

Coming Apart An essential addition to the history of Seventies New American Cinema

Hollywood Incoherent: Narration in Seventies Cinema

By Todd Berliner University of Texas Press, \$55

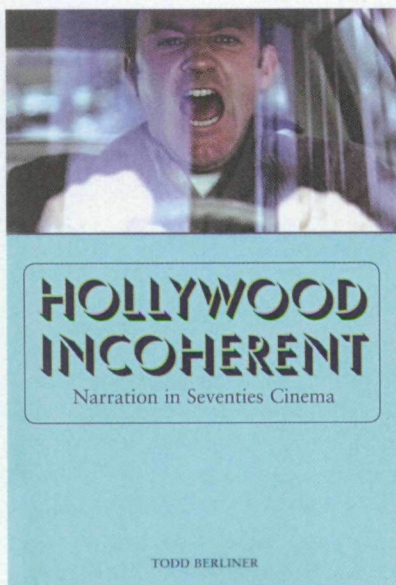
SEVENTIES HOLLYWOOD HAS ASSUMED THE STATUS OF MYTH, a brief, golden age of personal expression and aesthetic innovation before the onslaught of conglomerations and franchises that continues up to the present day. The enormous value of Todd Berliner's *Hollywood Incoherent: Narration in Seventies Cinema* is that its primary focus is not on the myth of "Easy Riders and Raging Bulls" but on the films themselves. Nevertheless, Berliner is captivated by this period in which he finds "Hollywood's most significant formal transformation since the conversion to sound film."

The book's title deliberately evokes Robin Wood's seminal "The Incoherent Text: Narrative in the '70s," the 1981 essay that examines the ideological incoherence of *Taxi Driver*, *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, and *Cruising*. *Taxi Driver* is the subject of one of Berliner's chapters, with others devoted to *The Godfather, Part II*, *The French Connection*, *The Exorcist*, and John Cassavetes. But Berliner's approach is not Wood's, and indeed the word "incoherent" has very different implications here. For Berliner, the interest of Seventies Hollywood lies not in the political and social content of the films "but their unusual manner of storytelling and the gripping, unconventional experiences they offer spectators." Five tendencies of narration are outlined in the book's first section (which covers a fairly broad stretch of the era, from *Nashville* to *Patton*) and these principles underpin the rest of the book: 1) the use of narrative and formal devices that work against causality; 2) a self-conscious situating of the film's style in relation to European and Asian art cinema; 3) a placing of the spectator in uncomfortable situations in relation to the ethical and narrational ambiguity of the films; 4) a resistance to clear resolutions to narrative and conceptual problems; and 5) an attraction to rambling and discursive structures that dissipate conventional narrative tension. Incoherence for Berliner, then, is not a matter of ideology but of form. In fact, the word "incoherent" crops up in the book much less frequently than two that are more appropriate for Berliner's concerns: *perverse* and *incongruous*.

Berliner works primarily within the cognitive school of analysis, a school that attempts

to understand how a "normative" spectator interprets a film. David Bordwell's relationship to this school is fundamental and his presence looms very large in *Hollywood Incoherent*. One is periodically reminded throughout Berliner's book of Bordwell's 1985 tome *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (written in collaboration with Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, and often cited by Berliner), in which Hollywood is frequently measured against art cinema. When Berliner argues that even the most audacious Seventies Hollywood films do not engage in the "radical" approach of *Last Year at Marienbad* or *Early Spring*, we are firmly in Bordwell territory, circa 1985. My struggle with this approach is not that it is wrong but that it sets up art cinema as a type of ideal, virtually outside of history and culture, against which even the most "perverse" Hollywood film is found to be lacking. Cassavetes is placed at the end of *Hollywood Incoherent* because he takes the perverse strategies of Seventies narration the furthest, resulting in the films becoming "a playing field of incongruous events, characters, and perspectives." This chapter produces one of the book's high points, a superb analysis of Cassavetes' idiosyncratic use of scripted dialogue. But the specific films that Berliner addresses were funded and distributed independently and as a result were not produced with the same expectations as the other films in this book. Berliner is aware of this, but the special status accorded Cassavetes, combined with the placement of the chapter, comes close to offering a teleological approach to style rather than a historical poetics.

The strengths of the book, though, far outweigh such matters. Berliner's approach allows him to consistently register a kind of delight with the films that is one of the book's great pleasures. By the end of *The Exorcist*, for example, he argues that the spectator must face so many incongruous concepts that "creative distortion" must be employed. "Such mental activity," he writes, "is more playful than rigorous problem solving, more of the nature of free association than logical reasoning." This sentence encapsulates the enormous appeal and usefulness of *Hollywood Incoherent* and of Berliner's own analytical skills in detailing the formal richness of the period. This will undoubtedly become an essential book for future scholars of Seventies Hollywood. □



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