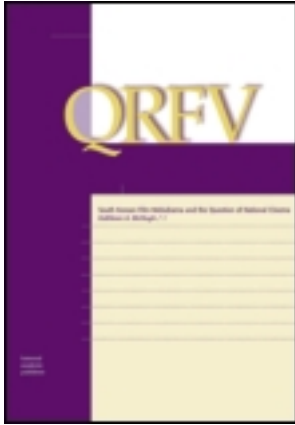


This article was downloaded by: [University North Carolina - Chapel Hill]

On: 08 November 2013, At: 08:42

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Quarterly Review of Film and Video

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gqrf20>

### Hollywood Incoherent: Narration in Seventies Cinema by Todd Berliner. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010

David Sterritt <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Maryland Institute College of Art and at Columbia University

Published online: 05 Nov 2013.

To cite this article: David Sterritt (2014) Hollywood Incoherent: Narration in Seventies Cinema by Todd Berliner. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010, Quarterly Review of Film and Video, 31:1, 89-93, DOI: [10.1080/10509208.2011.647982](https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2011.647982)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2011.647982>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

role of the innocent child and the public role of a filmmaker in search for information and truth. What was the parents' part in the Third Reich? To what extent were they involved in a politics of genocide? Curtis refrains however – and refreshingly so – from a psychoanalytic reading of family relations as it is so common to the study of autobiographical film. Instead, Chapter 5 carves out the entanglement of the individual body and cultural identity; for what the works here share is the simultaneous experience of becoming a stranger in one's family and a foreign body in a nation of strangers.

Examining the experience of sexuality, aging, and dying across a range of experimental works, the author concludes with a discussion of what it means to become a stranger in one's own body. Becoming strange lies in the experience of vulnerability, the fragility of life, which is a condition we usually forget we share with others. *Conscientious Viscerality* is careful to remind us not only on the necessary and ongoing process of reconsidering one's boundaries, but on the frequent acts of exclusion and violence this very process entails, too. And while the book is far from being a political manifesto, it gains its power in turning film experience into the possibility of an ethical and social form of self-positioning where being-in-world means being-with.

Because of its inspiring move to bring together the theoretical projects of phenomenological, aesthetic, and poststructuralist philosophy with the urgency of sociocultural and historical reality, *Conscientious Viscerality* should be widely read. It will be of interest not only to German and film studies scholars but for all of those who work on identity, subjectivity, and the body across the humanities and social sciences. In a time when racist polemics like German politician Thilo Sarrazin's recent publication "Germany does away with itself"—where the strength of the German nation is portrayed to be undermined by immigration—seem to do and sell so well, we need more books like this.

Feng-Mei Heberer is a PhD candidate in Critical Studies at the University of Southern California. In her work, she focuses on Asian transnational identity, performances of the self as well as questions of gender, sexuality, body and affect. Her article "Mein Körper, mein Selbst—zur filmischen Verhandlung asiatisch amerikanischer weiblicher Subjekterfahrung" ("My body, my self—filmic negotiations of Asian American female experience") is forthcoming in *Vietnamese Diaspora and Beyond*, Berlin: Assoziation A.

### Notes

1. I am using here the translations as given by Robin Curtis.

## ***Hollywood Incoherent: Narration in Seventies Cinema* by Todd Berliner. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010**

DAVID STERRITT

When we aren't busy overwhelming the Social Security system by retiring and ruining Medicare by getting decrepit, we cineastes of a certain age like to reminisce about periods

in film history that played particularly strong roles in shaping our sensibilities. One was the 1960s, when the spread of auteur theory and innovations by the likes of Jean-Luc Godard and Michelangelo Antonioni expanded our ideas of what movies could be. The other was the 1970s, when a gang of spirited American filmmakers launched thrilling challenges to what we'd later call the classical Hollywood style. Todd Berliner's terrific book *Hollywood Incoherent: Narration in Seventies Cinema* deals with the latter era, showing how some of those filmmakers created vital, original movies by finding untapped potential in the incongruities and inconsistencies that artistically "correct" cinema goes to great lengths to avoid.

Opening with a jolt, Berliner begins by describing how Robert Altman's amazing *Nashville* (1975) "opens with a jolt" (3), abruptly replacing a normal display of credits with a cacophonous, lightning-fast advertisement for itself that blasts out more satirical, incongruous, half-irrelevant information than anyone without slo-mo and rewind buttons could possibly take in. Self-reflexive overload was among the more aggressive forms of cinematic confusion explored by new Hollywood directors in the '70s, but other assaults on movie convention made major impacts as well. Those discussed at length by Berliner include the artful anticlimaxes that Francis Ford Coppola built into *The Godfather: Part II* (1974), the one-two punch that William Friedkin delivered to cop-movie norms in *The French Connection* (1971) and to horror-film moralizing in *The Exorcist* (1973), the extraordinary dance of storytelling eccentricity, visual complexity, and paratactic patterning in Martin Scorsese's nasty masterpiece *Taxi Driver* (1976), and the "radical narrative perversity" (180) unleashed by the fearless and (still!) widely misunderstood John Cassavetes in *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974) and other works that shake off narrative convention even more drastically than the other pictures I've mentioned.

Perhaps most remarkable of all, most of the movies Berliner adduces in his study – Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1970), Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), Sidney Lumet's *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), and others – actually made money in their day. The young directors said to "despise their audience" and care only about "some garbled self-satisfying message which is usually . . . anti-entertainment," as critic Leslie Halliwell fumed in 1977 (5), were somehow inducing their despised audience to line up at the ticket window with surprising regularity between 1970 and 1977, the years on which Berliner focuses.

None of this happened in a vacuum, of course, and Berliner gives an abbreviated but accurate account of the social realities surrounding these developments. Culturally speaking, the first half of the 1970s were rather like the second half of the 1960s, in areas ranging from antiwar and civil-rights campaigns to a general questioning of traditional values and received ideas. Large numbers of conservative Americans either opposed such phenomena or didn't care one way or the other about them, just as classically made movies – George Roy Hill's *The Sting* (1973), Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975), John G. Avildsen's *Rocky* (1976), George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977), and so on – continued to please (and make) millions, demonstrating the ongoing appeal of old Hollywood conventions. Hits and blockbusters notwithstanding, however, the American film industry was in crisis. The recession of 1969 caused huge losses for the studios, capping a quarter-century decline in ticket sales brought by postwar demographic changes, the rise of television, and the court-ordered termination of practices that had allowed a cluster of moguls to dominate the business.

As a result, conglomerates invaded Hollywood and swallowed most of the major studios, installing top execs who knew little about the industry except that the outfits they headed were up to their f-stops in financial woe. Sensing possibilities amid the turbulence – a specialty of left and right alike in that era – a new generation of moviemakers persuaded

these execs that a new generation of moviegoers was primed for an American version of the cinematic derring-do represented by European trailblazers like the French New Wave group. Fresh from film schools, adventures in 16mm, and Roger Corman's talent factory, adventurous young artists like Coppola, Scorsese, and Friedkin joined less-young mavericks like Cassavetes and Altman to inject American film with idiosyncratic blends of art-cinema style and genre-movie excitement. This is the territory Berliner explores.

In an offbeat conceptual move of his own, Berliner explains the usefulness of narrative incongruity partly through scholarly literature on jokes and laughter. His primary resource here is the Incongruity-Resolution theory of humor, which he uses less as a social-psychology foundation than as a source of empirical evidence (via controlled studies dating back to the 1970s) that jokes and stories featuring the resolution of a pun, paradox, or discrepancy offer aesthetic pleasures by prompting the subject to solve a problem in a creative way. Like anomalies and inconsistencies in jokes, Berliner contends, story incongruities add "richness and variety" to films that would otherwise seem merely logical; the viewer makes quirky, wobbly sense out of them by imaginatively working out the kinks, using mental dexterity to master a story or scene "that refuses to settle down and behave" (32). Hence the pleasure we take (some of us, anyway) in the overlap of actor and role in Cassavetes's great films, and the fun to be found in realizing that the United Nations building, the wheat field, and the Saul Bass credit sequence are constituents of a grid motif that lends Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959) some of its overarching unity (194, 174). The hypothesis at work here extends to serious and tragic works as well as mirth-inducing ones, moreover. Berliner persuasively argues that Incongruity-Resolution mechanisms operate as effectively for a dark-toned drama like Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (1973) as for a Woody Allen comedy. A film's conduciveness to intuitive thinking is what matters, not humor or wittiness per se.

Berliner establishes his major points through analyses of particular films, casting light on additional issues along the way. Thus the chapter on "narrative frustration," centering on *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Godfather: Part II*, also has a great deal to say about sequels. Following the success of his 1972 megahit, Coppola had sworn that the only follow-up he'd make would be "Abbot and Costello Meet the Godfather," but when Paramount Pictures made him an offer he couldn't refuse – creative control, lots of money, and financing for *The Conversation*, his even better 1974 release – he overcame his scruples and made the sequel, which traces the early history and eventual decline of Vito Corleone's criminal empire. So ornery was Coppola's nature, however, that the sequel seemed designed to fail. Berliner catalogues the ways Coppola appears to sabotage the film's effectiveness: Michael and his coterie are less vital and charismatic than Don Vito and his entourage in the first film; compared with Connie's wedding in the original, Anthony's celebration in the sequel is chilly and detached; even the murders lack the pizzazz their predecessors had; et cetera, et cetera.

But this, Berliner shows, is the point. A story of waning powers, implacable loss, and hopeless nostalgia is filtered through an aesthetic of "disappointment and deprivation" that mirrors and reinforces those very feelings in the audience. Berliner clinches his case with a quotation from the *New York Times* review by Vincent Canby, one of many critics who initially panned the film. The sequel's only remarkable quality, Canby wrote, is its insistent reminder of "how much better [the] original film was. Among other things, one remembers *The Godfather's* tremendous narrative drive and the dominating presence of Marlon Brando," which "transformed a super-gangster movie into a unique family chronicle." Berliner insightfully points out that Canby's "sorrowful remembrances, especially his reference to Brando as *The Godfather's* dominating and unifying force, sound much like

those of Connie, Fredo, and Michael” when they think of the larger-than-life leader and epic doings that have vanished forever from their lives (70). This is truly eye-opening analysis.

More of the same comes in a chapter on *The French Connection*, which makes a useful distinction between genre “breakers” and genre “benders,” finding the latter category the more subversive of the two. Genre breakers, such as Altman’s off-kilter noir *The Long Goodbye* (1973) and Bob Fosse’s morbid musical *All That Jazz* (1979), accentuate their differences from the norm, unmasking and deflating genre traditions – think of Mel Brooks’ long list of genre parodies and satires – and congratulating viewers for seeing those traditions as the artifices they are. Genre benders are subtler and craftier, rejiggering plots, characters, dialogue, and so forth so as to “twist genre conventions without cracking them open” (94).

Roman Polanski’s celebrated *Chinatown* (1974) is a good example. Jack Nicholson’s private eye is not a shuffling, mumbling slacker like Elliott Gould’s private eye in *The Long Goodbye*; in many ways he is clever, cool, tough-minded, and confident. These traits encourage us to respect him, trust him, and count on him to crack the complicated case he’s investigating. So it’s all the more startling when ignorance and incompetence trip him up, repeatedly throwing him off the track and ultimately causing him to fail at everything he’s been trying to accomplish. The film does not merely “stretch the limits of genre deviation,” Berliner concludes; going further, it “exploits audience familiarity with its genre to create uncomfortable ambiguities,” using genre conventions to throw moviegoers off the track and enlist our sympathies for a protagonist who turns out to grasp the facts of the narrative as tenuously and defectively as we do (96–97). What’s interesting here is the use of qualities that are discomfiting and squirm-inducing in themselves – uncertainty, instability, yawning gaps between appearance and reality – in such an exquisitely nuanced manner that the film became an immediate hit and an enduring classic.

Another revealing close analysis looks at *The French Connection* as a genre bender. I’ve always thought of this movie as the very essence of straight-on genre entertainment, but Berliner has set me straight, and I hereby change my tune. Although much of the movie does adhere to standard cop-drama formulas, Friedkin deviates from them in several brief, seemingly incidental moments, raising uncomfortable questions about “the ethics of the film’s hero [Popeye Doyle] and the ethos of the film itself” (108). In one such instance, a scene set at the site of a car accident inserts six quick, jolting shots of people killed in the crash, all of them unconnected to the story and unnoticed by Popeye, who has other things on his mind. Right after this, a French sniper shoots at Popeye but hits a woman with a baby carriage, apparently killing her on the spot; instead of mourning or at least lingering on this gratuitous tragedy, the film races ahead to the manic chase that remains the movie’s most famous set piece. Similar callousness is evident in Popeye’s racism, lechery, sloppiness, and taste for alcohol, not to mention his clear sadistic streak – all of which Gene Hackman emphasizes in his performance, and none of which the movie shows any interest in rebuking.

These and similar moments take on their real meaning in the film’s unexpected ending, when Popeye inadvertently kills an FBI agent during a manhunt in a warehouse, then reloads and continues with his mission as if nothing has happened. At last the camera abandons Popeye’s point of view, giving him a sinister look and staying put while he walks away and vanishes around a corner. “For the first time in the film,” Berliner points out, “the cinematography seems in tune with one’s misgivings” (114) about the antihero whose true viciousness has been incrementally unveiled to viewers who allowed the evidence on the screen to outweigh the expectations they habitually bring to movies that present themselves – deceptively in this instance – as standard genre offerings. “Whereas genre breakers invite viewers to share in the joke about genre,” Berliner concludes, “*The French Connection* uses genre to play a joke on viewers themselves, a joke so subtle that, though they fell for it,

they don't seem to get it" (117). I get it now, thanks to Berliner, and I think it's a great one in a sneaky sort of way.

Other high points of *Hollywood Incoherent* include a concise discussion of Cassavetes's gift for writing dialogue that sounds meandering and unfocused in ways so *realistic* that people conditioned by movie artifice often find it *unrealistic*, and a spot-on examination of how Scorsese enriches *Taxi Driver* with intricate cinematic patterns whose value "rests precisely in their *insignificance* within the causal chain of the narrative" (165). I also like Berliner's discussion of commentators' efforts to explain the astonishing popularity of *The Exorcist* in 1973, pointing to American angst over Vietnam, family breakdown, Thalidomide babies, abortion, Watergate, campus rebellion, and the generation gap – none of which provides the smallest clue as to why the film cleaned up at the box office all over again when it was reissued in 2000. The book's four appendices provide data on the popularity of pertinent movies, information about "film incoherence" and "resolution" compiled by Berliner and several colleagues, and charts juxtaposing degrees of incoherence with degrees of admiration expressed by movie fans and professional critics.

Berliner's approach to film analysis is geared to the poetics of cinema, not the ideologies and dogmas thereof, and this might displease readers who are strongly invested in political critique. He is forthright about this, though, seeing his work as, among other things, a counterweight to Robin Wood's arguments in the 1981 essay "The Incoherent Text: Narrative in the '70s," which, Berliner accurately notes, teases out contradictions in what films are attempting to say and mean, not in the aesthetic and cinematic properties that *Hollywood Incoherent* takes as its concern. I don't agree with everything Berliner sets forth – some of the "flourishes" in *Taxi Driver*, for instance, are more related to narrative and character than he realizes – but I have never seen a more clearly reasoned, felicitously argued, and lucidly written book on what for me is an ever-fascinating subject. "Contrary to what many film commentators believe," Berliner writes near the end, "disunity . . . often-times indicates good filmmaking – filmmaking that is unpredictable and varied, filmmaking that takes us to destinations that we could not foresee but that nonetheless feel, once we make an improbable connection or resolve an incongruity, as inevitably the right place" (221). By illuminating the aesthetic pleasures to be gleaned from the paradoxes, inconsistencies, and ambiguities coiled shrewdly within some of Hollywood's most memorable movies, Berliner makes as coherent a case for incoherence as I can imagine.

David Sterritt is chair of the National Society of Film Critics and film professor at the Maryland Institute College of Art and at Columbia University, where he also co-chairs the University Seminar on Cinema and Interdisciplinary Interpretation.

## ***Cult Cinema* by Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton. Walden, MA and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011**

BRET SHEPARD

A central paradox exists in contemporary society. People are told to be unique and individualistic, but when someone asserts differences the culture abandons that uniqueness, opting