

"The Last Good Time We Ever Had"

Remembering the New Hollywood Cinema

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That an aesthetically experimental socially conscious *cinema d'auteur* could exist simultaneously with a burgeoning and rapacious blockbuster mentality was extraordinary, but it became the defining mark of 1970s cinema. That the two could co-exist for long, however, was an illusion as ephemeral as the notion of liberal ideological consensus.¹

Who the hell is talking to you like this? How OLD is he? The author is 52 and he loved the decade of the 1970s and its movies. We had movies then that you had to *watch*. Many of them had unfamiliar shapes, new narrative structures or strategies. They began late. They switched course. And they did not end well or happily or comfortably. Sometimes they broke off in your hands, or your mind.²

The economic disaster of 1970 produced a lot of official proclamations of change, but in the final analysis things didn't change very much. For all the successes of a few small films, it was finally the more predictable successes of big films and big stars that carried Hollywood bookkeeping back into the black. Now, more than ever before, Hollywood is on the lookout for the "presold" project, the films that come with a formula for guaranteed success: films based on runaway best-sellers and hit plays, or films with stars who in themselves are so big that they generate their own publicity.³

I

In *A Confederate General at Big Sur*, Richard Brautigan refers to "the last good time this country ever had."⁴ As we move into the twenty-first century, that phrase also captures the way we are invited to remember the period of New Hollywood Cinema, as a brief moment of cinematic aesthetic adventure that

happened between the mid-1960s and the mid to late 1970s and then vanished. In his recent history of this period, *Lost Illusions*, David Cook sees the years from 1969 to 1975 as an "aberration" (p.xvii), a "richly fruitful detour in the American cinema's march towards gigantism and global domination," (p.xvii) as the franchise triumphs over the notion of the individual film. And in his review of the most recent edition of Robert Kolker's *A Cinema of Loneliness*, Jon Lewis, one of the most prominent of contemporary historians of contemporary Hollywood, refers to "this wonderful and brief moment" of New Hollywood.⁵

Of course any notion of a "New Hollywood" will always be a discursive construction of a particular kind. Different critical accounts seek to describe changes in Hollywood filmmaking in the period from the 1960s to the present, and although these acts of criticism target an agreed period of Hollywood film history they make different claims for what is significant about that period. The result is that "New Hollywood" does not remain the same object across its different critical descriptions. We encounter a series of competing accounts of "the new" in relation to "New Hollywood".⁶

But one strong strand of criticism sees "New Hollywood" as a brief window of opportunity running from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, when an adventurous new cinema emerged, linking the traditions of classical Hollywood genre filmmaking with the stylistic innovations of European art cinema. This concept of "the new" is predicated on a new audience demographic making its aesthetic preferences felt by opting for a new kind of cinema, alliteratively described by Andrew Sarris as a cinema of "alienation, anomie, anarchy and absurdism".⁷

This account of "the new" is followed quickly by the arrival of the "movie brats," a film-school educated and/or film-critical generation who began making commercial American cinema with an élan that, for some, recalled the emergence of the "French New Wave". The 1960s saw Martin Scorsese graduate from NYU film school (as Jim Jarmusch, Susan Seidelman and Spike Lee would later), Brian De Palma attend Columbia and Sarah Lawrence while on the West Coast Francis Coppola, John Milius, Paul Schrader and George Lucas graduated from UCLA and USC. They were reading the 1960s American film criticism of Pauline Kael, Andrew Sarris and Manny Farber, absorbing the influence of *Cahiers du Cinéma* on Anglo-American film criticism, and admiring the films of Bergman, Fellini, Antonioni, Bertolucci, Truffaut and Godard. Accordingly, some accounts of New Hollywood see this moment as the explicit inscription within American filmmaking of the critical practice of auteurism, resulting in a self-consciously auteur cinema.⁸

Noel Carroll calls this period of American filmmaking a "cinema of allusion" and claims that a shared practice of allusionistic interplay is a distinguishing feature of the work of New Hollywood filmmakers.⁹ By "allusion"



Randy Quaid, Jack Nicholson and Otis Young in *THE LAST DETAIL*

Carroll means "a mixed lot of practices including quotations, the memorialisation of past genres, homages, and the recreation of 'classic' scenes, shots, plot motifs, lines of dialogue, themes, gestures, and so forth from film history, especially as that history was crystallized and codified in the sixties and early seventies."¹⁰ Steve Neale's description of *RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK* (1981) as a film which "uses an idea (the signs) of classical Hollywood in order to promote, integrate and display modern effects, techniques and production values" would support Carroll's view.¹¹ This notion of a "cinema of allusion" generated by references to other cinematic practices, mainly classical Hollywood cinema and European art cinema, was anticipated by Stuart Byron's claim that John Ford's *THE SEARCHERS* (1956) was the ur-text of this New Hollywood, a cult movie referred to in Scorsese's *TAXI DRIVER* (1976), Lucas' *STAR WARS* (1977), and Schrader's *HARDCORE* (1978).¹² Similarly, the three films that brought Peter Bogdanovich to prominence, *THE LAST PICTURE SHOW* (1971), *WHAT'S UP DOC?* (1972) and *PAPER MOON* (1973) were loving tributes to the cinema of Howard Hawks and John Ford (about whom he had made the AFI documentary, *DIRECTED BY JOHN FORD*), and to lapsed classical Hollywood

genres such as madcap/screwball comedy. This New Hollywood practice of cinematic citation continued into the 1980s with Schrader's 1982 remake of Tourneur's 1942 horror classic, *CAT PEOPLE* and *AMERICAN GIGOLO* (1980) concluding with an homage to Bresson's *PICKPOCKET* (1959). Schrader also cites Bertolucci's *THE CONFORMIST* (1969) as a film "I've stolen from ... repeatedly," and says that Nic Roeg/Douglas Cammell's film *PERFORMANCE* (1970) "is very invigorating visually – if you ever need something to steal, that's a good one to check up".¹³

If we were to add TV as another element in the intertextual-nostalgia-memorialisation process, Carroll could be describing attempts in the 1990s to unify parent and child via a nostalgic cinematic recovery of TV memory: witness such films as *THE FUGITIVE*, *THE FLINTSTONES*, *THE ADDAMS FAMILY*, *ADDAMS FAMILY VALUES*, *MAVERICK*, *THE BRADY BUNCH*, *THE BEVERLY HILLBILLIES*, *MISSION IMPOSSIBLE*, *THE AVENGERS* and *THE SAINT*. Carroll also claims that this citational cinematic practice assumed a particular reading competence on the part of its cinéliterare audience, resulting in a two-tiered genre film that united a strong action through-line derived from classical Hollywood genres, with some of the more recondite, abstract aspects of European art cinema: "there was the genre film pure and simple, and there was also the art film in the genre film."¹⁴

Functioning alongside the "movie brat" film school and often overlapping with it was another film school: the Roger Corman exploitation world of AIP and New World Films. Corman's influence on the New Hollywood can scarcely be overestimated. From his time with AIP through to his establishing of New World Films, Corman provided opportunities for such directors as Scorsese, Coppola, Bogdanovich, Monte Hellman, James Cameron, John Sayles, Joe Dante, Jonathan Demme, Jonathan Kaplan, John Milius, Dennis Hopper, Ron Howard, Amy Jones and Stephanie Rothman; and for such actors as Jack Nicholson, Robert DeNiro, Bruce Dern, and Keith Carradine. Carroll credits Corman with having established the "two-tiered" film: "Increasingly Corman's cinema came to be built with the notion of two audiences in mind: special grace notes for insiders, appoggiatura for the cognoscenti, and a soaring, action-charged melody for the rest"¹⁵ and a link with the "Old Hollywood" is apparent in the fact that both Carroll and Jim Hillier note that Corman's workers likened themselves to the "Hollywood professionals" of the studio era, specifically to Raoul Walsh.¹⁶

Writing a decade earlier than Carroll, Thomas Elsaesser had noted the emergence of a "new liberal cinema" in 1970s America and saw it as breaking away from the classical Hollywood fictional world in which the heroes were "psychologically or morally motivated: they had a case to investigate, a name to clear, a woman (or man) to love, a goal to reach", and moving towards cine-

matic fictions in which goal-orientation can only figure as nostalgic.¹⁷ According to Elsaesser, 1970s American cinema saw the "affirmative-consequential model" of the classical Hollywood film replaced by a more open-ended, looser-structured narrative. As a result New Hollywood cinema displayed "a kind of malaise already frequently alluded to in relation to the European cinema – the fading confidence in being able to tell a story." But Elsaesser was also quick to say that the New Hollywood cinema achieved its innovations by "shifting and modifying traditional genres and themes, while never quite shedding their support."¹⁸

After the first two moments of the "New Hollywood" – the brief period of studio uncertainty that allowed experimentation in the early 1970s (under the alibi of the pursuit of the youth audience) and the time of the "movie brats" – the next distinctive moment of "New Hollywood" is one on which ALL critics agree: the period of Hollywood after 1975, after the release of Steven Spielberg's *JAWS*. David Denby says, "The movie business, perhaps American culture, has never recovered from that electric media weekend in June 1975 when *JAWS* opened all over the country and Hollywood realized a movie could gross nearly 48 million dollars in three days. Ever since, the only real prestige has come from having a runaway hit".¹⁹ We now know that when *JAWS* opened at 464 cinemas and went on to become the biggest grossing film of all time (well, for two years, until George Lucas's *STAR WARS* came along and topped it) we entered the era of high concept and summer hits. As Hoberman puts it, *JAWS*'s "presold property and media-blitz saturation release pattern heralded the rise of marketing men and 'high concept'."²⁰ Justin Wyatt would then seem justified in claiming "high concept" as "perhaps the central development within post-classical cinema."²¹

Thomas Schatz sees the concentration on the blockbuster as an inglorious distinguishing feature of the New Hollywood period. In the classical Hollywood studio system, he says, "ultimately both blockbuster and B movie were ancillary to first-run feature production, which had always been the studios' strong suit and which the New Hollywood has proved utterly incapable of turning out with any quality or consistency."²² The post-*JAWS* world, however, was one in which blockbuster films were conceived as "multi-purpose entertainment machines that breed music videos and soundtrack albums, TV series and videocassettes, video games and theme park rides, novelizations and comic books."²³ The media hype surrounding the theatrical release of films like *BATMAN* and *JURASSIC PARK* "creates a cultural commodity that might be regenerated in any number of media forms".²⁴

The clarity of this third moment of change is conveyed by the brute commercial fact that post-1975 blockbusters have proved the most profitable films of all time. As Hoberman says, "Hollywood's ten top-grossing films have all

been released since 1975. And even if one adjusts the figures to compensate for the dollar's reduced purchasing power, seven of the all-time blockbusters were still made between 1975 and 1985."²⁵ In *A Cinema Without Walls*, Timothy Corrigan ponders this new situation by looking back on the conglomerate take-overs of the majors in the 1960s and 1970s, the later pressures from video and cable television and the way the status of the blockbuster has come to figure in the corporate thinking of New Hollywood:

Far more than traditional epic successes or the occasional predecessor in film history, these contemporary blockbuster movies became the central imperative in an industry that sought the promise of massive profit from large financial investments; the acceptable return on these investments (anywhere from \$20 million to \$70 million) required, most significantly, that these films would attract not just a large market, but *all* the markets.²⁶

Many critics felt this form of cinema was achieved at the expense of a more meditative, adult cinema that had been present in the first two moments of the New Hollywood. Pauline Kael said that conglomerate control of the studios meant there was less chance for any unusual project to get financed. Andrew Sarris said "the battle was lost when Hollywood realized in 1970 that there was still a huge middle American audience for *AIRPORT*"²⁷ and, in a much-quoted phrase, James Monaco said, "Increasingly we are all going to see the same ten movies."²⁸ Monaco said that in 1979, and now we would have to say that the number is now far fewer than ten. The phrase that came to characterise this emphasis in Hollywood's economic-aesthetic strategy was the "film event". As William Paul explains: "At the time of the release of *EARTHQUAKE*, Jennings Lang, its executive producer, wrote an article for *American Cinematographer* in which he proclaimed that a movie had to be an 'event' in order to succeed in today's market".²⁹

But there are other ways in which the exceptional commercial success of films like *STAR WARS*, *ET* (1982) and *RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK* indicates a change from the first two moments of New Hollywood. If we set aside questions concerning saturation release and merchandising opportunities, the first two moments saw an auteurist cinema explore and stretch genres such as the western (*THE WILD BUNCH*, *McCABE AND MS MILLER*), the gangster film (*THE GODFATHER* and *THE GODFATHER PART 2*), and the detective-noir film (*CHINATOWN*, *NIGHT MOVES*, *THE LONG GOODBYE*). This laudable moment of thoughtful metafilmic exploration was then cast aside by the success of the late 1970s and 1980s films of Lucas and Spielberg, which marked a more calculatedly naive relation to classical genres. According to this view Lucas' *AMERICAN GRAFFITI* (1973) could be regarded as a transitional text. It was adventurous insofar as it took the then-unusual narrative step of basing its forty-five or so scenes

around as many pop songs, achieving, through the labours of Walter Murch, an innovative sonic depth of field. But the film's great commercial success (made for less than \$1 million and recouping \$55 million) foreshadowed the mix of retro-nostalgia and middle-American populism that would be found in most of Lucas's and Spielberg's blockbuster films of the late 1970s and the 1980s. For Hoberman, the success of these films meant that, "as the seventies wore on, it became apparent that the overarching impulse was less an attempt to revise genres than to revive them."³⁰ Or, as Carroll said, "After the experimentation of the early seventies, genres have once again become Hollywood's bread and butter".³¹

II

Already by the 1990s, the New Hollywood period of 1967 to 1977 and its films had become a benchmark against which developments in contemporary Hollywood cinema could be measured, invoked either to confirm a continuing decline from a time of adventurous commercial cinema or to constitute the most appropriate analogy for any current instances of adventurous American cinema. An example of the latter position is apparent in Quentin Tarantino's 1991 linking of the two periods: "I think right now is the most exciting time in Hollywood since 1971. Because Hollywood is never more exciting than when you don't know."³² There are many examples of the former attitude of lament for an aesthetic decline in American cinema. This has been a persistent discourse from the late 1970s to the late 1990s, in articles by William Paul, Jim Hoberman, Pauline Kael, David Denby, Richard Schickel and David Thomson.³³ The choral lament has increased over the past years as industry practitioners and insiders start to endorse the nostalgic narrative first posited by film-cultural critics.

For example, when interviewed in the "Film School Generation" episode of the *American Cinema* TV series, *Variety* editor Peter Bart identified the early 1970s as the moment when "the interior dialogue in Hollywood studios was corrupted irrevocably".³⁴ Ever since, each film has become "an industry unto itself" as filmmaking becomes a matter of selling the film-as-franchise in "all of its little parts". Judging by two of his recent books, Bart has not changed those opinions. *The Gross: The Hits, The Flops – The Summer that Ate Hollywood* examines the production and reception of the major studio films made for the (northern hemisphere) summer of 1998 by targeting the specific stars, directors, and writers involved in blockbuster films like *GODZILLA* and *ARMAGEDDON* and in smaller films like *THE TRUMAN SHOW* and *SOMETHING ABOUT*

MARY.³⁵ Bart is encouraged by the unexpected success of these last two films because it helps foster the (necessary) illusion that it is still possible for filmmakers to make a hit out of a film that does not bring in big opening weekend dollars. It is always nice when film viewers do not behave as the carefully orchestrated, obedient demographic the Hollywood marketing machine wants them to be.

In *Who Killed Hollywood ... and Put the Tarnish on Tinseltown?* – a collection of his *Variety* and *GQ* columns – Bart continues his critique of contemporary Hollywood by offering sardonic observations on various filmmaking personnel.³⁶ Across a series of short chapters on “suits,” “stars,” “scribes,” and “filmmakers,” *Who Killed?* laments the influence of globalisation on Hollywood filmmaking. Studios no longer are “seedbeds of popular culture” but are “mere appendages of vast multinational corporations grinding out ‘content’ for their global distribution mills”, channelling “new product and ideas into theme-park rides, music, toys, videos, video game emporiums, and all the other ancillary goodies that enhance the revenue streams of their corporate parents.”³⁷

Bart contrasts the late 1990s context as seen from his position as editor of *Variety* to his moment as a participant in New Hollywood filmmaking in the early 1970s when he worked as a studio executive for Paramount, Lorimar, MGM/UA, and briefly as an independent producer. During this time Bart was involved with the production of such films as Coppola’s *THE GODFATHER*, Hal Ashby’s *HAROLD AND MAUDE* and *BEING THERE*, Polanski’s *ROSEMARY’S BABY*, Ted Kotcheff’s *FUN WITH DICK AND JANE*, Franklin Schaffner’s *ISLANDS IN THE STREAM*. As an example of how economic-aesthetic decisions were arrived at in the New Hollywood era, Bart recalls his involvement in green-lighting *HAROLD AND MAUDE*, saying that it was discussed by a handful of executives who admitted they had no idea what it was about but felt they couldn’t lose badly on a film that was costing \$1.2 million, and so approved it. The film went on to turn “a handsome profit”³⁸ and to have longevity as a cult object. The cult status of this film would later inspire Douglas Coupland’s “Harold in West Vancouver” chapter in his *Polaroids From the Dead*.³⁹

As opposed to this form of decision-making, Bart says the contemporary situation is one in which “scores of executives” debate such things as: “will the movie play well in Europe and Asia? How strong is the video and DVD aftermarket? Will the subject matter attract marketing partners like McDonald’s? Will there be tie-ins for toys and other merchandising opportunities? Could the story line inspire a theme-park ride? Could the narrative be captured in a brief TV commercial? Will the star be willing to travel to openings around the world? If the budget is north of \$60 million, is co-financing money available?

Can the producers fund a completion guarantor who will intercede if overages occur?”⁴⁰

Bart can see no likelihood of a return to a more economically restrained form of Hollywood filmmaking: “Given the monumental resources of the multinational corporations, the demands of stars and star filmmakers will continue to escalate.”⁴¹ His lament is supported by one of the most revered screenwriters of the New Hollywood period. In a similarly titled collection, *The Big Picture: Who Killed Hollywood? and Other Essays*, William Goldman says, “Most of the studio guys I’ve met are really smart, but they don’t care much about movies as movies. As slots, yes. As merchandising tie-ins, – oh my – yes. As theme-park rides, you betcha! And that’s the problem. They are mostly ex-agents or business school types. They care about slots and profit and product and Burger King cross-promotions.”⁴² In 1983 Goldman had published *Adventures in the Screen Trade: A Personal View of Hollywood and Screenwriting* to considerable critical acclaim and very healthy sales. In it he offered “nobody knows anything” as the main rule for understanding Hollywood’s strange ways of going about its business.⁴³ In his follow-up volume, *Which Lie Did I Tell?: More Adventures in The Screen Trade*, the anecdote that gives his book its title shows how little his attitudes have changed over the years, and, accordingly, how little some of Hollywood’s business practices have altered in the seventeen years between the two *Screen Trade* books. Goldman is in a Las Vegas room with a producer he doesn’t like. The producer is showing off, making lots of self-important telephone calls as Goldman reads *Sports Illustrated* to indicate his lack of interest in these conversations. Suddenly the producer asks him, “which lie did I tell?”⁴⁴ This is presented as one form of Hollywood lying, the mendacity of the money men. On the other hand, of course, there are the beautiful lies fabricated by under-appreciated storytellers-screenwriters (who can tell us this anecdote) and any other Hollywood worker (director, cinematographer) who recognises the importance of a strong script. Goldman is nearing seventy, and *Which Lie* finds the celebrated New Hollywood screenwriter (who, after all, came to fame with his original screenplay for *BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID*, a screenplay initially famous for the amount it fetched as much as for the story it told) honouring the classical scriptwriting of a man who worked a generation earlier. Ernest Lehman’s eight-minute “crop-dusting” sequence for Hitchcock’s *NORTH BY NORTHWEST* is “one of the very best pieces of action adventure” Goldman celebrates – something that wouldn’t be possible in the post-MTV world of Hollywood editing, which favours a “blizzard of cuts” – while also analysing the filmmaking efforts of some of the hipper contemporary types, the brothers Coen (*FARGO*, *THE BIG LEBOWSKI*) and Farrelly (*THERE’S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY*).

III

Any description of the film-cultural world that came *after* the New Hollywood period discussed in this book can easily become a lament for a lapsed mode of being in the world with cinema: a time of movie-going before the predominance of malls and multiplexes, before brands and franchises, synergies, high concept and film as 'event,' a time when the act of going to see a film at a central city "movie palace" or a double-feature at a suburban cinema was the main event. The nostalgia (overt or implied) for this earlier time is implicit in the severity of the critique of a contemporary situation in which Hollywood film industry spokesman Jack Valenti can describe the release of a film as a "platform to other markets", where films are described as being more or less "toyetic" (and where "toyetic" is regarded as a good thing to be), where watching *GODZILLA* is as much about "tacos and t-shirts" as it is about an imaginative encounter with a celluloid fiction in a movie theatre. It is a world in which, as Robert C. Allen so succinctly puts it, one's relation to the projecting of celluloid on a big screen jostles for space with a pyjama manufacturer's analysis of the Spielberg-produced animated film *AN AMERICAN TALE: FIEVEL GOES WEST*: "We think *AMERICAN TALE* will be strong in sizes 2-7."⁴⁵ From this perspective an earlier time in which we could conceive of the Hollywood studio film as a discrete textual object is replaced by an uglier cultural fact: the individual film as simply the first move in a wider game of media market exploitations. The more this cinematic cultural fall is noted, the more some writers worry about a decline in the standards of Hollywood storytelling as kinaesthetic affect overwhelms the earlier tradition of the 'literate script'. One description of this contemporary form of cinema comes in the script rewrite advice Renny Harlin handed to Joan Didion and John Gregory Dunne (on a film that didn't go forward with them as scriptwriters): "First act, better whammies. Second act, whammies mount up. Third act, all whammies."⁴⁶

If many discussions of the mutations effected in Hollywood filmmaking in the 1970s exhibit a strong strain of romanticism and nostalgia, the question remains whether this nostalgia is historically justified. The David Thomson quotation which appears as my second epigraph openly admits to a nostalgic attitude, and Thomson repeats this position in a 1996 piece for *Esquire* by saying of the New Hollywood films: "I look back on the time of first seeing them as one of wonder, excitement, and passion. It was bracing to face such candid, eloquent dismay; enlightenment does not have to be optimistic or uplifting."⁴⁷ Citing the ending of Spielberg's *THE SUGARLAND EXPRESS* (in which the father is shot) he says, "that was the proper ending; in 1974 that's how American films ended. But Spielberg has never risked that tough an ending again"⁴⁸

For Thomson, Rafelson's *FIVE EASY PIECES* (1970) and *KING OF MARVIN GARDENS* (1972), Ashby's *THE LAST DETAIL* (1973) and Polanski's *CHINATOWN* (1974) – all with Nicholson – constitute a major cinematic achievement in the history of post-1960s Hollywood cinema, representing a time when "the movies mattered" in a way they haven't since. This early 1970s moment becomes the aesthetic "path not taken". Thomson regrets the passing of that brief half-decade period of productive, innovative uncertainty that enabled a more philosophical, risky, and countercultural cinema. This exciting cultural moment is lost as mainstream genre filmmaking is re-established, often by the very young Turks who supposedly were moving away from traditional forms of cinema towards more "personal" films. In one of the paradoxes of the decade, the already existing practice of "blockbuster cinema" is taken by the movie brats to new levels of profitability.

As we consider changes in modes of distributing and encountering movies from the 1970s to now, it would be hard to better some of Allen's descriptions of this immense cultural shift: "The Happy Meal toy our kids demand *before* the film is released derives its value through its strange metonymic connection (in which the part *precedes* the whole) to a movie that commands our attention as a cinema event because it's already been figured as the inedible part of a Happy Meal."⁴⁹ Or, as Jonathan Rosenbaum says in his provocative book, *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Conspire to Limit What Films We Can See*, "When Disney holds all-day 'seminars' about Native American culture and animation techniques for grade school children in shopping malls as part of its campaign to promote *POCAHONTAS*, the point at which advertising ends and education begins (or vice-versa) is difficult to pinpoint."⁵⁰ Rosenbaum is discussing a cultural context in which it is no longer clear whether in watching a theatrical release of a film one is meant to think of the film as "a viewing experience" or "the central object in a marketing campaign".⁵¹ Of course it is both – as he well knows since he reviews films for the *Chicago Reader* – but Rosenbaum, like many commentators, wants to claim that the latter fact deforms the former experience.

In one sense Rosenbaum's *Movie Wars* pursues a point Jean-Luc Godard made in 1982 when he and Pauline Kael debated "the economics of film criticism" (an encounter organised by and subsequently published in the Californian feminist film journal, *Camera Obscura*); namely, that there is an obligation on the film critic to practise a form of cultural analysis that distances itself from the many circuits of publicity and advertising masquerading as cultural commentary (eg *Details* magazine, *Vanity Fair*'s "Hollywood issue").⁵² Godard was referring to "Why are Movies so Bad?, or, the Numbers," an article Kael published in *The New Yorker* (June 23, 1980) which now seems one of the most influential formulations of the position that argues for a continuing decline in

American cinema from the late 1970s.³³ Kael took a five-month break from writing her *New Yorker* column on movies to work for Warren Beatty and Paramount as an "executive consultant".³⁴ She then wrote a piece informed by her insider-knowledge of Hollywood studio film production practices of the late 1970s. Her article reveals its polemical opinion at the outset: "The movies have been so rank the last couple of years that when I see people lining up to buy tickets I sometimes think that the movies aren't drawing an audience – they're inheriting an audience." Kael delivers a familiar lapsarian narrative in which an earlier, foundational era of cinema was presided over by "vulgarian moguls" who were genuinely in touch with a notion of popular entertainment and were ready to face risks that those who replaced them – ex-agents, former TV executives, business school graduates – weren't prepared to take. As a result the quality of the standard studio product goes down. Kael found that the real power in the new, conglomerate Hollywood rested with the advertising and marketing people "who not only determine which movies get financed but which movies they are going to sell".³⁵ She has a nice description of how a script's status is evaluated in that early 1980s Hollywood: "To put it simply: A good script is a script to which Robert Redford will commit himself. A bad script is a script which Redford has turned down. A script that 'needs work' is a script about which Redford has yet to make up his mind."³⁶ It's a tribute to Redford's longevity as a star and to the unchanging ways of Hollywood's packaging of films that Kael's comment still stands; we would only have to add a few other names to go along with Redford's.

For Kael the two main enemies of good American cinema are television – the more cinema "televisionises" itself, the more it squanders its aesthetic obligation to perform specifically cinematic work on and with the image – and conglomeratisation: "Part of what has deranged American life in this past decade is the change in book publishing and in magazines and newspapers and in the movies as they have passed out of the control of those whose lives were bound up in them and into the control of conglomerates, financiers, and managers who treat them as ordinary commodities. This isn't a reversible process..." Indeed not. The recent memoirs contained in Andre Schiffrin's *The Business of Books: How the Conglomerates took Over Publishing and Changed the Way We Read* and some sections of Jason Epstein's *The Book Business* flesh out the consequences right now of the situation Kael is describing twenty years ago, and Rosenbaum's chapter, "Some Vagaries of Distribution" in *Movie Wars* updates the cinema situation in the US.³⁷

For later critics, writing in the 1990s, the decline in quality of American cinema is also the result of the success of the VCR and levels of video rental and purchase. As Janet Wasko says, by 1990 this area of business outgrossed Hollywood theatrical release revenues by 10 billion dollars.³⁸ By 1996 that figure had

risen to almost 12 billion. Writing in 1999, Robert C Allen encountered an even more intensified version of this situation. Allen notes that in 1992 Disney's Buena Vista Division became the largest and most profitable "film" studio in Hollywood, and points out that Christmas 1998 was the first time the launching of a "video game drew more consumers than the highest grossing feature film. In the last six weeks of 1998 Nintendo's 'The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time' produced \$150 million in retail sales, compared with Disney's *A Bug's Life*, the highest grossing film of the season, which did \$114 million."³⁹

Hence the crisis for some ways of thinking about the privileged or simply preferred status of Hollywood celluloid and of a lapsed period of movie-going. Since the 1980s Hollywood films have made far more money from the so-called "ancillary" (syndicated TV, cable, pay per view, etc.) markets than from their social circulation as theatrically released celluloid. Consequently we encounter a slight strangeness of relation between the term "ancillary" and its referent in the world of New Hollywood economics. For of course these ancillary markets are primary and central. Likewise, it seems perverse to refer to the merchandising/franchising elements of a film as an "aftermarket" when they determine much of the structure the film takes in the first place and when they are usually made available to film viewers before the theatrical release of the film.

Allen pushes the issues bound up with different modes of circulation and consumption of films to some kind of philosophical edge when he says, "The shift that occurs[...] – from audience to markets, from film as celluloid experienced in a theatre to film as [film] plus so many other manifestations over so long a period of time – not only alters the logics by which films are made and marketed but alters what the film 'is' in an economic sense, and by extension, in both an ontological and epistemological sense as well." And since it is now the case that theatre owners make more money on "concessions" (the sales at the "candy bar," or "drinks and lollies" as some cultures would say) than on ticket sales, then, as Allen observes, "to theatre owners and managers the most important innovation in recent film exhibition history is not surround-sound or wide-screen but the cup holder."⁴⁰

In the Kael-Godard "economics of film criticism" exchange, Godard said he had prepared for their conversation by reading an article by Kael called "Why is the movie so bad?" Godard then says it should be "the movies" – which in fact it is. He goes on to make many funny, perverse comments, and one of his main points is that, as a film critic, Kael must take responsibility for the state of US cinema. Kael tries to say that critics have little power against advertisers – much as Robert Hughes once responded to the claim that he was a powerful and influential art critic by saying that one might as readily speak of a "powerful beekeeper". If in the short-term Kael's article had the unusual outcome of

setting the terms for a debate with one of the greatest of filmmakers, in the longer term it has generated a series of considerations of the health of American cinema. Every five or ten years a prominent film critic takes a sounding and finds that Kael's criticisms still have pertinence. So, when David Denby asked, in 1986, "Can the Movies be Saved?" he was repeating Kael's polemic, and he too attacked conglomerate control by saying, "they want the smash, they're not interested in the modest profit".⁶¹

IV

In apparent deference to the notion of a "New Hollywood cinema", post 1970s American film sometimes is described as "New New Hollywood." The phrase was used as early as 1978 by David Colker and Jack Virrell in their article on "The New New Hollywood," in the Canadian journal, *Take One*.⁶² In order to set the ground for their series of interviews with Badham, Kagan, Kleiser, Landis, Weill and Zemeckis/Gale, they said that Coppola "might as well be George Cukor, or Otto Preminger, for that matter." The durability of the category is shown by the fact that an account of contemporary Hollywood filmmaking in October 1995 in *GQ* magazine retains the phrase, "the 'new' Hollywood".⁶³

The difficulty in deciding how to remember the period of New Hollywood cinema is indicated by the fact that David Thomson can recall 1970s American cinema as "the decade when movies mattered" while also seeing that decade of film production as one which ushered in "a terrifying spiral ... whereby fewer films were made, most of them cost more, and a fraction were profitable."⁶⁴ Bernardo Bertolucci said of post New Hollywood cinema, "how can an audience desire films if the films themselves do not desire an audience?"⁶⁵ In the current context of this collection of writing on New Hollywood cinema we could rephrase Bertolucci's point to say that the film that wants to attract every viewer is not the kind of film that is being written about favourably in this book. In a recent piece, Jon Lewis points out that, "as the importance of foreign markets increased, Japanese, French, Australian, Canadian and Italian companies, at one time or another during the decade (the 1990s) took control of a major 'American' film studio. By decade's end the term 'American film' had become relative, perhaps even obsolete."⁶⁶ Perhaps this can help (this reader, at least) focus what I am saying which must to some extent be an exercise in nostalgia. The New Hollywood period might be the last good predominantly American time American cinema had. Of course Hollywood has always imported international talent, but the New Hollywood fictions, as Elsaesser's article makes clear, touch on deeply American themes and visions. In the wake

of the current crop of internationally financed globalised narratives New Hollywood of the 1970s might represent the last time American cinema was a distinctive, national entity. And as we read the following contributions to our understanding of New Hollywood cinema, we can see that this golden period of filmmaking also challenged film criticism to find a critical language appropriate to New Hollywood's cinematic achievements. This collection of criticism abundantly and inventively meets that challenge. And so the nostalgia is doubled, and also shown to be both real and justified.

Notes

1. David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam 1970-1979* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2002): xvii.
2. David Thomson "The Decade When Movies Mattered," originally *Movieline* (August 1993): 43, in this volume.
3. William Paul "Hollywood Harakiri," *Film Comment* 13, 2 (1977): 62.
4. Richard Brautigan, *A Confederate General at Big Sur* (New York: Grove/Castle, 1964): 147.
5. Jon Lewis, review of Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman* (Third Edition), in *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies* (August 2002) at <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/film/journal/bookrev/books-august-02.htm>
6. The following argument condenses points made in Noel King, "New Hollywood," in Pam Cook and Mieke Bernink, ed., *The Cinema Book 2nd Edition* (London: BFI, 1999): 98-106.
7. Andrew Sarris, "After THE GRADUATE," *American Film* 3, 9 (1978): 37.
8. James Bernardoni, *The New Hollywood: What the Movies Did with the New Freedom of the Seventies* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co, 1991): 8.
9. Noel Carroll, "The Future of Allusion: Hollywood in the Seventies (and Beyond)," *October* 20 (1982): 51-78.
10. *Ibid.* 56.
11. Steve Neale, "Hollywood Corner," *Framework* 18 (1981): 32.
12. Stuart Byron, "The Searchers: Cult Movie of the New Hollywood," *New York Magazine* (March 5, 1979): 45-48.
13. Paul Schrader, in Kevin Jackson, ed., *Schrader on Schrader & Other Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990): 210-211.
14. Carroll, 56.
15. Carroll, 74.
16. Jim Hillier, *The New Hollywood* (London: Studio Vista, 1992): 47.
17. Thomas Elsaesser, "The Pathos of Failure," originally published in *Monogram* 6 (1975): 13-19, in this volume.
18. Elsaesser, 14.

19. David Denby, "Can the Movies Be Saved?," *New York Magazine* 19, 28 (1986): 30.
20. J. Hoberman, "Ten Years that Shook the World," *American Film* 10, 8 (1985): 36.
21. Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1994): 8.
22. Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Pantheon, 1988): 492.
23. Schatz, "The New Hollywood," in Jim Collins, et al. (eds.), *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* (London: Routledge, 1993): 9-10. For more recent writing on the blockbuster, see Larry Gross, "Big and Loud," *Sight and Sound* 5, 8 (August, 1995): 6-10; Thomas Elsaesser, "The Blockbuster: Everything Connects, but Not Everything Goes," in Jon Lewis, ed., *The End of Cinema As We Know It: American Cinema in the Nineties* (New York: NYU Press, 2001): 11-22; Sheldon Hall, "Fall Features: The Genealogy of the Modern Blockbuster," in Steve Neale, ed., *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood* (London: BFI, 2002): 11-26.
24. Schatz, "The New Hollywood," 29.
25. Hoberman, "Ten Years", 58.
26. Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam* (London: Routledge, 1991): 12.
27. Sarris, "After THE GRADUATE", 37.
28. James Monaco, *American Film Now: The People, The Power, The Money, The Movies* (New York: OUP, 1979): 393.
29. Paul, "Hollywood Harakiri", 59.
30. Hoberman, "Ten Years", 38.
31. Carroll, 56.
32. Quentin Tarantino, in Mim Udovich, "Tarantino and Juliette," *Details* (February, 1996): 117.
33. Apart from the articles already cited in this essay, see Richard Schickel, "The Crisis in Movie Narrative," *Gannett Center Journal* 3 (1989): 1-15; David Denby, "The Moviegoers," *The New Yorker* (April 6, 1998): 94-101; David Thomson, "Who Killed the Movies?," *Esquire* (December 1996): 56-63.
34. Bart is interviewed in the "The Film School Generation" episode of the *American Cinema* TV series (Annenberg/CPB Project: 1995: 60 mins).
35. Peter Bart, *The Gross: The Hits, The Flops - The Summer that Ate Hollywood* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999).
36. Peter Bart, *Who Killed Hollywood? ... And Put the Tarnish on Tinseltown?* (Los Angeles: Renaissance Books, 1999).
37. *Ibid.*, 17.
38. *Ibid.*, 19.
39. Douglas Coupland, "Harolding in West Vancouver," in his *Polaroids From the Dead* (London: Flamingo, 1996): 101-106.
40. Bart, *Who Killed Hollywood?*: 19-20.
41. *Ibid.*, 22.
42. William Goldman, *The Big Picture: Who Killed Hollywood? and Other Essays* (New York: Applause, 2000): 210-211.
43. Goldman, *Adventures in the Screen Trade: A Personal View of Hollywood and Screenwriting* (New York: Warner Books, 1983).

44. *Which Lie Did I Tell?: More Adventures in The Screen Trade* (New York: Vintage, 2001): x.
45. Robert C. Allen, "The Movie on the Lunch-Box." Abbreviated version available as "Home Alone Together: Hollywood and the 'Family Film'," in Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby, ed., *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies* (London: BFI, 1999): 109-131.
46. John Gregory Dunne, *Monster: Living Off the Big Screen* (New York: Vintage, 1997): 37.
47. David Thomson, "Who Killed the Movies?," *Esquire* (December, 1996): 56-63.
48. *Ibid.*, 60.
49. Robert C. Allen, "The Movies on the Lunch Box" (unpublished manuscript, 21).
50. Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Conspire to Limit What Films We Can See* (Chicago: A Cappella, 2001): 10.
51. *Ibid.*, 67.
52. Jean-Luc Godard and Pauline Kael, "The Economics of Film Criticism: A Debate," *Camera Obscura* 8-9-10 (1982): 174-175.
53. Pauline Kael, "Why Are Movies So Bad? or, The Numbers," in Kael, *Taking It All In* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984): 8-20. The article originally appeared in *The New Yorker* (June 23 1980).
54. See Pat Aufderheide, "Pauline Kael on the New Hollywood," *In These Times* (7-13 May 1980): 12, 23. Reprinted in *Conversations with Pauline Kael*, 41-49.
55. Jean-Luc Godard and Pauline Kael, "The Economics of Film Criticism: A Debate," *Camera Obscura* 8-9-10 (1982): 174-175. Also available in Will Brantley, ed., *Conversations with Pauline Kael* (Jackson: Univ. of Mississippi, 1995): 55-74.
56. Kael, "Why Are Movies So Bad? or, The Numbers": 16.
57. Andre Schiffrin, *The Business of Books: How the Conglomerates took Over Publishing and Changed the Way We Read* (London: Verso, 2001); Jason Epstein, *Book Business: Publishing: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2001). Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Some Vagaries of Distribution," in his *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Conspire to Limit What Films We Can See* (Chicago: A Cappella, 2001): 39-48.
58. Janet Wasko, *Hollywood in the Information Age* (London: Polity Press, 1994): 114.
59. Robert C. Allen, "The Movies on the Lunch Box": 5, 11.
60. *Ibid.*, 12. See also Thomas Elsaesser, "The Blockbuster: Everything Connects, but not Everything Goes": 14.
61. David Denby, "Can the Movies be Saved": 34.
62. See Axel Madsen, *The New Hollywood: American Movies in the 70s* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co, 1975); Diane Jacobs, *Hollywood Renaissance: the New Generation of Filmmakers and Their Works* (New York: Delta, 1977/1980); Michael Pye and Lynda Myles, *The Movie Brats: How the Film Generation Took Over Hollywood* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979); Thomas Schatz, *Old Hollywood/New Hollywood* (UMI Research Press, 1983); *Wide-Angle* 5, 4 (1983) is a special issue on "The New Hollywood"; Jon Lewis, *Whom God Wishes to Destroy: Francis Coppola and the New Hollywood* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1995), pp 143-164; David Colker and Jack Virrell, "The New New Hollywood," *Take One* 6, 10 (August 1978): 19-23.
63. See CQ (October 1995), special issue called "The 'New' Hollywood."

64. David Thomson, "The Decade when Movies Mattered," *Movieline* (August 1993) 43-47, 90; David Thomson, *Overexposures: the Crisis in American Filmmaking* (New York: William Morrow & Co, 1981) 27.
65. Bernardo Bertolucci in Enzo Ungari, with Don Ranvaud, *BERTOLUCCI ON BERTOLUCCI* (London, Plexus, 1987) 181.
66. Jon Lewis, "Introduction," to Jon Lewis, ed, *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Film in the Nineties* (New York: NYU Press, 2001) 2-3.

American Auteur Cinema

The Last – or First – Picture Show?

Thomas Elsaesser

For many critics writing in the 1980s, when Hollywood once more began to conquer the world's screens with its blockbusters, the American cinema they loved and admired – the cinema of the great studio directors as well as that of independent-minded auteurs – had entered its terminal decline. Not only was the industry that produced these new event movies different: so were the people who made them, the shoot-them-up plots that obsessed them, the special effects that enhanced them, and the money that drove them. Article after article mourned the 'death of cinema' and poured scorn on those who had 'killed Hollywood'.

The retrospective vanishing point from which these critical obituaries were written was located in the early 1970s. Especially the years between 1967 and 1975 became the Golden Age of the 'New Hollywood', beginning with *BONNIE AND CLYDE* (Arthur Penn, 1967), *THE GRADUATE* (Mike Nichols 1967), *EASY RIDER* (Dennis Hopper/Peter Fonda, 1968) and ending with Roman Polanski's *CHINATOWN* (1974), Martin Scorsese's *TAXI DRIVER* (1975) and Robert Altman's *NASHVILLE* (1975). Coincidentally or not, these were also the years of the most violent social and political upheavals the United States had experienced for at least a generation, and probably not since the Depression in the mid-1930s. Between the assassination of Martin Luther King in April 1968, and Richard Nixon's resignation in August 1974, America underwent a period of intense collective soul-searching, fuelled by open generational conflict, and no less bitter struggles around what came to be known as 'race' and 'gender'. The protests against the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement and the emergence of feminism gave birth to an entirely different political culture, acutely reflected in a spate of movies that often enough were as unsuccessful with the mass public as they were audacious, creative and offbeat, according to the critics. The paradox of the New Hollywood was that the loss of confidence of the nation, its self-doubt about 'liberty and justice for all' in those years, did little to stifle the energies of several groups of young filmmakers. They registered the moral malaise, but it did not blunt their appetite for stylistic or formal experiment. They put aimless, depressive or (self-)destructive characters on the