

Rosemary's horror turns to domestic acceptance of her role as stay-at-home demon-mother, suggesting that the Betty Friedanian isolation of the housewife trumps the liberating potential of the apartment.

Lastly, Chapter 5 takes on the marginalized role in the apartment plot of the African American tenant. The chapter begins and ends with the *The Jeffersons* in the 1970s moving from a house in Queens to "a deluxe apartment in the sky" on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. A rare and late example of geographic and class mobility for black protagonists in the genre, the series demonstrates that this "philosophy of urban life" and its cultural representation is tacitly a white philosophy. Though the postwar period saw large migrations of blacks to Northern cities, their appearance in the genre happens rarely enough to suggest a cultural version of 1960s "urban renewal" policies, or what James Baldwin called "Negro removal" (227). As earlier chapters showed the apartment in dialogue with the suburb, here the tenement, in films like *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Watermelon Man*, becomes the other space that helps to define the African American apartment (as the business practice of redlining made the suburbs an impossible choice for blacks). These films critique the status quo, Wojcik notes, showing the failure not only of "access to different neighborhoods, but access to an ideal of the urban," the kind described by Jacobs but unavailable to all (at least, not yet).

*The Apartment Plot* is a deeply researched and engaging volume standing at the busy intersection of film, cultural, and urban studies (though the film studies thoroughfare is the widest). Reading it will give city dwellers a renewed sense of why they put up with it, and any film lover a wealth of films, both classic and forgotten, to see with fresh eyes.

### *Hollywood Incoherent: Narration in Seventies Cinema*

By Todd Berliner

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### **Reviewed by Kevin M. Flanagan**

If the first eruptions of the United States' youthful "new wave" cinema of the late 1960s—epitomized by such landmark case studies as *Bonnie & Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1966), *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), and *Alice's Restaurant* (Arthur Penn,

1969)—flirted with the formal, stylistic, and political commitments of their European counterparts, then the American cinema that came to typify and characterize the 1970s can be seen as a refinement of available traditions, built as strongly on Hollywood seductions as on sophisticated continental aesthetics.

One of the guiding enthusiasms of Todd Berliner's *Hollywood Incoherent* is an eloquent, sustained defense of this hybrid form of filmmaking that effortlessly played with both the normative assumptions of classical Hollywood cinema—the dominant film practice tacitly supported by the major studios through the 1960s—and the exciting new styles offered by an *auteur*-driven international art cinema. According to Berliner, this “Hollywood cinema of the 1970s tends to nestle idiosyncratic and complicating devices within a familiar and stable structure” (9).

In *Hollywood Incoherent*, the films afforded the most scrutiny are recognizable to mainstream audiences as those of rare artistry and quality. Moreover, with the exception of the chapter covering the aggressively independent work of director John Cassavetes, most of the films examined at length were monetary successes, to the extent that they (taken together) can be said to have salvaged (perhaps even *saved*) the American film industry from liquidation. A casual browse through *Hollywood Incoherent* reveals that Berliner appears to be grappling with an AFI Top 100 version of the decade: *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) and *The Godfather, Part II* (Coppola, 1974), *The French Connection* (William Friedkin, 1971) and *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976) loom large, as do the diverse offerings of Woody Allen and Robert Altman.

Despite the well-worn, overly familiar quality of some of the films up for discussion, Berliner is not making an easy appeal for their continued relevancy. Nor is he ceding to such tropes as accessibility or unclouded nostalgia. Rather, Berliner wants to situate many of the popular films of the 1970s as successful *because of* their complexity. High-profile Hollywood films made before the ascendancy of the “blockbuster” model—fashioned into orthodoxy with the astronomical successes of *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) and *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977)—are worthy of sustained discussion, he argues, because of their skill at reconciling the messiness of the world with the compelling characters and kinetic narratives on which the industry built its name.

According to Berliner, "what matters most about films of the seventies—what makes people remember them and return to them—is not so much their themes, politics, or cultural relevance, as previous studies of the period have contended, but their unusual manner of storytelling and the gripping, unconventional experiences they offer spectators" (5). This narrative "perversity," a kind of pleasure through weirdness, typifies the achievement of the 1970s (5-11).

The title *Hollywood Incoherent* obviously nods to Robin Wood's seminal essay "The Incoherent Text: Narrative in the '70s," famously reprinted in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (1988). But as Berliner notes, he is less interested in allegorical or ideological incoherence—the axis of Wood's emergent brand of Marxist-Freudian analysis—than with violations of conceptual unity and narrative causality (26). One way to frame Berliner's project is to see it as a sustained attempt at making sense of what happened to Hollywood cinema in the nebulous moment at which it became fully articulate as "Post Classical."

Unsurprisingly, Berliner does extensive work with the brand of neo-formalist analysis most readily allied with David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson. Berliner's break with Wood and alignment with Bordwell and Thompson is even explicitly announced: "Political, historical, and ideological analysis, although potentially useful in understanding how movies function within culture, cannot answer myriad fundamental questions about cinema that neoformalist film analysis addresses directly, the most fundamental being, 'How does a film construct an aesthetic experience?' " (18). He is primarily addressing the narrative poetics (inclusive of formal and stylistic devices) that coalesce to form the storytelling apparatus. From the early stages of the book, then, one expects carefully argued close readings. These are delivered, but sometimes at the cost of the kind of culturally and politically transformative rhetoric (the utopian imagination) favored by scholars like Wood, Michael Ryan, and Douglas Kellner.

The book's truly delightful twist (I could go so far as to call it the "productive perversity" of its own argument) is that, after turning to a brief discussion of "Incongruity Theory"—the conceptual domain of psychologists and anthropologists who study how humans make logical and informed decisions when faced with nonsensical violations of their established situational reality—it begins to think about incoherence through the lens of research by scholars of humor

and comedy (29). This is not to say that Berliner seeks comedic eruptions in films that are primarily intended to be read as serious. Rather, "in humor or in serious situations, narrative incongruity induces us to mentally resolve a discrepancy between what context tells us must be true and what logic, pattern, or probability tell us should not be true" (31). As viewers, even of supposedly streamlined Hollywood entertainment, we are constantly channeling narrative meaning through the wild synthesizing power of jokes.

After establishing this context for pleasurable incongruities, Berliner offers chapters that focus on close readings of specific films. Each chapter situates the chosen text within its avowed genre and production contexts. But instead of thinking of films such as *The Godfather*, *The French Connection*, and *The Exorcist* as typical of those genres, Berliner writes each case study to show how exceptional and incoherent narratives have transcended genre dictates, usually through some combination of authorial intention, the influence of European art cinema, and the ambitions of an industry that was temporarily (at least) committed to offering its dwindling audiences something new.

Berliner's defense of 1970s movies—films that take the middle way between popular entertainment and art cinema, or *auteurist* indulgence and tested genre credentials—seems to peak with his carefully structured chapter on *Taxi Driver*. This high estimation only partially has to do with DeNiro's famously volatile performance as Travis Bickle, Paul Schrader's fluent script, and expertly chosen New York City locations. A calculated inconsistency in its palette of film techniques accentuates the other aspects: "In *Taxi Driver*, Scorsese creates idiosyncratic stylistic devices so pervasive and bold that they become a form of narration in themselves, cueing spectators to frame hypotheses and draw inferences based on patters in the film's style" (153). The ensuing chapter, more than any other in the book, makes excellent use of screen grabs and frame enhancements in order to argue for the film's success in merging abstract and mainstream visual grammars in service of a challenging, memorable film experience. Berliner's *Hollywood Incoherent* does not provide the broadest and most comprehensive estimation of the films of the 1970s, but it does offer one of the most revelatory.

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