



Book Reviews

Todd Berliner, *Hollywood Incoherent: Narration in Seventies Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), xii + 276 pp., \$55.00 (hardback).

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The consensual narrative regarding the evolution of Hollywood cinema involves the oft-repeated story of how, in the 1970s, a group of maverick filmmakers—a squadron of easy riders, a herd of raging bulls, as Peter Biskind (1999) would have it—fundamentally altered the aesthetics of classical storytelling. Occasionally, though, less celebratory accounts of this period seditiously wonder if such starry-eyed historians might be overstating the case. Geoff King, for example, delicately suggests that the degree of aesthetic novelty in the films of this so-called Renaissance may not be sufficient enough to warrant such a grandiose title, especially because their stylistic departures did not constitute a “wholesale abandonment” of classical conventionality (2002: 44, 47–48).

Intriguingly, then, *Hollywood Incoherent*’s working thesis is an appropriation and reversal of King’s observation: Todd Berliner suggests that the pervasive acclaim for the films directed by the American auteurs of 1970s cinema can be attributed to the various ways that their narrative design compellingly exploits, modifies, and perverts conventional norms without ever fully upsetting classical traditions. Extremely lucid and highly persuasive in its analyses, *Hollywood Incoherent* helpfully explicates the general principles that determine the unusual narrative structures of New Hollywood films, and deftly characterizes the effects of these narratological strategies.

Chapter 1 provides a solid context for the book’s analyses as Berliner situates the films he investigates in relation to the period’s dramatic cultural and industrial shifts. His working thesis is that the various upheavals of the 1970s did not result in a uniformly leftist or politically “progressive” cinema; in fact, he questions the use-value of ideological and cultural analysis to account for the lasting acclaim of the New Hollywood films. Rather, the period’s volatility more palpably affected the films’ style (17). The dramatic changes within the decade to audience demographics, studio infrastructures, funding models, censorship practices, alternative markets, professional training, and distribution patterns (to say nothing of the enormous political and countercultural upheavals) proved to be ideal conditions for the germination of modestly bud-

geted films with a surprising degree of “narrative perversity.” Such narrational deviance is said to “undermine, interfere with, or distract spectators from a story’s causal logic” (10).

The New Hollywood, then, is a cinema predicated on fundamental conceptual incongruities. Challenging classical coherence and harmony, these perversities take the form of “story detours and dead ends, ideological incongruities, local and characterological inconsistencies, distracting stylistic ornamentation and discordances, irresolutions, ambiguities, and other impediments to straightforwardness in a film’s narration” (10). These incongruous elements require spectators to undertake a considerable degree of cognitive effort to resolve satisfactorily their disruptions to the film’s narrative unity.

As Berliner shares the dominant view that the New Hollywood auteurs appropriated the more radical innovations of their modernist predecessors in Europe and Asia (albeit in a necessarily attenuated fashion), he is heavily indebted to David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson’s various neoformalist descriptions of art cinema. Bordwell’s account of the random narrative structure, introspective reactions, and undermotivated characters of modernist cinema in “The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice” (1979) figures largely throughout the book (58–60), as does Thompson’s concept of “parametric form” in *Breaking the Glass Armor* (1988) (245–351). With these antecedents in mind, Berliner outlines in Chapter 2 the dominant principles of 1970s narration: (a) the insertion of stylistic devices that are “counterproductive” to the story’s conceptual logic; (b) the exploitation of “unrealized” classical potentials (e.g., tonal leaps, story gaps, expository delays, illogic, non-causal linkages, derivation, baroque visuals, ambiguous characterization); (c) the generation of “uncertain and discomforting” spectator responses; (d) the prominence of conceptual incongruence and dramatic irresolution; and (e) the hindrance of the story’s teleological impetus and the viewer’s concomitant affective stimulation (51–52).

Given the neoformalist constitution of Berliner’s narratological approach, it is therefore unsurprising that he adopts a cognitivist approach to address the means by which viewers reconcile the “narrative incongruity” with which they are confronted. Specifically, he takes his cue from incongruity-resolution theory, devised by psychologists conducting empirical research on the mental processes required to comprehend humor, in order to explain the “dexterous feats of imaginative reasoning” required by 1970s cinema (31). As with instances of humor, the films require us to creatively devise apposite relations between discrepant information (albeit in a more po-faced fashion) through “imaginative associations, improbable linkages, illogical resolutions . . . that serious situations . . . inhibit and treat as dysfunctional” (30). In short, we are asked to “find the fit” between incongruent narrative elements and take

pleasure in devising solutions to the films' purposeful incoherence—a perversity that is typically inhibited by classical regulation (31).

Chapter 3 outlines the first of the three “key modes” of narrative perversity: *narrative frustration*. In an insightful assessment of *The Godfather Part II*'s (1974) accomplishments as one of the most highly acclaimed sequels ever produced, Berliner demonstrates that the widespread critical regard for the film results from its willful denial of viewers' story expectations. Specifically, the film refuses to provide the “glamour, charm, and excitement” of the previous film, and viewers resultantly “experience a sense of loss, nostalgia, and deterioration” (62) that echoes *The Godfather Part II*'s thematic interest in the devolution of Michael Corleone (Al Pacino), as well as his immediate and criminal families. The film's narrative seems at odds with itself: it “taxes spectators' memories and analytical capacities, leaves vital story information unresolved, and fixates on events superfluous to the causal chain” (79). Such frustrations, however, are an intentional aspect of the film's reflexive play. Moreover, by intentionally referring to dynamic stylistic elements in the first film (e.g., the climatic murder montage) and then subverting them (e.g., draining the montage of dramatic tension), *The Godfather Part II* also acknowledges the inevitable law of diminishing returns that accompanies sequelization, and uses this “degenerative turn” to its aesthetic benefit (74).

Chapter 4 concerns itself with the second key mode, that of *genre deviation*. Berliner divides the 1970s films that explicitly address classical genre conventions into “genre breakers” or “benders”: the former category announces a pronounced rupture from generic traditions, which such works frequently parody (e.g., *The Long Goodbye* [1973]), while the latter draws on viewers' familiarity with these conventions in order to subtly (and sometimes mischievously) subvert them (e.g., *Chinatown* [1974]) (90–91). Although all genre films necessarily exhibit a degree of variation from formula in the name of product differentiation, genre benders' differences are of such an unnerving degree as to cause viewers to question their presumed generic expertise (97). Not only are viewers cued “to falsely predict narrative outcomes,” but certain generic deviations sometimes are not fully processed as such at the moment they occur and only achieve their full affective weight retroactively (108). To illustrate his point, Berliner tallies up a number of fleeting occurrences in *The French Connection* (1971) that seem out of keeping with the film's generic status as a hard-boiled *policier* (e.g., brief narrational instances that depict Detective “Popeye” Doyle [Gene Hackman] in a negative light), and whose accumulative effect is to invite us to reevaluate our willingness to ally ourselves instinctively with authoritative heroes.

Chapter 5 outlines the final key mode of 1970s narration: *conceptual incongruity*. This mode can consist of a number of narrational idiosyncrasies, including “moral/ideological incongruities” (i.e., an equitable presentation of

conflicting belief systems), “factual contradictions” (i.e., discrepancies in story information), “logical inconsistencies” (i.e., disruptions of viewers’ inferential attempts at story comprehension), and “characterological inconsistencies” (i.e., irreconcilable alterations to previously established characterizations) (119). Berliner also recognizes that though a certain degree of incongruity is permissible in pre-1970s Hollywood films—the result of Production Code Administration (PCA) regulation and the necessity of establishing narratives with dramatic tension—such discordance is inevitably resolved by a decisively recuperative conclusion, no matter how pat, convenient, or superficial. However, 1970s films, by contrast, offer “counterproductive” incongruities that hinder rather than help the viewers’ attempts at resolution.

Such disturbances are said to account partly for the pervasiveness of the visceral responses to *The Exorcist* (1973). The film’s sensationalist content is bolstered by a disturbingly unpredictable narrational system that plays havoc with viewers’ ability to straightforwardly assess story information. Although narrative irresolution is often a generic staple of horror films, *The Exorcist*’s inconclusiveness is much more ambitious, undoing the stark Manicheanism of its moral order. The propriety of Father Merrin’s (Max von Sydow) liturgical authority, for example, is undermined by the ultimate success of Father Karras’s (Jason Miller) “improper” emotional confrontation with the demon—even though his “success” involves the choking of a twelve-year-old girl and his subsequent death (the cause of which is left distressingly unclear: demonic murder or altruistic suicide?).

The remaining chapters provide close formal analyses of the work of two filmmakers who frequently gravitated to these three modes: Martin Scorsese and John Cassavetes. The former is described as a director who pushes classicism to its limits, while the latter undoes classical strictures altogether. Chapter 6, then, undertakes a lengthy examination of *Taxi Driver* (1976) in order to demonstrate how its “incongruous stylistic devices jeopardize the film’s organic unity,” even while various harmonizing patterns simultaneously provide an alternative source of coherence as well as compelling visual information (155). Berliner neatly provides numerous examples of parametric narration employed throughout *Taxi Driver*: from the juxtaposition of a realist mise-en-scène and expressionist cinematography, to its unmotivated camera movements, jump cuts, varying film speeds, and non-naturalist staging.

Like Kristin Thompson, Berliner hopes to persuade us that our interpretation of these narratively superfluous stylistic devices need not be shackled to an attempt to discern the implicit or symptomatic meanings of the movie; rather, his “non-interpretive criticism” attempts to show how the repetition of these devices “create extra-significant systems of coherence” whose significance does not relate to “theme, characterization, or story causality” (165). Wishing to attribute motivation to Scorsese’s various ostentatious devices in order

to explain their function in *Taxi Driver*, Berliner attributes to them an “artistic motivation” (as opposed to compositional, realistic, or transtextual ones) (170). As these patterned devices do little in the way of advancing the narrative or assisting our comprehension of the psychotic Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) in a meaningful way, they exist as salient features of interest in their own right (i.e., as “ornamentation”), form an independently distinctive “stylistic structure,” and finally give the film a subtle formal harmony that the protagonist (in his struggles to “get organiz-ized”) and narrative itself lacks (171–175).

If Scorsese nonetheless remains bound by Hollywood classicism despite his efforts to test its narrational elasticity, Cassavetes frequently treats classical strictures as a form of propulsion that slingshots his films beyond conventional storytelling parameters. Focusing on the inefficiency and non-linearity of the dialogue in *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974), Berliner demonstrates in Chapter 7 how conversations in the film tend to “fixate on narrative dead ends, irrelevancies, and impediments to straightforwardness” (188). Such “perverse” dialogue has a high degree of verisimilitude, and avoids the carefully constructed, sometimes artificial, conversations of classical Hollywood. As Berliner amusingly points out, one is unlikely to hear such classical idioms as, “I hope so, Todd. I hope so,” in a Cassavetes film, or in real life, for that matter. Instead, conversations randomly slide from one topic to the next without a unifying purpose, communication between characters is often ineffective, syntax is frequently skewed as the speakers actively readjust their thoughts while speaking, and dialogue rarely contributes to narrative causality (190–191). The end result is the impression of unscripted extemporization, despite the fact that Cassavetes’s actors all worked from a tightly scripted screenplay collectively developed during the rehearsal process (196–197).

In addition, the “radical narration” Cassavetes developed in films such as *Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976) is marked by the incongruity of perspectives it offers, deliberate obscurantism, and a narrative rich in detail but highly disorganized (201). The film refuses a straightforward sympathetic alliance with its hard-done-by strip club owner, Cosmo Vittelli (Ben Gazzara), and the story often wanders away from the pulpy thrills of noirish action to spend a great deal of “dead” time observing the carnivalesque performances in Cosmo’s club. Interestingly, the film also disregards the typical classical dictum of a highly communicative narrative discourse. *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* often positions its actors’ bodies away from the camera, confuses spatial and temporal orientation, denies expository information, includes causal gaps, and often places the camera in less-than-ideal ocular positions (212–213). Finally, the subtlety and continually shifting nature of the interrelationships between the characters is so dense (e.g., the exquisitely textured bonds between Cosmo, his girlfriend, Rachel [Azizi Johari], and her mother [Virginia Carrington]), that Cassavetes prefers to allocate a disproportionate amount of story

time to explore these “peripheral” dramas, and to preserve their ambiguities (213). As a consequence, viewers must attend to the implications of these evolving relationships on their own accord without the assistance of a carefully ordered dramatic structure to guide their efforts at sensemaking.

The book is an impressive accomplishment, but it is not entirely without its faults. It is unclear, for example, why Berliner insists on quantifying his findings, such as his “aesthetic value predictions.” In order to provide empirical evidence for his assertion that the majority of the most critically acclaimed films of the 1970s “exhibit relatively overt narrative incoherencies,” Berliner tallied the responses of sixteen “film experts,” who were instructed to code the highest-rated films from 1970 to 1977 on IMDb and other lists, as “less coherent” than or “as coherent” as most comparable generic films (48). But his criteria for establishing narrative perversity seem rather problematic. Nonbiased participants in the study were instructed to find a film “less coherent” than the norm if it exhibited only *one* of a potential nine “perverse” traits (229). On that basis, 55 percent of the top thirty-one films from were coded as “less coherent” than the norm (50, 234–235).

Moreover, if the existence of “ideological ambiguities” (how many?) or the “nontraditional use” of genre conventions (how extraordinary?) is the sole criterion of a “less coherent” film, then a similar study of the top-rated films of other decades might yield surprising results. A similarly non-biased viewer (i.e., one who is “unfamiliar with [Berliner’s] hypothesis” and thus takes his criteria at face value) might very well discover that 60 percent of the top thirty films of the 1950s are “less coherent,” as are 47 percent of the top thirty-two films of the 1960s, and 56 percent of the top thirty-two films of the 2000s. Indeed, it is unclear as to why Berliner wants to make such evaluative claims. Do we need to imply that narrative incoherence is a guarantor of quality, or is the main factor explaining the lasting appeal of 1970s cinema? The claim seems quite specious when fourteen of the thirty-one highest rated 1970s films—a full 45 percent—are coded as having “coherent” narrational systems.

Hollywood Incoherent also stands as an explicit riposte to the aesthetic ideal of an integrated and coherent “organic unity,” as articulated by V. F. Perkins in his 1972 influential book, *Film as Film* (28). Yet one might argue—especially in the case of *Taxi Driver*—that highly patterned formal “deviance” *does* constitute an organic unity of sorts, especially if one makes the effort of attributing other motivations to incongruent devices beyond “artistic” ones. That is, by avoiding interpretively connecting apparently deviant moments to a film’s explicit meaning, one runs the risk of reducing the filmmaker in question to a mere contrarian—which Berliner nearly does unintentionally in his description of Friedkin’s mischievous work in *The Exorcist*.

Although Berliner is quite careful to characterize narrative perversity in relational terms, one also might occasionally worry that his conception of clas-

sical Hollywood assumes too great a degree of stylistic homogeneity in pre-1970s films. That is, in attending to a film's narrational conventionality, one must be mindful that a formal device acquires its meaningfulness "by virtue of context and intention," as Douglas Pye (1989) reminds us (48). Even a conversation filmed in a typical shot/shot-reverse pattern, for example, might occlude more than it reveals, or take on a level of significance that removes the device from simple, conventional usage—as is the case with Hitchcock's incorporation of the device within *Strangers on a Train's* elaborate formal system of crosscutting and parallelism (Pye, 48).

But to focus on such minor flaws in such an exceptional study is to risk churlishness. By attributing the accomplishments of 1970s cinema to their "perverse" narrational strategies in a rigorous and systematic fashion, Berliner has provided an invaluable contribution to the historical poetics of Hollywood cinema. *Hollywood Incoherent* is the first monograph to posit a general narrative construction of the canonical New Hollywood films in such comprehensive and persuasive terms. Eminently readable, Berliner's book should have broad appeal—from undergraduates approaching these films (perhaps) for the first time to seasoned narratologists; indeed, aspiring screenwriters and filmmakers could learn much about story architecture and narration from his insightful and lucid analysis. In the end, the book inspires a substantial degree of nostalgia for a time when mainstream Hollywood frequently produced such modestly budgeted and challenging movies. Might we one day see such creative fecundity restored to (non-indie) studio fare? I hope so, Todd. I hope so.

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