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Todd Berliner.   *Hollywood Incoherent: Narration in Seventies Cinema.*
Austin: U of Texas P, 2010. 288 pp.

Todd Berliner's study dwells on the ways a cycle of lauded films strained
the conventions of classical Hollywood narrative, resulting in movies that
are more frustrating, more open-ended, more "incoherent" than typical fare.
Berliner traces these perturbations in several dimensions of famous films
produced from 1970-1977: departures from linear, cause and effect plots;
upending of genre conventions; characterological ambiguities; conceptual
confusions; and unresolved endings.

Though consistently well-written, intelligent, and intriguing, the book's
greatest strength lies in its close readings of sample films — *The Godfather, Part
II* (1974); *The French Connection* (1971); *The Exorcist* (1973); *Taxi Driver* (1976);
and *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974). Close readings often dwell on aspects
of the film that any well-versed viewer would or could see; one enjoys them
as a confirmation of one's own experience. In this case, however, I could
have watched these films many more times and never noticed some of the
inconsistencies that Berliner highlights. And he's right: the Havana episode
in *The Godfather, Part II* really makes no sense, and the Hyman Roth subplot
is full of gaping holes. Yes, I see now that the climax of *The Exorcist* is riddled
with contradictions, from the non-development of Damien's character, to the
radical switch in strategies of dealing with the Devil, to the ending's quasi-
endorsement of a *suicide* of a Catholic priest. Berliner's laser sharp atten-
tion to detail of these films — he has great insights too on *Chinatown* (1974),
Nashville (1975), and *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) — make us pause again and
again over their strangeness.

Berliner's account of why this incoherence surfaces in these years,
however, doesn't break new ground. He provides a clear and cogent summary
of factors well known from earlier research: the economic shifts in the film
industry, the managerial chaos at the studios, the fall of the production
code, the influence of European art cinema, the self-conscious, "film-school"
educations of a new generation of directors, etc. (Given these familiar causes
I am puzzled by Berliner's periodization: why not start his study in 1967
with *Bonnie and Clyde* as so many other scholars focusing on New Hollywood
do? He never provides a truly satisfactory explanation for 1970-77.) Berliner
describes himself as a follower of Kristen Thompson and David Bordwell
in employing neo-formalist poetics. Whatever one's methodology, a film
theorist should, I believe, declare where he stands on the issue of intentional-
ity. Berliner is frustratingly mum about whether he believes that these films'
incoherencies are deliberate, conscious strategies on the part of the filmmak-
ers. On the one hand, he places great stress on Scorsese's power over and
story-boarding of every shot in *Taxi Driver*, emphasizes Cassavetes' rehearsal
methods, and quotes the screenwriter of *The Exorcist*. But he is silent about
whether most of dangling threads he points to are deliberate or just mistakes.

More troubling to me are the conclusions that Berliner draws about the effects of the narrative incoherence in his chosen films. He pushes so hard on his thesis that one is tempted to bring up counter-examples: what about the fact that in the *Wizard of Oz* (1939) there's no solution to the Toto-Miss Gulch subplot? What about the famous dangling murder in *The Big Sleep* (1948)? Doesn't *The Golddiggers of 1933* (1933) correspond even more poorly to conventions of the musical than *The French Connection* corresponds to our expectations about a *policier*? But such counter-arguments would be a little silly, because intuitively I agree with Berliner: on some imaginary scale of incoherence, his seventies examples are indeed more so. No, what troubles me most is that Berliner claims that the incoherence of these works *accounts* for their aesthetic value: "Narrative perversities," he writes, "are exceptionally productive in creating the rich aesthetic experiences that have made seventies films among Hollywood's most treasured creations" (11). Berliner turns to incongruity theory in psychology, a body of research that suggests that incongruity creates humor, although this research is itself quite provisional and complicated. In a large and unsubstantiated leap, Berliner then claims that

> the perceiver's process of resolving incongruity is the same [as in gags and jokes] and has the same potential to inspire creative mental associations freed from governance of pattern, probability and strict story logic. Like incongruities in jokes, narrative incongruities in seventies films have the potential to excite in us a playful process of free association. (31)

To imply that *The Godfather, Part II* is a great film *because of* its narrative incoherencies—rather than its acting, music, cinematography, thematic resonances, etc.—troubles me. Nor am I at all convinced *The Exorcist*'s conceptual incoherence should be credited as the force that made it stand out from the other 150 horror films surrounding it.

Finally, I am troubled by Berliner's repeated disparagements of cultural studies and ideological readings of these films. In addition to proving an explanation of New Hollywood's unique narrative style, he uses this study to make an impassioned brief for his methodology. One can demonstrate the advantages of neo-formalist poetics as he does in his close readings without seeking to de-legitimize other approaches. I am as deeply intrigued by narrative experimentation as the next guy, but I ultimately quit teaching my course on New Hollywood because I could no longer stomach the canonized films' relentless violence, insufferable male-centeredness, and outright misogyny. (Peter Biskind's *Easy Riders/Raging Bulls* (1998) confirms the tone pervasive in the movies through biographical and production information.) This would make me, in Berliner's eyes, a non-normative viewer. Who gets to define normative here? And shouldn't we look at movies through whichever lenses have the most explanatory power?

Sarah Kozloff, *Vassar College*