Symposium on Todd Berliner’s Hollywood Aesthetic

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Projections

The Journal for Movies and Mind

From the Editor

Ted Nannicelli

I would like to start off this issue's note by thanking everyone who has been part of a really impressive team effort to keep *Projections* running even while ordinary life has been upended as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes referees and authors, who have had to juggle deadlines with a variety of other commitments, associate editors Tim Smith and Aaron Taylor (as well as acting associate editor Katalin Bálint—more on which soon!), and Janine Latham and the production team at Berghahn. Thank you all for going out of your way to continue working on the journal in spite of everything else that has been going on, including some significant personal challenges for some of you.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, it can feel like there is never any good news. But there is, and we need to celebrate it when the opportunity arises. Congratulations to associate editor Tim Smith, who has recently welcomed a new family member into the world! Tim will be on parental leave for the rest of 2020, and I am very grateful to Katalin Bálint for accepting the invitation to serve as acting associate editor during this time. Katalin holds a PhD in psychology from the University of Pecs, has held a number of prestigious postdoctoral fellowships throughout Europe, and is currently Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Science at VU Amsterdam. Welcome Katalin!

Our issue begins with an empirical study that investigates the effect of "breaking the fourth wall" upon the enjoyment of motion pictures. "Breaking the fourth wall," which involves characters seemingly addressing the audience directly and thus "breaking" the imaginary wall the separates the world of the fiction and the world of reality, is hypothesized to abet what the authors call "parasocial interaction"—a term that draws attention to the fact that viewers' "interaction" with characters in motion pictures sometimes parallels real social interaction in various ways, since it draws upon the same sorts of cognitive and affective capacities that we deploy in real life.

Our second article takes a more theoretical approach. Drawing upon empirical and theoretical work in the interdisciplinary field of embodied cogni-

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tion, Maarten Coëgnarts analyzes the ways in which filmmaker Éric Rohmer's visual style is underpinned by concepts that are central to our apprehension of everyday life as essentially embodied. One of the interesting things about Coëgnarts's analysis is that it is more than an application of "theory"; rather, he notes, his analysis makes clear that it predicts but does not demonstrate how viewers experience the embodied film style his article describes. That task, he notes, would need to be achieved by additional empirical work that would test his theoretical claims.

The centrepiece of our issue is a book symposium dedicated to Todd Berliner's *Hollywood Aesthetic: Pleasure in American Cinema* (2017). One of the features that makes Berliner's book particularly conducive to a symposium is that—like our two articles—it balances empirical and theoretical claims and engages with relevant research across a number of disciplines. Commenting on Berliner's book is a stellar group of scholars: James Cutting from psychology, Murray Smith from aesthetics, and Janet Staiger and Patrick Keating from film studies. I hope you find the dialogue as productive and enriching as I did. We have had a lot of positive feedback about these book symposia in the last few issues. Please get in touch if you have a proposal for a future book symposium.

Rounding out the issue is a group of book reviews devoted to the topic of video games.

Until next time, stay safe and stay well.

Hollywood Aesthetic
Précis

Todd Berliner

Abstract: *Hollywood Aesthetic: Pleasure in American Cinema* investigates the Hollywood film industry's chief artistic accomplishment: providing aesthetic pleasure to mass audiences. Grounded in film history and supported by research in psychology and philosophical aesthetics, the book explains (1) the intrinsic properties characteristic of Hollywood cinema that induce aesthetic pleasure; (2) the cognitive and affective processes, sparked by Hollywood movies, that become engaged during aesthetic pleasure; and (3) the exhilarated aesthetic experiences afforded by an array of persistently entertaining Hollywood movies. *Hollywood Aesthetic* addresses four fundamental components of Hollywood's aesthetic design—narrative, style, ideology, and genre—aiming for a comprehensive appraisal of Hollywood cinema's capacity to excite aesthetic pleasure. This article outlines the book's main points and themes. As a précis, it is heavy on ideas and light on evidence, which is to be found in the book itself.

Keywords: aesthetic pleasure, cognitive psychology, film narrative, film style, genre, Hollywood cinema, ideology, mass art

Hollywood makes the most widely successful pleasure-giving artworks the world has ever known. The American film industry operates under the assumption that pleasurable aesthetic experiences, among huge populations, translate into box office success. More than any other art industry, Hollywood has systematized the delivery of aesthetic pleasure, packaging and selling it on a mass scale. If the Hollywood film industry succeeds in delivering aesthetic pleasure both routinely and, at times, in an extraordinary way, then we should ultimately regard Hollywood cinema as an artistic achievement, not merely a commercial success.

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Because the movies are so expensive to make, Hollywood designs them to appeal to extremely large audiences. That business model establishes some parameters for Hollywood filmmakers. *Hollywood Aesthetic: Pleasure in American Cinema* is an effort to account for the ways in which filmmakers working within those parameters entertain mass audiences aesthetically. Several film scholars have written about the aesthetic achievements of individual Hollywood films and individual filmmakers, but it takes artists to make even routine

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Hollywood movies; technicians alone cannot do it. The book identifies the ways in which Hollywood's time-tested practices deliver aesthetic pleasure and the ways in which filmmakers following those practices make artworks that appeal to mass audiences. I hope this endeavor enables us to see Hollywood's capacity as an artform and to better understand its capabilities and limitations.

Hollywood Aesthetic analyzes the design of a range of films that span Hollywood history. The book demonstrates some of the ways in which even ordinary popular films (like *Tarzan and His Mate* [Cedric Gibbons, 1934], *No Time for Sergeants* [Mervyn LeRoy, 1958], and *Rocky III* [Sylvester Stallone, 1982]), as well as New Hollywood action blockbusters (like *Die Hard* [John McTiernan, 1988], *Independence Day* [Roland Emmerich, 1996], and *The Dark Knight* [Christopher Nolan, 2008]) deliver aesthetic pleasure. It furthermore examines films (such as *City Lights* [Charles Chaplin, 1931], *Psycho* [Alfred Hitchcock, 1960], *The Godfather* [Francis Ford Coppola, 1972], and *Goodfellas* [Martin Scorsese, 1990]) that have earned aesthetic appreciation from both fans and critics, as well as curious outliers and celebrated Hollywood experiments (like *The Killing* [Stanley Kubrick, 1956], *Brazil* [Terry Gilliam, 1985], and *Starship Troopers* [Paul Verhoeven, 1997]) that are popular with cinephiles and cult audiences. The book explains how these and dozens of other movies engage viewers by satisfying their aesthetic desires. Many film scholars dismiss Hollywood cinema as mere commercial entertainment and leave it at that. *Hollywood Aesthetic* explains how Hollywood creates, for massive numbers of people, some of their most exhilarating experiences of art.

Hollywood Classicism and Deviation

In their aesthetic construction, Hollywood films balance two tendencies, which we can abbreviate, for convenience, as a "classical" tendency and a "deviant" tendency. The classical tendency stretches toward unity and uniformity and helps make Hollywood films familiar, easy to understand, emotionally intense, and spontaneously pleasing. Hollywood's deviant tendency, by contrast, reaches toward complexity and novelty in order to produce films that mass audiences find interesting and moderately challenging. Delight from aesthetic experience, art historian E. H. Gombrich writes, "lies somewhere between boredom and confusion" (1979: 9). The nebulous area between boredom and confusion would seem hard to pinpoint and different for every spectator, but the Hollywood film industry banks on the assumption that, with some reliability, it can locate an optimal spot for delighting huge numbers of people.

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We can articulate Hollywood's general principles for creating aesthetic pleasure through two theses:

(1) Hollywood cinema targets a space between boredom and confusion, creating films that are optimally pleasing for mass audiences. It seeks to offer enough cognitive challenge to sustain aesthetic interest but not so much that it would jeopardize a film's hedonic value or cause average spectators to give up trying to understand it.
(2) Many of the Hollywood films that offer exhilarating aesthetic experiences through multiple viewings and over extended periods push at the boundaries of classicism. They veer into areas of novelty and complexity that more typical Hollywood films avoid, but they do so without undermining a mass audience's ability to cope with the challenge. Such films offer spectators exhilarated pleasure when the films seem on the verge of overburdening or displeasing spectators in some deviant way.

Films such as *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940) and *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) find an aesthetically productive balance between easy understanding and cognitive challenge, illustrating the types of moderate risk-taking that Hollywood cinema cultivates. These celebrated films complicate formal patterning and thwart audience expectations. They do so by combining classical narrative, stylistic, ideological, and genre properties with some fairly bold (by Hollywood standards) deviations from normative practices.

Narrative

Part II of the book studies the aesthetic pleasures associated with Hollywood cinema's approach to storytelling. It offers a new theory of Hollywood storytelling aesthetics: that spectators of Hollywood cinema take pleasure not just from narrative unity and easy understanding, as previous scholars have argued, but also from narrative disunity and cognitive challenge. Illustrated with examples from whodunits, screwball comedies, twist films, and mysteries and supported by empirical research in experimental psychology, Part II argues that viewers enjoy narratives that stimulate free association, insight, and incongruity-resolution. A Hollywood whodunit, for example, typically reveals the *least* likely character as the murderer, surprising us and also enabling us to see an intriguing correctness and inevitability in events that previously seemed unimaginable. Screwball comedies often bring together mismatched characters, creating a disunity in the narrative (*Those two could never be right for one another*) and violating our expectations about suitable couples. Although scholars often regard Hollywood as an extremely unified and "excessively obvious" cinema, movies such as *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946), *The Killing* (1956), and *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) make comprehension difficult when their disunities jeopardize, or flat-out violate, story logic.

This theory of Hollywood storytelling aesthetics helps us understand how Hollywood balances narrative unity and disunity to create pleasure—not just

through twists, revelations, and moments of mystery, but regularly and in a sustained way by exciting cognitive play. *Red River* (Howard Hawks, 1948) violates Hollywood's cardinal rules regarding narrative probability, causality, and story logic. The film illustrates that, as long as we feel we can make sense of inconsistent plot information, even using spurious logic, then narrative disunity will intensify our aesthetic pleasure. Disunity in this classical Hollywood narrative adds variety to our film-going experience; stimulates our imagination, curiosity, and creative problem-solving processes; and liberates our thinking from the burdens and limitations of good sense.

Disunity in this classical Hollywood narrative adds variety to our film-going experience; stimulates our imagination, curiosity, and creative problem-solving processes; and liberates our thinking from the burdens and limitations of good sense.

Style

When people talk about a Hollywood movie, they normally talk about the story, but the script represents a small fraction of the filmmaking budget. Aside from stars, most of the money spent on a Hollywood movie goes toward funding the film's stylistic properties—or what the film industry sometimes refers to as its "production value." From a purely monetary standpoint, Hollywood values style more than story. Let us therefore try to understand the aesthetic pleasures afforded by Hollywood's stylistic norms.

From a purely monetary standpoint, Hollywood values style more than story.

First and foremost, Hollywood film style supports a film's storytelling function by enhancing *clarity* and *expressiveness*. Clarity in Hollywood style makes Hollywood storytelling accessible, immediately understandable, and spontaneously pleasing for mass audiences. Expressiveness enhances a film's cognitive and affective impact, focusing our attention on key narrative details and emphasizing a narrative's emotional development.

Hollywood style, however, also offers aesthetic pleasures independent of storytelling through *decoration* and *stylistic harmony*. Decoration in Hollywood movies (glamor, idealized imagery, song and dance, stylistic virtuosity, technological novelty, spectacle, etc.) affords easy adjustment and easy arousal. Since decoration, by definition, is not crucial to understanding a film, it offers us something attractive to enjoy without demanding our attention or thought. Stylistic harmony (visual patterning, repeated sounds and imagery, etc.) offers systems of coherence and correspondence outside of narrative patterning, establishing background connections between different parts of a film.

Finally, a film's style may create *stylistic dissonance* by competing with story (e.g. *Touch of Evil* [Orson Welles, 1958]), with genre (*Leave Her to Heaven* [John M. Stahl, 1945]), or even with itself (*Goodfellas* [1990]) for control of a film's mood and meaning. Dissonance inspires cognitive play as we adjust to stylistic cues

Since decoration, by definition, is not crucial to understanding a film, it offers us something attractive to enjoy without demanding our attention or thought.

that harbor disparate attitudes and meanings. *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980) illustrates the boundaries of Hollywood's stylistic norms. The film tests the limits of the classical Hollywood style and sometimes crosses over into avant-garde practice. Dissonance, in these and other stylistically challenging Hollywood films, generates aesthetic interest by creating inconsistent objects—objects of curiosity.

Ideology

Much in the book might be controversial—especially its emphasis on the disunity we find in much Hollywood cinema—but I suspect that Part IV, which offers a new approach to ideological film analysis, might be the most tendentious. Part IV argues that Hollywood movies promote particular beliefs and values not to advance an ideological agenda, as previous scholars have argued, but rather to maximize aesthetic pleasure. A Hollywood film's ideological properties might contribute to aesthetic pleasure by either intensifying or complicating viewers' cognitive and affective responses. In ideologically unified Hollywood films—such as *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), *Die Hard* (1988), and *Independence Day* (1996)—narrative and stylistic devices concentrate our beliefs, values, and emotional responses, offering us a purer and more emotionally charged experience than we can find in most real-life situations. By contrast, ideologically complicated Hollywood films—such as *The Third Man* (|Carol Reed, 1949), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Martin Scorsese, 1988), and *The Dark Knight* (2008)—advance their worldviews in a novel, ambiguous, or peculiar way, upsetting our appraisals of events and characters and complicating our intellectual and emotional experiences.

Hollywood movies promote particular beliefs and values not to advance an ideological agenda, as previous scholars have argued, but rather to maximize aesthetic pleasure.

Ideological constraints in studio-era Hollywood shaped the aesthetic properties of an entire body of crime films of the 1940s and 1950s, now commonly known as "film noir." The ideological restrictions of regional censorship and the Production Code Administration posed creative problems that noir filmmakers solved through visual and narrative contortion. The contortions, in turn, created challenges for audiences, who had to decode and make sense of films that may not show complete clarity or coherence in their storytelling or worldview. Film noir remains aesthetically engaging because it operates near the boundaries of classicism, posing challenges to mastery but doing so without sacrificing classical Hollywood's accessibility and formal unity. We may not in fact understand films noirs—their incoherence may prevent us from understanding them—but we may feel that we could and that, if we did, they would offer us deeper meaning.

Whereas film noir illustrates how ideology can complicate a film's artistic design, we can also find Hollywood films in which the artistic design compli-

cates their ideology. *Starship Troopers* (1997) illustrates the commercial risks, and the aesthetic excitement, of a Hollywood mega-picture whose formal properties muddle up its ideological content. The film's unconventional use of genre devices leads to ideological complexities that pose challenges for spectators trying to make sense of the film's form and meaning. *Starship Troopers* employs the conventions of the Hollywood war film and the war-film satire in ways that make the film's worldview incoherent. The film's mercurial form limited its success in a mass market, but it seems to have exhilarated cult audiences engaged by the film's unusual design.

Genre

The genre system turns routine filmgoers into film experts. Genre eases viewers' grasp of narrative information and offers the pleasure of familiar scenarios. But genre filmmakers also integrate novel and complex aesthetic properties that counter audiences' growing expertise. To fully exploit the pleasures of genre filmmaking for a mass audience, a genre film must fit within traditional genre parameters, offering easy recognition, but it must also differ enough from previous films to make it moderately challenging for average spectators.

The genre system turns routine filmgoers into film experts.

Filmgoers, however, do not share the same levels of genre expertise, and we can understand—through case studies and experimental research—how our individual film knowledge affects our aesthetic preferences. Consider the 1977 blockbuster *Star Wars* (George Lucas). Although most film scholars at the time blasted *Star Wars* for its simplicity and unoriginality, the film offered less knowledgeable spectators a more complicated and novel experience than scholars gave it credit for. *Star Wars* located, for a mass audience, an optimal area between unity and complexity, familiarity and novelty, easy recognition and cognitive challenge. Films such as *Gosford Park* (Robert Altman, 2001), by contrast, rely on a higher (and rarer) level of film expertise. *Gosford Park* deviates from the conventional trajectories of the Hollywood whodunnit and resists understanding, even for an expert. These and other examples help explain why one film spectator may find a genre film dull, another may find it baffling, and a third may find it exhilarating. We can often attribute those differences to expertise.

These and other examples help explain why one film spectator may find a genre film dull, another may find it baffling, and a third may find it exhilarating. We can often attribute those differences to expertise.

Although both novelty and complexity add challenge and interest to a genre, they work somewhat differently in practice. We can turn to the Hollywood musical to help us understand novelty in aesthetic experience and to the Hollywood Western to help us understand complexity.

These days, when characters in movies "burst into song," it recalls Hollywood's Golden Age musicals because of the convention's place in film history.

We can understand the aesthetic value of novelty in a genre's evolution by tracing the history of the convention that characters in movies sing without realistic motivation. The convention emerged toward the end of 1929 and largely vanished by the end of the 1950s. Studio-era filmmakers, attuned to film styles and song styles of the day, developed the convention in order to better exploit the aesthetic possibilities of song in cinema. The eventual abandonment of that convention created new constraints on the uses of song, but it also enabled new aesthetic possibilities. Post–studio-era filmmakers transformed the convention (e.g., *The Graduate* [Mike Nichols, 1967]), exposed it (*All that Jazz* [Bob Fosse, 1979]), and reclaimed it (*Everyone Says I Love You* [Woody Allen, 1996]) in ways that added novelty to spectators' aesthetic experiences.

We can understand the pleasure of complexity in genre filmmaking by examining filmmakers' efforts to complicate the figure of the Western hero. We can see, in the Western's long history, that filmmakers repeatedly experimented with the genre's conventions in order to appeal both to the general public and to the large audience of Western cinephiles, who had a greater-than-average knowledge of the genre. That history helps explain the Western's endurance as a genre as generations of filmmakers continued to rethink and revitalize its time-honored conventions.

Conclusion

It is fitting to end an investigation of Hollywood aesthetics with the Western, Hollywood's most enduring, emblematic, and historically popular genre. Whenever the Western seems finally to have depleted its ability to interest audiences, filmmakers manage to mine interesting new material out of it. The genre's potential for novelty and complexity seems, after all these decades, inexhaustible. The Western is so solid and robust that filmmakers found they could sledgehammer its foundational myths without cracking its structure. Filmmaker Jean Renoir said, "The marvelous thing about Westerns is that they're all the same movie. That gives a director unlimited freedom" (qtd. in McBride 2001, 103). Renoir could have said the same about Hollywood cinema as a whole. Hollywood films anchor themselves to a reliable, time-tested framework. That framework limits options, but it also encourages artistry.

One would think that an art form whose business model relies on systematic production and mass accessibility would produce only formulaic entertainment and eventually exhaust its ability to delight. Yet we find that Hollywood filmmakers, working within some fairly tight constraints, have managed to create a host of aesthetically bold works, and, when they do, they energize the form all over again.

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BerlInversions

Murray Smith

Abstract: Todd Berliner's *Hollywood Aesthetic* advances an original perspective on Hollywood filmmaking by insisting on its fundamentally aesthetic character, and exploring its particular aesthetic features with the tools of neoformalist film analysis, cognitive psychology, and the philosophy of art. I focus on two of the book's most ambitious claims: a) that appreciation of the style of Hollywood films can play an important role in our experience of them, over and above its role in representing and expressively dramatizing narrative elements; and b) that the ideological dimension of Hollywood filmmaking serves its aesthetic purposes, rather than vice versa. I conclude by noting a common root to the resistance likely to greet Berliner's two bold inversions of conventional wisdom on narrative, style, aesthetics, and ideology.

Keywords: aesthetics, ideology, stylistic decoration, stylistic harmony, stylistic dissonance, dominant, constructive principle

Has there ever been a work reflecting on the characteristic aesthetic features, value, and experience afforded by Hollywood filmmaking with anything approaching the self-consciousness, rigor, and flair exhibited in Todd Berliner's *Hollywood Aesthetic* (2017; henceforth HA)?[1] Certainly, the history of film criticism provides us with a storehouse of writing on the aesthetics of Hollywood. But—virtually by definition—such critical writing is concerned with these aesthetic phenomena in a first-order fashion, with just those features of the films, our experience of them, and the value they might possess, rather than with reflecting on *what these things are* in a second-order fashion. The "central question" posed by HA has just that level of abstraction: "What is it about the Hollywood movies that people enjoy that makes people enjoy them?" (xi). Of course, there is a good amount critical analysis in Berliner's book, serving both the first- and second-order functions of which I speak: illuminating the works themselves, but also showing how these works serve to exemplify the Hollywood aesthetic *and* Berliner's account of aesthetic properties, experience, and value (in general and in film in particular). To put this another way, Berliner's book offers us a theory of the aesthetic and of the Hollywood aesthetic, in which critical analysis plays a key supporting role. (I am not sure that it explicitly theorizes the role of criticism—and here I have in mind journalistic film criticism, printed and online—within the Hollywood film industry, though it could certainly do so; it would be interesting to hear Berliner on this theme.)

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Some precursors do loom large in Berliner's rearview mirror—in particular, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (CHC), by David Bordwell and colleagues (1985), and Monroe Beardsley's writings on the aesthetic. Beardsley wrote as a philosopher, though, his attention ranging widely across the traditional arts, with only very occasional remarks on film. CHC, then, is a much more direct ancestor. The importance of that work and its influence (along with the school of neo-formalism more generally) on Berliner is evident, beginning with the section in chapter 1 of HA devoted to an exposition of CHC. CHC offered an account of the Hollywood aesthetic in terms of the centrality of storytelling, the emergence of a "classical" model of storytelling, and the tight harnessing of style to story, allowing for style to be foregrounded as spectacle at conventionalized moments—all of this varied, within limits, across genres and historical periods. While this account is an important ingredient for Berliner, CHC and HA are very different in certain key respects. One of the innovations of Bordwell and colleagues' work was to base their analysis on a much larger sample of Hollywood films than had been previously been undertaken, part of which was randomly selected. CHC still discusses canonical works, but in HA Berliner swings our attention back to films that might be deemed more-than-ordinary films, prefacing the book with a paean to the "test of time." (The shift of attention is relative, as Berliner is still interested in the ordinary work, and the influence of CHC in this respect is clear; but the shift of attention to the outstanding, unusual, or "limit" work is nonetheless significant. The epigraphs from Andy Goldsworthy and Tony Kushner, for chapters 1 and 4 respectively, are very revealing in this respect.) CHC and HA also contrast in some of their theoretical reference points: Bordwell and colleagues derive their aesthetic vocabulary and framework primarily from the Russian Formalists, and while the influence of the Russian Formalists can in turn be felt in HA, Berliner devotes much more attention to Anglo-American philosophical aesthetics (drawing extensively not just on the ideas of Beardsley, but also on those of Jerrold Levinson, Anthony Savile, and Nick Zangwill, for example).

HA is also a descendant of CHC in that it is a work of cognitive film theory, a research program effectively launched by CHC along with Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film* (NiFF), which was also published in 1985 (and which provides a comparative analysis of the Hollywood aesthetic alongside other significant aesthetic modes of film production: chiefly those associated with art cinema and historical materialism). NiFF too is cited by Berliner, and there are many points of contact with others working in the cognitive tradition (e.g., Carl Plantinga, Kristin Thompson; to my chagrin, Berliner states in two economical paragraphs (8–9) what it took me an entire monograph to articulate).[2] But the arguments that Berliner builds from the findings of psychologists and other cognitive scientists are original and distinctive. Berliner's proposals on the interplay between processing fluency and cognitive challenge in our appreci-

ation of Hollywood films and on the role of expertise in determining what films strike the right balance between fluency and challenge for individual viewers—at different points in their appreciative development—are particularly significant.

So much for an overview of Berliner's many achievements in HA. I turn my attention now to two issues that mirror one another in the sense that, in each case, Berliner seeks to challenge or invert conventional wisdom on central aspects of the Hollywood aesthetic: on the roles of *style* and *ideology*, respectively.

Pull Up to the Bumper

Berliner lays out five functions of style ("the distinctive and patterned use of the devices of the cinematic medium" [86]) within the Hollywood aesthetic—style, he argues, may be set to work in the service of clarity, expressiveness, decoration, harmony, and dissonance. Some further explication here is in order. The set of functions might be subdivided into two groupings on the assumption that the first pair are core, while the last three are less salient and less pervasive within the Hollywood aesthetic, though by no means rare. The clarifying function of style describes the clear *representation* of the action by means of staging, performance, camerawork, editing, and so forth; in other words, the role of style here is not merely to depict action with clarity, but to get the game of representation going in the first place. (No film narration without stylistic representation!) When conjoined with the second of what I am calling the two "core" functions of style, expressiveness, we have a version of the two classical purposes of art: representation (mimesis) and expression. But Berliner doesn't stop with these classical, core functions. Purely decorative uses of style burnish a film without contributing to the clarity or expressive qualities of the action; stylistic harmony seems to denote global, salient, decorative patterning, the effect of which is to create a heightened sense of unity in the work. Insofar as stylistic decoration and harmony can, on Berliner's view, play an important role in our experience of a Hollywood film, these paired concepts constitute the first of Berliner's inversions—style typically being regarded as wholly in the service of storytelling in Hollywood. Stylistic harmony bears some resemblance to what Bordwell in NiFF terms "parametric" or "style-centred" narration, where certain uses of style are deployed so systematically across a work that we cannot fail to notice them (or we cannot claim to have properly appreciated the work until we do so).[3] But Bordwell's style-centred narration is not quite the same as Berliner's stylistic harmony. Bordwell discerns parametric narration in a handful of highly idiosyncratic filmmakers (Theo Angelopoulos, Robert Bresson, Jean-Luc Godard, Otar Iosseliani, Yasujiro Ozu, Jacques Tati) who bend style into some very odd shapes. The stylistic harmony that Berliner identifies as a possibility in the Hollywood aesthetic is more like the conform-

ist cousin to Bordwell's band of style-centred outsiders: we still notice his style, but it is much more familiar and "classical" than that of his parametric relatives. (Think Giorgio Armani rather than Jean-Paul Gaultier.)

For reasons that will become apparent, it is easier to identify global stylistic harmony than local decorative flourishes. (Note also that is difficult to see how a local—one-off—decorative use of an aspect of film technique can be regarded as a *stylistic* feature in the strict sense, since style indicates patterning and patterning requires at least two instances of the use of a technique. On this logic, we should be talking about "flourishes of technique" rather than stylistic flourishes.) *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974) provides us with a nice example of stylistic harmony at work. Polanksi's film adopts an elegant cinematographic style making ample use of long framings and long takes, somewhat at odds with the "intensified continuity" that had been emerging since the 1960s.[4] The color palette of the film is also striking, depicting Los Angeles—or at least the well-heeled parts of it that the film spends much of its time depicting—as a brightly lit, handsomely endowed place. For this very reason, *Chinatown* also seems to be an example of stylistic *dissonance*, insofar as Berliner says that such dissonance arises when the style of a film seems "out of harmony" with any other element of it. *Chinatown*'s graceful cinematography and glowing light certainly seem dissonant in relation to the film's bleak moral and political perspective. (Berliner offers a similar analysis of one of his case studies, *Leave Her to Heaven* [John M. Stahl, 1945], with its malign female protagonist and saturated Technicolor cinematography.) But then we seem to have a film whose style functions at once to create harmony (heightened unity) and dissonance (the conflict between beautiful appearances and evil actions). My main goal in floating this possibility is to underline that, in Berliner's scheme, stylistic dissonance does not seem to be merely a contrary to stylistic harmony, as the underlying musical metaphor implies, but a quite distinct function of style; and so stylistic harmony and dissonance are not, as one might infer from the metaphor, mutually exclusive. Whether it is possible for a film to exhibit stylistic harmony and dissonance at once, and whether Berliner thinks this is possible, I'm unsure. But HA's model of the functions of style in the Hollywood aesthetic suggest that it is—so either the model needs some revision, or we have to accept the somewhat counterintuitive and oxymoronic idea of an elegantly dissonant film.

It's worth dwelling on the musical metaphors at work here: harmony and dissonance. As they operate in ordinary discourse, we think of harmony and dissonance as straightforward, paired contrasting states (like black and white, tall and short, and so on). That is why, at first glance, and notwithstanding the argument above, one might infer that stylistic harmony and stylistic dissonance in Berliner's model are nothing more than contrasting, mutually exclusive properties. But if we dig into the concepts in the source domain of

music, the simple contrast disappears. Harmony describes a parameter of music concerning the relations of pitches within a composition. Specific harmonic intervals—the felt relationship between any two pitches—can be more or less consonant or dissonant; a perfect fifth is a highly consonant interval; a tritone—by tradition, the devil's interval—is strongly dissonant. And different compositional practices allow for greater or less degrees of dissonance. Observance of the principles of tonal music, in which compositions have key signatures establishing a given note as the harmonic center of gravity, keep dissonance at bay. Chromatic, atonal, and microtonal approaches to composition all allow much more scope for dissonance. But the really key point here is that traditional tonal composition, while tightly constraining dissonance, still allows for enormous harmonic diversity and tonal complexity. A "harmonic" piece of music is not restricted to the most consonant intervals (the octave and perfect fifth), but may work with the vast array of interval, chord, chord progression, and cadential combinations permitted within a given key and genre. And Hollywood films are rather like tonal compositions: the absence of strong dissonance does not make for lack of complexity.

Returning to the decorative function of style—the more basic possibility that stylistic harmony builds on—Berliner develops another interesting metaphor in the following passage, in the opening paragraph of a section titled "Style Independent of Storytelling":

> *At some point, it becomes impossible to separate almost any component of Hollywood film style from its narrative function; in Hollywood filmmaking, style and narrative inevitably intersect. But in attempting to isolate and evaluate Hollywood style, one can get pretty far before driving through an intersection. (95)*

Although I am tempted by Berliner's seductive metaphor, in fact I think that in the Hollywood aesthetic one runs out of road for *purely* decorative uses of style almost immediately.[5] As Berliner emphasizes elsewhere in HA, even where a filmmaker intends a particular use of technique to be a stylistic flourish and nothing more than or other than that, the force of narrative gravity in the Hollywood aesthetic is so strong that viewers just can't stop themselves from looking for narrative—representational or expressive—relevance.[6] (Anyone who's taught this question will have a large dataset comprising student testimony on the narrative interpretability of anything and everything.) That is how we get from stylistic harmony to stylistic dissonance in the case of *Chinatown*; the style of the film is not just a decorative overlay, but an ironically lustrous scrim through which we perceive a venal world. Similar objections might be raised (and have been raised—by my students) in relation to one of Berliner's first examples of decorative style, from *Stranger than Fiction* (Marc Forster, 2006): "The odd arrangement [of the two characters seated in different halves

of an 'articulated,' two-section bus]," writes Berliner, "provides a realistic motivation for ornamental camera and character movement, an interesting visual effect that serves no obvious narrative function" (99). The snaking movements of the tram and the dance-like camerawork deployed here, however, can readily be seen as expressive of the constant maneuverings of Harold (Will Ferrell) in his pursuit of Ana (Maggie Gyllenhaal)—or so my students tell me.

So the functions of style to represent the action clearly and to represent the action with expressive force are voracious, leaving little design space or psychological space for purely decorative style—uses of technique that are strictly *independent* of storytelling. But elsewhere, Berliner writes that "stylistic devices typically serve several functions at once" (86). This formulation is, I think, more plausible, and allows us to recognize the centrality of narrative design and narrative expectations in the Hollywood aesthetic without wholly reducing the function of style to narrative clarity and expressiveness. The Coen brothers have insisted that what Geoff Andrew (1992, 21) calls "little formalist games with narrative, images, characters and dialogue" are part of their *modus operandi*. Of such games, Ethan Coen notes: "What's irritating is, some critics see the repetition as if there's a meaning behind it; as if by virtue of its repetition it has a sorta *coded* meaning. But the formal stuff is interesting in itself, takes on a life of its own" (qtd in Andrew 1992, 21).[7] We need to create some space to recognize this dimension as a possibility within Hollywood filmmaking, no matter how fleeting and marginal it may be most of the time. Allowing that we can recognize the decorative and harmonic functions of style *in parallel with* whatever narrative functions those uses of style may be performing creates that space. As Bordwell puts it: "In storytelling films, style can be decorative in just this sense: the pattern making operates alongside or 'on top of' other stylistic functions" (2005, 34). Even this much will be challenged by the apostles of pan-narrativity; but with this more moderate claim regarding the decorative function of style, the burden of proof falls on the skeptic to demonstrate that the work of style is entirely *exhausted* by its narrative role.[8]

"Vice and Virtue Are to the Artist Materials for an Art"

Let us turn now to the second—and, as he says himself, even more audacious—of Berliner's inversions.[9] This is the proposal that, in the Hollywood aesthetic, ideology serves aesthetic purposes, rather than the other way around: "Rather than view Hollywood as an instrument of ideology's oppressive goals, as many previous film scholars have done, I want to view ideology as an instrument of Hollywood's aesthetic goals," Berliner states (137). This is a controversial proposal because for decades the mainstream of film studies—now virtually indistinguishable from cultural studies—has taken the unearthing of the ideological values of films to be a, if not the, core activity of the discipline. And that academic stance to a large extent mirrors and extends the everyday as-

sumption that a primary function of stories is to convey moral lessons or messages. On this view, the aesthetic charge of a work is the sugar that makes the ideological medicine go down. Nonetheless, Berliner's inverse hypothesis, that the ideology of a work—or rather, its ideological elements, which may or may not be consistent in themselves—are just further ingredients (or "materials," to use Wilde's word, a term also favored, in just the same sense, by the Russian Formalists[10]) in what is essentially an aesthetic object, is an attractive idea for a number of reasons. It makes sense of the fact that Hollywood films have given expression to a wide range of political sentiments, from tales shedding a critical light on capitalism (from *It's a Wonderful Life* [Frank Capra, 1946] to *The Big Short* [Adam McKay, 2015]) to those which flirt with neo-Fascist authoritarianism (*The Fountainhead* [King Vidor, 1949], *Robocop* [Paul Verhoeven, 1987], *300* [Zack Snyder, 2006]). The Hollywood system is nothing if not opportunistic: if a given story can be shaped to deliver the kinds of aesthetic pleasures Berliner analyzes, few Hollywood players will lose much sleep about its politics. "The studios would promote the revolution if they thought it would sell tickets," as Berliner states (137). And as viewers, we often seem happy to shelve our ordinary moral compasses, enjoying "fictional relief" (Vaage 2013 and 2016) from the weight of our real-world evaluative judgments, especially in the context of genre fictions: how many of us who root for Dirty Harry would do so with his real-world counterpart? For all these reasons, Berliner is right to argue that in Hollywood, in a host of ways, the aesthetic tail wags the ideological dog.

Note also that Berliner's take on ideology is neither formalistic nor hedonistic. The ideological content of Hollywood films still matters—but it matters aesthetically rather than in a directly ideological fashion. If that thought seems obscure, consider this articulation of the idea by Jan Mukařovský: "[T]he influence of aesthetic value is not that it swallows up and represses all remaining values, but that it releases every one of them from direct contact with a corresponding life-value" (1979, 89), such as ethical or political value. Our aesthetic attention is not restricted to the purely formal properties of works (compositional balance or narrative proportions, for example); the substance of the story counts aesthetically as well. This is the sense in which Berliner's account is not formalistic. But if mattering aesthetically can't be reduced to the narrowly formal features of Hollywood films, neither can it be reduced to the "reassuring pleasure" attributed to Hollywood by orthodox critiques of the "dream factory" (even if our pleasure in Hollywood films often does take that form). As Berliner demonstrates, Hollywood films can engage us and enrich our experience by presenting complex ideological frameworks, even ones displaying a measure of disunity (see Berliner's analyses of *The Asphalt Jungle* [John Huston, 1950] and *Starship Troopers* [Paul Verhoeven, 1997]). As Berliner notes in the Introduction to HA, he conceives "of pleasure . . . as a broad category that includes any intrinsically rewarding emotional experience

(which might involve fear, sadness, anxiety, etc.)" (6). So while "pleasure" in a broad sense—self-rewarding and perhaps self-perpetuating engagement[11]—is at the center of Berliner's account, and as noted above Hollywood films generally eschew strong dissonance, there is no exclusive emphasis here on the "feel good" factor.[12]

Notwithstanding Berliner's general argument for the priority of the aesthetic in the Hollywood tradition, the ideology of a Hollywood film is not always a matter of complete indifference to viewers. Advocates of "affective disposition theory" argue that certain kinds of media entertainment can only be enjoyed on the basis of "moral disengagement," but this cannot be true across the board.[13] Audiences for films with an overt ethical or political dimension, like *Selma* (Ava DuVernay, 2014) or *Green Book* (Peter Farrelly, 2018), will likely have a moral-ideological motivation to see the film. The Russian Formalist concept of the *dominant* allows us to finesse this point. The dominant describes the "constructive principle" which plays the overall guiding role in shaping the elements of a given work (or category of works).[14] Applying this concept to Berliner's argument, we may agree with him that Hollywood as a system is geared toward delivering a particular kind of aesthetic pleasure (normally expressed in terms of "entertainment") and that that principle dominates the ideological ends of filmmakers working in this tradition. But not without exception: in some films, the articulation of a particular political, moral, or ideological perspective has to be *balanced* with the entertainment principle. But even here the aesthetic dimension is not being overridden; it is rather that the ideological and the aesthetic must be aligned. Mukařovský's point comes home to roost again; we can engage with "life-values"—including ethical, political, and ideological values—aesthetically.[15] What is certainly the case is that the formal demands of the Hollywood aesthetic will shape diverse political and ideological ideas to *its* contours—the occasional left-leaning Hollywood yarn (*Reds* [Warren Beatty, 1981], *Missing* [Costa-Gavras, 1982]) will not adopt the aesthetic norms of Soviet montage or Brechtian epic theater.

There is a connection between the two motifs I've picked out of HA for discussion. Resistance to the thought that style in certain contexts plays a purely decorative role, and to the idea that a film might use ideological material as a means to aesthetic ends, shares a common root—namely, that artistic complexity is always a matter of, or constituted by, or reducible to, thematic complexity. Consider, for example, George Wilson's remark on the visual beauty of Josef von Sternberg's films as an example: "The beauty is unquestionable, but, if there is nothing more to add, their loveliness is not enough to lift the movies out of the realm of amusing, decorative camp" (2011, 168–169). Visual loveliness is ultimately trivial and only takes on more than superficial interest when it belies thematic—philosophical, conceptual, ideational—significance. As my exploration of musical metaphor above suggests, however, aesthetic unity,

complexity, intensity, and subtlety do not depend on thematic substance or depth of insight alone. Sometimes in a visual work of art there is nothing more than meets the eye, though what the eye meets is really quite something.[16]

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Notes

[1] Perhaps this is also the moment to say that Berliner's book contains one of the best expressions of spousal gratitude and affection ever committed to print.

[2] See my *Film, Art, and the Third Culture: A Naturalized Aesthetics of Film* (2017; first paperback impression, 2020). See also the symposium devoted to the book in *Projections* 12 (2) from 2018.

[3] Bordwell's first detailed treatment of the idea of parametric narration lies in chapter 12 of NiFF (1985), the term "parametric" deriving from Noël Burch (1973), in which the technical "parameters" of a film play a central role. In later publications where the idea resurfaces, Bordwell tends to favor "style-centred" over "parametric," an expression Bordwell borrows from a 1927 essay by Yuri Tynianov (NiFF, 275). See Bordwell's *Figures Traced in Light* (2005), 34-5, for another significant discussion of the idea.

[4] Berliner discusses Bordwell's concept of "intensified continuity" in chapter 5 of HA (87).

[5] According to Bordwell, "systematic use of decoration is pretty rare in cinema, partly because this art form is historically so tied to denotation. We ought, for this reason, to resort to decorative explanations of film style only after fully considering other functions' (2005, 35).

[6] Berliner makes this point in relation to the viewer's efforts to resolve narrative gaps (HA, 66–69).

[7] In the interview, *Miller's Crossing* (1990) is identified as the Coen brothers film in which this "formalist" dimension is most evident in their oeuvre up to *Barton Fink* (1991).

[8] Also relevant here is Kristin Thompson's discussion of stylistic "excess." See her discussion of the phenomenon as it is arises marginally in Hollywood filmmaking, and much more strongly in Jacques Tati's *Play Time* (1967), in *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (1988), 259–62. Here she defines excess as "an inevitable gap in the motivation for the physical presence of a device; the physical presence retains a perceptual interest beyond its function in the work" (259). I take Thompson to mean that no matter how strongly a device is motivated (realistically, or by considerations of story or genre), such motivation will always fall short of fully justifying why just this device has been chosen. And nothing can erase the fact that what the spectator encounters is, precisely, an artefact constituted by a set of devices, that is, technical choices.

[9] The title of this section is drawn from Oscar Wilde, "The Preface," in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891/2004, xxiv).

[10] See, for example, Boris Eichenbaum (1965).

[11] On aesthetic pleasure as a distinctive kind of "facilitating" or self-perpetuating pleasure, see Matthen (2017).

[12] Berliner points in this direction by recognizing both the "hedonic" (pleasure-giving) and "epistemic" (curiosity-prompting) dimensions of films. His use of these terms in this context is somewhat unorthodox and for that reason does not quite line up with what I am suggesting here. But we are on the same page.

[13] On moral disengagement, see Raney (2004); the concept is also discussed by Bruun Vaage (2016).

[14] Among contemporary studies in the neoformalist tradition, Thompson (1988) provides the most extensive discussion. See especially part 3.

[15] Mukařovský (1979) in effect argues that different types of artefact vary according to the degree to which the aesthetic dimension is dominant or subordinate in the way that the object functions (by design, or by use). In other words, the principle of the dominant is operative not only at the level of the individual artwork and at the level of genres or categories of artworks, but at the still more abstract level where the very status of a work as a type of artistic or aesthetic object is at stake.

[16] My thanks to Ted Nannicelli for inviting me to participate in this symposium.

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Goldilocks Aesthetics

James E. Cutting

Abstract: Much of aesthetics is based in psychological responses. Yet seldom have such responses—couched in empirically based psychological terms—played a central role in the discussion of movie aesthetics. Happily, Todd Berliner's *Hollywood Aesthetic: Pleasure in American Cinema* does just that. This commentary discusses some history and some twists and turns behind Berliner's analysis.

Keywords: aesthetics, complexity, hedonics, modeling, movies

> *"Tastes can be diverse and yet depend on common factors and principles. For example, different people's evaluations may be governed by the same variables, but the values of these variables that are optimal for some individuals will not be optimal for others. The curves that can be drawn . . . may well be distinct but have the same general shape."*
>
> *— Daniel Berlyne*

In his book *Hollywood Aesthetic: Pleasure in American Cinema* (2017), Todd Berliner lays out a theory of how and why popular cinema succeeds in entertaining millions of viewers. His book is provocative and convincing, full of detailed examples from particular movies and fascinating general insights.[1] His basic argument is that Hollywood is a fine-tuned production system for generating moderately complex stories within genre formulae, which are told in a moderately complex way and with attention to production values (decoration) in order to please general audiences. Hollywood's movies vary along multiple dimensions and have sufficient appeal to the widest possible audience. At issue, of course, is how to appeal to that audience. No one knows how to guarantee the success of a particular movie, but it is undeniable that many movies succeed handsomely.

For me, the book is extremely welcome. It is grounded in my home discipline—psychology. The purpose of this commentary is to frame those grounds, providing background to the psychological theory on which Berliner bases his work. Let me start by borrowing from Robert Southey's early-nineteenth-century popularization of the story of three bears. In essence, Berliner suggests that for any movie viewer generally there is a Goldilocks zone—the porridge is the right temperature, the chair is the right height, the bed is the right softness, and the movie grabs her emotions and thoughts in an all-encompassing

way.[2] In the domain of the narrational structure of movies, this is an idea toward which I am quite partial (Cutting 2019). Moreover, Daniel Berlyne's is one of the most enduring ideas in psychology and it has since spread to economics (Kaimann et al. 2018), consumer research (Anand and Holbrook 1986), information science (McCormack and d'Inverno 2012), and now to movies.

Later in the nineteenth century, Southey's idea found its way into psychology through the German psychologist Wilhelm Wundt. It was then filtered through the ideas of the British-Canadian psychologist and aesthetician Daniel Berlyne.[3] It also has several variants. One is the discrepancy hypothesis (Blijlevens et al. 2012; Haber 1958; McCall and McGhee 1977),[4] which suggests that people have a preference for stimuli that differ slightly, but not too much or too little, from a norm. Another is the "law" of Yerkes and Dodson (1908), where people are said to perform better at a moderate level of arousal rather than either at a lower or higher level. And a third is an opponent-process theory (Solomon 1980; Solomon and Corbit 1974) for which reward and aversion accommodate the temporal patterns of love, addiction, and many other motivational situations.

For Berliner, through Berlyne, the relationship between viewer interest and movies is captured by what is typically called the Wundt curve. A version of it, slightly different than Berliner's (26) and sourced here from Berlyne (1970), is shown in the middle panel of Figure 1. The left panel shows a simplification of Wundt's figure, which has a much narrower band of variation for which positive hedonic value is high. Across the succeeding literatures on aesthetics, arousal, and preference, the axes of this type of plot are given in many differ-

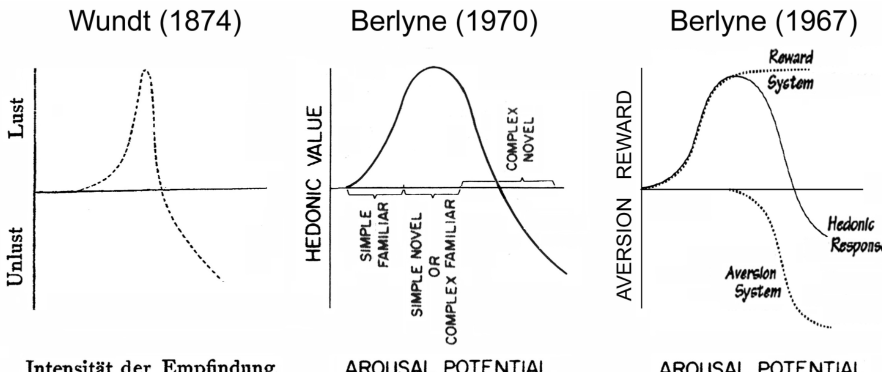

Figure 1. Three representations of the relation of hedonic value (roughly, sensory pleasurefulness) to arousal potential (roughly, the potential response to a stimulus by our autonomic systems of heart rate, blood pressure, and skin conductance). The left panel is simplified from Wundt (1874: 432, 1910: 323) and reworked into modern graphic form. The German abscissa label translates as "intensity of sensation" and the ordinate labels roughly as "pleasure" and "displeasure." The central panel is modified from Berlyne (1970), an article that investigates novelty and complexity, two features that Berliner is interested in with respect to movies. The right panel is reworked from Berlyne (1967, 88; see also Galanter 2012) to show the workings of opponent systems of reward and aversion.

ent ways. Berliner chose those from Berlyne (1960, 1971)—arousal potential on the horizontal axis and hedonic value, in his case how much one likes a movie, on the vertical axis.

The notion of arousal potential, rather than simply arousal, is important. It acknowledges that, as Berlyne notes in the epigram, some stimuli (movies) can affect people in different ways and at different times. According to Berlyne (1971), such arousal is dependent on three attributes. First, there are *psychophysical* properties. As an example, consider temperature. Generally, we do not like weather that is too cold or too hot. In between is best. One can imagine a movie bleached out or too dark to have general appeal. Second, there are *ecological* properties, for example, those that are biologically noxious or beneficial but also such things as meaningfulness and personal relevance. Cultures, and the individuals within them, vary widely in their embrace of a panoply of such properties. South Asians seem to like musicals more than North Americans do. And finally, there are *collative* properties. Collative is the adjective of the verb *to collate*. It means to collect and compare, gather information from diverse sources, and then be able to rank order things based on all that information. For example, I might like movie A, because of its actors and action sequences, better than I like movie B, even though the latter has better plot structure and computer graphics.

Collative variables are evaluative. Examples include complexity, novelty, conflict, uncertainty, suprisingness, and ambiguity.[5] However, Anthony Chmiel and Emily Schubert noted that "while Berlyne proposed that all three types of variables contribute towards aesthetic preference, his legacy is the discovery of collative variables and the idea that these are the 'most significant' determinants of preference" (2017, 887). To his credit and again following Berlyne's epigram, Berliner does not want to divorce his approach from the ecological variables, particularly those experiential and idiosyncratic aspects of a movie viewer's personal makeup and history.[6]

Berlyne's intent was to argue that collative variables, particularly novelty and complexity, could be "usefully discussed in the language of information theory" (1971, 69–70). These could be pitted against hedonic value—observer preferences—to yield the Wundt curve. But he started simplistically. For example, he measured familiarity as the number of times that listeners heard a novel melody. And he measured complexity in terms of the number of sides of a polygon (Berlyne 1970). Unfortunately, his own data did not really reveal the pattern of the Wundt curve.

Remarkably, one would be hard-pressed to find an idea more persuasive in psychology than Berlyne's that has also resisted corroboration so thoroughly. For example, across more than a dozen experiments, Edward Walker (1981) came up essentially empty on finding evidence for Berlyne's theory and the Wundt curve. In addition, Manuela Marin and colleagues (2016) cited a dozen

other papers, each often with multiple experiments, that also yielded nonsupportive results. Instead of an inverted U-shaped function, hedonic judgments typically increase with complexity or decrease with familiarity. In a yeomanly, back-bending effort to wrest support for Berlyne, Chmiel and Schubert (2017) recategorized results of studies that looked at preferences for musical patterns that differed in complexity or familiarity. Their argument is that those with linear increases might have sampled stimuli belonging to only the left-hand shoulder of the Wundt curve and that those with linear decreases might have sampled stimuli only pertinent to the right-hand shoulder. Counting these two patterns of results as supportive of Berlyne, plus the few studies that actually did find the inverted-U, they counted 50 of 57 studies (88 percent) in support of Berlyne. However, excluding the linear cases the support is much more meager—only 15 out of 57 (26 percent). Not impressive.

Why is this? Why is it that an idea that fits so snugly into our intuitions is so difficult to corroborate? My answer is threefold. First, I think we should forget about arousal. When one plots a graph, one typically thinks that the variation on the horizontal axis causes the variation on the vertical axis. But we now know that equal values of arousal (for example, the autonomic measures of heart rate, blood pressure, and skin conductance) can be associated with both positive and negative responses. Thus, arousal per se only confuses the issue. Second, hedonic tone—the ability to feel pleasure—is itself multidimensional and dependent on the stimulus set. Photographs, paintings, and cartoons may all elicit different kinds of hedonic responses (Cupchik 1986; see also Marin et al. 2016).

Third, and as Berlyne (1971) explained, to generate a U-shaped function one generally needs two processes and a staggered relation between them. One process generates the upward part of the function and a second process generates the downward part. Moreover, these become relevant in different collative ranges, one in the lower range and one in the upper range. A schematic example is shown in the right panel of Figure 1, a graph modified from Berlyne (1967; see also Galanter 2012). The two processes are a reward system and an aversion system or, perhaps with a more provocative association from Wundt's German, *lust* and *unlust* (see the left panel of Figure 1). The neurophysiology of these systems is beyond what we need here, but the two systems are separable and well ensconced in contemporary theory and data (Hu 2016).

Consider the graph in the right panel of Figure 1. The reward system builds in its response to a collative property. It forms an elongated S-shaped curve that is asymptotic at both ends, one at indifference on the left and the other at some maximum value on the right. With increases in the collative variable, the aversion system does not kick in immediately, but waits until some threshold is exceeded. It then follows a function that is also an elongated-S and doubly

asymptotic but with a reversed polarity and a bit greater in magnitude. Add the two together and you have a Wundt curve. This underlying, two-process account is exactly what one finds in other, related domains (for example, Solomon and Corbit 1974), although the component curves can be shaped somewhat differently.

My guess is that the failure of research to find Wundt curves for many collative variables is that there is nothing aversive in the stimulus set that has been used, and sometimes nothing particularly rewarding either. Polygons with more sides are just more complex; they are not aversive. Similarly, more intricate, short sequences of tones are also just more complex, and again not aversive. Moreover, one would be hard-pressed to say that any polygons are particularly rewarding, although some short ditties might be.

Gratifyingly, much recent research has found Wundt-curve-endorsing results. Celeste Kidd and colleagues (2012) found that, using carefully calibrated information-theoretical criteria, infants preferred visual sequences of moderate complexity over those that were both simpler and more complex. And Pietro Gravino and colleagues (2019) studied big data from recommender systems, those online algorithms that recommend books, songs, and other items based on what the internet surfer has purchased. Among popular songs, they found that an individual listener was more likely to listen to a song they had heard, say, ten times before than one they had listened to fifty times or only twice. Such results suggest that familiarity and novelty both drive preferences, with a Goldilocks zone in between.

Berliner's book is divided into five parts, and his précis in this issue recaps those. First, in writing about Hollywood classicism and deviation, Berliner says: "Hollywood's deviant tendency . . . reaches toward complexity and novelty in order to produce films that mass audiences find interesting and moderately challenging." The middle panel of Figure 1 from Berlyne (1970) endorses this view completely—as long as the reach is not too far.

Second, in discussing narrative Berliner suggests that "Hollywood balances narrative unity and disunity." This is a slightly different view of what underlies hedonics, and it is endorsed by George Birkhoff (1933), Murray Gell-Mann (1995), and Philip Galanter (2012). These authors believed that midway along a single dimension from order to disorder (order to chaos) should prove most interesting. At the border between the two are fractal systems, which may indeed be a domain that is aesthetically the most attractive (see Cutting et al. 2018). Supporting this idea, Güçlütürk and colleagues (2016) generated complex visual patterns for aesthetic judgments by viewers. Importantly, they first normalized results within individuals and then made comparisons across them. This procedure yielded an inverted U-shaped pattern for individual preferences, which was absent when no individual differences were

considered. Similarly but back in the two-process domain, Alexandre Sousa and colleagues (2019) modeled preferences to popular music along three collative variables—novelty, complexity, and uncertainty—and, once they were combined, found separate and different Wundt curves for individual listeners. These two sets of results are important, and they are congenial to Berliner. Moreover, they may explain why many of the earlier results were inconsistent with Berlyne's theory, because individual differences were not considered.

Third and considering film style, Berliner emphasizes clarity, expressiveness, and decoration as making movies spontaneously pleasing to mass audiences. Stylistic harmony also contributes, but he also notes that stylistic dissonance "inspires cognitive play . . . Dissonance . . . generates aesthetic interest by creating inconsistent objects—objects of curiosity." This play pushes movies into a domain of the more complex and may require a more sophisticated viewer to appreciate, again emphasizing that different viewers may have different Wundt curves. Fourth, "the ideological restriction of the Production Code Administration posed creative problems that noir filmmakers solved through visual and narrative contortion." These have challenged audiences with their complexity, stimulating the sophisticated viewer but perhaps leaving other viewers less enthusiastic.

Finally, "to fully exploit the pleasures of genre filmmaking for a mass audience, a genre film must fit within traditional genre parameters, offering easy recognition, but it must also differ enough from previous films to make it moderately challenging for average spectators." This view also finds empirical support. Sameet Sreenivasan (2013) looked at the keywords viewers had used to tag all movies on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb)[7] between 1930 and 2010. He then measured the general uniqueness of the terms used by viewers for each particular movie compared to those terms used for all movies released in prior years (dating from 1910). In general, the movies that were most successful were ones that had an intermediate number of unique terms. Movies with fewer unique terms and those with more unique terms did not do as well at the box office. This supports the idea that Hollywood movies continually search out new but related themes as they continue mostly to match the genre expectations of viewers.

In summary, Berliner's appraisal of the success of Hollywood in terms of aesthetics is well-grounded. Its backbone is Berlyne's theory of hedonic value. Here, I have reviewed and updated that theory—one that had a rocky existence in the latter third of the twentieth century—to find consistent and relevant empirical support in the domain of movies and entertainment. It really is the case that we share a lot with Goldilocks as we forage for pleasure in the world around us.

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Notes

[1] The epigram is from Berlyne (1971, 29).

[2] The notion of a Goldilocks zone is also important to astronomy and exobiology as the circumstellar habitable zone around a star—neither too close nor too far—where the temperature is appropriate for life to evolve and be sustained.

[3] Berlyne (1971) noted that Aristippus, the Cyrenaic philosopher, presaged his curvilinear hedonics. With some Google sleuthing, I was able to find this: "The motion of which we have sensation is of three kinds: feeble motion, to which we remain indifferent; violent motion, which is in disaccord with nature, and which we describe as pain or suffering; and lastly, motion of the easy and gentle kind, which is congenial to nature, and which we describe as a movement of pleasure" (Stökl 1887, Part 1).

[4] I worked as a research assistant under Robert McCall on some aspects of this project nearly a decade before this chapter was published.

[5] See Berlyne (1960; 1971).

[6] Berliner (2017: 26) notes that "the inverted-U findings indicate that subjects prefer challenging properties—novelty, complexity, etc.—in increasing intensity until some maximal level, at which point subjects start to become overwhelmed." Here, I take Berliner to use the notion of "intensity" not as a physical measure (like loudness), but as a metaphor for increasing novelty or complexity.

[7] See www.imdb.com.

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Speculating about Spectatorship

Janet Staiger

Abstract: Todd Berliner's *Hollywood Aesthetic: Pleasure in American Cinema* (2017) offers useful broad theoretical arguments about how to understand our pleasures in viewing cinema. Yet, moving to individual cases requires recognizing the historical conditions of spectatorship including contemporaneous ideological issues, levels and types of knowledges, and cooperation (or non-cooperation) by a spectator.

Keyw ords: historical spectator, critical methods, genre analysis, *Red River*

I enjoyed this book. I know that this is not a very scholarly way to begin an article, but since Todd Berliner's *Hollywood Aesthetic: Pleasure in American Cinema* (2017) is about pleasure in Hollywood cinema, it seems fair to indicate my overall response at the very start. The value of the project is combining standard film-critical knowledge with the cognitive strand of psychological theory. In this effort, Berliner provides an enhancement of a major trajectory in film and media studies. Here, I want to suggest what his project accomplishes while also opening up directions for future developments.

Berliner operates as most of us do when providing criticism of a film from a hypothetical perspective. He creates a theoretical spectator and postulates what goes on for that person. He "assumes a mentally active and engaged spectator, one who performs cognitive work" (4). While Berliner does not quote David Bordwell here (although he relies on him heavily throughout his book), Berliner is operating in the sort of speculative realm that Bordwell does when Bordwell generates his knowledgeable and cooperative spectator in his *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985). Both scholars are postulating standard or typical spectatorial activities.

This is perfectly fine, but it is fairly difficult to remain in that space for very long. Soon, in order to make certain types of observations, variables from this sort of spectator start to creep into the discussion. One of the first times I noticed this was as early as page 30, when Berliner is arguing that a film's novelty and complexity contribute to aesthetic pleasure. He then italicizes this principle: "*People prefer artworks that are challenging in accordance with their own coping potential*" (30). Moreover, he starts to parse out audiences to "average,"

"mass," "expert," and "spectators with a greater-than-average ability to cope" (30). Furthermore, he acknowledges that the "average spectator" differs over the history of films.

This management of his thesis appears throughout his argument but particularly comes to the fore in his fourth section, which is on genre. He splits the audience to try to understand why *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) was so successful in terms of box office and long-term popularity but had such a so-so to negative evaluation from film critics. His explanation? A rather novel and possibly compelling one is that "more expert filmgoers [the film critics] require greater novelty and complexity to feel an exhilarated aesthetic response" (185). He then describes the hypothetical "popular" and "scholarly" responses to *Star Wars* based on genre expertise.

While Berliner does not actually foreground this, it would appear to be his argument that the popular audience—which he assumes does not have a detailed knowledge of the genre(s) from which *Star Wars* derives (or at least echoes)—is mentally active, engaged, and cooperative, but either (1) has aesthetic pleasures based on their limited knowledge; or (2) enjoys the film for all sorts of other reasons for which his primary thesis about *aesthetic* pleasure does not account. In his Introduction, Berliner notes that he is considering *aesthetic* pleasures while recognizing that other pleasures exist: "a social activity, fantasy, ogling at stars, a respite from the heat outdoors, sexual excitement, a distraction from worries, communion with the past, and many others" (4). So an analysis of the processing of *Star Wars* for the mass audience may include some aesthetic issues (although not as many or as complex as for an "expert" film viewer) and other pleasures. Moreover, for this case of experts not enjoying *Star Wars*, are we to understand that *expert* film viewers only seek aesthetic pleasures and are not influenced by these other ones in their generalized evaluation of the film?

Thus, once the amounts or types of knowledge that spectators have differ, all sorts of issues about hypothetical versus actual spectatorship appear. Here are a few of them:

1. Can we (or how do we) separate out aesthetic pleasures from the other ones that Berliner mentions (or might have mentioned)? For instance, what is the relationship (or difference) between Berliner's mention of "ogling at stars" with *expertise* in stars, celebrities, and acting? I can imagine a distinction—scopophilia versus cognitive knowledge—but, then, where does this information fit into aesthetic processing of a film, since watching stars (or acting approaches) may be at odds with following a narrative, style, ideology, or genre (Berliner's four main categories of aesthetic analysis)?

2. What needs to be considered when taking account of the expert *historical* spectator to which Berliner often refers? For instance, he discusses historically the experiences of audiences of the musical to explain the changes in

the genre's conventions. An example is the custom of characters bursting into song to display their emotional stakes (as occurs in 1930s–1950s Hollywood films). How would he explain the throwback examples in the Oscar-winning *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, 2016)? I doubt that film experts in the musical, who would recognize this break in convention, were the only ones enjoying these violations of contemporary twenty-first-century musical conventions. What were the various pleasures in that musical for the "nonexpert" spectator unfamiliar with such "old" customs? How do those pleasures relate to or differ from "aesthetic" ones?

3. Does the explanation for "cult" spectatorship, which Berliner associates with extensive knowledge of Hollywood practices and applies to rare, unusual films that "exhilarate" some people (27), exclude *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) from that category? Or are different sorts of explanations and spectatorial knowledges possible under the broad description of "cult" movie viewing?

4. Should the so-called cycle of "classicism, complexity, exhaustion, parody" (219) be applied historically or ahistorically? Is this really a historical trajectory or an already present set of narrative and narrational options? After all, Laurence Stern's comedic satire *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–1762) *starts* a major genre of prose, and the film *Wild and Woolly* (John Emerson, 1917) is a masterful spoof of Eastern notions of the West produced just as the Western genre was in mid-course in both prose and film. To describe a genre's development as historically from classical to complex (as Berliner does for the Western) seems as well to be bracketing out contemporaneous historical and ideological matters that affect a text's representations and a knowledgeable spectator's mental engagement. One example is the questioning of the Cowboy/Western in the 1940s, which occurred nationally and internationally, as a conflict based on race; another is the critiques of US militarism/imperialism in the 1960s. Is the classical phase really just one version of the genre available at every historical point? And parody as well? Do actual historical audiences really have the knowledge of these periods of a genre, or are these sorts of expert pleasures only available to, well, the expert? Without the historical knowledge of the conventions, is the average engaged audience member restricted to the other sorts of aesthetic pleasures (in narrative, style, and ideology)?

5. How should descriptions of aesthetic expertise necessarily include the ideological? Berliner postulates that "ideology can factor into aesthetic pleasure when it helps to concentrate—or complicate—our beliefs, value, and emotional responses to an artwork" (133). Given the variability of experts' ideological positions, does this inclusion significantly complicate the hypothetical analysis that Berliner is offering? Is the engaged critic a democratic socialist, a moderate, a white supremacist? Who is the "our" in "our beliefs"? From what set of knowledges is the expert critic operating?

6. Can analyses of individual films such as *Red River* (Howard Hawks and Arthur Rosson, 1948), in which Berliner claims audiences forgive and forget narrative gaps and character revisions, make sense without also recognizing that spectators know the conventions of plots, stars, and genres that comprise the group of films known as Hollywood cinema? Where do the habits of watching and making coherent a Hollywood film fit in?

It is for this last point that I want to make a somewhat extended analysis. As one of his main examples for his first category, "narrative," Berliner provides a discussion of the Howard Hawks 1948 Western. He has been arguing that Hollywood narratives somewhat necessarily contain gaps in order to provide sufficient challenge and complexity for a spectator, with the pleasure deriving from "novelty, complexity, incongruity, dissonance, and ambiguity" (18). His question is: "Does narrative disunity offer aesthetic pleasure only for an instant or can filmmakers sustain the pleasures of abduction, insight, and incongruity-resolution throughout a film in order to enliven and diversify the spectator's aesthetic experience of an extended narrative?" (73). Berliner argues that *Red River* "repeatedly violates Hollywood screenwriting's cardinal rules regarding narrative unity, probability, causality, and story logic" (73). However, "as long as we can make sense of inconsistent plot information, even through spurious logic, then narrative disunity will add aesthetic value to classical storytelling and pleasure to our aesthetic experience" (73).

What are the primary plot and character gaps in *Red River* that concern Berliner? These include storylines that Berliner believes have no actual resolution—"planting without payoff" (74–76): Thomas Dunson (John Wayne) beginning a love story with a woman, Dunson starting a feud with a Mexican land baron, and the youthful Matt Garth (Montgomery Clift) seemingly setting up a rivalry based on shooting expertise with ranch hand Cherry Valance (John Ireland). Berliner argues that the film makes "fuzzy connections" to cover up these open plot threads by not actually resolving the plotline but "depicting scenes *reminiscent* of the forecasted scenes" (76). Dunson's lost love reappears as Matt's woman. Dunson has to defend his land not against a Mexican land baron but against Matt. Matt and Cherry do not have a gunfight, but Cherry and Dunson do (with Cherry defending Matt and Dunson shooting Cherry), and, then, Matt and Dunson engage in an intense fistfight that neither of them actually wins.

"Fuzzy connections," yes, but an alternate explanation might be that the film uses the aesthetic practice of rhyme, repetition with small differences, to provide narrative transformation and progress toward resolution. In other words, the narrative plot is not so much filled with plot gaps that seem resolved via hazy substitutes (and requiring abductive reasoning), but with a different sort of aesthetic method of gap-filling. Here are a few such plot rhymes:

A. In the opening meeting between Dunson, who has left a wagon train to head to good land in the south, and Matt, who has just escaped an Indian attack on that wagon train, Dunson owns a bull and Matt owns a cow. In that initial meeting, Matt expresses his own approach in opposition to Dunson, but they join forces (and cattle) to create the herd. When they begin the ranch, Dunson creates a brand using only his initial ("D") against the objections of Matt, but Dunson wins out. (Also note that the film habitually refers to Dunson as "Mr. Dunson" and Matt by his first name, subtly reinforcing the male hierarchy.)

B. When Dunson leaves the wagon train to head south on his own, he also leaves a woman to whom he gives his mother's bracelet. The bracelet travels back to Dunson after the woman presumably dies in an Indian attack, and it returns to Dunson via Matt, who has it when he escaped that very attack. Matt wears the bracelet through his childhood and the Civil War, but ends up giving it to a woman in a wagon train whom he meets and rescues from an Indian attack and whom, like Dunson has done, he also leaves. (Freudian theory might have something to say about that!)

C. Dunson shoots an emissary of a Mexican landowner to take the land for his ranch. Matt shoots Dunson's hand as Matt takes over the leadership of the trail drive and the cows.

D. In the story's final narrative reckoning, Dunson hits Matt. Matt lets him do this several times, but then Matt finally responds, fighting back physically. As the ranch hand working with Dunson for the past fourteen years (Walter Brennan) says, it was "fourteen years a-comin.'" Indeed,the seed for the conflict was established in the meeting of the two men, and one narrative principle is for seeds to grow. That Dunson's character changes as a result of his financial desperation seems to be a rational outcome of the personality of the man Dunson was when he chose to strike off on his own at the start of the story. Matt's response is likewise.

E. With both men exhausted from their fistfight, Dunson acknowledges Matt's equality and states that he will revise the ranch's brand to include an "M" for Matt. See "A" above.

I would argue that the film's *rhyming* of narrative events creates both coherence (the patterns) and deviation (the variations), providing an engaged and active spectator with what Berliner requires for an aesthetically pleasurable experience. Now, whether the methods for the film's unification by the spectator are better explained as "fuzzy connections" or as rhyming patterns is debatable; the bigger point is that two "expert" critics can take the same film and read it differently, one seeing gaps that require finessing and the other seeing rhyming and revising patterns. So, how do we know what, precisely, constitutes the "correct" analysis of the film's aesthetics and its consequential pleasures?

Moreover, once again, the historical spectator (and ideological differences) appears. One of the major tribulations during *Red River*'s trail drive is that men begin to desert the crew as food supplies diminish. The deaths of the first three men who flee occur offscreen with a report that the deserters attempted to attack the men who came after them. When another group absconds but is brought back alive, Dunson states that he is not going to shoot them but hang them. Matt objects, leading to the confrontation after which Matt takes over running the drive. From the perspective of 2020, the threat of hanging the deserters seems excessively brutal. However, I am reminded that the film was produced in 1948, just three years after the ending of World War II, a time in which deserting the army was certainly traitorous (as it still is). Although the death penalty for desertion was abolished in 1930 in the United States, it still occurred at times on the battlefield. I wonder how different people might judge Dunson's threat, Matt's objection, and then Matt's mutiny.

What is going on in this film reveals the problems with a hypothesized "mentally active and engaged spectator" premise. To move to any sort of actual case requires lots of variations and stipulations and parsing. That may be possible, but it is important to recognize what a broad theory explains and does not explain. I would propose that Berliner's general theses are very much worth examining, accepting, and using to explain knowledgeable and cooperative spectatorial aesthetic responses to films, but that, for any actual textual study, recognition of historical and otherwise variable spectators must be included in the analysis to describe and explain the aesthetic pleasures (and displeasures) of the text.

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Style and Storytelling in the Hollywood Aesthetic

Patrick Keating

Abstract: In this article, I offer a response to Todd Berliner's splendid book *Hollywood Aesthetic*. Although the book is an innovative and well-crafted contribution to the study of Hollywood cinema, I argue that it underestimates the extent to which unity and coherence contribute to the aesthetic value of a film.

Keywords: aesthetics, Hollywood, narrative, value, coherence

Todd Berliner's *Hollywood Aesthetic* is a major contribution to the study of Hollywood movies. While many previous critics—notably, auteur critics—have defended the artistry of selected subsets of Hollywood films, Berliner makes a compelling case for the aesthetic value of Hollywood cinema as a whole—as a rich and varied tradition that includes both ordinary films and time-tested classics. He supports his argument with detailed examples from dozens of movies; the highlights include *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940), *The Asphalt Jungle* (John Huston, 1950), *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967), and *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1990). To my astonishment, I even enjoyed the chapter about *Starship Troopers* (Paul Verhoeven, 1997).

In this response, I offer some critical queries regarding Berliner's chapters on narration and style. While admiring the book's considerable strengths, I suggest two alternative ways of thinking about the aesthetic value of unity, disunity, clarity, and ambiguity. First, in my view Berliner understates the aesthetic value of unity and clarity when he treats them as appeals to easy understanding. A unified film may create aesthetic pleasure by carefully delineating the nuances of a complex (but not incoherent) character. Second, though Berliner convincingly praises the aesthetic value of disunity and ambiguity, he tends to treat them as nonnarrative or even antinarrative features, when instead they are crucial components of all narratives, even in the most ordinary films. My two proposals involve shifts in emphasis rather than outright disagreements, but my concluding example from *Sadie McKee* (Clarence Brown, 1934) will show that these shifts of emphasis can help us better appreciate the aesthetic value of a good film that is not a time-tested classic.

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Hollywood Aesthetic offers two distinct theories of why spectators enjoy narrative films. The first theory appears in Chapter 3, "Hollywood Storytelling." The second appears in Chapter 7, "Ideology, Emotion, and Aesthetic Pleasure." In brief, the former argues that we enjoy narrative films because they are cognitively interesting, and the latter argues that we enjoy narrative films because they are emotionally intense. Both theories have two tiers—one tier explains the simple pleasures of ordinary films, and the other tier explains the more difficult pleasures of classic films that have withstood the test of time.

Chapter 3's argument about cognitive challenge rests on a distinction between unity and disunity. Berliner writes: "Narrative unity stimulates the calm pleasures associated with easy understanding, making Hollywood cinema accessible and immediately pleasing for mass audiences" (52). Hollywood regularly produces these pleasures by organizing plot events so spectators can reconstruct the causal chain fluently. Building on this stable base, the most memorable films complicate the process in enjoyable ways: "Easy understanding, however, does not fully account for the intensity of the aesthetic pleasure people sometimes derive from Hollywood storytelling. Cognitive challenge . . . can lead us toward more exhilarated aesthetic pleasures" (52). Whereas ordinary films are highly unified, these more challenging films deploy disunity strategically to stimulate greater interest—albeit at the risk of losing the mass audience, as happened initially with *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) and *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958).

In Chapter 7, Berliner's argument explicitly shifts from interest to emotion. After a characteristically thought-provoking analysis of *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1987), he writes: "The exhilaration felt when watching Hollywood action films differs from the exhilaration I have discussed previously in the book. Until now, we have examined the exhilarated pleasure of attempting to master a challenging aesthetic object. In the action genre, exhilaration comes from having our emotions, desires, and convictions heightened" (140). Relying on familiar ideological cues (including some cues that we might firmly reject in everyday life), Hollywood movies prompt us to hope for certain outcomes and fear others; this process increases the intensity of our emotional responses. According to Berliner, psychologists have shown that recipients typically experience greater pleasure in artworks that stimulate intense emotions, even when the emotions are negative.

Both arguments are largely persuasive, but I have two worries. The first concerns the aesthetic value of unity. Put simply, Berliner sets up unity as a value only to knock it down again as a lesser form of aesthetic pleasure. While he fully acknowledges that unity offers some amount of aesthetic pleasure, he usually characterizes it as the pleasure of easy understanding. At one point, he even refers to the "numbing effect" of unity (80). It is disunity that offers the more exhilarating pleasure; he has particular praise for the aesthetic

value of incongruous characters (*The Searchers* [John Ford, 1956]) and of illogical (but still graspable) stories (*The Big Sleep* [Howard Hawks, 1946]). Though Berliner brilliantly explains the aesthetic value of these disunities, I wonder whether there are unified pleasures that he overlooks—such as the pleasure of watching an actor get the interpretation of a complex but coherent character just right (think of Bette Davis as Margo Channing in *All About Eve* [Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950]), or the pleasure of hearing a line of dialogue that fits a character perfectly (think of all the insulting lines that J. J. Hunsecker delivers to Sidney Falco in *Sweet Smell of Success* [Alexander Mackendrick, 1957]). One of Berliner's first examples of disunity is an alleged inconsistency in *Citizen Kane*: Kane appears to die alone, but, illogically, everyone knows what his dying word was. This inconsistency is interesting (though I should mention that Raymond the butler later claims to have heard the word in person), but it seems significantly less interesting than some of the richer unities that the film provides: its convincing depiction of the Kane–Leland friendship souring over the years, or its devastating depiction of the Kane–Susan relationship becoming abusive, or even its quick, sharp delineation of Raymond's arrogance. A unified film may create exhilarating pleasure by offering a complex picture of a complex world.

My second worry is somewhat more technical: the two arguments about pleasure handle the crucial concept of the gap (and the related idea of ambiguity) rather differently. In Chapter 3, Berliner admits that every narrative film must contain some gaps, but he suggests that ordinary narrative films keep them to a minimum; it is only the exhilarating movies that do complicated work with gaps. By contrast, Chapter 7's arguments about hope, fear, and other anticipatory emotions elevate the gap's importance considerably, to the point that it becomes a defining principle of narrative construction, whether the film is complicated or ordinary or anywhere in between. I think that the second position is correct; it is the argument that ordinary films keep gaps and ambiguity to a minimum that concerns me.

When Berliner distinguishes between unity and disunity in narrative construction, he places gaps within the territory of disunity. He writes: "A unified narrative develops according to an internally consistent story logic, the work's narrative properties connected and interrelated to form a seemingly organic whole" (52). Pointing to a tradition stretching back to Aristotle, Berliner describes unified films as classical. "A disunified narrative, by contrast, contains gaps, ambiguities, improbabilities, incongruities, or other impediments to coherent story construction" (52). Whereas ordinary films tend to be highly unified, time-tested films such *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974) usually contain some striking ambiguities—just enough to provide a cognitive challenge without slipping into the confusions that characterize the most difficult art films. This does not mean that ordinary films lack gaps entirely. Indeed, even

the most forgettable film will contain some disunity, if only because it must withhold information to keep spectators interested until the end of the story (56). But the disunity never threatens to overwhelm the pleasure that the spectator feels in grasping an easily comprehensible story.

The distinction seems intuitively clear, but I must confess that I remain uncertain about how to classify certain basic features of Hollywood films—as unifying or as disunifying. For instance, most Hollywood films contain a scene (traditionally at the end of the first act) when the protagonist tackles a goal. In *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954), Jefferies decides to investigate the possible murder of Thorwald's wife. According to Noël Carroll's (1996) theory of erotetic narration, such scenes typically work to generate questions in the mind of the spectator, such as "Will Jefferies solve the crime?" Even the most ordinary mystery films typically contain such a scene. When the protagonist sets out to unravel a mystery, the decision inevitably generates the question: "Will the protagonist succeed or not?" In his section on narrative unity, Berliner cites Carroll's theory of erotetic narration to make the case that Hollywood films are highly unified. The question holds the movie together. This argument makes me think that my example from *Rear Window* would count as unifying in Berliner's model. But, in the section on narrative disunity Berliner points out that Hollywood films delay crucial information to cue spectators to hypothesize about upcoming events. This classification of delaying tactics under the heading of "disunity" makes me think that my example from *Rear Window* would count as disunifying, because the movie raises a question and refuses to answer it for the next hour. While it makes perfect sense to say that a typical film will contain both unifying and disunifying elements, it seems more problematic to count the same technique as evidence of both.

My confusion about this point stems from a deeper uncertainty about whether Berliner is relying on an "objectivist" or "functionalist" definition of narrativity in Meir Sternberg's (2010) sense of the terms. Sternberg argues that most existing narrative theories are *objectivist*, defining narrativity in terms of the organization of events—for instance, as two or more events connected by causality. By contrast, Sternberg terms his own approach *functionalist*, defining narrativity in terms of its characteristic effects—suspense, surprise, and curiosity (or, to use less emotionally laden terms, prospection, recognition, and retrospection). The definitions might seem to be complementary, but Sternberg insists that they rest on an incompatible assumption—namely, the two approaches handle gaps differently. Objectivists see gaps and ambiguity as threats to narrativity, because they destabilize the causal connections that define the genre. A work's narrativity is increased when it helps the reader spot causal connections; it is decreased when the work ambiguates causality. But functionalists see gaps and ambiguity as the essence of narrativity, because

the interplay between the story and plot keeps the reader's mind engaged in prospection, recognition, and retrospection at all times. Sternberg writes:

> *What theorists since Aristotle (e.g., cognitivists, poeticians, philosophers) have regarded as a narrative threat, or threat to narrativity, hence excluded at any cost, turns into the genre's very hallmark, inherent rich appeal, manifold driving force, and the highway to ends other than itself as well. Born of gapping, temporary or permanent, such dynamic ambiguity thus generates, energizes, and signals narrativity—and if dominant, narrative. (Sternberg 2010, 644)*

Sternberg has convinced me that functionalism is the more rewarding approach. For the most part, Berliner's argument seems richly functionalist, as in Chapter Seven, where he explains how Hollywood movies "stimulate a variety of emotions that unfold over time" (146), or in the analysis of *Red River* (Howard Hawks, 1948), where he explains how a viewer might scramble to find the "best fit" to make sense of a movie that is progressing in unpredictable ways (79). However, his argument seems more objectivist when he insists that ordinary movies minimize ambiguity and gaps in favor of the clearest possible delineation of the causal progress, even though they cannot eliminate those disunities entirely.

Perhaps this is all just a question of wording, but I think that the chapter on style (Chapter 5) sometimes gets caught between objectivism and functionalism, defining gaps and ambiguities as discordant or even as antinarrative features, when they might just as easily enhance a film's narrativity. Berliner first argues that style performs two main storytelling functions: clarity and expressivity (92). The first function follows from the argument of Chapter 3: Hollywood filmmakers use the device of cinematic style to deliver story information clearly, especially in ordinary films. The second argument looks ahead to Chapter 7: Hollywood filmmakers use those same devices to increase the film's emotional impact. Berliner then considers three other functions of cinematic style (decoration, harmony, and dissonance); he stresses that these functions are ways that Hollywood films work against the primacy of narrative—for instance, by putting maximum clarity in doubt.

With the partial exception of the section on expressivity (which deals with emotional intensity), the structure of the argument of Chapter 5 follows the structure of the unity–disunity argument in Chapter 3. Clarity appeals to our delight in processing fluency by increasing the unity of Hollywood cinema, but most of the other functions appeal to our delight in cognitive challenge by introducing a manageable amount of disunity. As in the previous discussion of unity, this argument sets up clarity as an ideal partly in order to knock it down. A film that is entirely clear may offer the simple pleasures of processing fluency, but a film that is aesthetically rich complicates that fluency by intro-

ducing features that detract from clarity (e.g., obscure lighting, distractingly glamorous costumes, incongruous generic stylistic traits). This makes perfect sense if we define storytelling as the elucidation of a causal sequence. Stylistic devices that make the events easy to read will enhance a film's causal unity; stylistic devices that obscure those events and their causal connections will count as disunities or dissonances or even as antinarrative techniques. But if we define narrative in functionalist terms, then stylistic devices that obscure events and their causal connections may still count as narrative devices—indeed, as quintessentially narrative devices—as long as the obscurity works to produce narrative effects of suspense, curiosity, and surprise. Clarity and obscurity are both means to higher narrative ends. In that sense, they both contribute to a film's unity.

Consider a scene from the M-G-M romance *Sadie McKee*. I pick this admittedly obscure title because it lies somewhere in the middle of Berliner's spectrum between the ordinary movie and the time-tested classic. It represents the work of some talented collaborators (director Clarence Brown, star Joan Crawford, and writer Viña Delmar, who is credited with the original story), and it is more of a polished studio product than an auteurist experiment. Over the course of the film, the protagonist, Sadie, falls in love with three men: unreliable, working-class Tommy (Gene Raymond); wealthy alcoholic Brennan (Edward Arnold); and handsome scion Mark (Franchot Tone). The story is built around a gap: which man will Sadie choose? At the time, Crawford and Tone were engaged in a public offscreen romance, so most spectators of 1934 would have guessed correctly that Sadie would end up with the glamorous Mark. But the gap remains a gap: the film withholds this culmination until the very end. Even better, the film maintains considerable ambiguity about which man Sadie *should* choose. Sadie's desire for Tommy is genuine, as is her loyalty to Brennan, but Mark acts like a snob for most of the movie. The story's central ambiguity is not founded on incoherence, but upon complexity: all of these characters have a mixture of flaws and virtues.

Early in the film, the stage star Dolly (Esther Ralston) seduces Tommy away from Sadie by asking him to join her traveling musical act. The act employs a gimmick: Dolly starts to sing and dance, but her performance is interrupted by Tommy, planted in the audience and playing "All I Do Is Dream of You" on a ukulele. In the scene I want to discuss, Sadie attends a performance and expects to see Tommy; when Sadie sees another man singing in Tommy's place, she recognizes for the first time that Tommy and Dolly have split up. Stylistically, the scene is highly conventional. As Sadie watches Dolly perform the first part of the number, a passage of shot-reverse-shot emphasizes the tension between the two women. When the ukulele starts to play, Sadie turns to see whether Tommy is the player. The next part of the story unfolds over the following five shots: (1) a wide shot of the unfamiliar man playing the ukulele as he sits in

darkness among the audience; (2) a tight close-up of Sadie as she wonders whether the man is Tommy or not; (3) a medium-close-up of Dolly performing her act; (4) a medium shot of the ukulele player, who is now illuminated by a spotlight; and (5) a return to the tight close-up of Sadie as she becomes certain that Tommy is not there. With the unity–disunity model in mind, we might say that the stylistic techniques combine classical clarity with a moderate dose of cognitive challenge. The close-ups give us a clear view of Sadie's facial expressions, and the shot-reverse-shot patterns make it easy to figure out who is looking at whom. At the same time, the lighting and editing intriguingly obscure the identity of the man playing the ukulele, and the glamorous photography provides opportunities for nonnarrative enjoyment. Instead of the easy pleasures of total unity, the style offers the richer pleasure of unity mixed with disunity. Note that the obscurity of the man playing the ukulele would count as an intriguingly dissonant factor in this account, working against the clarifying drive of the scene's other techniques. The clarity of the scene is mildly enjoyable, but the calculated obscurity provides more exhilarating pleasure.

Berliner might or might not agree with this analysis, but I think that it is in the spirit of his chapter on style, which finds a modest amount of aesthetic value in the unifying power of clarity and a greater amount of aesthetic value in stylistic features that introduce some measure of challenging disunity or dissonance. However, I do not think that this account captures the aesthetic value of the scene in question—value that resides in the scene's functional unity, emotional intensity, and characterological insight.

From a functionalist perspective, the obscurity is not dissonant at all. The scene is unified by an eminently narrational purpose—the management of curiosity, surprise, and suspense. When Sadie turns to look at the man playing the ukulele, her gaze generates curiosity: "Is this man Tommy or not?" Rather than deliver the answer immediately and unambiguously, the film cuts to a wide shot with dim lighting, forcing us to look very closely to confirm that the man is someone else. This confirmation, in turn, generates a new suspense-oriented question: "How will Sadie react when she finds out?" The film stretches out the resulting suspense for three more shots (Sadie, Dolly, the ukulele player) before providing the answer in Sadie's close-up. The close-up is the richest moment in the scene: Crawford skillfully registers Sadie's conflicting emotions when she sees that the man she loves is not there. As Flo Leibowitz (1996) has explained, women's films such as *Sadie McKee* depict scenes of loss to appeal to multiple emotions at once: sadness is typically mixed with admiration. Here, Sadie is sad for two overlapping reasons—first, because she has been deprived of the bittersweet experience of seeing her lost love Tommy; second, because Tommy's absence is an indication that he may be in trouble. If Sadie were a lesser person, she might triumph in the fact that Tommy and Dolly have broken up; instead, Sadie inspires our admiration for her selfless de-

sire to help Tommy, even though he had betrayed her years ago. This mixture of sadness and admiration increases the ambiguity of the overarching "Which man will she choose?" plot, generating the hope that Sadie may rescue and reunite with Tommy without necessarily diluting our genre-specific awareness that an improved Mark might be better suited for her in the end.

My analysis seems compatible with the analysis of ideology, emotion, and genre that Berliner offers in Chapter 7. At the same time, the analysis offers a somewhat different account of the scene's aesthetic achievement than we find in Chapter 5, which treats clarity as a vehicle for the easy pleasure of processing fluency and which treats obscurity as the more interesting feature because it works against clarity. In my account, clarity and obscurity work together for unified narrative ends. The scene denies us maximum clarity for several seconds (by obscuring the identity of the man with the ukulele and by cutting away from Sadie just as we might be wondering whether she has seen what we have seen) and then delivers a jolt of heightened clarity (by giving us a close-up view of Crawford skillfully performing the full range of Sadie's emotions). This moment of clarity is not a dip in the scene—that is, it is not a return to the low pleasures of easy understanding after a period of exhilarating cognitive challenge. Rather, it is the aesthetic high point of the scene, precisely because we so *clearly* understand the full *complexity* of Sadie's response: her anticipation turning to sadness, her love mixed with pity, her thoughts about the past enhancing her uncertainty about the future. If the style were more distracting, more dissonant, it would not make the scene more interesting by exchanging clarity for cognitive challenge; it would deprive us of the opportunity to experience the pleasure of seeing Sadie's conflicted ambivalence so clearly delineated. The scene offers complexity, not dissonance.

As we have seen, Berliner's book makes two distinct arguments about the pleasure of watching a Hollywood movie—one argument about interest and another argument about emotional intensity. I find the argument about emotional intensity convincing, but I fear that the argument about interest places so much weight on the superior exhilaration of disunity that it misses the ways that emotional effects can unify a film's style and narrative at a higher level.

In closing, these reservations should not be taken as indications of a lack of enthusiasm for the book overall. *Hollywood Aesthetic* is a triumph: an ambitious and engaging defense of Hollywood movies as works of art.

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Hollywood Aesthetic: Pleasure in American Cinema

A Reply to Critics

Todd Berliner

Abstract: In this reply to four commentaries on my book, *Hollywood Aesthetic: Pleasure in American Cinema*, I address several conceptual and methodological issues raised by the respondents. Those issues include the book's focus on aesthetic pleasure; the functions of narrative, style, ideology, and genre in Hollywood cinema; the relationship between ideology and aesthetics; the use of scientific research in the humanities; normative aesthetic evaluations; real versus hypothetical spectators; and the practices of aesthetic film analysis.

Keywords: aesthetics, American cinema, cognitive science, film style, Hollywood, mass art, narrative, pleasure, reception studies.

What a privilege to have such an accomplished and intellectually diverse group of scholars respond to my book. I want to organize my reply around that intellectual diversity since each respondent has offered a set of criticisms of *Hollywood Aesthetic* that reflects a distinct approach to film scholarship: philosophical aesthetics, psychology, reception studies, and the aesthetic analysis of Hollywood narrative and style. Each respondent has, in her or his own way, spoken to the capacities—both the potentials and the limitations—of the approach I have taken in the book, and I want to use this reply to address some of the larger conceptual issues they have raised. Since each respondent has tackled this assignment in a distinctive way, I shall respond to the articles in turn.

Murray Smith, "Berlinversions"

Murray Smith approaches *Hollywood Aesthetic* from the perspective of philosophical aesthetics, engaging some of the book's theoretical arguments and interventions. He notes some conceptual distinctions between my book and earlier examinations of Hollywood aesthetics, most notably David Bordwell's chapters on classical narration in two books, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Bordwell et al. 1985) and *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Bordwell 1985). Smith

says, for instance, that Bordwell focuses on the "ordinary" film, while *Hollywood Aesthetic* examines both ordinary and extraordinary achievements, and that Bordwell relies primarily on Russian Formalism for his theoretical framework, whereas *Hollywood Aesthetic* turns more toward Anglo-American aesthetic philosophy. But I want to point to a more important difference, at least to my mind: Bordwell addresses the *comprehension* of Hollywood cinema, whereas *Hollywood Aesthetic* addresses the *pleasure* of it. Chalk it up to the anxiety of influence, but I think the distinction matters. As I noted in my précis, Hollywood makes the most widely successful pleasure-giving artworks the world has ever known. More than any other historical mode of art, Hollywood has systematized the delivery of aesthetic pleasure, packaging and selling it on a massive scale. Film studies had no account of this astonishing artistic accomplishment.

Hollywood makes the most widely successful pleasure-giving artworks the world has ever known.

Smith directs his criticisms of *Hollywood Aesthetic* to Part 3 on style and Part 4 on ideology in Hollywood cinema. I am going to ignore all of the lovely things he, and the other respondents, had to say about my book and focus on the more provocative negative criticisms.

Smith correctly separates my examination of Hollywood style into two categories: primary functions (clarity and expressiveness) and secondary ones (decoration, harmony, and dissonance). He points out, with an adroit turn to *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974), that in my system the same device can serve both harmony and dissonance, leading him to conclude that "either the model needs some revision, or we have to accept the somewhat counterintuitive and oxymoronic idea of an elegantly dissonant film." I choose neither option.

Is it really counterintuitive to think that the same device may harmonize with one part of a film and conflict with another? The examples of *Chinatown*, in Smith's article, and *Leave Her to Heaven* (John M. Stahl, 1945), in *Hollywood Aesthetic*, illustrate the play of harmony and dissonance that artists engage in regularly: Salvador Dali playing with the harmonies and dissonances between the practices of realism and surrealism; The Beatles creating pleasing harmonies and dissonances by combining Anglo-American rock music with Indian sitar music; James Joyce and Virginia Woolf finding harmonies between the dissonant practices of stream of consciousness and the conventions of the novel; and so on. The history of art is a catalogue of artists' efforts to violate expectations through one form of dissonance or another, even as artists work out intriguing harmonies between otherwise dissonant elements. This conclusion is not counterintuitive—it is unavoidable.

His second criticism of Part 3 boils down, I think, to a misunderstanding. I would blame the misunderstanding on him, except that Patrick Keating has a similar criticism, which I address below. So I guess it is my fault, and I want to take special care now to untangle my point.

A scriptwriter could stage a Bond movie in a basement apartment, but it is more decorative to stage the action in Istanbul, The Bahamas, or Amsterdam.

About my efforts to "isolate and evaluate Hollywood style" independent of storytelling (Berliner 2017, 95), Smith writes, "I think that in the Hollywood aesthetic one runs out of road for *purely* decorative uses of style almost immediately." He's right. Hollywood cinema offers few "uses" of style that seem purely decorative, serving no narrative function, but that does not stop us, as analysts, from *isolating* and *evaluating* a device's decorative function independent of its storytelling function. James Bond movies regularly take place in foreign locales, such as Istanbul (*From Russia with Love* [Terence Young, 1963]), The Bahamas (*Thunderball* [Terence Young, 1965]), and Amsterdam (*Diamonds Are Forever* [Guy Hamilton, 1971]). The films have integrated each locale into their narratives, but we can "isolate and evaluate" the locales' decorative functions. We can say that Istanbul looks ancient, The Bahamas picturesque, Amsterdam elegant, etc. Eventually, we will hit a narrative intersection, but I want us to see how far we can get *in our analysis* before we cross one. Much of a Hollywood budget finances the decorative value (sometimes referred to as "production value") of a movie (beautiful locations, glamourous mansions, special effects, fight choreography, elaborate sets, bravura cinematography, etc.). If decoration did not add some independent value to a film, then why would a production spend so much money on it? A scriptwriter could stage a Bond movie in a basement apartment, but it is more decorative to stage the action in Istanbul, The Bahamas, or Amsterdam. So I am not arguing, as Smith suggests I might be, that Hollywood favors purely decorative flourishes. Rather, I am exhorting analysts of Hollywood cinema to attend to the decorative functions of devices that may serve narrative functions as well.

Smith's critique of my ideology chapters offers a more complex set of points pertaining to ideological criticism of the arts—too complex to address in this brief reply—so I will focus on just one of Smith's points because doing so helps define the book's scope.

Rather than look at Hollywood as an instrument of dominant ideology's oppressive goals, as previous scholars have done, we can look at ideology as an instrument of Hollywood's aesthetic goals.

In Part 4 of the book, I argue that, rather than look at Hollywood as an instrument of dominant ideology's oppressive goals, as previous scholars have done, we can look at ideology as an instrument of Hollywood's aesthetic goals. Smith seems to appreciate the "inversion," as he calls it, but suggests that I might be leaving behind some of the effects of ideology on people's attraction to artworks. To quote Smith:

> *We may agree with him that Hollywood as a system is geared toward delivering a particular kind of aesthetic pleasure (normally expressed in terms of "entertainment") and that that principle dominates the ideological ends of filmmakers working in this tradition. But not without exception: in some films, the articulation of a particular political, moral, or ideological perspective has to be balanced with the entertainment principle.*

Citing *Selma* (Ava DuVernay, 2014), Smith notes that viewers "will likely have a moral-ideological motivation to see the film."

I agree with Smith's conclusion, but I want to clarify that *Hollywood Aesthetic* does not attempt to account for *all* attraction to Hollywood cinema, only aesthetic attraction. People have other reasons for seeing a Hollywood movie, including, for instance, fantasy, sexual excitement, participation in a cultural event, boredom during a global pandemic, and a film's moral-ideological content. Some viewers may choose to see *Selma* in order to better understand the wisdom of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to share that wisdom with their children, or to learn about the history of the civil rights movement. Those may be good reasons to see and appreciate *Selma*, but they are not aesthetic reasons. "Aesthetic appreciation of art," philosopher Jerrold Levinson writes, "always acknowledges the vehicle of the work as essential, never focusing only on detachable meanings or effects" (1996, 7). Smith, of course, understands this caveat and says as much: "The ideological content of Hollywood films still matters," he writes, "but it matters aesthetically rather than in a directly ideological fashion." The tricky cases (which I address extensively in the three chapters of Part 4) involve films that bond their ideological content to the audience's aesthetic experience, such as *The Asphalt Jungle* (John Huston, 1950), *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Martin Scorsese, 1988), *Starship Troopers* (Paul Verhoeven, 1997), and other films in which ideological properties attach to the aesthetic design, sometimes in complex ways.

Hollywood Aesthetic, however, barely addresses cases in which a film's nonaesthetic content enhances or detracts from its aesthetic appeal.[1] The "detachable" messages of Dr. King, for instance, may enhance one's aesthetic appreciation of *Selma*'s design. By the same token, a film's moral-ideological flaws may lead to aesthetic flaws. I can hardly imagine wholeheartedly rooting for a white supremacist Western hero or a misogynistic noir hero, whatever the film's formal manipulations, without some resistance, and that resistance may damage the aesthetic effect. I think Smith's argument that "the ideology of a Hollywood film is not always a matter of complete indifference to viewers" pertains especially to these types of cases.

James Cutting, "Goldilocks Aesthetics"

Whereas Smith approached *Hollywood Aesthetic* philosophically, from the top down, psychologist James Cutting came at it from the bottom up, examining the empirical basis for some of the book's arguments. Although I did not conceive of *Hollywood Aesthetic* as a psychology book, I wanted to get the science right. Based on Cutting's response, I think I did okay. I would not say that I put my foot in my mouth but maybe a few toes.

As Cutting notes, researchers have debated the validity and interpretation of psychologist Daniel Berlyne's (1971) experimental findings regarding he-

donic value. Researchers seem to agree that Berlyne discovered *something*, although perhaps something trivial (Kubovy 1999), and some have reinterpreted his results using models other than Berlyne's psychobiological theory (Silvia 2005). In any case, what Berlyne found remains a subject of some debate.

In my defense, the book does not lean on Berlyne as heavily as Cutting suggests. First of all, I would not say that my book is "grounded" primarily in psychology, although I am heartened that a psychologist of Cutting's stature believes that it is. Psychology provides one type of evidence that I use for reasons explained below. However, the book is *grounded* in the arts and humanities, particularly in film aesthetics. That said, I wanted to develop and assess my theories of aesthetic experience in light of the current understanding of the human mind. Were the book's theories empirically demonstrable and consistent with scientifically obtained knowledge? The literature in experimental psychology enabled me to formulate and evaluate some of *Hollywood Aesthetic*'s empirical claims.

Were the book's theories empirically demonstrable and consistent with scientifically obtained knowledge?

Second, I would not agree that Berlyne's research is "the psychological theory on which Berliner bases his work." *Hollywood Aesthetic* employs a variety of experimental psychology research to try to understand the aesthetic appeal of Hollywood cinema, research not only in hedonic psychology but also in the psychology of humor, emotion, insight, expertise, interest, processing fluency, coping, aesthetics, well-being, and other areas. As Cutting notes, the Berlyne studies fail to capture the "multidimensional" components of aesthetic experience, focusing solely on the simplistic finding that people prefer objects that meet their optimal levels of novelty and complexity. I attempted to capture as many dimensions as I could in light of relevant empirical research.

Most readers of this journal know of the controversy in film studies concerning the applicability of scientific research to our understanding of film. I would like to explain my reasons for employing science research in parts of *Hollywood Aesthetic* because they speak to that debate.

As a film analyst and aesthetic researcher, I use various rationalist approaches to understanding film aesthetics. Primarily, I study the formal properties of movies against their historical background, but formal analysis addresses only part of the aesthetic equation—the objective properties of the artwork itself. Cognitive science offers empirical information pertaining to the other part of the equation—the viewer's mind.

Aesthetic analysis normally involves normative judgments—judgments based on reasons—but philosophers have also acknowledged the subjective component of aesthetics. Aesthetic properties are "response-dependent" in that they rely on "human perception" and connect to our "experience" of an artwork (Carroll 1999). Reason alone cannot establish that "*Casablanca* is a beautiful movie." Such judgments require subjective experience. So, in

addition to relying on reasons, *Hollywood Aesthetic* turns to actual viewer responses as an indicator of aesthetic value. We can try to access those responses from various historical sources, such as box office figures, accounts of cult film practices, movie reviews, audience ratings, interviews, awards, reports of filmmaking practices, biographical information, and other historical information, all of which may be found in the book; however, experimental psychology offers aesthetic researchers an additional source, helping us form models of aesthetic experience. Indeed, I found, when writing my book, an abundance of experimental research, far more than I anticipated, that helped me understand the aesthetic pleasures that Hollywood cinema has to offer. The fact that both psychology researchers and Hollywood filmmakers seem primarily concerned with "average spectators" makes the research particularly relevant to Hollywood aesthetics.

Employing psychology research in humanities projects like mine comes with challenges and pitfalls. For one thing, experimental psychology rarely addresses the exact artworks studied, so the aesthetic analyst ends up speculating about the applicability of the research.[2] For another, although the standards of evidence are high in the sciences, we cannot assume that scientifically obtained knowledge is entirely reliable, a factor evidenced by the replication crisis going on right now in some social science and medical research. But Cutting's response to my book points to a more serious problem that arises when the humanities turns to scientific research: As humanities scholars, we are tourists in the sciences.[3] I read hundreds of books and articles in psychology to write *Hollywood Aesthetic*, but I am not a psychologist. I was not even aware of most of the research that Cutting references in his article, let alone trained to scientifically evaluate the disagreements. Cutting, for instance, points to failed efforts to replicate Berlyne's experiments, as well as recent studies that lend support to Berlyne's findings (though perhaps not his explanations). The science here is not settled, despite decades of research, and the remaining scientific controversy creates hazards for a humanities researcher like me.

As humanities scholars, we are tourists in the sciences.

At last year's conference of the Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image, media psychologist Ed Tan and I had a brief discussion about the difficulty and dangers of using research outside of one's home discipline. Ed argued that humanities researchers should therefore keep abreast of the latest findings in psychology. I argued the opposite. I think we should ignore the latest findings and stick to the stuff that has shown some staying power, especially since even time-tested research like Berlyne's remains a subject of some debate. As a humanities researcher, I lack the scholarly equipment to gauge the current controversies in psychology and which paradigms we can expect to shift in the future. I have enough trouble keeping track of that stuff in my own discipline.

Although grounded in the humanities, *Hollywood Aesthetic* looks to pertinent scientific research for feedback, the most reliable and uncontroversial research I could find pertaining to the perception, cognition, and aesthetic appreciation of cinema and the other arts. The fact that this research falls outside of the book's home discipline does not relieve me from having to grapple with it and assess my own arguments in light of scientific discoveries. Given the amount of available psychology research relevant to Hollywood aesthetics, I considered it irresponsible to proceed as though the research did not exist.

Janet Staiger, "Speculating about Spectatorship"

Janet Staiger offers a different type of bottom-up perspective—the perspective of reception studies, which examines the ways in which real spectators receive, interpret, and use artworks. Staiger questions how well my book accounts for "actual historical" responses to Hollywood movies, as opposed to the responses of "hypothetical" spectators who engage in supposedly "standard or typical spectatorial activities."

If one abandons the notion of shared standards and common viewing activities, then the concept of aesthetic value becomes meaningless.

Her question applies to any approach to art that addresses aesthetic value (as opposed to individual taste). Value is normative. If one abandons the notion of shared standards and common viewing activities, then the concept of aesthetic value becomes meaningless. Elsewhere, Staiger (2000) has disputed the notion of "presumed" normative standards and viewing activities. Here she argues,

> *Berliner's general theses are very much worth examining, accepting, and using to explain knowledgeable and cooperative spectatorial aesthetic responses to films, but that, for any actual textual study, recognition of historical and otherwise variable spectators must be included in the analysis to describe and explain the aesthetic pleasures (and displeasures) of the text.*

Addressing *Red River* (Howard Hawks, 1948), she analyzes some of same plot patterns analyzed in my book, using an "alternate explanation," and concludes "that two 'expert' critics can take the same film and read it differently, one seeing gaps that require finessing and the other seeing rhyming and revising patterns." Given such differences, Staiger questions how we can determine a "correct" aesthetic analysis. "To move to any sort of actual case," she argues, "requires lots of variations and stipulations and parsing," a fact that would seem to question the explanatory power of a "hypothetical" spectator and of any "broad theory" of Hollywood aesthetics.

Disagreements about individual film analyses do not necessarily undermine my book's effort to understand some of the general aesthetic principles

that govern Hollywood filmmaking. Indeed, I do not think her "alternate" analysis of *Red River* offers evidence against the explanatory power of studies, like mine, that rely on notions of common viewing activities, hypothetical spectators, and shared aesthetic standards. For one thing, much of what Staiger says about *Red River* accords with the analysis in *Hollywood Aesthetic*, which argues that *Red River* "can risk some trivial story logic violations and still remain anchored to classical cinema's structure and purpose" (81). The fact that our analyses agree in many respects suggests that the film sparks some common viewing activities among some viewers.

However, let us accept for a moment that our analyses disagree at least on whether the movie contains *any* story logic violations, trivial or not. We can still view her and my commentary on *Red River*, set side by side, not as different *experiences* of the film but as different *analyses* of the film. Indeed, Staiger has not so much described her personal response to *Red River* as she has instead offered an analysis of the film based on normative matters relevant to determining the film's aesthetic value (rhyming patterns, coherence, theme and variation, progress toward resolution, available historical information, genre considerations, etc.). She has, in short, offered *reasons* for appreciating the film's narrative design. So I would argue that her analysis of *Red River* better supports my point that aesthetic analysis depends on normative matters than it supports her point that "actual historical" spectators differ from "hypothetical" ones. Her *Red River* spectator is just as hypothetical as mine, both of which are based on a combination of subjective experience and reasoning. The fact that our analyses disagree in some respects suggests that one of us may have some things wrong, that we may be emphasizing different aesthetic properties, or that there may be more than one "correct" aesthetic analysis of the film. Whichever the case, Staiger's illuminating narrative analysis of *Red River* has employed normative standards that help make our understanding of the film's aesthetic value more complete.

Indeed, I am struck by how much of Staiger's analysis of *Red River* articulates my own experience of the film. Of course, we cannot know precisely how similar our experiences really are, but it is reasonable to believe that she and I and other historical spectators might like or dislike *Red River* for some of the same reasons. How could Hollywood filmmakers make movies if they did not have some sense of whether people, generally, might enjoy them? Hollywood, after all, makes mass artworks. If spectator responses varied so much (or if spectators did not at least fall into huge response groups), then filmmakers could not make mass art, and no one would fund it. Hollywood filmmaking banks on the assumption that a film can at least guide the responses of a massive number of viewers. And if filmmakers can create a mass response, then scholars can study it.

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Staiger rightly questions what a book like *Hollywood Aesthetic* does and does not achieve. The book is an aesthetic study—an effort to understand the aesthetic properties that Hollywood filmmakers developed to appeal to a mass audience. It does not offer a historical account of Hollywood film reception. The book studies film reception to the extent that reception can help us understand the subjective component of aesthetics. Indeed, as I noted in my reply to James Cutting above, the book not only makes normative claims about Hollywood films but also uses historical and scientific evidence to make empirical claims about "actual historical" spectators. However, even when the book examines cult film aesthetics and other film niches, it focuses on normative matters—normative for the niche. If groups of spectators did not share evaluative standards, people could not even argue over whether a film was any good or not. And though a focus on normativity and mass response sets to the side idiosyncratic responses to art, the book argues that we can theorize Hollywood aesthetics in part by attending to the experiences that people seem to share and by modeling some of the variables that lead to individual, historical, and group differences in aesthetic experience.

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Patrick Keating, "Style and Storytelling in the Hollywood Aesthetic"

Patrick Keating approaches *Hollywood Aesthetic* from the perspective of an aesthetic analyst of Hollywood narrative and style. Keating has made major contributions in both areas, and I want to address some of the particulars of his arguments, which are nuanced. In general, Keating argues that *Hollywood Aesthetic* "understates the aesthetic value of unity and clarity" and treats "disunity and ambiguity . . . as nonnarrative or even antinarrative features." As a result, he argues, the book neglects some aesthetic values to be found in Hollywood cinema.

I first want to argue that the theories advanced in *Hollywood Aesthetic* can account for many of the aesthetic experiences Keating describes and that the analytical techniques illustrated in the book can be used to explain some of the pleasures that Keating says I neglect. For instance, he writes: "I wonder whether there are unified pleasures that he overlooks—such as the pleasure of watching an actor get the interpretation of a complex but coherent character just right." But does this example qualify as "unified pleasure"? I think we can better describe it as the pleasure of finding "uniformity amidst variety," to quote Francis Hutcheson ([1725] 2008, I.II.§III), a key concept in *Hollywood Aesthetic*. Keating wants to stress the unity of the performance, but we could just as well stress the complexity (what Hutcheson calls the "variety") of the character. An artwork creates unity by joining different things. *Hollywood Aesthetic* argues that the challenges posed by joining different things leads us toward exhilarated pleasure, as the separate pieces of a film either resist union or snap together with a satisfying click. So "watching an actor get the interpretation of

a complex but coherent character just right" does not serve as a counterexample to those in *Hollywood Aesthetic*; it is, rather, an illustration of one of the book's central points.

Hollywood Aesthetic *argues that the challenges posed by joining different things leads us toward exhilarated pleasure, as the separate pieces of a film either resist union or snap together with a satisfying click.*

Keating's "more technical" criticism, I believe, is that I want to have my cake and eat it too when I try "to count the same technique as evidence of both" unity and disunity. In one part of the book, for instance, delay in a narrative holds a movie together by connecting different plot elements (unity), whereas in another part of the book delay pulls a movie apart by separating different plot elements (disunity). This contradiction, he says, points to an ambiguity about whether I am using an "objectivist" or "functionalist" definition of narrativity. Keating concludes that I am mostly functionalist but that I eat the objectivist cake when I want it.

Keating is right that I regard narrative delay as an example of both unity and disunity because it is. Indeed, it is the kind of narrative device (like planting and payoff, deadlines, and twists) that Hollywood gravitates toward because the device accomplishes so much aesthetically—not just curiosity, suspense, and surprise, but also hypothesis formation, problem-solving, focused attention, insight, tension release, successful prediction, incongruity resolution, and interconnection.[4] I do not see a problem in the fact that a single device can fulfill multiple functions, even opposing functions.

Objectivist and functionalist approaches may treat "narrativity" in different ways (one approach may regard a device like delay as decreasing narrativity, the other as increasing it), but, as approaches to narrative analysis, they serve different purposes. Objectivist approaches help us explain the formal features of narratives, whereas functionalist approaches help us explain narrational effects. The approaches are not incompatible unless one is trying to determine whether a device increases or decreases narrativity. But if we are instead trying to determine what Hollywood narration is (objectively) and what it does to an audience (functionally), then we must take both approaches. Indeed, aesthetics, as I say above, relies on both objective reasoning and subjective experience.

Chapter 5 of *Hollywood Aesthetic* is fundamentally functionalist, organized around different aesthetic effects of Hollywood style. Keating argues that some of the devices that I "count as disunities or dissonances or even as antinarrative techniques" are not "antinarrative" in functionalist terms, since they produce narrative effects of suspense, curiosity, and surprise. I agree and say as much when I write: "Of course, at some point, it becomes impossible to separate almost any component of Hollywood film style from its narrative function; in Hollywood filmmaking, style and narrative inevitably intersect" (95). Indeed, I never describe such devices as "antinarrative"; that is Keating's term. I do, however, say that they offer pleasures "independent of whatever storytelling purposes they might *also* fulfill" (95, emphasis added). I wanted to show

in the chapter that we can gain aesthetic pleasures from Hollywood's stylistic properties *in* themselves—stylistic pleasures distinguishable from whatever narrative pleasures such properties may also offer us.

So, do I think Patrick Keating's criticisms have failed to land on *Hollywood Aesthetic*? I want to argue that I have dodged any hits, but I must acknowledge the impact of his larger point, as evidenced by his brief descriptions of some pleasures to be found in *All About Eve* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950), *Sweet Smell of Success* (Alexander Mackendrick, 1957), and *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) and, in particular, by his extended aesthetic analysis of a sequence from *Sadie McKee* (Clarence Brown, 1934). The theories and analytical techniques I offer in the book, it turns out, cannot totally capture the aesthetic value of that sequence. I will, presumptuously, summarize Keating's larger point as follows: "Todd, you may think that you have offered a comprehensive appraisal of Hollywood's aesthetic capacity, but there is more to the Hollywood aesthetic than your book can account for." I think he is too kind to put his criticism so bluntly, so I put it that way myself and, grudgingly, agree.

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Notes

[1] See Carroll (1996).

[2] For a counterexample, see Timothy Justus's 2019 article in this journal, which includes humanities, behavioral science, and natural science research on the filmic uses of Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*.

[3] Malcolm Turvey (2020) points to this and some other problems with using science in film studies.

[4] For an examination of these various cognitive effects and the aesthetics of the "planting and payoff" device, see Berliner (2020).

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