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BOOK REVIEW

Hollywood Incoherent

TODD BERLINER

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Todd Berliner's *Hollywood Incoherent* is the first sustained study of the aesthetics of the American cinema during one of its most fecund periods—the 1970s. To those who are familiar with some of the great works of 'The New Hollywood', it may come as a surprise that this book is charting new territory. But, as Berliner correctly notes, most previous critics have exclusively focused on the cultural contexts in which the films of New Hollywood were produced, subjecting them to political and ideological 'readings' with little regard for the style and form of the films themselves. *Hollywood Incoherent* goes a good way to redress this oversight, and will therefore, I suspect, enjoy an enthusiastic reception from a wide range of scholars interested in the aesthetics of film.

More specifically, *Hollywood Incoherent* is a study of the narrational styles and narrative forms of 1970s Hollywood cinema. Berliner's thesis has two components. First, he claims, 'A peculiar narrative design became prevalent in American cinema during the years 1970 to 1977' (6). According to Berliner, this narrative design is characterized by what he calls 'perversity' in the literal sense of the word, which means 'turned around' (9). For him, 'narrative perversities' include 'story detours and dead ends, ideological incongruities, logical and characterological inconsistencies, distracting stylistic ornamentation and discordances, irresolutions, ambiguities, and other impediments to straightforwardness in a film's narration. . .' (10). Berliner argues that 1970s Hollywood cinema experiments with these kinds of 'narrative perversities', yet ultimately subsumes them within the structures of classical Hollywood narration. The second part of Berliner's thesis is a claim that the aesthetic value of 1970s Hollywood cinema derives, in large part, from these narrative perversities inasmuch as they incorporate elements of incongruity and disunity into the classical Hollywood paradigm without radically subverting it.

Although Berliner advances this twofold thesis, most of *Hollywood Incoherent* is devoted to arguing solely for the first part of it—roughly put, that incongruity is 'the defining characteristic of seventies narrative design' (32). The book comprises three parts: Part I—An Introduction to Narrative Incongruity; Part II—Modes of Narration in Seventies Films; and Part III—Incongruity's Endpoints. The two chapters constituting Part I ('Poetics of Seventies Cinema' and 'Narrative Incongruity in Seventies Cinema') lay out the book's central arguments, describe its methodology, detail the concepts it deploys, and make the bulk of the case for understanding the aesthetic value of the films in terms of narrative incongruity. This latter discussion, in which Berliner argues for the second part of his thesis, is the most philosophically interesting (and debatable), so I shall return to it greater detail at the end.

For now, the only remark I will make about Part I is that Berliner's decision to limit the book's scope to the period of 1970 to 1977 feels a bit odd and somewhat arbitrary. The industrial changes that underwrote the artistic experimentation Berliner studies were well under way years earlier, and, as a result, a number of innovative films had been produced well before the beginning of the decade. Most scholars take the release of *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) as New Hollywood's starting point. Other films from the late 1960s that seem relevant to Berliner's inquiry include *Head* (1968), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Easy Rider* (1969), *The Rain People* (1969), and *The Wild Bunch* (1969). I am not sure Berliner is right that this group of films 'presages a movement that hadn't yet taken hold in mainstream cinema' (6). Ultimately, though, this somewhat questionable periodization

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detracts very little from the success of his project, which largely owes to his nuanced close analyses of individual films.

Following Part I, every chapter analyses a specific film in precise detail, elucidating its narrative strategies. Further, the case studies in Part II are putatively representative of specific narrational techniques—or, to use Berliner's term, 'modes of narration'—prevalent in 1970s Hollywood cinema. Berliner borrows this expression from David Bordwell, although it's important to understand that he uses it quite differently here. Bordwell first introduced the phrase in *Narration in the Fiction Film* to describe 'a historically distinct set of norms of narrational construction and comprehension'[1]. On Bordwell's account, at least four such modes of narration have been prominent in the history of the fiction film: classical narration, art cinema narration, historical-materialist narration, and parametric narration. Very roughly speaking, these are the narrational modes employed, respectively, by classical Hollywood cinema, European art cinema, Soviet cinema, and, on specific occasions, certain auteurs like Alain Resnais, Jean-Luc Godard, and Yasujiro Ozu—although this is putting it a bit patly. In any case, Bordwell's work on narration has been extremely influential in Film Studies, and most scholars in the discipline are familiar with the concept of a mode of narration as well as the rough typology Bordwell offers.

Thus, readers may be slightly puzzled when Berliner refers to the general narrational strategies he identifies in Part II—narrative frustration, genre deviation, and conceptual incongruity—as 'modes of narration'. Not only is this use of the term potentially confusing, but it also threatens to distort Berliner's argument, making it appear much more ambitious (and implausible) than it actually is. For it would be easy here to misinterpret Berliner as suggesting that 1970s Hollywood cinema manifests a distinct mode (or several distinct modes) of narration in Bordwell's sense of term.

1 David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 150.

The problem might not be so acute if Berliner simply appropriated the term and ignored its original sense. Yet Berliner also invokes Bordwell's conception of a mode of narration and, more specifically, his conception of the classical mode because Berliner's own argument depends on both of these concepts. According to Berliner, 1970s Hollywood films contain elements of narrative 'perversity', but ultimately do so within the framework of the classical mode. In his words, 'With the stability afforded by classical narration, they can risk a measure of narrational incoherence and still remain anchored to classical cinema's structure and purpose' (9). This statement makes clear that Berliner does not mean to suggest that 1970s Hollywood cinema manifests an historically specific set of narrational norms, but rather experiments with the conventions particular to the classical mode of narration from within that framework.

In spite of this potential confusion, Part II is the strongest section of the book. Berliner describes, in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, respectively, the ways in which *The Godfather, Part II* (1974) frustrates narrative expectations, *The French Connection* (1971) bends genre conventions, and *The Exorcist* (1973) manifests 'conceptual incongruities', including ideological incongruities, factual contradictions, and logical and characterological inconsistencies (137). In all three of these chapters, Berliner's observations are astute and his arguments are compelling.

Part III argues that *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974) experiment with even more radical narrative strategies, 'testing the limits' of narrative incongruity (147). For Berliner, *Taxi Driver* is working in each of the three modes of narrative perversity delineated in Part II: narrative frustration, genre deviation, and conceptual incongruity (150). Furthermore, Berliner argues that, although *Taxi Driver* ultimately works within the norms of classical narration, the film borrows stylistic strategies that are characteristic of parametric narration. Whereas in classical narration, on Bordwell's account, style is used 'principally to reinforce the causal, temporal, and spatial arrangement of events in the syuzhet [that is, the story events as presented by the film],' in parametric narration 'the

film's stylistic system creates patterns *distinct from the demands of the syuzhet system*'.[2] That is, in parametric narration, stylistic patterning is not motivated narratively and, indeed, the demands of the narrative may be subordinated to style.

At first I was very reluctant to accept Berliner's claim that *Taxi Driver* employs the stylistic strategies of parametric narration. I am not sure that the film's stylistic patterning can really be said to be unmotivated by and distinct from narrative demands, as in paradigmatic instances of parametric narration like *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). And when Berliner writes, 'Using visual style as an organizing principle, [*Taxi Driver*] employs [parametric narration]' (162), I wonder if he is using the concept of parametric narration too loosely. The fact that a film uses visual style as *one* organizing principle seems insufficient for it to be categorized as an instance of parametric narration. For visual style is at least one organizing principle of a great many films in the classical Hollywood tradition; just think of *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Lady in the Lake* (1947), *Rope* (1948), or *All That Heaven Allows* (1955). Nevertheless, Berliner's close analysis of *Taxi Driver*'s style is rigorous and persuasive, even if the conclusion he ultimately draws is not entirely convincing.

Berliner's discussion of the narrational strategies in *A Woman Under the Influence* and in other work by John Cassavetes is also persuasive, but I found it somewhat tangential to the overall project for two reasons. First, Cassavetes made his most celebrated films, including *A Woman Under the Influence*, independently, free from the narrative and stylistic demands of Hollywood. Heretofore, Berliner's argument has been about narrative strategies particular to 1970s Hollywood cinema, so a chapter on Cassavetes does little to bolster it. Berliner seems to justify the chapter's inclusion by claiming that Cassavetes had 'a perverse inclination to employ narrative strategies counterproductive to the linear progress of his stories' (147), but here is another problem even if one ignores the fact that Cassavetes worked outside of Hollywood: the inclination to which Berliner refers is only 'perverse' if acted upon within the classical Hollywood mode of narration. Outside of that mode of narration—say, in the art cinema mode of narration—it is not perverse but rather conventional to impede the linear progress of the narrative (think of *L'Avventura* (1960)). So, Berliner's argument here is premised on the assumption that Cassavetes's films are working in the classical mode of narration. However, it is far from clear that such an assumption is warranted given that Cassavetes worked independently and what we know about his artistic intentions.

Finally, I have some brief remarks about the second part of Berliner's thesis, which concerns the putative aesthetic value of narrative incongruity. Berliner could reasonably be interpreted as suggesting that narrative incongruity—and, indeed, incongruity in general—has an inherent aesthetic value. Needless to say, this is a very strong claim, but it seems to be one Berliner wishes to support in his discussion of scholarship on humour. In his view, 'research into [Incongruity-Resolution Theory in humour studies] offers compelling empirical evidence (and probably the only scientific evidence) for the aesthetic pleasure of resolving incongruities' (30). There are at least two problems with this claim. First, it is far from clear that the pleasure we get from humorous incongruities is necessarily *aesthetic* pleasure. Second, even if the pleasure afforded by humorous incongruities *is* aesthetic pleasure, surely this does not entail that resolving incongruities in other contexts necessarily gives us aesthetic pleasure. If only it were so—the time I spent in graduate school trying to decipher film theorists like Jean-Louis Baudry would have been much more enjoyable.

Despite the implausibility of the strong version of Berliner's claim regarding the aesthetic value of narrative incongruity, there is a weaker version that I think he succeeds in supporting. 'Narrative perversities', he writes, 'are exceptionally productive in creating the rich aesthetic experiences that have made seventies films among Hollywood's most treasured creations' (11). Parts II and III of *Hollywood Incoherent* demonstrate the truth of this statement, and this, I think, is the great achievement of Berliner's book.

2 Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 275.

That Berliner does not give a robust account of *how* such narrative perversities contribute to the aesthetic value of 1970s Hollywood or of why narrative perversities constitute aesthetic merits in the context of the New Hollywood but may constitute aesthetic defects in other contexts (a prospect he does not consider) might be viewed not as a shortcoming of his study, but rather as a virtue. For another implicit success of *Hollywood Incoherent* is that it opens up several new avenues for future research.

Ted Nannicelli
University of Waikato
tedn@waikato.ac.nz
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