at the end of this section in order to show how certain contradictions inherent in the very idea of absolute villainy are forcibly denied through the invocation of certain potent, highly emotive traits.

In Chapter Three, I examined the ostensible content of the popular 1990s film, i.e., its themes and discourses. I explained that the repeated use in the ostensible content of a limited set of permitted themes and discourses affords popular texts a transparency that allows a more unmediated access to and, thus, recognition of the closed narrative structure. I characterised this as a secondary kind of orientation

strategy as it *passively* permits an easier recognition of the closed narrative structure rather than more directly indexing it in the manner of the orientation strategies discussed in the preceding chapter. Then, using Abraham Maslow's theory of human motivation, I hierarchised and discussed the particular discourses invoked by the films in my sample, establishing not only what kinds of discourses are invoked by popular 1990s films (those that affirm certain ideological institutions) but also, by showing that the same discourses appeared again and again in film after film, that the set of discourses typically invoked is indeed limited. I also noted the extent to which certain potentially alienating or unfamiliar topics are reduced to the familiar terms of these permitted discourses. Throughout this chapter, when appropriate, I made references to contemporary American society, establishing the manner in which particular treatments of discourses actually avoid certain social and political realities of the period.

Chapter Four sought to discern what (if anything) is distinct about popular 1990s films; as a mode of film practice specific to a period in history. In other words, I sought to set the popular 1990s cinema within its social, political and economic context. To do so, I introduced and qualified (and sometimes dismissed) certain common presuppositions about popular films during the period. For example, I noted how, in general, the 1990s film fails to engage directly with the social and political events of the decade (or their repercussions) preferring instead to treat of themes and discourses of a more individualistic and humanist nature (discourses, I noted earlier, that affirm the dominant ideology). However, in order to show that this apparent apolitical quality was not unique to the 1990s, I demonstrated a similar lack of engagement in the most popular films of the 1980s. I also discussed the claims that narrative had decreased in importance and/or sophistication in the 1990s due to the

increase in spectacle occasioned by the expansion of foreign (non-English speaking) markets; and that the incorporation of film production companies into larger conglomerations (with concerns in ancillary markets such as music publishing and merchandising) had resulted in a standardisation of film product. Again, I noted that neither of these features are distinct to the 1990s, both already being in place during the 1980s. Ultimately, I concluded that there is nothing particularly distinct about popular film production in the 1990s and that this period in popular film history is best conceived as a continuation (albeit an extension) of the industrial principles established by the blockbuster format developed in the mid-1970s (and consolidated during the 1980s).

I further noted that the industrial practices required of the blockbuster format actually lead to a more reactionary film text. In order to prove that this necessarily reactionary quality of these blockbuster films constitutes a meaningful basis for establishing a continuity between these films, I demonstrated the central and determining importance in these films of their primary ideological/reactionary function (performed by the closed narrative structure). To do this, I showed how certain contradictions and inconsistencies on the level of content exist as a direct consequence of the primary need in these films to satisfy the ideological prerogatives of the closed narrative structure (of the need to use those orientation strategies that assist in a recognition of its presence, progress and resolution). (Of course, this discussion of content allowed me further to demonstrate the profoundly ideological (contradictory) nature of the popular 1990s film.)

The particular symptoms of this secondary importance discussed included 'holes' in the plot, the overuse of spectacle (which brings us proximately closer to the point of resolution without complicating the plot and, thus, makes for a clearer, more

unobstructed recognition of the closed narrative structure), certain unintended textual implications (such as violence in the articulation of non-violent themes, homoeroticism in ostensibly heterosexual relationships, etc.), and the impossibility of committed social discourses, due mainly to the accommodationist ideology employed and the indispensable roles of hero and villain who individualise all potential social and political issues and, thus, displace (in an almost homeopathic manner) a more significant or meaningful criticism of the social, political or economic structure. I closed the section with a consideration of the coercive closure devices employed by popular films to terminate with force any potential consideration of these contradictions and inconsistencies.

Ostensibly, Chapter Five attempted to round off a general discussion of the commercial film industry by considering those films that appear to criticise its values from within. In Section One, I looked at certain previous conceptions of a potentially political cinema in journals such as *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Cinéthique*, borrowing from Comolli, Narboni and MacCabe to offer the idea of a 'progressive realist cinema'. This, I suggested is a cinema that engaged a relevant mass audience (rather than a small group of connoisseurs) and, more crucially, in a manner that is not immediately alienating and, hence, dismissable. As a hypothetical mode of film production, I noted, the progressive realist cinema accepts its status as commodity while still being critical of this status. At the same time, it uses the economic apparatus of the commercial cinema to its advantage, for example, employing stars to gain both financing (and also distribution and exhibition); the incorporation of the 'art' cinema into the commercial mainstream, I noted, makes this increasingly necessary. This progressive realist cinema, I argued, uses certain dominant representational modes (but in ironic, exaggerated or inconsistent ways) in order to

prevent complete audience alienation while still generating a vague *malaise*. In Section Two, I described certain alternative versions of the reactionary orientation strategies outlined in preceding chapters and also alternative uses of certain popular discourses. I also considered the importance of combining a subversion of content with some kind of formal subversion, noting occasions when potentially progressive films were disempowered by certain significant concessions made to reactionary narrative strategies. Additionally, I discussed 'the artifice of popular modes of representation', a specific discourse that seems to come up again and again in the sample of progressive realist films. Throughout, I was careful to note that any descriptions of possible audience reaction were purely speculative and not based on any empirical data.

In summary, I concluded that although the popular 1990s film is highly reactionary, this quality is not distinct to the films of this period. Rather, the popular films of the 1990s exist on an economic and ideological continuum that extends back to the blockbuster format of the mid-1970s. An obvious implication of this is that the popular cinema should always be regarded in the first instance as a commodity, and any formal or substantial textual analysis or potential cinema history should prioritise economic determinations. Another general conclusion is that the popular films of the 1990s are highly fractured and contradictory (because they are highly ideological). While this is not an original conclusion, it does suggest the viability of a meaningful progressive film practice within the more obvious mainstream, presenting a creative space or point of engagement for films that do not conceal (or which actually foreground) the kinds of contradictions and inconsistencies that more reactionary films attempt to deny.

FURTHER APPLICATIONS

It now remains to discuss briefly further possible applications of my particular critical approach, i.e., to examine its potential relevance to the study of other types of cinemas, past and present. This thesis focused on contemporary popular cinema, both those films that demonstrate high levels of ideological complicity and those that appear to enact a more progressive social or political agenda. In more abstract terms, I suggested how certain narrative structures serve to affirm the prevailing realist epistemology. Consequently, the general critical approach of this thesis could also be applied to the study of other types of film discourse, including more obviously experimental texts.

For example, Jean-Marie Straub's first (highly experimental) film, Machorka-Muff (1963), can be read as a meditation on (or subversion of) the reactionary Hollywood villain, in particular its use of certain physical and behavioural traits as an obvious index to moral alignment. Martin Walsh writes:

> [Straub] refuses to conform to a convention that decrees that evil men look evil. No individual can personify the qualities inherent in our reading of the collective unit, the Military... His portrait of Machorka-Muff centres not so much upon interpretation of his personality, as upon an agglomeration of documentary detail, seizing on elements of Machorka-Muff's environment that tell us far more about the mentality of post-war Germany than a caricatured presentation of the man could have implied.[1]

According to Walsh, Straub refuses to present a 'villain'. As a result, he refuses the creation of a 'strong' power that might displace the critique of a wider socio-political issue, in this case 'the mentality of post-war Germany', onto discrete, individual and, hence, eminently dismissible terms.

It could also be suggested that much of what I described in terms of reactionary narrative strategies and the closed narrative structure is applicable to the

specific mode of film production identified by Bordwell *et al.* as the 'classical Hollywood cinema'. While this is certainly true, it is important to note that my decision not to reference this earlier period in the current thesis was purely a matter of personal focus. First and foremost, this was an analysis of popular filmmaking in the 1990s. However, my particular critical approach can still be used to supplement the numerous existing historical analyses of Hollywood.

For example, one historical era that is particularly suited to this kind of ideological analysis is the period following the institution of the 1930 Production Code. This Code, employed by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, systematically attempted to lay down and justify not only a set of rules for the ostensible content of popular film, but also to naturalise a specific moral-causal economy (by consolidating a large number of Humean necessary connections. For a film to gain the crucial Production Code Administration (PCA) seal of approval, it could not violate any of the Code's conditions. In other words, it could be argued that it was required to maintain an ideal operation of the prescribed MCE. In this manner, the Production Code ensured a representation of the world in which the conspicuous shortcomings of an apparently benevolent, divine Providence were rigorously denied.

Of course, any treatment of the Code's implicit MCE would probably have to include an examination of the necessary connection it appeared to establish between female sexual transgression and death, the basis of the 'fallen woman' film.[2] By demanding this ultimate punishment for the fallen woman, the Code fulfilled its declared (ideological) aim of protecting certain permitted discourses, in this instance 'the sanctity of marriage and the home.'[3]

Such a study of the Production Code could also reflect back on the operation of the dominant MCE in contemporary popular film, showing how, in principle, very

little has changed since the 1930s. While it might not seem that modern film makers are particularly concerned with raising the moral standards of their patrons, or indeed with presenting, in the words of the Code, 'correct standards of life', on a structural level, and especially in the treatment of endings, the broader intentions of the Code's 'General Principles' still obtain.[4] It is only the particular prescriptions of the Code, informed by ephemeral social mores, that have fallen out of favour. In other words, all that has changed since the 1930s, it could be argued, are the standards by which one judges moral behaviour. Those acts considered immoral by contemporary standards, it could be shown, are still punished in modern reactionary films with the regularity that obtained under the Code.

The progressive realist film could also be traced back through the history of cinema. Such a study might include, for example, analyses of certain films by Alfred Hitchcock and Billy Wilder, the revisionist westerns of Sam Peckinpah, the melodramas of Vincente Minnelli, Douglas Sirk and Nicholas Ray, etc. Other prominent examples of commercial subversion might include the history of consciously invoked homoeroticism in mainstream film (identified by Vito Russo in his book, The Celluloid Closet, and, later, in the film of the same name).

The centrality of closed narrative structure to our prevailing realist way of seeing suggests that the arguments and conclusions of this thesis can also be applied to the study of certain popular (and alternative) *non-cinematic* forms such as television, popular novels, sporting events, jokes, comic strips, songs, and so forth. The diversity of these potential applications, to both cinematic and non-cinematic narrative forms, suggests also that some modified version of my approach could perhaps provide a functional critical context for various comparative media studies, i.e., cinema and television, television and stage melodrama, etc. It also suggests the

possibility of certain further applications to adaptation studies.

Of course, it is important to note that the suggestions outlined above cannot be accomplished by means of a simple substitution of objects of analysis. In other words, this thesis does not provide a ready-made critical apparatus that can be applied indiscriminately to the study of any popular narrative form. My object has always been contemporary Hollywood cinema and this narrow focus has determined both the specific qualities and limits of my critical approach. If one wishes to study other types of popular narrative, whether cinematic or non-cinematic, much further work is required.

Notes

[1] Martin Walsh, 'Political Formulations in the Cinema of Jean-Marie Straub', The Brechtian Aspect of Radical Cinema, London: BFI, 1981. pp. 43-4.

[2] Lea Jacobs writes:

> These films concern a woman who commits a sexual transgression such as adultery or premarital sex. In traditional versions of the plot, she is expelled from the domestic space of the family and undergoes a protracted decline. Alone on the streets, she becomes an outcast - often a prostitute - suffering various humiliations which usually culminate in her death [The Wages of Sin, p. x.].

[3] Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc., A code to govern the making of motion pictures: the reasons supporting it and the resolution for uniform interpretation, [Washington, D.C.]: Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, 1955 [1934], p. 14.

[4] Drafted by two devout Catholics, Martin Quigley (publisher of The Motion Picture Herald) and Father Daniel Lord (a St. Louis University professor), the Code, rather

unsurprisingly, is predicated on certain key Christian providential and eschatological precepts. Its moral agenda is typified by its three 'General Principles':

> No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown on the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin.
>
> Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.
>
> Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation [Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc., A code to govern the making of motion pictures, p. 2.].

APPENDIX A

The Most Popular Films of the 1990s

Table 3 below shows the five highest-grossing US domestic releases of each year 1990-1999. All amounts are in unadjusted US dollars.

Table 3: Sample of popular films (1990-1999).

1990	Film	US$ millions
1	Home Alone	285.8
2	Ghost	217.6
3	Dances with Wolves	184.2
4	Pretty Woman	178.4
5	Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles	135.3

1991		
1	Terminator 2: Judgment Day	204.8
2	Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves	165.5
3	Beauty and the Beast	145.9
4	Silence of the Lambs	130.7
5	City Slickers	124.0

1992	Film	US$ millions
1	Aladdin	217.6
2	Home Alone 2: Lost in New York	173.6
3	Batman Returns	162.8
4	Lethal Weapon 3	144.7
5	A Few Good Men	141.3

1993		
1	Jurassic Park	357.1
2	Mrs. Doubtfire	219.2
3	The Fugitive	183.9
4	The Firm	158.3
5	Sleepless in Seattle	126.7

1994		
1	Forrest Gump	329.7
2	The Lion King	312.8
3	True Lies	146.3
4	The Santa Clause	144.8
5	The Flintstones	130.5

1995	Film	US$ millions
1	Toy Story	191.8
2	Batman Forever	184.0
3	Apollo 13	172.1
4	Pocahontas	141.6
5	Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls	108.4

1996		
1	Independence Day	306.2
2	Twister	241.7
3	Mission: Impossible	181.0
4	Jerry Maguire	154.0
5	Ransom	136.5

1997		
1	Titanic	600.8
2	Men in Black	250.0
3	The Lost World: Jurassic Park	229.1
4	Liar, Liar	181.4
5	Air Force One	172.9

1998	Film	US$ millions
1	Saving Private Ryan	216.3
2	Armageddon	201.6
3	There's Something About Mary	176.5
4	A Bug's Life	162.8
5	The Waterboy	161.5

1999		
1	Star Wars: Episode One - The Phantom Menace	431.1
2	The Sixth Sense	293.5
3	Toy Story 2	245.8
4	Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me	206.0
5	The Matrix	171.5

The Most Popular Films of the 1980s

Table 4 below shows the five highest-grossing US domestic releases of each year 1980-1989. All amounts are in unadjusted US dollars.

Table 4: Sample of popular films (1980-1989).

1980	Film	US$ millions
1	The Empire Strikes Back	209.4
2	9 to 5	103.3
3	Stir Crazy	101.3
4	Airplane	83.4
5	Any Which Way You Can	70.7

1981		
1	Raiders of the Lost Ark	209.6
2	On Golden Pond	119.3
3	Superman II	108.2
4	Arthur	95.5
5	Stripes	85.3

1982	Film	US$ millions
1	E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial	359.2
2	Tootsie	177.2
3	An Officer and a Gentleman	129.8
4	Rocky III	125.0
5	Porky's	105.5

1983		
1	Return of the Jedi	252.6
2	Terms of Endearment	108.4
3	Flashdance	92.9
4	Trading Places	90.4
5	WarGames	79.6

1984		
1	Beverly Hills Cop	234.8
2	Ghostbusters	229.2
3	Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom	179.9
4	Gremlins	148.2
5	The Karate Kid	90.8

1985	Film	US$ millions
1	Back to the Future	210.6
2	Rambo: First Blood Part II	150.4
3	Rocky IV	127.9
4	The Color Purple	94.2
5	Out of Africa	87.1

1986		
1	Top Gun	176.8
2	Crocodile Dundee	174.8
3	Platoon	138.5
4	The Karate Kid Part II	115.1
5	Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home	109.7

1987		
1	Three Men and a Baby	167.8
2	Fatal Attraction	156.6
3	Beverly Hills Cop 2	153.7
4	Good Morning Vietnam	123.9
5	Moonstruck	80.6

1988	Film	US$ millions
1	Rain Man	172.8
2	Who Framed Roger Rabbit?	156.4
3	Coming to America	128.1
4	Big	115.0
5	Twins	111.9

1989		
1	Batman	251.2
2	Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade	197.2
3	Lethal Weapon 2	147.2
4	Look Who's Talking	140.1
5	Honey, I Shrunk the Kids	130.7

The Progressive Realist Film Sample

Table 5 below shows both the box-office performance and (widest) number of screens for each of the films discussed in Chapter Five as a progressive realist film. As can be seen, each of these films performed (relatively) well on a (relatively) wide distribution pattern.

Table 5: Sample of progressive realist films.

Film	Widest No. of Screens	Box-Office Gross (US$)
American Beauty	1990	130,096,601
Being John Malkovich	630	22,858,926
The Big Lebowski	1235	17,451,786
The Blair Witch Project	2538	140,530,114
Fargo	716	24,567,751
Fight Club	1966	37,006,984
The Player	452	21,706,101
Seven	2582	100,123,974
Shakespeare in Love	2030	100,291,009
The Sixth Sense	2821	293,506,292
Three Kings	2942	60,652,036
The Truman Show	2911	125,603,360
To Die For	954	21,097,191
The Usual Suspects	876	23,158,713

APPENDIX B

THE HERO-VILLAIN POLARISATION

The 50 film sample breaks down as follows: singular hero vs. singular villain (14/50 films); singular hero vs. villain-group (07/50 films); hero-group vs. villain-group (04/50 films); and hero-group vs. singular villain (07/50 films). In total, then, there are 32 films in the 50 film sample in which either a singular hero or hero-group opposes a singular villain or villain-group.

The remaining 18 films break down as follows: hero or hero-group vs. natural (or abstract) evils (07/50 films) and default hero vs. default villain (11/50 films). Both of these categories, I have explained, still employ villainy in a displaced form (see Chapter Two).

Singular Hero vs. Singular Villain

Even if villains are members or leaders of a larger group of villainous characters, they are still *singular* villains if it can be established that they are *personally responsible* for the initial challenge to the hero's epistemology. Similarly, heroes can be part of a wider group of heroic characters and still be *singular* heroes if they are *personally responsible* for resolving the epistemological challenge (expelling the villain).

Ghost (Zucker, 1990): Sam Wheat (Patrick Swayze) vs. Carl Bruner (Tony Goldwyn).

Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves (Reynolds, 1991): Robin of Locksley (Kevin Costner) vs. the Sheriff of Nottingham (Alan Rickman).

Aladdin (Clements & Musker, 1992): Aladdin (voiced by Scott Weinger) vs. Grand Vizier Jafar (voiced by Jonathan Freeman).

The Lion King (Allers & Minkoff, 1994): Simba (voiced by Matthew Broderick) vs. Scar (voiced by Jeremy Irons).

True Lies (Cameron, 1994): Harry Tasker (Arnold Schwarzenegger) vs. Salim Abu Aziz (Art Mallik).

The Flintstones (Levant, 1994): Fred Flintstone (John Goodman) vs. Cliff Vandercave (Kyle MacLachlan).

Pocahontas (Gabriel & Goldberg, 1995): John Smith (voiced by Mel Gibson) vs. Governor Ratcliffe (voiced by David Ogden Stiers).

Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls (Oedekirk, 1995): Ace Ventura (Jim Carrey) vs. Vincent Cadby (Simon Callow).

Mission: Impossible (De Palma, 1996): Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) vs. Jim Phelps (Jon Voight).

Ransom (Howard, 1996): Tom Mullen (Mel Gibson) vs. Detective Jimmy Shaker (Gary Sinese).

Air Force One (Peterson, 1997): President James Marshall (Harrison Ford) vs. Egor Korshunov (Gary Oldman).

There's Something About Mary (Farrelly & Farrelly, 1998): Ted Stroehmann (Ben Stiller) vs. Pat Healy (Matt Dillon).

A Bug's Life (Lasseter & Stanton, 1998): Flik (voiced by Dave Foley) vs. Hopper (voiced by Kevin Spacey).

Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me (Roach, 1999): Austin Powers (Mike yers) vs. Dr. Evil (Mike Myers).

Singular Hero vs. Villain-Group

In many of the films in the following two categories, the villain-group gives way to a *representative* villain for the purposes of a more-satisfying, material expulsion.

Home Alone (Columbus, 1990): Kevin McCallister (Macauley Culkin) vs. the burglars, Harry (Joe Pesci) and Marv (Daniel Stern).

Dances with Wolves (Costner, 1990): John Dunbar (Kevin Costner) vs. the various agents of American imperialism.

Home Alone 2: Lost in New York (Columbus, 1992): Kevin McCallister vs. (Macauley Culkin) vs. the burglars, Harry (Joe Pesci) and Marv (Daniel Stern).

A Few Good Men (Reiner, 1992): Lieutenant Daniel Alistair Kaffee (Tom Cruise) vs. the US army; Colonel Nathan R. Jessup (Jack Nicholson) is the representative villain.

The Firm (Pollack, 1993): Mitch McDeere (Tom Cruise) vs. the 'firm'; William Devasher (Wilford Brimley) is the representative villain.

The Waterboy (Coraci, 1998): Robert 'Bobby' Boucher, Jr. (Adam Sandler) vs. the various agents of modern society; Coach Red Beaulieu (Jerry Reed) is the representative villain.

The Matrix (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999): Neo/Thomas A. Anderson (Keanu Reeves) vs. the machines; Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving) is the representative villain.

Hero-Group vs. Villain-Group

Batman Forever (Schumacher, 1995): Batman (Val Kilmer) and Robin (Chris O'Donnell) vs. the Riddler (Jim Carrey) and Two-Face (Tommy Lee Jones).

Independence Day (Emmerich, 1996): the humans vs. the aliens.

Saving Private Ryan (Spielberg, 1998): Captain John Miller (Tom Hanks)'s squad vs. the German army.

Star Wars: Episode One – The Phantom Menace (Lucas, 1999): Annakin Skywalker (Jake Lloyd), the Jedi Knights, Qui-Gon Jinn (Liam Neeson) and Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan MacGregor), Princess Amidala (Natalie Portman), Jar Jar Binks (voiced by Ahmed Best), etc. vs. the Trade Federation and the Lords of the Sith, Darth Maul (Ray Park) and Darth Sidious (Ian McDiarmid); Darth Maul is the representative villain.

Hero-Group vs. Singular Villain

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (Barron, 1990): The turtles and Splinter (voiced by Kevin Clash) vs. The Shredder (James Saito, voiced by David McCharen).

Terminator 2: Judgment Day (Cameron, 1991): The Terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger), Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) and John Connor (Edward Furlong) vs. the T-1000 (Robert Patrick).

Batman Returns (Burton, 1992): Batman (Michael Keaton) and Cat Woman (Michelle Pfeiffer) vs. the Penguin (Danny DeVito).

Lethal Weapon 3 (Donner, 1992); Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson) and Roger Murtaugh (Danny Glover) vs. Jack Travis (Stuart Wilson).

Titanic (Cameron, 1997): Jack Dawson (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Rose deWitt-Bukater (Kate Winslet) vs. Caledon Hockley (Billy Zane).

Men in Black (Sonnenfeld, 1997): Officer James Edwards/MIB Agent J (Will Smith) and MIB Agent K (Tommy Lee Jones) vs. the Alien Bug/ Edgar (Vincent D'Onfrio).

Toy Story 2 (Lasseter, 1999): Woody (voiced by Tom Hanks), Buzz Lightyear (voiced by Tim Allen) and various other toys vs. Ed McWhiggin (voiced by Wayne Knight).

A Singular Hero or Hero-Group vs. a Natural (or Abstract) Evil

Although some of the following evils are man-made, they still cannot be held responsible for their actions. Consequently, the natural evil is often anthropomorphised or, alternatively, villainy is displaced onto a human agent.

Silence of the Lambs (Demme, 1991): Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) vs. mental dysfunction; villainy is displaced onto Dr. Frederick Chilton (Anthony Heald).

City Slickers (Underwood, 1991): Mitch Robbins (Billy Crystal) *et al.* vs. the wild frontier; villainy is displaced onto several malign cowboys.

Jurassic Park (Spielberg, 1993): Ellie Sattler (Laura Dern), Alan Grant (Sam Neill), *et al.* vs. rampaging dinosaurs; villainy is displaced onto Dennis Nedry (Wayne Knight).

Apollo 13 (Howard, 1995): the flight-crew and ground-crew of the Apollo 13 mission vs. dangerous technology.

Twister (De Bont, 1996): Bill Harding (Bill Paxton) and Jo Harding (Helen Hunt) vs. angry nature; villainy is displaced onto Dr. Jonas Miller (Cary Elwes).

The Lost World: Jurassic Park (Spielberg, 1997): Dr. Ian Malcolm (Jeff Goldblum), Sarah Harding (Julianne Moore), Nick Van Owen (Vince Vaughn) *et al.* vs. rampaging dinosaurs; villainy is displaced onto a series of characters, i.e., the big-game hunter, Roland Tembo (Pete Postlethwaite) and several corporate goons.

Armageddon (Bay, 1998): Harry S. Stamper (Bruce Willis) vs. the meteorite; villainy is displaced onto Colonel William Sharp (William Fichtner) and the US President (Stanley Anderson).

Default Hero vs. Default Villain

The *default* villains of these films are usually individuals who need to remedy a significant social dysfunction. As they are not villainous in the traditional sense, in many of the following films, there are *eleventh hour* villains, characters who epitomise the default villain's worst failings. The expulsion of these villains provides a more satisfying closure to the narrative's epistemological conflict.

Pretty Woman (Marshall, 1990): Vivian Ward (Julia Roberts) vs. Edward Lewis (Richard Gere); Philip Stuckey (Jason Alexander) is the eleventh hour villain.

Beauty and the Beast (Trousdale & Wise, 1991): Belle (voiced by Paige O'Hara) vs. the Beast (voiced by Robby Benson); Gaston (voiced by Richard White) is the eleventh hour villain.

Mrs. Doubtfire (Columbus, 1993): Miranda Hillard (Sally Field) vs. Daniel Hillard (Robin Williams).

The Fugitive (Davis, 1993): Richard Kimble (Harrison Ford) vs. Samuel Gerard (Tommy Lee Jones); Dr. Charles Nichols (Jeroen Krabbé) is the eleventh hour villain.

Sleepless in Seattle (Ephron, 1993): Annie Reed (Meg Ryan) vs. Samuel Baldwin (Tom Hanks).

Toy Story (Lasseter, 1995): Buzz Lightyear (voiced by Tim Allen) vs. Woody (voiced by Tom Hanks); Sid Phillips (voiced by Erik von Detten) is the eleventh hour villain.

Forrest Gump (Zemeckis, 1994): Forrest Gump (Tom Hanks) vs. Jenny Curran (Robin Wright Penn); see 'Additional Comments' below.

The Santa Clause (Pasquin, 1994): Dr. Neal Miller (Judge Reinhold) and Laura Miller (Wendy Crewson) vs. Scott Calvin (Tim Allen).

Jerry Maguire (Crowe, 1996): Dorothy Boyd (Renée Zellweger) vs. Jerry Maguire (Tom Hanks).

Liar Liar (Shadyac, 1997): Max Reede (Justin Cooper) vs. Fletcher Reede (Jim Carrey); Samantha Cole (Jennifer Tilly) is the eleventh hour villain.

The Sixth Sense (Shyamalan,1999): Malcom Crowe (Bruce Willis) vs. Cole Sear (Haley Joel Osment); see 'Additional Comments' below.

Additional Comments

In Forrest Gump, Jenny Curran is the default villain. It is her refusal to consummate a heterosexual relationship with Gump that constitutes the main obstacle to his only declared goal in the film, i.e., to marry her. Furthermore, most of the social conflict that provides the context for Gump's series of personal dramas is associated with Jenny and, by extension, women in general. As Jennifer Hyland Wang writes:

> The film highlights the feminine as the site of cultural chaos... In juxtaposing Jenny's sexuality and the tumultuous moments of the 1960s, sexual chaos and historical chaos are intimately linked. Moving from strip shows, to the pages of *Playboy*, to college, to antiwar activism, the account of Jenny's sexual experimentation is intertwined with her involvement in 1960s political and cultural movements.[1]

Jenny, then, is narrowly conceived as a sexual (and social) transgressor. Consequently, she is punished in a manner consistent with the 'fallen women' films of the 1930s and 40s. As Lea Jacobs writes of the genre:

> a woman... commits a sexual transgression such as adultery or premarital sex... she is expelled from the domestic space of the family and undergoes a protracted decline. Alone on the streets, she becomes an outcast - often a prostitute - suffering various humiliations which usually culminate in her death.[2]

Forrest (the default hero) cures Jenny (the default villain) of her independent (promiscuous) ways. He domesticates her, first by impregnation, then by marriage. Then, in accordance with the patriarchal demands of the fallen woman film, she enjoys a brief moment of absolution before her inevitable death; in the more modern context of Forrest Gump, the usual syphilis has translated into AIDS.

In The Sixth Sense, the child-psychiatrist Malcom Crowe is established as the film's default hero. Consequently, Cole Sear is read as the default villain of the narrative, i.e., it is he who possesses the personal psychological dysfunction that requires healing. The final twist of the film reveals that this assignation is incorrect, that, in fact, the opposite is true. It is Crowe that possesses the most significant personal dysfunction, i.e., the delusion that he is still alive, and it is Cole who catalyses in Crowe's realisation of this. Thus, in addition to providing a satisfying twist in the plot, this reversal at the end of the film also subverts the reader's original, more conventional interpretation of the epistemological conflict.

Notes

[1] Jennifer Hyland Wang, 'A Struggle of Contending Stories', pp. 92-7.

[2] Lea Jacobs, The Wages of Sin, p. x.

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