

## I Genre, star and auteur: an approach to Hollywood cinema

### INTRODUCTION

#### Ways of approaching Hollywood

*New York, New York* is a film produced in Hollywood in 1977 by United Artists. It contains 'bankable' elements around which a characteristic Hollywood deal could be struck by producers Irwin Winkler and Robert Chartoff; a director (Martin Scorsese) and two stars (Liza Minnelli and Robert De Niro). Previous remarkable collaborations between Scorsese and De Niro, most recently *Taxi Driver*, further guaranteed the project. What was less certain was the box-office potential of a film dressed up as classic studio system musical. However, the confidence of the backers was clear; they agreed to a budget of \$9 million. In return they got a film 153 minutes long costing \$11 million. Any film of this length has exhibition problems, but in fact the film was first released in a version of (only) 136 minutes and got longer on re-release. The director had enough power to insist that what he considered a crucial scene – one which cost \$350,000 to shoot – be included despite a general perception that the narrative needed to be tighter rather than more expansive. *New York, New York* was a commercial failure although it has been passionately defended by some critics and audiences.

A study of *New York, New York* could elaborate on some of the stark details outlined in the previous paragraph. The film could be seen in relation to the institution which produced it, in this case, the Hollywood industry, as it was operating in the second half of the 1970s. *New York, New York* is very much a product of the 'New' Hollywood of independent producers, powerful directors and autonomous stars drawn together in speculative one-off projects. The study could focus on the financing of the project, the power-brokering involved during the different stages of production. The marketing, distribution and exhibition of the film would, perhaps, consider the particular challenges presented to the industry in handling a musical – and one of such length. Of particular concern might be the perennial conflict between financial restraint and artistic license; a conflict which would reach its high point with Cimino's *Heaven's Gate*, five years after *New York, New York*, which brought United Artists to financial ruin. Beyond this, the more fundamental debate about production under the 'new' Hollywood compared with production under the studio system might be generated; a debate with unusual significance in this particular case where a deliberate attempt was made to recreate what appears at least on the surface to be the quintessential studio system product in a very different production context.

A different approach to *New York, New York* would be one that focuses less on institutional issues and more on *film form*, the organisation of narrative, the use of *mise-en-scène*, editing and cinematography. For example, the narrative of this fictional musical melodrama/bio-pic is conventionally linear, one event follows the preceding one in a chronological way conveying in the process a cause–effect→cause→effect pattern. Much more unusual, by comparison, is the film's use of very long sequences, partly the result of an improvisational, documentary-style approach. In editing, the rejection of the master shot, that is one which provides an overview of the setting and the

\* By request, Patrick Phillips's key terms (in bold type) do not appear as marginal notes but only in the glossary (see pp. 429–37) [Ed.].

place of the characters within it, in favour of a rhythm of tracking shots creates a distinctive visual style. Most obviously there is the challenge contained in the film's anti-naturalism.

Scorsese has said:

In the city streets I'd seen in MGM and Warner Brothers musicals, New York kerbs were always shown as very high and very clean. When I was a child, I realised this wasn't right, but was part of a whole mythical city, as well as the feeling of the old three-strip Technicolor with lipstick that was too bright and make-up even on the men.<sup>1</sup>

One pleasure of this film is precisely in its contrast between this nostalgic artificiality of the film's look and the edgy improvisational acting of its stars, especially Robert De Niro. (This type of acting which involves actors engaging very intensely with their roles is referred to as the 'Method' and more will be said about this on pp. 144–6.)

In summary, one can describe *New York, New York* in relation to genre, star performance and director: the 'Method' meets the MGM musical through the distinctive visual style and thematic preoccupations of the film's director.

Studies in genre, star and auteur (a director who brings distinctive and recognisable stylistic or thematic characteristics to a film) have developed as the most common critical approaches to Hollywood film.

Genre, star and auteur approaches can be applied to the principal areas of film studies, helping to make sense of, for example:

- 1 the production and marketing practices of the industry;
- 2 the meaning systems at work within the film text;
- 3 the range of expectations which determine spectatorship.

For reasons of length this chapter cannot possibly consider the full complexity of genre-star-auteur across industry-text-audience. The focus elsewhere in this book on industry and spectatorship means that the most appropriate focus here is on assessing the value of these critical approaches to understanding how genre, star and auteur contribute very significantly as 'meaning systems' at work within the film text.

#### Discourse and structure

In the interplay between industry-text-audience, genre, star and auteur critical approaches perform two essential roles, both of which are primarily communicative:

- they function as structures to be deployed by those making the film;
- they function as discourses for those who wish to talk about the film, make sense of it.

To take the second of these first. A discourse is a mode of speech which has evolved to express the shared human activities of a community of people. So, for example, there is the distinctive discourse of the medical and legal professions and there is the discourse of different academic disciplines. Film Studies has, like other disciplines, developed its own language – its own discourse system – to make possible the identification and structuring of that area of human activity and experience with which it is concerned. In addition to narrative and realism, genre, star and auteur are fundamental discourse systems working within the larger discourse system we call Film Studies.

Any language system allows us to:

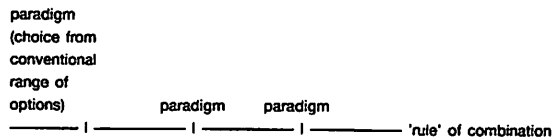
- 1 identify through isolating phenomena and naming them; and
- 2 construct meaning through organising the otherwise shapeless and random into some sort of system.

In applying a generic or star or auteurist approach we are attempting just this with regard to film.

Thinking of a genre or a star or an auteur as a structure allows us to understand how it contributes to the overall meaning we are able to discern in the film. A structure is a combination of elements, this combination governed either explicitly or implicitly by 'rules' which can be identified as a result of study. The elements available for inclusion in a particular structure are limited by convention or common sense. They are referred to in what follows as paradigms.

For example, a western like *Stagecoach* (1939) has a characteristic set of paradigms (locations, characters, costumes, etc.) which operate according to a code, a 'rule' of combination. The star of *Stagecoach*, John Wayne, also has a characteristic set of paradigms (voice, mannerisms, character types, etc.) which are combined in a way which constructs Wayne's very distinctive screen persona. The director of *Stagecoach*, John Ford, similarly brings to the films he directed a characteristic set of paradigms (theme, characterisation, visual style) which possess a 'rule' of combination which allows us to recognise both the individuality of Ford's film and the way this individuality contributes to the overall impression the film makes on us.

The figure below represents in simple outline form the relationship between paradigms and their 'rule' of combination. This structure provides a common approach to the study of genre, star and auteur.



The immediate objection to this 'structuralist' approach is that it seems too abstract and appears to convert the life of a film into a set of lifeless formulae. However, if we accept that genre, star and auteur each provide a set of meanings which are central to our understanding of a Hollywood film and our response to it, then it is important to consider how these meanings work as 'systems'; what are their components and how they work. It is very useful to think of the 'meaning systems' of different genres, stars and auteurs as *communication structures*. And since there are other key structures working within a film as well, most obviously the narrative structure, then it is particularly important to develop the ability both to distinguish between them and to recognise how they work in conjunction with one another.

In fact the major problem with a structuralist approach is not its abstraction but its power. As tools, structures can dominate our thinking, indeed do our thinking for us. We need to be critically self-aware about the ease with which it is possible to force a film or a series of films into a generic, auteur or star 'structure'. Ultimately we need to be alert to the possibility that in constructing an argument around a particular genre,

auteur or star, we may be producing a neatly organised overview - but we may also be constructing a fiction every bit as credible but every bit as contrived as the narratives of the films themselves. For example, having identified common features across two or three films directed by the same individual, it is reasonable to organise these features into an auteur 'structure' which represents this person's work and allows us to talk intelligently about it. We then encounter a film which does not seem to fit the auteur 'structure' we have created. The temptation to force the film into the framework we have constructed, by the most convoluted of means if necessary, is great. Neatness will have been prioritised over genuine complexity and truth. As with other forms of language study, a descriptive rather than a prescriptive approach is to be recommended, that is one which honestly respects what is actually there rather than one which tries to sidestep the messy reality of what is in front of us. A structuralist approach is only a means to an end; our goal is to appreciate the film being studied as well as we can.

## □ CASE STUDY PART 1: NEW YORK, NEW YORK

Consider these three statements:

*New York, New York* is a musical. It has a generic identity.

*New York, New York* is dominated by two stars who define much of the film's identity.

*New York, New York* is directed by an auteur, someone who brings to the film a very distinct identity.

The need to identify, the need to be identifiable, are vital for audience and industry respectively. Concepts and categories are constructed through naming: a musical, a Scorsese film, a Scorsese-De Niro film, a Minnelli vehicle. An audience will be sold a product on the basis of expectations offered, guarantees promised in the perceived identity of the film text. Hollywood sometimes creates this identity, sometimes exploits it after it has emerged in popular culture. These identities are mobilised in the whole social practice surrounding Hollywood cinema, including advertising, media treatment and ordinary conversation, entering freely into circulation as 'common sense' shared by industry financiers and publicists, critics, journalists and audiences.

The fact that disagreements arise over identification opens up critical debate and encourages more detailed analysis. In the case of *New York, New York* a major difficulty arises over its generic identity. Is it a musical? Could it be better described as a melodrama involving musicians? If it is a musical, which of the various subgenres of the musical does it most obviously conform to? Is it a celebration or a deconstruction of the MGM musical with its refusal of a happy ending? (The dismissal by Jimmy Doyle (De Niro) of the lavish *Happy Endings* film within a film as 'sappy endings' will be touched on in the next section.) These questions are all interesting and worth pursuing and are all premised on the notion of generic identity. The ability to agree in some definitive way is less important than the much more basic fact that a critical approach through genre allows the discussion to take place at all, in the process heightening our awareness of the film's complexities and ambiguities.

The presence of Liza Minnelli brings a number of elements associated with her star image. What precisely are we to make of the fact that the film is consciously re-creating



• Plates 5.1 and 5.2

Mother, father, daughter: 5.1 Vincent Minnelli directs Judy Garland on the set of *Meet Me in St. Louis* (US 1944); 5.2 Liza Minnelli in *Cabaret* (US 1972)

the look of her father's MGM musicals or that her onscreen vulnerability is possibly informed by knowledge of her mother, Judy Garland? Perhaps neither of these things is important as the final third of the film becomes a vehicle for Minnelli to 'do her thing', belt out numbers in her distinctive style. Perhaps it is the sassiness which is most important – first established in her Sally Bowles role in *Cabaret* (1972) – and the provocation this provides the De Niro character. The latter is equally easily identifiable as the inarticulate, aggressive male-in-crisis we associate with so many of his collaborations with Scorsese (especially between 1972 and 1982). In arriving at some critical understanding of Minnelli or De Niro's contribution to *New York, New York* a fundamental point has to be acknowledged: that it is star study which allows us to enter into such a potentially interesting and revealing inquiry at all.

An understanding of *New York, New York* is very much enhanced by an appreciation of the identity Martin Scorsese's auteurism brings to the film. With no awareness of his thematic and stylistic preoccupations in films either side of *New York, New York*, it may appear a far less interesting work. Reference has already been made to his conscious 'homage' to the musical, on the one hand, but his rejection of its easy optimism, on the other. Also, reference has been made to the deliberate conflict between improvisational and documentary realist techniques, on the one hand, and the pure artifice of studio sets, on the other. The excess and abundance normally associated with the classical Hollywood musical has become an introverted and dark melodrama of threatened masculinity. Scorsese is one of relatively few directors working in Hollywood today who can unambiguously be described as an auteur. The assembled identity of the auteur, built up through careful viewing of several films in which the individual is clearly the controlling presence, informs analysis and discussion of the film text in potentially very useful ways.

Put very simply, the combination musical-Scorsese-De Niro-Minnelli will produce a film distinctive from one in which any of these four elements are changed. In analysis, knowledge of the identity of each will inform understanding of the other three.

Audiences, students, critics, film historians, marketing executives, actors and directors themselves create identities by selecting significant elements and putting them together into coherent structures. In *New York, New York* we have available an auteur 'structure' (Scorsese), a star 'structure' (De Niro or Minelli) and a genre 'structure' (the musical) each made up of observable characteristics.

Sometimes these structures may be over-elaborate, sometimes over-crude as critical tools – as much of the rest of the chapter will go on to investigate. However, they provide the principal means by which we talk, both critically and conversationally, about Hollywood films.

## GENRE

### How to approach genre?

Genres are formal systems for transforming the world in which we actually live into self-contained, coherent and controllable structures of meaning. Genres can thus be considered to function in the way that a language system does – offering a vocabulary and a set of rules which allow us to 'shape' reality, thus making it appear less random and disordered. Transforming the experience of living into a set of *predictable conventions* provides a number of pleasures. These include anticipation of these predictable features and satisfaction when expectations are fulfilled. (At the same time the 'mix' of

elements is slightly different each time thus providing just enough uncertainty for the spectator to be held by anxious curiosity.)

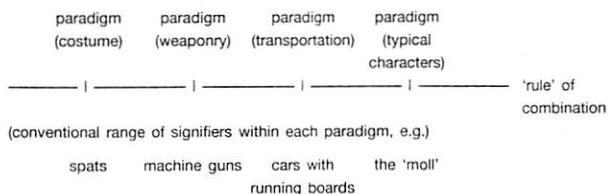
At an ideological level, genre offers a *comfortable reassurance*, closing down the complexities and ambiguities of the social world we actually inhabit, replacing them with patterns of order and continuity deriving from the conventions of genre itself.

Genre and specific generic forms have evolved through the history of Hollywood so that industry and audience alike have learnt to speak through them and have their thinking done by them.

The most common-sense approach to genre is through **iconography** – the props, costumes and settings. In the terminology of semiotics these are signs, visual **signifiers**, which can immediately alert us to the generic identity of a film. The visual signifiers of a western, like *Stagecoach*, are clearly different from those of a techno-thriller such as *Terminator* (1984). Each genre has a limited number of characteristic elements, paradigms (see p. 124). Each paradigm has a limited range of signifiers. We cannot dress or arm or transport a western hero, a city detective and the commander of a space station as we please. Decisions are determined by the limited range of paradigms associated with each genre. Similarly, verbal and musical signifiers, in the form of dialogue and soundtrack, are often closely associated with particular genres.

As formal systems genres have recognisable paradigms made up of signifiers. These are deployed according to rules of combination and the 'structure' which results is one which is highly conventional, highly recognisable. For example, we find in the mise-en-scène of a genre film such as a Warners' gangster film of the 1930s a number of signifiers which, in combination, communicate important aspects of generic identity. The figure below can be used as a template for listing the conventional characteristics of any genre.

The gangster generic structure



One feels an infringement of these 'common-sense' rules if the choice is made of a signifier which does not seem to be on the 'list' of paradigms established by convention. The often quoted example of the introduction of a motor car, and even more disconcertingly a camel, into Peckinpah's western *Guns in the Afternoon* (1962) illustrates well the dramatic effect of going outside the accepted paradigms. This strategy of deliberately selecting inappropriate signifiers has become more common since the mid-1980s and is well illustrated by a film like *Back to the Future III* (1991). More will be said about this on pp. 133–6.

This structural approach helps in tracing continuities and changes within a genre over time. If you try to list the major paradigms of the gangster film and the characteristic signifiers within each of these paradigms, you will become aware of the need to



• Plates 5.3 and 5.4 Paradigms of dress as illustrated here from two gangster movies. *Public Enemy* (Warner Bros. US 1931) and *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, US 1990), may help identify a genre – but not always. We often need to look beyond iconography

differentiate in some respects a Warners' product of the early 1930s such as *Public Enemy* (1931) from *Goodfellas* (1990).

Many genre films cannot be immediately identified by their visual signifiers. A contemporary comedy, a thriller and a melodrama may look identical (though verbal and musical signifiers may help to distinguish them). This leads us to consider whether in identifying the characteristic features of a genre we might more usefully look to the narrative conventions of different genres.

Within Hollywood cinema genre manifests itself in narrative. However, the work of theorists such as Propp and Todorov<sup>2</sup> has emphasised that narratives can be remarkably similar across a range of different genres. Genres which are clearly different from one another in terms of visual, verbal and musical signifiers actually operate according to the same overall narrative structures. It is worth mapping out the major narrative elements of, say, a western, a science fiction adventure and a police thriller to investigate the extent to which this is true. At the most obvious level films classifiable into different genres because of their visual signifiers are simply 're-costuming' narratives which function just as effectively in other genres. *Star Wars* (1976) is often referred to as a western in disguise. Carpenter's *Assault on Precinct 13* (1977) is a reworking of Hawks' *Rio Bravo*, a western of 1959. A study of the opening sequences of Siodmak's *The Killers* (1947) and Siegel's *The Killers* (1964) raises more subtle questions about transitions and transformations between related genres, film noir and the gangster.

If generic identity is simply a superficial if effective way by which film texts multiply a relatively small number of basic narratives, then it is clear that genre study must go beyond these 'superficial' elements if it is to be anything more than just a means by which films are classified. Genre study must reach across its own classification borders if it is to offer real insight and understanding of core elements of mainstream Hollywood cinema.

But where to go if the study of generic signifiers is in itself a 'superficial' form of analysis and if we accept that there is only one narrative structure with a very limited number of variants? One possibility is to consider the different thematic preoccupations of different genres and the contrasting ways different genres manage the same thematic issues. For example, the western or the police thriller are concerned with issues of law and order, contested space, the individual hero and handle them in very similar ways. The musical or the romantic comedy are more centrally concerned with issues of class, status and sexuality but may handle them rather differently.

The relationship between genres and cultural myths is particularly strong. Mythical representations of the nineteenth-century American West or the 'mean streets' of the American city in the 1930s and 1940s are obvious examples. Across this range of myths there are certain recurring figures and situations which dramatise fundamental ideological values and which 'negotiate' shifts in the culture.

In a particularly imaginative study, Frank McConnell<sup>3</sup> offers just four character types and four genres which correspond to the four-stage historical cycle of a culture:

- The King - establishing the state - the epic;
- The Knight - consolidating the state - the adventurous romance;
- The Pawn - trapped in the institutionalised state - the melodrama;
- The Fool - responding to the madness of the state - the satire.

Beyond this McConnell posits a fifth stage in the cycle - apocalypse - a breakdown which leads back to the beginning and the initiation of a new cycle.

It is possible to consider how Hollywood has been particularly preoccupied with, for instance, the 'knights' of westerns and science fiction, the 'pawns' of noir crime and melodrama and the perceptive 'fool' who from Chaplin through the Marx Brothers to Steve Martin comments on the pretension and institutionalisation of contemporary life.

This kind of 'archetypal' criticism attempts to construct broad patterns to break down distinctions which appear in a genre classification system based primarily on contrasting visual, verbal and musical signifiers. Applying McConnell's model we are encouraged to see the ideological interrelationships that exist, for example, across a range of genres where characters are essentially 'pawns' with a sense of entrapment within an oppressive, institutionalised society. It is also possible to identify different tendencies and emphases within a genre by reference to McConnell's cycle: for example, we find in the western not only the four archetypes listed above but the tensions between them.

If what may be seen as a large number of genres actually represent a relatively small number of fundamental ideological/mythical/thematic concerns and if, in commercial Hollywood cinema, they manifest themselves in a remarkably small number of basic narratives, then it seems sensible to look towards forms of classification which emphasise similarity and overlap.

One such model has been provided by Thomas Schatz in his definitive study, *Hollywood Genres* (1981). He adopts a thematic and ideological approach which identifies only two genres: the genre of order and the genre of integration.<sup>4</sup>

**Genres of Order**  
(Western, gangster, sci-fi, etc.)

**Hero**  
Individual (male dominant)

**Setting**  
● Contested space  
(ideologically unstable)

**Conflict**  
● Externalised (expressed through violent action)

**Resolution**  
● Elimination (death)

**Thematics**  
● the hero takes upon himself the problems, contradictions inherent in his society and acts as redeemer  
● macho code of behaviour  
● isolated self-reliance  
(either through his departure or death, the hero does not assimilate the values/lifestyle of the community - but maintains individuality)

**Genres of Integration**  
(Musicals, comedies, domestic melodramas, etc.)

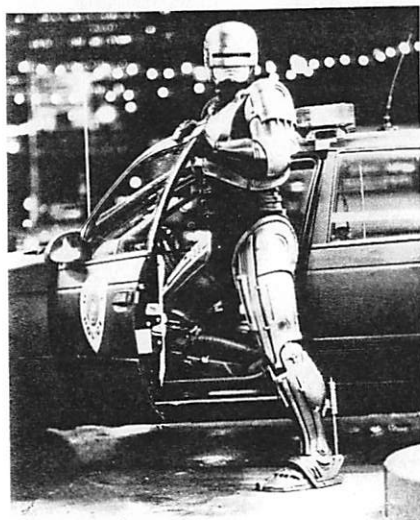
**Hero**  
Couple or collective (e.g. family) (female dominant)

● Civilised space  
(ideologically stable)

● Internalised (expressed through emotion)

● Embrace (love)

● the romantic couple or family are integrated into the wider community, their personal antagonisms resolved  
● maternal - familial code  
● community co-operation



• Plates 5.5 and 5.6 Genres of order. Is it possible to see two genre films, which at face value appear completely different from each other, as having important things in common? Plate 5.5 Stagecoach; Plate 5.6 RoboCop

One value of Schatz's approach is that it allows *Rio Bravo* and *Assault on Precinct 13* to be discussed together, and not only in order to identify a similar narrative structure but also shared ideological themes and effects. The combination of different ideological themes with the standard narrative (disruption of equilibrium — overcoming the resulting crises → restoration of equilibrium) makes possible complex critical analysis. The kinds of disruption which trigger the narrative in different genre films can be compared. What is the nature of the disruption in *My Darling Clementine*? How does it compare with the disruption in *Meet Me in St Louis*? Equally, the means by which narrative resolutions are sought can be compared. What are the principal means used in *RoboCop*? How do they compare with those employed in *Sister Act*? Perhaps most pertinent is to look at the characteristic ways in which narratives in different genres come to a point of closure. To take two notorious recent examples: how is *Fatal Attraction* brought to a point of closure? How does this compare with the closure in *Thelma and Louise*? How can these films separately, together, be linked to ideological themes established over time in several different Hollywood genres?

Schatz's model also encourages the exploration of films which fall between the binary opposites of order/integration presented in his model. Certain films with female protagonists reveal their ideological contradictions precisely in the crossover area between order and integration. Where do we place *Mildred Pierce* or *Thelma and Louise*?

A study of genre which allows, say, *High Plains Drifter* and *Terminator* to be compared collectively to, say, *Desperately Seeking Susan* and *Fried Green Tomatoes* will be significantly more incisive than one which retains its focus exclusively within traditional generic categories such as the western and the comedy. Indeed it can be argued that the latter approach is circular and self-fulfilling: the critic starts off with a notion of the 'essential' elements of some archetypal form called the western and then proceeds to identify them within particular films.

Like the genre itself, this critical approach produces a formal containment and closure of the world it represents, a world reduced to a set of conventions. A genre's apparently freestanding existence in which it appears to make reference only to itself discourages the spectator from thinking beyond the fictional world to the reality which exists outside the cinema. From an ideological perspective it can be argued that tying the spectator into the 'closed' world of the genre closes down the possibility of critical engagement with ideological issues which may be at the heart of the film. It is interesting, for example, to look at a range of Hollywood Vietnam War movies in relation to the extent to which each absorbs ideological issues into the conventions of the war genre.

Western, musical, techno-thriller, psycho-thriller, road movie. If genre study is of value it is in encouraging a marauding approach to the whole of Hollywood. Genre study can easily become the kind of 'strait-jacketing' exercise, warned against on pp. 124–5, which only succeeds in locking the film into the structure which the student imposes on it. What is required is a flexible rather than a pedantic approach to generic classification which encourages creative and productive comparisons to be made across formal generic boundaries such as is encouraged, at least to some extent, by the application of Schatz's model. In fact a 'marauding' approach to genre is best exemplified today from within Hollywood, from film-makers and scriptwriters.

#### Playing with genre

Genre production in the 'New' Hollywood is very different from the way it was under the Studio System of production. In the 1930s and 1940s an efficient and quality

production system was able to turn out films which conformed unproblematically to formulae and satisfied audience expectations. The conventional wisdom of film historians states that the production of standardised generic product was transferred to television in the 1950s. Those genres which remained in production were increasingly determined, first, by social and demographic changes which led to a pandering to the American teenager and, second, by the 'deal' method of putting together a film project which worked to the disadvantage of traditional genre production in favour of the one-off 'concept' or series film. Stars, who under the studio system had further stabilised genre production, were, with notable exceptions, less willing to tie their star image too closely to a specific genre, while the rise of the auteur drove the Hollywood film further into the realms of the 'distinctive' and 'different' and further away from any comfortable acceptance of the generically conventional.

However, the **Studio System** period of genre film production is still central to an appreciation of Hollywood film today. Even, and arguably, especially, films which are preoccupied with transformation and 'hybridisation', have their roots in this earlier period. Accessibility to the standard genre films of the studio period has never been greater. Whether screwball comedy or film noir, they exist alongside the product of the 'New' Hollywood in the continuous present tense of reception – on television and video. The auteurs of the New Hollywood from Scorsese to Tarantino are steeped in classical Hollywood genre and the contemporary cultural condition which they work to reflect and explore includes the 'still-present' of so many past Hollywood films. Hollywood genres make possible transformations precisely to the extent that they are reference points, sites of order, coherence and stability to contemporary culture.

Awareness today of genre among both film-makers and audiences is such that it has become a defining characteristic of what is often referred to as **postmodern** Hollywood.

John Belton, in his excellent *American Cinema/American Culture* (1994), identifies three characteristics of postmodernist cinema:<sup>5</sup>

- First, it is based on pastiche of traditional generic material.
- Second, much of this imitation is of images from the past offered as a nostalgic substitute for any real exploration of either the past or the present.
- Third, this referencing the past reflects another problem the artist faces today: not being able to say anything that has not already been said.

The postmodern artist struggles to make meaning from what appear as the meaningless assembly of the details of contemporary culture. As Belton says (p. 309), 'in transmitting the reality of their social and cultural context, they reproduce only its incoherence'. This can produce work which is superficially exciting, both thematically and stylistically, but which begs questions about any substantial meaning. The Coen Brothers' work is most often cited to illustrate postmodern Hollywood – *Barton Fink* (1991) providing a particularly good example.

'**Bricolage**' – the playful mixing of elements from different artistic styles and periods – finds its manifestation in Hollywood film in the self-conscious use of references, especially generic references from the vast storehouse of images and memories of film accumulated through the viewing and reviewing of films from the past. The access to this storehouse through television, and particularly video, has created a genre-literate culture of considerable sophistication. Reference was made earlier to Peckinpah's shocking use of a motor car and a camel in *Guns in the Afternoon*. The use of these signifiers is motivated by the desire to introduce in a startling way the theme of the



• Plates 5.7 and 5.8 *Raising Arizona* (Coen Bros. US 1986): this baby has genre problems!

West as a place of transition and change. In pastiche and parody films like *Airplane* and *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid*, there is clearly an exploitation of genre for comic effect and the joke depends on a knowledge of genre shared by film-makers and audience.

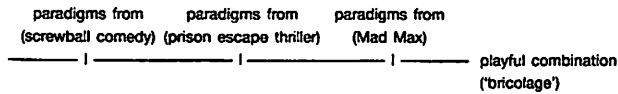
The postmodern goes well beyond this. Jim Collins<sup>6</sup> describes the contemporary Hollywood text as a narrative which now operates simultaneously on two levels:

- in reference to character adventure
- in reference to a text's adventure in the array of contemporary cultural production.

The 'text's adventure' can be described as being in large part the free use of generic signifiers, dissociated from their conventional paradigmatic deployment in stable narratives. *Raising Arizona*, the 1986 Coen Brothers film, provides a vivid illustration of this playfulness. Its overall hybrid generic identity - comic melodrama, social satire, thriller - is intensified by its exploitation of signifiers from an even broader range of genres. The Mad Max biker figure and the escaped convicts come from other generic worlds; the comedy their presence creates is shadowed by other associations, capable of inducing anxiety, even terror in an audience.

In returning to the figure on p. 128 to illustrate the highly stable, conventionalised world of the genre film, we must now take on board the freeing of signs from their generic structures, of signifiers - visual, verbal and musical - available for use anywhere within cultural production. (The music video and advertising provide both the strongest impetus and most vivid illustrations - consider the appropriation of such films as *Metropolis*, *Citizen Kane* and *Casablanca*.)

The generic 'hybrid': some features of *Raising Arizona*



(potentially any signifier from the vast range put into circulation by genre)

The 'playfulness' is dependent on pre-existing generic forms which, in the case of Hollywood, after nearly a century are able to offer a 'vocabulary' rich in association shared across industry-text-audience.

Not only in relation to the hybrid but to the generically unambiguous film, audiences and film-makers are bringing a heightened awareness of genre which is altering the viewing experience and making available different forms of pleasure. Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) uses the signifiers and structures of a particular genre in a highly conventional way - elaborated on by some blockbuster budget special effects and an understated AIDS theme. By contrast, Scorsese's *Cape Fear* (1991) exploits a range of 'vocabularies' within the psychological thriller format. However, in both films there is a 'knowingness', a complicity between film-maker and spectator as they produce meaning in the deployment and reading respectively of the film's generic signifiers. Both film-maker and audience are aware of their revisiting of generically constructed worlds which increasingly are perceived as having their own history, their own independent reality. The self-conscious 'knowingness' is also clearly present in the performances of Hopkins' Von Hessling and De Niro's

Max Cady and in the 'excess' in visual style. Both are further characteristics of postmodern Hollywood and characteristics of postmodern cultural production in general.

The foregrounding of production values, the straining for auteurist signature in the visual style, mark both Coppola and Scorsese's 'performances' as auteurs. (More will be said about the signifiers of performance with regard to stars on pp. 143-4 and with regard to auteurs on p. 153.)

In contrast to the 'new eclectic film' defined in terms of such films as *Blade Runner* (1982), *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988), *Wild at Heart* (1990) and *Back to the Future III* (1990), Jim Collins<sup>7</sup> identifies a counter-tendency in films such as *Field of Dreams* (1989), *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *Hook* (1991). These films, in different ways, are reasserting authenticity, some sense of value and clarity of definition in worlds which, however fictional, are underpinned by a simplicity and reassurance which genre production in Hollywood traditionally provided. Certainly the extravagant reception given to more traditional genre films in 1992 such as Eastwood's *The Unforgiven* or Franklin's low budget *One False Move* suggests, at the very least, a nostalgia for the Hollywood structures to which they conform. However, this same nostalgia which informs the making and the viewing of such films is itself a form of self-conscious knowingness, a variant on the sensibility characteristic of the postmodern condition generally, 'serious', respectful but only a short remove from 'play'. *Reservoir Dogs*, for example, negotiates this border area in a striking way.

To return again to the analogy between genre and language made at the start, it can be said that just as we inherit language so we inherit genre with all its accretions through history. At the same time it can be said that just as we inhabit a language which structures the way we process our world so we inhabit genre. As film-maker, as spectator, the more appreciation of the inheritance, the more understanding of the habitation, the more creativity will be shown by both film-maker and spectator in the making of meaning. Film-makers like Scorsese, Lynch, the Coen Brothers and Tarantino are steeped in genre traditions but use their knowledge in creative and exciting ways.

Genre criticism has the potential to be equally bold, prepared to demonstrate that 'the construction and criticism of genres is itself an important cultural process'.

## □ CASE STUDY PART 2: THE PROBLEMATIC MUSICAL - NEW YORK, NEW YORK AS GENRE FILM

In returning to *New York, New York* I wish to consider the potential of genre study for opening up a specific film for discussion and analysis.

The spectator is first confronted with the problem of classification. A range of visual and musical signifiers indicate that this is a musical, although it is to be noted that there are four sorts of musical, four subgenres present. Most remarkable for a film of 1977 is the homage to the clearly artificial studio sets of the Vincente Minnelli and Stanley Donan-Gene Kelly MGM musical of the late 1940s, early 1950s. However, the performances themselves refer, on the one hand, to the big band era which preceded the great MGM musicals and, on the other, to the modern individualistic star celebration incarnated in the 1970s by Liza Minnelli's *Cabaret* and various Streisand vehicles. In narrative development the film most resembles the musical biography popular in the 1940s and 1950s, though integrating narrative and set-piece elements from the other subgenres referred to here.



The musical numbers occur as part of the narrative, as an actual stage performance – or, in the *Happy Endings* sequence as a film performance – rather than leaving behind the surface realism and going off into another dimension of fantasy and artifice as was the convention in Busby Berkeley Warner Brothers or MGM musicals. Further, these numbers are nearly always fragmented as rehearsals or snatches of performance without the usual production values and with no choreography (except in the *Happy Endings* film-within-the-film).

Like *Cabaret*, it is probably most appropriate to describe *New York, New York* as a melodrama with music. Its main themes revolve around marriage and personal relationships. Scorsese has said:

It could have been a film about a director and a writer, or an artist and a composer. It's about two people in love with each other who are both creative. That was the idea: to see if the marriage would work.<sup>9</sup>

Although there is some complexity, the generic description, as presented so far, allows us to place the film within Schatz's 'Genre of Integration' which includes the musical and the melodrama. The identification of contrasting and potentially conflicting musical subgenres at work within the film is useful in terms of trying to 'name' the film. But this in itself can only be regarded as a means to an end – a delineation of the contours of the film so that greater understanding of the whole might become possible.

However, the description is not yet complete. Richard Dyer<sup>10</sup> identifies the distinctive 'product' of the classic MGM style musical as feeling – abundance, energy, community. Dyer demonstrates how these qualities of the musical provide imaginary solutions to a real world of scarcity, exhaustion, dreariness, manipulation and fragmentation. *New York, New York* singularly lacks this 'feel-good' factor, does not attempt a 'utopian solution' to the problems of living in a real social world. The sets have an eerie, often barren quality to them, their obvious artificiality is used expressively to convey distance, disconnectedness, alienation. This may not quite be the world of *Taxi Driver*, but it certainly suggests the world of film noir. The further underlying ideological issues are explored – issues of masculinity, individualism, contested space – the deeper we travel into that set of descriptors which Schatz drew up to describe not the Genre of Integration but the Genre of Order.

Three moments:

- Jimmy (De Niro) alone observes a sailor dancing with a girl late at night. The couple are alone and there is no music. This is less an 'homage' to *On the Town* (Donen, 1949), than a re-enactment of the kind of alienation and male-angst associated with the period immediately following the end of the Second World War and which is generally referred to by students of film noir as a formative element in the development of that genre.
- Jimmy impulsively decides to marry Francine (Minnelli) – in the middle of a snowy night (of studio-set artificiality). He drives her to the registry office without having proposed or even explained his actions. The scene that follows has elements of both comedy and romance, but it is uncomfortable, at times embarrassing to watch. Neither the comedy nor the romance promises any kind of 'integration'.
- Jimmy and Francine have divorced. Francine is now a movie star. Jimmy goes to see her latest film, *Happy Endings*, which contains Busby Berkeley style choreography



• Plate 5.9 *New York, New York* (Martin Scorsese, US 1977)  
Robert De Niro and Lisa Minnelli breakfasting in the opening scene

and exuberant display (highlighting in its extravagance and joy the starkness of the musical called *New York, New York* which contains it). Afterwards Jimmy lightly dismisses the sequence as 'sappy endings' – in so doing dismissing the film's own homage to the classical musical. This is followed by the closure of narrative in which no reconciliation between Jimmy and Francine occurs – no happy ending.

What is going on in this film?

Genre is being employed as one of the principal components of the film's discourse system through which the particular themes of the film can be articulated. This is not the simple communication of an unproblematic set of conventional signifiers operating according to a stable and therefore predictable rule of combination. Rather it is a complex exploitation of different genres developed through the history of Hollywood. As described earlier, film-maker and spectator alike inherit and inhabit genre, but in the making of meaning they also constantly work to expand genre.

The generic pleasure of *New York, New York* is partly that of recognition, the connection that is established with other texts of pleasure from the history of Hollywood cinema. However, the most common form of generic pleasure – the pleasure of expectations fulfilled – is replaced by the potentially more thrilling but also potentially disconcerting interrogation of those expectations. Andrew Sarris wrote in *The Village Voice*: 'What is it like? people ask me ... it is mixed moods and delirious dialectics – two crucial ingredients for box office poison.'

Like Scorsese's *The King of Comedy*, and for similar reasons, the film did indeed do badly at the box office. Delirium is far too dangerous a state of pleasure for the spectator keen to receive the conventional reassurances of Hollywood entertainment. The value of genre study in this particular case is that it allows us to both experience and understand that delirium.

## STARS

## Where do we find the star?

The star is found in two places – in the *roles* s/he plays in films and in the *media exposure* s/he receives as a consequence of this and which will in turn contribute to the meaning she brings to her next role.

The film is often a *vehicle* for the star, offering her the opportunity to display whatever is specific to her star persona. Dyer identifies the following:<sup>11</sup>

- a character role;
- a situation;
- a context for doing her 'thing' – be it dancing, singing or whatever.

In addition, the star's appearance within the film may have certain recurring elements which lead to a high degree of predictability and associated audience expectation. Again Dyer identifies three:

- iconography;
- visual style;
- placement within the structure of the narrative.

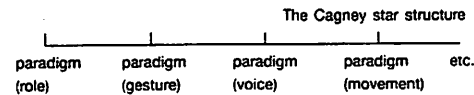
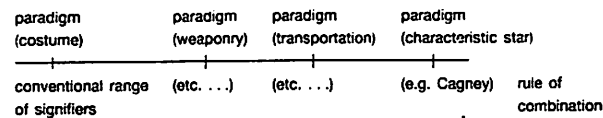
It will be seen from the above that the star can be approached as a formal structure. As in a generic structure there is a definable set of paradigms which will be the principal means of repetition and differentiation from one film to the next. These include the star's appearance, voice, gestures, movement and other distinctive characteristics. Like a generic structure, a star structure provides a communication system capable of generating complex meanings.

The star persona often evolves through the vehicle provided by a particular genre and in the process creates something distinct, for example, Clint Eastwood's work both as the Man with No Name and as Dirty Harry. However, the measure of this distinctiveness can only be made in relation to the generic and narrative conventions which precede the star. Thus stars depend heavily on genre as a system through which their persona finds expression.

At the same time it should be acknowledged that a genre may well rely upon the availability of a star to embody the archetypal roles associated with that genre. The exchange of stars within a genre and the movement of a star across several genres are each extremely interesting points of focus for the film student. Genre study can be advanced through a focus on stars (as an example, one could look at the shifting dynamic of the western as chartered by the star personae of Wayne, Cooper and Eastwood). Star study can in turn be advanced through a focus on genre (as an example, one could compare James Stewart's star persona in Hitchcock thrillers and Mann westerns). Edward G. Robinson's defining role in *Little Caesar* in January 1931 and James Cagney's in *Public Enemy* three months later raise questions about the simultaneous development of generic and star paradigms.

The following version of the figure on p. 141 illustrates how the star structure, for example, James Cagney, exists in a complex relationship with the generic structure of the Warners' gangster movie:

## The gangster generic structure



In addition to the vehicle, the star is 'accessed' through the exposure her constructed image receives in forms other than film itself. Dyer differentiates between *promotional material*, produced by the industry (including the agency acting on behalf of the star) and *criticism and commentaries* which function to 'voice' the response of the public. In practice each can both construct and alter the star image while circulating it within culture.

In practice, of course, the second of these may be highly determined by the first. Nevertheless, the actual ways in which spectators 'use' stars and seek 'gratification'<sup>12</sup> from them are far more varied than a deterministic model of star production-consumption would suggest. In reality the star image is polysemic, that is having many different meanings, and its study can lead into a much broader exploration of popular culture in which their images circulate, embodying (literally) the fantasies, desires and myths – often otherwise repressed – of ordinary people.

A useful way of drawing together these opening remarks is by reference to Christine Gledhill's identification of the four components which make up the star:<sup>13</sup>

- 1 The real person.
- 2 The characters/roles – which are generally fixed by fictional and stereotypical conventions.
- 3 The persona – the combination of the first two – the predictable in role, the 'unique' in self.
- 4 The image – circulating in subsidiary media forms such as TV interviews, magazines, etc.

In public actors begin to project themselves as though these four categories collapse into one another. In a sense one can say that the image becomes a character, but not a character in a narrative film, rather a character within the institution of cinema. The complexities of this are increasingly exploited in postmodern Hollywood. For example, Arnold Schwarzenegger plays not so much himself as his own cinematic image within the narrative of *Last Action Hero* (1993).

Richard Dyer offers an analysis of Julia Roberts<sup>14</sup> which employs many of the ideas so far outlined. What is exemplary about this short study – whether or not one wishes to dispute the detail – is the way it moves across the four components of the star construct in a way which emphasises their complex interdependence. He describes 1991

as 'the moment' of Julia Roberts and asks what precisely constituted her as star, the first female star for twenty years whose name alone was enough to sell a movie.

The subsidiary forms of circulation and the roles she plays coalesce around the crucial quality of 'authenticity'. The stories told about Julia Roberts in the media, about her relationships with the male leads in her films, convey the idea that she is just being herself. The characters she plays have a powerful mixture of strength and vulnerability which suggests that these roles are personifications of a real person. The spectator is presented with the classic paradox of stardom: the star is known or knowable, accessible, ordinary and yet, at the same time, extraordinary and only attainable in the everyday world of the spectator in forms of desire and fantasy.

The 'real' person, Dyer says, is likeable, attractive and talented – but this only begs the question, why *this* particular likeable, attractive, talented young woman?

One explanation Dyer offers is in terms of charisma: the fact that some people naturally 'glow'. 'We often talk about people whom the camera loves . . . Perhaps it is not so much that the camera loves some people as that some people love the camera.' The star displays herself, as Roberts does in sequences of *Sleeping with the Enemy* which have no motivation other than display. Both this film and *Pretty Woman* include the sheer enjoyment of trying on different images.

An alternative explanation is simply that Roberts was lucky enough to be the one from many young women with virtually identical attributes chosen to be hyped by the marketing machinery of Hollywood. But hype in itself cannot guarantee stardom. The history of Hollywood is littered with examples of actors who did not reach stardom despite having huge amounts of money invested in them.

Dyer concludes that to become a star 'you have to be the right person in the right films at the right time'. This involves a complex mix of real person-role-persona-image which structures and gives coherence to moods, feelings, desires in the culture at that particular moment. Dyer suggests that Roberts embraces feminism in as much as it is no longer credible to be a bimbo or a housewife for a female audience. At the same time she is not so far prepared to suppress the bimbo or the housewife that she fails to appeal to the male spectator. She's no pushover, no victim in the parts she plays, and yet 'there are some of the disturbing implications of female desirability – she's vulnerable, that's to say eminently hurtable'. Dyer concludes his analysis as follows:

Julia Roberts is so sexy and yet so very much her own woman that she's the very embodiment of the so-called post-feminist woman. She's prepared to allow herself to be sold as a sex object and yet at the same time she gives the impression that she's in charge of her image. . . . Playing with your own image, shopping is the only thing worth doing; these are very 80s images – but Julia Roberts is just soft and old-fashioned enough to reconcile them with what we flatter ourselves are the more caring attitudes of today. And she does light up the screen.

Dyer synthesises a set of observations by reference to the way the star functions as a signifying system communicating a range of meanings – some of which reinforce accepted cultural myths (here of appearance, sexuality, lifestyle) – and some of which represent specific cultural tensions and contradictions within or between these myths and idealisations. The complex meaning structure called Julia Roberts can be considered to function very much as genre was described as doing in the previous section: embodying dominant values and reconciling or closing down contradictions.

To borrow from Pam Cook's *The Cinema Book*, stars thus offer 'insurance value' to the industry, a 'production value'<sup>15</sup> to the film-makers and a 'trademark' value to potential audiences.

### Impersonation or personification?

Inasmuch as the stars operate as signifiers within narrative and genre their meaning is controlled and predictable, providing the pleasures of recognition and expectations fulfilled. However, inasmuch as the star signifier operates not just within narrative and genre but as an image within culture, it is potentially much less stable. Their polysemic potential is such that they can open up rather than close down the fracture lines between opposing values and attitudes in culture. The critical industry which has grown up around the persona-image of Madonna illustrates well the conflict between the star seen as suturing or 'stitching together' contradiction and the star as subversive, working away at those contradictions, forcing us to pay attention. She is scarcely, if at all, 'confined' by the textual system into which she is placed. For an audience of today the same could be said of Marilyn Monroe – in a particularly interesting way. The very fact of her 'confinement' in generic roles contributes to the way we read her wider cultural image which includes the way she has come to signify, in an archetypal way, the objectification and exploitation of a talented woman by an industrial complex.

Nothing so obviously or so frequently challenges the fictional illusion of a Hollywood film than the presence of the star. However much the conventions of Hollywood narrative realist cinema are intent upon rendering invisible the constructedness of its product through, for example, naturalistic mise-en-scène and continuity editing, the star presence has the potential to undo this. The spectator is consciously aware of, for example, Schwartzenegeger-in-performance. Although this does not undermine the pleasure of the text, indeed it can intensify it, the act of spectatorship must negotiate the potential conflict between star presence and the fiction's attempt to persuade us that we are watching 'life' rather than a Hollywood construct. Why is it that the illusion 'gap' opened up by star in performance rarely provides a real problem for the spectator?

One explanation has to do with the way an audience is invited to approach the reading of a film. The narrative and generic structures of Hollywood film provide pleasure both through the illusion of reality they offer and through their self-containment as forms which have no existence outside themselves. The latter pleasure is that of the safety hatch – it's only a film . . . it's only a horror movie – after having been scared witless. The star structure, working within the larger structures of narrative and genre is handled in the same way. 'It's just a movie' is a statement which acknowledges that a 'gap' exists and yet uses this knowledge as a means of escape from the film's more demanding thematic and ideological implications.

Often the 'gap' is made invisible by the casting to type of star (signifier) in role (signified). The relationship between the star and the part s/he is playing appears 'common sense' whether it be Hamson Ford as the law enforcer or Sharon Stone as the *femme fatale*. The pleasure of reassurance felt by the audience comes from a perceived 'natural' connection between star and role which, in some respects, is a reassurance based on the confirmation of cultural myths, of ideologically-based stereotypes.

Thus a second possible answer to the question involves looking at the nature of star performance itself.

Acting involves either impersonation or personification.<sup>16</sup>

Impersonation, involves the actor creating a role from the range of skills and imagination she possesses. Successful impersonation involves disappearing into the role and

leaving the 'real' self behind. The actor as impersonator is evaluated in relation to the range of roles s/he can successfully take on and the degree to which they are perceived as psychologically realistic. It is most often associated with serious acting in the theatre.

**Personification** involves the actor stepping into a role by virtue of her physical appearance and behaviour patterns conforming to the 'type' of that role. The actor as personifier is evaluated in terms of what s/he is – rather than what s/he can do. It is most often associated with cruder forms of melodramatic theatre – and with popular cinema.

Hollywood star acting has traditionally been dependent on a very high degree of personification. Bogart personifies the noir private eye. Flynn personifies the swash-buckling hero. Sometimes it is difficult to describe a typical role at all: Garbo or Dietrich or Madonna primarily personify themselves.

It is this merging of person-persona-image and role through the process of personification which provides a second more tentative answer to the question of why the star in performance does not encourage, by her presence, a deconstruction of the film's realist illusion.

Having said this, the 'gap' remains real, the site where the so-called 'seamless' text is most easily exposed as a fictional construct. And this is equally true of star performances today as it is of those produced under the studio system. The tendency since the breakdown of the studio system, through the early Method performances (see p. 123) of, for example, Brando and Steiger, to the star-as-actor phenomenon of the new Hollywood, well exemplified by a star-as-actor such as Meryl Streep, is to claim for the star personifier the skills of impersonation.

However, the American Method as originated by Lee Strasberg, while giving performance the appearance of impersonation, is in practice a more intense form of personification. Unlike the process of character construction advocated by Stanislavski<sup>17</sup> which encourages the actor to work from the imagination, the process advocated by Strasberg demands that actors work from within their own person, their own conflicts and personal experiences. It can lead to the painful self-exposure of Brando in *Last Tango in Paris*, the literalness of physical identification of De Niro in *Raging Bull*. The Method can be seen as a more sophisticated and intense kind of personification. Whereas the latter requires that the star physically embodies the role in appearance, gesture and movement, the former adds to this the requirement that a star psychologically 'becomes' the role.

Method acting, far from closing the 'gap' between star (signifier) and role (signified), actually emphasises it. One is often more aware of Hoffman or Streep or Pacino 'doing their thing' the more they strain towards impersonation.

Personification can be described as a relationship between star (signifier) and role (signified) which is so highly motivated as to render signifier and signified almost identical. It is for this reason that the *commutation test* is particularly applicable to star study. Substitute one actor for another in a particular role and see if it makes any significant difference (for example, try Hoffman, Cruise, Robbins and Costner as Tom Hank's Forrest Gump).

The principal value of a commutation test (besides its fun) may appear to be descriptive: it can lead to a more precise description of what is indeed unique in one persona over another measured in terms of their potential for personifying a 'type'.

A variation on the commutation test is to look at a *star in transition* from one persona and image to another. A spectacular and interesting example is offered by Jane Fonda whose career has represented major transitions which include, rather crudely, a range from bimbo to left-wing political activist to one of the most successful businesswomen



• Plates 5.10, 5.11 and 5.12 The Method actor: De Niro in *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, US 1976) (left) and as both the young and fit middleweight boxing champion La Motta (above) and the middle-aged, 60-pound heavier La Motta (below) in *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, US 1980)

in America. A study will reveal the extent to which a 'core' persona holds across these changes. (In Fonda's case, a 'core' persona including voice, gesture, mannerism and other aspects of the body consistently applied in Method performances and beyond this, qualities of sincerity, independence, competence and vulnerability.)<sup>18</sup>

It is especially useful to study Fonda's 1972 participation in Godard's *Tout Va Bien*. It provides an interesting and rare example of star deconstruction. She offers herself to the film in an act of pure personification – she signifies her own star persona – within a film with a strong left-wing polemic. As in Brechtian theatre, the audience is constantly aware that they are watching actors in a constructed performance. Fonda's presence is one of the means by which this awareness is communicated.

### The star and the ideology of individualism

Collectively, narrative, genre and star provide a highly conventionalised form of communication which makes available to an audience two forms of fantasy pleasure.

One is the artificial security created by the formal organisation of the film; we know the real world is far less comprehensible and manageable than that constructed by narrative and genre (see p. 127). The second is the intense personal potential for the resolution of crisis embodied in the star; we know the real world cannot be acted upon so directly, so effectively by the individual.

The fact that the star is a 'maximised type', that is, as perfect an embodiment of a set of characteristics as can be imagined, allows the culture to perpetuate its myth, be they of forms of masculine heroism or forms of female beauty. Inasmuch as western consumer capitalism is built on the cult of the person, the development of a unique individualised identity through image, the ideological reinforcement provided by the star image is very powerful.

Take, for example, the 'maximised types' personified by Kevin Costner and Whitney Houston in *The Bodyguard*. Both star personae are displayed doing 'their thing', action hero and singer, with narrative clearly subordinated to spectacle. Neither star creates character so much as embodies 'type' traits which, at the same time, have a uniqueness deriving from who they are as stars. On the one hand, then, are their generic roles, highly conventionalised and predictable. On the other, there are all the meanings each star image possesses for the spectator who has encountered them in a vast range of subsidiary forms of circulation. The star is recognisable yet unique, caught in a melodramatic narrative but free to assert individuality, enclosed within a recognisably naturalistic world and yet able to exist as an autonomous self which can gain a significant degree of control over this world.

Thus the pleasure the star provide us with includes that of *ideological reinforcement*, a renewed image of the importance of the self as an agent able to act upon and make a difference to the world s/he inhabits.

As an aside to this discussion, it is ironic to observe that in practice Hollywood does not offer the individual-as-star the mythic freedom to act on her world which has just been described. Stars have, in economic terms, an 'exchange value'; they are forms of capital strategically employed in order to create profit. Equally, stars have a 'use value' which is what they bring as signifying systems, as meaning structures to a narrative. In both their exchange and use values, that is in their existence as forms of capital, on the one hand, as raw material available for refinement within narrative and genre, on the other, stars are far from free agents. In their willingness to function as signs, actors surrender control to those responsible for the construction of image – both in film production and in publicity. The extent to which a contemporary star is significantly more



• Plate 5.13 *The Bodyguard* (Warner Bros, US 1992)  
The movie as star vehicle

in control of their image than a star working within the studio system is debatable. No less than during the studio system period, to the extent that a star offers herself as a bearer of meaning, a 'semiotic commodity', she exposes herself to the shifting requirements of the market and those who try to manage that market.

### CASE STUDY PART 3: NEW YORK, NEW YORK - CLASH OF THE STARS

If *The Bodyguard* offers a fine 'old-fashioned' example to illustrate how star study can be productive in the analysis of a film text, *New York, New York* puts into play a more complex combination of elements.

The two stars, Robert De Niro and Liza Minnelli, perform within the terms of melodrama discussed above. *New York, New York* in focusing so exclusively on a relationship by reference to psychology and emotion illustrates Hollywood's typical avoidance of other determining factors - social, cultural, political. However, the film is unusual in demonstrating so vividly two contrasting tendencies in star performance. First, how the application of a Method performance to a melodramatic scenario can produce characterisation of depth. De Niro's Jimmy Doyle is not one-dimensional as is often the case in melodrama. Second, how this is countered by a much more old-fashioned and extremely powerful form of star performance from Minnelli. The relationship has a genuine complexity arising from each star persona's interrogation of the other and from the very different resources each brings to the screen.

De Niro and Minnelli bring their star personae to bear in extremely powerful ways. De Niro's role as Jimmy Doyle presents uncompromising yet self-doubting masculinity; a struggle to control and channel his violent energy; an inability to articulate verbally so that communication must take the form of physical action; a lack of social competence which can be both humorous and embarrassing. This is a persona developed through *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver* and which is therefore rich in associations from those films. However, it is also important to point out that at this time in his career De Niro had scarcely any image in subsidiary forms of circulation - except the entertainment media's reference to him as 'Garbo' in his successful attempt to keep his private life private. More significant is De Niro's role-by-role commitment to the Method. He devoted eight months to learning how to play the saxophone as he had spent two weeks driving twelve hours a day around the streets of New York in preparation for *Taxi Driver* and as he would spend a year in training for his boxing role in *Raging Bull*.

Unlike De Niro, Minnelli brings with her to the film a persona constructed in her performances as Liza Minnelli, singer, as well as in earlier screen performances - most obviously *Cabaret*. Much more than De Niro, she brings with her an image constructed in other media, an image which includes her personal background and problems, as well as her characteristic style as singer in performance. She is able to personify a star-in-the-making who is self-confident, seeking independence and who, while vulnerable (how often this word comes up in describing Hollywood female star personae!) is able to survive and succeed through her own qualities rather than through the 'prop' of a man. She brings the power and charisma of her image to bear throughout the film and not only in her on-screen performances. The explosion of energy after the divorce when she achieves stardom is contained from the beginning in the 'promise' of Lisa Minnelli superstar.

Thus a principal source of interest lies in the interplay between a star (Minnelli) whose personification in the role of Francine Evans is based on traditional roots in a star image and De Niro's Method 'entry' into role.

If the De Niro and Minnelli roles are informed both by the 'baggage' they bring with them and by their particular mode of performance, this is a common enough phenomenon with stars (very similar to Costner and Houston, for example). However, the way these meaning systems are allowed to interact is far from usual. They are not tightly managed and controlled (as the Costner and Houston personae are), but rather they probe each other in scenes whose excessive length by Hollywood standards can be justified in terms of the excess, the surplus of meaning which is generated. (A 'surplus' of meaning is meaning in excess of what is required to fulfil the functional requirements of the narrative; a 'surplus' includes the ambiguities and imaginative associations which leave us with a sense of wonder.) In discussing the film in the previous section (p. 139) the idea of generic 'play' leading to 'delirium' was used. Here, it is possible to use the same words to talk about the way - in some scenes at least - contrasting star performances offer an audience much to engage with.

Certainly with regard to the problem of the star presence threatening to undermine the fictional illusion of the film, *New York, New York* offers a valuable case study. De Niro's Method and Minnelli's virtual self-personification both draw attention to themselves. The spectator is simultaneously drawn into the intensity of the melodramatic conflict and consciously aware of two very different star presences and performances in the process of self-activation. The fact that this is done on sets of stunning artificiality, counterpointing performance style and visual style in a complex revisiting of an old Hollywood genre, further confirms the film as one which is operating through multiple levels of meaning.

Scorsese has said, 'we were just doing it - rewriting, improvising, improvising, improvising until finally twenty weeks of shooting had gone by and we had something like a movie'.<sup>19</sup> It is uncommon in Hollywood commercial cinema for narrative development to be so dependent on the way character evolves through improvisation.

This Method approach to character creation is a demand made on both De Niro and Minnelli. However, inasmuch as this is a performance mode more suited to De Niro playing a character who foregrounds extreme emotions, especially aggression as a means of overcoming repression, Jimmy Doyle appears to dominate much of the film. What is remarkable about *New York, New York* is the balance between a masculine Method performance and Minnelli's much more traditional form of personification as Francine Evans. However, it has been argued<sup>20</sup> that the film privileges the male point-of-view, even in the latter part of the film when Minnelli appears strong, since she is seen through and judged from a male perspective.

Star study, like genre study, can help to explain the textual operations of a Hollywood film - as well as locate those textual operations within the wider context of Hollywood cinema as a whole. In turning to auteur study one is drawn away to some extent from the concept of broadly based meaning systems rooted in the whole Hollywood industrial process towards notions of individual creativity and control.

## AUTEUR

### The auteur contrast

The director in modern Hollywood can function much like a star in offering an *insurance value* to the industry and a *trademark value* to an audience. Increasingly films are bought and sold on the basis of a director's name, which takes on the function of a sign. This sign will carry much information of significance concerning the popular and critical 'credit' of the director based on his previous work and the kind of promise offered by a new film bearing his name. The auteur sign, by contrast, is much more precise and specific. It will signify a set of stylistic and thematic features which, if it is anticipated, will be identifiable in the text of a film bearing the auteur name. In other words, an auteur possesses a *sign(ature)* marking out his own individuality which is legible in a film over which he has enjoyed sufficient creative control for that sign(ature) to permeate the film. In practice the auteur sign, like the star sign, can be approached as a structure made up of a set of paradigms working in distinctive rules of combination.

Issues of definition and classification which are encountered in studying genre and stars are at least as problematic in Hollywood auteur study. Since the late 1950s, following the work of critics in France, it has been considered both possible and necessary in film studies to distinguish the auteur in Hollywood cinema from what they called the *metteur-en-scène*, that is to distinguish a director who brings to a film the signs of his own individuality as the dominant creative force in the film's production from the director who 'merely' brings competence to the particular specialist role of directing. It is difficult to determine in many instances where on a continuum the qualities of a *metteur-en-scène* become those of an auteur, and this is especially so as the Hollywood industry markets films increasingly in terms of a name, in the process collapsing distinctions students and critics may want to make.

This last point is particularly significant. In previous sections it has been apparent that genre and star are phenomena of importance to audiences; a genre or a star signifies myths and desires which circulate at the heart of popular culture. By contrast, the presence of an auteur structure is neither so easily 'felt' nor, as a consequence, so direct a focus for response. If genre and star study can be said, in broad terms, to have been developed out of the lived experience of Hollywood cinema, auteur study is a construct of criticism. As such its centrality within film studies has long been a cause of dispute. This is compounded not only by problems of definition touched upon above, but by fundamental questions surrounding the very idea of 'authorship'.

### The auteur structure

Early auteur theory pursued what might reasonably be described as a cult of the personality in which a film text under close examination might reveal the 'essence' of its director – and hence invite the granting of auteurist status. This approach did not so much ignore factors such as narrative and genre, or the fact that film making is a co-operative enterprise, as suggest that the auteur somehow rose above these 'restraints' to personal expression. The underlying 'politics' of the *Politique des Auteurs*, the name given to the movement in France in the 1950s to promote Hollywood directors as 'authors' of their work, included the admirable desire to have Hollywood cinema taken more seriously. However, in pursuing the idea of the individual creative figure, conceived as romantically fighting against the odds to impose his unique mark on the text, much more was lost than gained:

- Directors whose work did not reveal the marks of some essential underlying personal force were relegated to the status of *metteurs-en-scène* – and their work relegated with them.
- The evaluation of a film was carried out in terms of whether or not it possessed an auteurist identity – leading to some absurd conclusions. (A bad film by an auteur was 'better' than a great film by a non-auteur.)
- The 'Genius of the System' in Thomas Schatz's words,<sup>21</sup> the industrial production of quality entertainment through the formal means of narrative and genre, far from advanced by early auteur theory, was underestimated even further – the system was regarded as that which the great creative individual struggled against.
- The attempt to raise the status of a popular cultural form by reference to one of the characteristics of high culture – the individual genius – ignored the specific ways in which Hollywood cinema produces meaning across industry – text – audience.
- Instead of broadening the study of film into wider political and cultural debates, auteur theory led inwards towards pedantic and trivial debates about who was and who was not an auteur and what precisely were the features that constituted the auteur signature.

Perhaps the most telling indictment on early auteur theory was its failure to be endorsed by many of the very directors who were assigned auteurist identity by film criticism. Directors like Hawks, Ford and Wilder were eager to place their work within a description of film production which emphasised collaboration by a significant number of creative individuals within a profit-driven industrial system.

However, auteur study has made two profound and fundamental contributions to film studies:

- In the most general sense it encouraged the serious study of popular Hollywood cinema.
- More specifically, it did so by demanding a close analysis of *mise-en-scène* – as the principal site of the auteur identity.

'Excavating' a film is an activity already referred to in relation to star 'persona' and genre. Certainly there is some continuity between auteur study and the study of genre and stars. As with genre 'excavation', it is necessary to identify in auteur study the characteristic range of paradigms employed across a range of films and the characteristic rules of combination for these paradigms across two or more films directed by the same individual. Like a star, an auteur can be regarded as a 'persona', similarly made up of a combination of a real person and the films in which he exists as sign(ature). The principal difference, of course, is that the auteur does not appear in films (with notable exceptions like Woody Allen and Spike Lee) so that whereas the star-in-role is visible, functioning as icon, the auteur-in-role must be excavated by critical analysis.

The development away from the auteur as individual to *auteur as structure* (a development particularly associated with the work of Peter Wollen in the late 1960s)<sup>22</sup> did not get rid of the idea of an author but it radically redefined the nature of this authorship in Hollywood cinema. The emphasis shifted to a study of the recurring features operating in films bearing the name of a particular director. Although these recurring features were identified in terms of an individual (a 'Hawks' structure, for example), there

was no requirement to go looking for a person called Howard Hawks whose essence was waiting to be revealed beneath this structure. These recurring features form what might be called a 'meaning structure' operating in addition to those of narrative, genre and star across the body of a film. This is not to say that biographical information about the auteur is irrelevant. It may be useful in helping to confirm observations made about the distinctive 'presence' communicated by the auteur structure. The sign(ature) is a set of formal elements – the choice remains for the student as to whether to engage in character analysis based on this signature.

Consider the problem of reconciling the concept of the auteur with that of film production as co-operative enterprise involving the contributions of an assortment of creative personnel. In specific scenes the work of one or more of these may be particularly foregrounded – the actor, the set designer, the scriptwriter, the editor, the music composer – but the controlling creative authority and deployment of these contributions is that of the auteur director. The contributions of others are expressions of specific aspects of the auteur's overall imaginative vision and to that extent they become inscribed with the auteur's identity. For example, disputes as to whether Saul Bass's scenario or Bernard Herrmann's music constituted the crucial creative contributions to the shower scene in *Psycho* become irrelevant if we accept that these elements exist only as 'potential' until mobilised and made coherent within a meaning structure with a unitary identity – in this case something called 'Hitchcock'.

What this suggests is in fact something of a compromise between early auteur individualism and a purely structuralist conception. The auteur structure called 'Hitchcock' leaves room not only for the individual called Alfred Hitchcock to be seen as a 'catalyst' but as the final determining creative force. In addition, this does not preclude the possibility of a 'combination' structure, in which a text is 'authored' by different codes working together in an identifiable, recurring form: the Ford-Wayne-western structure for example.

Certainly the identification of a single 'author' has been embraced by all those who must classify and catalogue films. The listings produced both by other media and by academia embrace the single name – perhaps as much as anything for convenience. However, this simple justification sidesteps the contested reading of this name: as originating genius, as catalyst, as structure. And convenience or not, it is difficult to accept uncritically a discourse which so powerfully diverts attention away from the collaborative and complex creative relationships between a large number of people which are at the heart of Hollywood cinema.

### The auteur's habitat

Under what circumstances does the auteur flourish? In the security of a studio system or the wheeler-dealing of the new Hollywood? In the formal conventions of narrative and genre or in the 'free play' of postmodernism referred to on pp. 134–7?

Both these questions tempt answers formulated in terms of establishing what might be considered optimum conditions for individual expression. Much of the critical writing on auteurism is preoccupied with, for example, the extent to which Ford or Hawks were able to work through the conventions of genre in order to produce films marked with their distinctive thematic preoccupations and characteristic signifiers, or the extent to which either of these men benefited from working within the studio system.

Perhaps the most satisfactory response to the 'problem' of the auteur working within Hollywood conventions is to regard these conventions as facilitating expression. A system of rules provides both security and the opportunity for inventing variations. Indeed it is

possible to argue that Hollywood narrative and generic norms provide the ideal framework for creative expression. The auteur enjoys both a safe anchorage within an artistically self-enclosed world and the incentive to constantly push against the edges of this world to discover new possibilities.

However, Francis Ford Coppola acknowledges the reality of Hollywood box-office pressure:

The problem is I have a double life and I work for the commercial film industry, which basically wants to take old formulas and make them with new actors. It's like Boeing – they have to make planes that will fly. They can't make one that flies on its side, even though that might be a good idea. . . . People are particular about films, they don't want to be put into an incredibly unusual situation. It's like the little kid who says 'Tell me the story of the Three Bears again.'<sup>23</sup>

In fact the tension between auteurist innovation and commercial requirements continues to sustain a romantic view of the 'heroic' embattled creative artist. Consider, for example, the tension in the following between acknowledging the power of Hollywood discourse and the need to retrieve the individual figure working within and through it. Dudley Andrews writes that:

to 'begin' a project is not to originate a work, but rather to deflect a flow, to branch off in a direction. This limited sense of novelty retains the power of individual effort and critique while recognizing the greater power of the social system within which anything that makes a difference must begin. . . . Why not apply [this view] in some degree, to a Ridley Scott, whose attempt to branch out from the road picture in *Thelma and Louise* seems more heroic for its collapse in the film's final chase sequences.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, in pursuing debates about the pressures imposed on the auteur in the new Hollywood by the deal system of one-off film production, it is necessary to take on board the opposite pressure to the one Coppola refers to: the increasing expectation in audiences of *textual 'excess'* in production values and stylistic flourishes. A young director wishing to be noticed must leave his calling card on screen. All directors must aspire to the status of auteur in the new Hollywood while prioritising audience requirements (box office) over their own individuality. Maybe this is the way it has always been but the current Hollywood system exposes the conflict particularly starkly (Altman's *The Player* captures these issues with sharp ironic humour).

Coppola is also an interesting point of focus in relation to debating the benefits or otherwise of working within a studio system. His attempt to make films with an auteur signature across a range of genres and to enable others to do the same under the new Hollywood dispensation led him to create in 1969 a 'studio' (Zoetrope) which would offer the kind of security and continuity creative personnel had not been offered since the end of the studio system. (It is worth comparing Coppola's *One from the Heart* with *New York, New York* – both are auteurist attempts to do something new while exploiting the conventions of the 1950s studio musical and melodrama – and both were box office failures.)

Under whatever production system and regardless of the film form in vogue, the auteur needs to enjoy a significant level of control and independence in the various stages of production if the auteur structure is to assert itself on the screen. To refer back to



an earlier point, his 'catalyst' function must be secured. This is equally true of those working on mainstream commercial projects, directors like Steven Spielberg, Oliver Stone, Clint Eastwood and Spike Lee, as it is for those working in the low-budget 'independent' sector such as John Sayles, Jim Jarmusch, Gus van Sant and Hal Hartley. In this regard the de facto producer role of the director is fundamental. In the studio system directors such as Howard Hawks and John Ford enjoyed either actual or de facto producer power. However, it is difficult to precisely define the amount of control a director needs to enjoy before he can be considered sufficiently enabled to impose his signature on a film. Using right to the final cut as a benchmark of an auteur's controlling presence within the film is to go too far. Clearly *The Magnificent Ambersons* would have been the better for Welles retaining control through to final cut, but the film in the form in which it survives is still very visibly marked by the Welles' auteur presence. Is Sluizter's Hollywood remake of his own Dutch-language *The Vanishing* with an entirely different ending an example of loss of auteur control? The case of *Blade Runner – the Director's Cut* raises the interesting idea that it is possible to become the auteur of a film ten years after its original release through being granted additional power. At what point precisely did Ridley Scott make the transition from metteur-en-scène to auteur?

This example of the foregrounding of Ridley Scott in the re-release of *Blade Runner* also indicates the extent to which the industry is keen to promote directors to the auteur ranks for marketing reasons. 'A film by —' or 'A — film' is a typical feature of film promotion today even when the director clearly has not enjoyed the producer power described above (for example, *Fatal Attraction* – an Adrian Lyne film?). Thus for marketing purposes all directors seem to have assumed or had thrust upon them auteur status. Is this to fatally undermine the auteur concept or does it highlight how absurd it has been all along to try to make meaningful distinctions between those who 'direct' and those who 'create'?

Beyond this, one may ask whether the producer himself can be regarded as auteur with recurring characteristics observable across a range of films. This might be particularly appropriate in looking at groups of films from the studio system produced by men with characteristic personal visions – like Thalberg or Selznick or Freed. In contemporary Hollywood Spielberg is, arguably, as much an auteur in his role as producer as he is in films which he personally directs. And still further, should one regard the studio as auteur; the Warners gangster film, the MGM musical, for example, represent meaning structures with characteristic paradigms.

And what of the star as auteur? The vehicle can be so controlled by the star that he becomes the producer–star determining the stylistic as well as the thematic content of the film. Is Schwartzenegger or Stallone an auteur? A claim can be made for Kevin Costner as auteur not only in his role as director–star in *Dances with Wolves* (including a 'Director's Cut') but in his role as producer–star in *The Bodyguard*.

If there are more questions than answers here, this is because traditional auteur theory stands on insecure ground in relation to the whole issue of origination. Its undoubted value is in putting in place another meaning structure, another creative dimension (whether deriving from auteur–director, auteur–producer or even auteur–studio) to intersect with those of genre and star already discussed, thus enabling a closer interrogation of the film text. However, before proceeding to an application of auteur structuralism to *New York, New York*, it is necessary to touch upon two further issues regarding origination, identity and the 'politics' of classification.

### The spectator as auteur?

Meaning is only created in the act of reading – an encoded message (text) remains only as potential meaning until it is decoded by a reader (or spectator). Further, different readers come to a text with their own specific social, culture and psychological formation as individuals. The logical deduction from this is that the text is 'authored' by the reader rather than by the text's originator. Roland Barthes, for example, talked of the 'death of the author' and the 'birth of the reader'.

In practice, however, spectatorship is not as autonomous as the above would suggest. There are not literally as many readings of a text as there are readers – far from it. The range of responses within an audience will be made relatively homogeneous as a result of

- 1 hegemony – the conventional 'common-sense' political, social and cultural ways of seeing the world shared, more or less, by the vast majority of spectators;
- 2 language (in the broadest sense of signs working in structures and including non-verbal languages) which, to emphasise the point again, 'does our thinking for us'.

This can be illustrated clearly by examining the range of response to genre or star. Each is brought into consciousness through the act of reading but in that moment powerful conventional ways of thinking and decoding impose themselves on what might otherwise be a very personal, idiosyncratic reading.

As with any other meaning structures, an auteur structure is brought into consciousness in the act of reading, decoding. However, as has already been pointed out, a crucial difference exists between this and genre or star structures in that the latter exist much more obviously and vibrantly as discourses within popular culture. An auteur structure is rendered visible and therefore readable by the invention of the auteur in a much more critically willed manner than is the case with genre and star. Once named (and thus capable of identification) it imposes its own power on the reader.

A 'Douglas Sirk' film will be read in response to knowledge about the 'Douglas Sirk' auteur structure and if that knowledge is absent, the auteur structure will not be read at all – it will be a meaning 'potential' left untouched by the reader. Sirk was thought of in the 1950s as a director of traditional melodramatic 'weepies' set in a bourgeois world. Only with auteur critic Andrew Sarris at the end of the 1960s was a different view of Sirk's work put forward: that he was in fact offering a scathing critique of the world depicted in his films. Sarris argued that in visual style and in his 'narrative attitude' Sirk was a remarkable auteur – delivering films to Universal as per contract which appeared to be standard genre product but which were characterised by an individual way of seeing and telling. One of Sirk's celebrated films, such as *Written on the Wind*, may well appear of little or no special interest unless the spectator is aware of the Douglas Sirk auteur structure. The claims made for it as a 'subversive' text rather than as a regular 1950s melodrama and star vehicle require validation through reference to the determining additional meaning structure – 'Sirk' – operative within the text. In other words, the film can only be read as a text of significance if mediated through the process of criticism.

On a more basic level, even if the spectator is ignorant of the auteur structure, the simple power of naming remains significant. The classification which the auteur name allows means that texts can be differentiated from one another, most particularly in terms of the status which can be conferred upon them. The act of spectatorship will be

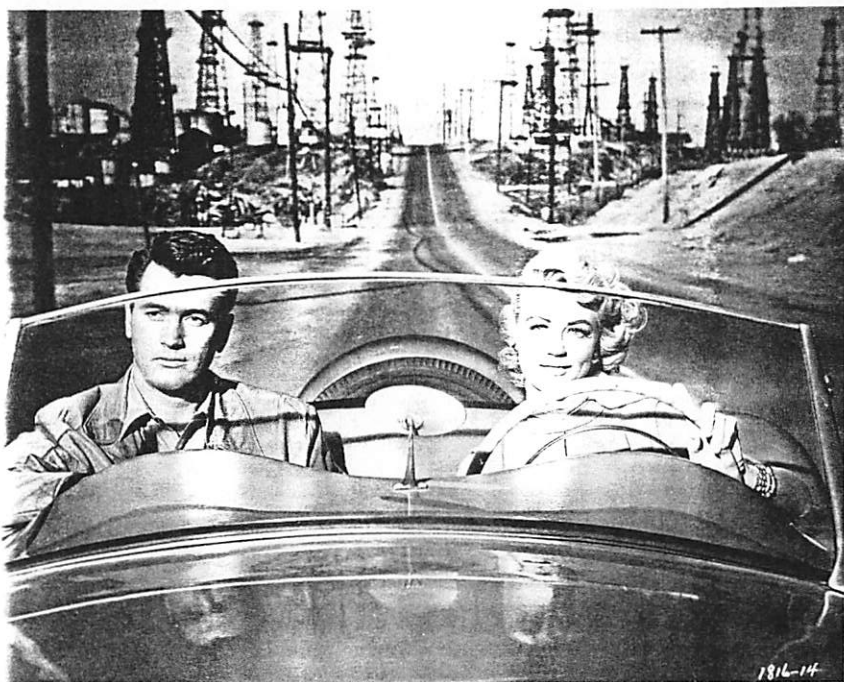


Figure 5.14 *Written on the Wind* (Douglas Sirk, US 1956)  
Hudson and Dorothy Malone: early American soap or auteur masterpiece?

influenced by the power of the name. This returns us to the auteur as 'guarantee' and 'trademark'. It also returns us to the observation that in contemporary Hollywood nearly all films have placed upon them the name of an auteur whether or not any auteur structure has been established behind that name. The name exists purely as a name-tag on a commodity – indeed the name-tag is itself a commodity: 'Spielberg'.

The attempt to establish a recognisable set of thematic and stylistic features (a signified) for the auteur name (the signifier) is, in a self-reflexive way, increasingly taken on by the bearer of that name, that is the director himself. Thus we can trace a transition from the late 1950s when critics constructed an auteur meaning structure out of a body of films put in place more or less intuitively by a director in active collaboration with other creative individuals within enabling institutional structures to the situation today where a director often strives, self-consciously, to impose a recognisable auteur structure to verify the commercial and critical existence of the name s/he bears.

#### □ CASE STUDY PART 4: SCORSESE AND NEW YORK, NEW YORK

Finally, it is worth returning to another idea introduced earlier: that of 'surplus' meaning. An auteur critical approach, described here as an 'excavation' of the text, may reveal meaning which is 'surplus' to what is required for the text to make basic narrative sense but it is precisely in surplus meaning that the text marks itself as having a distinct identity. It is in surplus meaning that much pleasure, possible 'delirium', has its source. As with a star study, auteur study confirms the presence of some of this surplus, identifies its mechanisms and explains the pleasure which is its product.

Some of the surplus of meaning contained in *Written on the Wind* (1956) can be confirmed by reference to its stars, much more by reference to the 'Sirk' auteur structure – and the same can be said of *New York, New York* when an additional level of 'coding', the 'Scorsese' auteur structure, is examined.

The Scorsese auteur structure is assembled deductively from the films Martin Scorsese has directed. (The extent to which this structure is also the result of inductively applying biographical information about the person Martin Scorsese is more debatable and will be touched on below.) The structure is then applied to the text under scrutiny.

Concern over the circularity and self-fulfilling character of this procedure must be considered – even as it is put into practice. There is clearly the danger of locking the film into a formalist system in the same way as was commented on earlier with regard to the application of a genre structure (see p. 125). There is a fine line between determining and overdetermining the meaning of a film text. A structuralist approach provides the student with valuable tools, but they are tools which must be used with intelligence and flexibility. If the film can be regarded as an object, the purpose is not to package and make it conform to some standard but precisely the opposite: to unpack its meaning and in the process identify what is distinctive in the particular combination of elements.

The Scorsese auteur structure can, at least in part, be deduced from films which lie chronologically either side of *New York, New York* in which Martin Scorsese enjoyed the kind of producer-director control discussed on p. 151. Thus *Who's That Knocking at My Door?*, *Mean Streets*, *Raging Bull* and *King of Comedy* offer themselves as texts to be searched for the kind of recurring features which will allow us to construct an auteur structure. *Boxcar Bertha* and *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, films over which Scorsese did not exercise such personal control, are excluded from consideration. (But should they be? Perhaps they are in some respects the most interesting; projects where the director had to 'negotiate' a relationship, an identity with the material.)

We discover the following principal thematic preoccupations in two or more of Scorsese's 'auteur' films:

- a strong focus on masculinity: on male friendship, on male sexuality and on the ways in which these are threatened or experienced as areas of personal crisis;
- more specifically: the male attitude to women as 'other', as unknowable, definable as 'whores' or 'virgins', as the source of the threat to masculinity, as the cause of male paranoia, and consequently as objects of abuse within relationships where the male seeks to assert dominance;
- explicitly or implicitly the male character is placed within a framework of guilt, sin, retribution, redemption;
- the male existing within a closed world, either a community (Italian New York) or a mental state of alienation and reality distortion;

- this reality distortion is sometimes linked to wider forms of reality distortion within American culture (*Taxi Driver* and *King of Comedy*);
- generally the resolution of internal conflict by means of external violence;
- as an extension to this: the dominance of the physical over the verbal – male characters are characteristically inarticulate but physically expressive;
- a representation of blacks which reflects either the overt or implicit racism of the protagonists.

We also note the following features of form and style recurring in two or more of the above-named films:

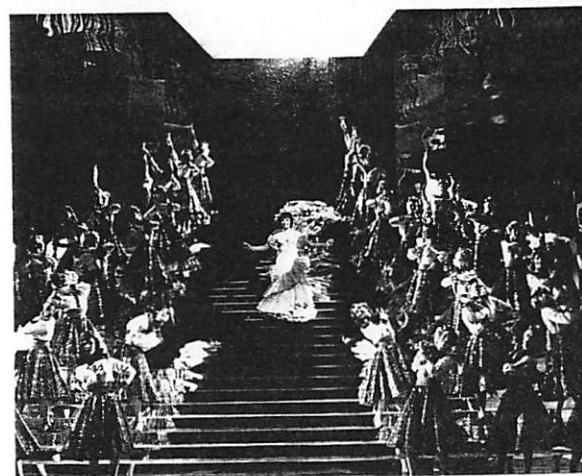
- documentary-style realism in Method performances and locations;
- the expressive use of mobile camera, lighting, editing and sound which works against the documentary realism, placing it within a stylised artificiality;
- thus point-of-view is a complex interaction of the spectator's observations of an 'objective' world and the character's 'subjective' perception of that world;
- the primary role assigned to soundtrack in the creation of meaning;
- the adoption (and subsequent problematising) of generic forms and, in particular, the ambiguity and perplexity of the films' closures.

These paradigms, these features observable within the films can be amplified by reference to biographical information concerning Martin Scorsese. So, for example, his close identification with Little Italy in New York City with its distinctive social formation may be cited. More specifically, his Catholic background provides useful corroborating evidence, and some (overly neat?) personal statements such as that in which he says that as a boy he wished to be either a priest or a gangster. His immersion from a very early age in film culture helps to explain something of the rich repertoire of styles and images he is able to bring to the screen. His interest in the films of Powell and Pressburger, as well as the more obvious homage to the MGM classic musical, may, for example, advance our appreciation of *New York, New York*.

Keeping Scorsese-the-person at arm's length by working with Scorsese-the-structure in order to make meaning out of *New York, New York*, may appear absurdly purist. Biographical information such as that outlined in the previous paragraph clearly contributes to the composite auteur-structure which we are applying to the film. However, the question must be considered: what kinds of biographical detail are useful? For example, during the filming of *New York, New York* Scorsese was having a relationship with Minnelli while his nine-months pregnant wife, co-screenwriter Julie Cameron, stalked the set. There were also strong rumours of on-set cocaine use. When considering the improvisational approach used throughout the film, is it necessary to probe the madness in this Method?

Nevertheless, whether the focus is Scorsese or Hitchcock or Woody Allen, an emphasis on the biographical, and especially the more speculative forms of the biographical, takes us into the 'essentialist' distraction – that a text is a site for excavating the 'essence' of a person, albeit the film's principal creative force. The emphasis in this section and throughout the chapter has been firmly on the film text and how it operates as a meaning system.

In placing *New York, New York* within an auteur structure called 'Scorsese' it is possible to identify more sharply both stylistic and thematic elements and in so doing move towards a more complex understanding and appreciation of the film.



• Plate 5.15 *New York, New York* (Martin Scorsese, US 1977)  
Happy endings' or 'sappy endings'?

One of the themes which is amplified by application of the auteur-structure is the male struggling to find expression and identity within a heterosexual relationship. For example, Jimmy Doyle's saxophone as phallus is most dramatically referred to in a scene with Francine just before the birth of their baby when he accuses her of provoking him to smash it.

One of the stylistic features which is amplified by the application of the auteur-structure is the placing of Method performance against the artificiality and visual excess of its studio-bound locations. At the same time, the film does not demonstrate some of the key elements of other Scorsese films such as the placing of the central character within a Catholic theological context of guilt and redemption (the rejection of *Happy Endings* actually makes this a less 'redemptive' film than those apparently much bleaker films made on either side of it). The fact that there is not a perfect 'match' between auteur-structure and film is perfectly reasonable. To repeat the point: the structure is a tool not a strait-jacket.

This superficial sketch of auteurist features of *New York, New York* nevertheless allows some evaluation of the use of auteur study as a critical approach to Hollywood cinema. Most obviously, elements of theme and style become foregrounded, confirming what might otherwise remain a spectator's tentative interpretation of the film's meaning. Perhaps new significance can be read into detail and a richer appreciation becomes possible of aspects of the film's form.

While remaining philosophically and methodologically suspect, an auteur approach offers an additional layer of coherence to the text and explicates some of the text's important 'surplus' meaning. The more auteur structures/identities that enter into general

circulation, the more expectations are raised and fulfillment sought by audiences always on the look out for patterns of repetition and variation as part of the pleasure of cinema.

### FILM, AUDIENCE, DIALOGUE

A structuralist approach to film study can be very useful. It allows a *common approach* to be adopted not only to a large number of apparently very different films but also to different critical discourses within the subject – such as genre, star and auteur. It also allows for sufficient *containment of all the surface variables* that make every film different from every other film for a study of a film text or a group of film texts to become manageable.

However, these advantages – a 'common approach' and 'containment' – can also be regarded as disadvantages, *overdetermining* how a film is read and critically 'processed' (see again pp. 134–6). Also, comment has been made throughout this chapter on the increasing *difficulty or desirability of containment*, of limiting for the purpose of study all the meanings in play.

In relation to genre, star and auteur, the chapter has emphasised the loosening of traditional categories:

The range of paradigmatic features 'permissible' within a genre film has been freed up considerably with the text cross-referencing paradigms from the whole of Hollywood cinema (see pp. 144–6).

In relation to star study, the shift from 'star' to 'actor' has made it much more difficult to fix in place a set of recurring characteristics, in relation to either roles or persona (see pp. 155–6).

With the industry's incorporation of many directors into the ranks of auteurism, if only for marketing purposes, and with the free movement by auteurs between 'personal' and 'commercial' projects (Scorsese provides an obvious example over the past ten years), it is as difficult as it has always been to agree what might actually constitute an auteur in Hollywood cinema (see pp. 156–7).

All those elements which cannot be contained and which, with reference to *New York, New York*, have been described as 'surplus meaning' or 'excess' or even 'delirium', are the very things we might most want to explore. Particularly intense forms of pleasure and meaning are precisely in those aspects of the film which escape structural containment. The film illustrates not only the rich complexities of *intertextuality*, of the 'dialogue' which is going on between this film and a whole Hollywood history, rich in association, but also how much internal 'dialogue' is going on within and between the different paradigmatic elements, genre, star and auteur, which the simple musical bio-pic narrative (just about) holds together. The imposed logic of structuralism needs to be balanced by a sensitivity to these forms of 'dialogue'.

To continue the analogy made throughout with language, a finite set of rules and a limited vocabulary can generate an infinite number of meanings. It is very useful to learn the vocabulary and the structures, but the purpose of doing so is to participate in the real world of communication. In the real world of interaction between film industry–film text–film audience, a limited vocabulary in the form of paradigms, structured in ways which are sufficiently conventionalised to be called 'rules' are capable of producing an infinite number of meanings. Pleasure is to be found both in the artificial containment

of the real world in structured forms and in the 'play' which these structured forms allow.<sup>25</sup>

For this reason the formal study of genre, star and auteur must be balanced by a very different approach to film studies which emphasises reception and the actual uses to which a film text is put by specific groups of people differentiated by gender, class, race or age at the particular historical moment of viewing. A film is a text with complex internal structures put into circulation as a commodity by an industry. But it is also an experience, a cultural event in which the commodity form of the film can be appropriated by an audience as part of their own cultural production. (For example, the meaning of Schumacher's vigilante thriller *Falling Down* for lower middle-class white American urban audiences; the appropriation of Lisa Minnelli's mother, Judy Garland, by gay audiences.) This is where the exploration of genre and star in particular must move along the continuum from textual to *cultural studies*, from structuralism to *ethnography*, from theories to the way people actually watch and use films within their lives.<sup>26</sup>



- 1 D. Thompson and I. Christie (eds), 1989, p. 69.
- 2 See J. Fiske, 1987, ch. 8.
- 3 See F. McConnell, 1979.
- 4 See T. Schatz, 1981, pp. 29–36.
- 5 See J. Belton, 1994, pp. 305–10.
- 6 J. Collins, 'Genericity in the Nineties', in J. Collins, *et al.* (eds), 1993, p. 254.
- 7 *ibid.*, pp. 257–62.
- 8 See J. Cawelti, 1976, ch. 1.
- 9 Thompson and Christie (eds), p. 72.
- 10 R. Dyer, 'Entertainment and Utopia', in R. Altman (ed.), 1981.
- 11 R. Dyer, 1979, pp. 68–72.
- 12 For a simple exposition of Uses and Gratification Theory, see J. Fiske, 1990, pp. 154–6.
- 13 See C. Gledhill (ed.), 1991, chs 13–16 have provided the basis for pp. 143–7.
- 14 This is taken from Richard Dyer's piece on Julia Roberts broadcast on BBC's *The Late Show* in March 1991.
- 15 See P. Cook (ed.), 1986, pp. 50–2.
- 16 See B. King, 'Articulating Stardom', in Gledhill (ed.), 1991.
- 17 The Russian Stanislavski and the American Strasberg developed, arguably, the century's two most influential theories and practices of acting. Whether they are as opposing to one another as is commonly thought is open to debate.
- 18 See Dyer, 1979, pp. 72–98.
- 19 Thompson and Christie (eds), p. 72.

- 20 See the articles by R. Lippe and L. Cooke, in *Movie*, vol. 31-2, winter 1986.
- 21 See T. Schatz 1988, an excellent study of the studio system.
- 22 P. Wollen, 1972.
- 23 See *Guardian*, 21 January 1993.
- 24 See D. Andrews, 'The Unauthorised Auteur Today', Collins *et al.* (eds), 1993, pp. 82-3 (emphasis added).
- 25 See, for example, ch. 12 of Fiske, 1987.
- 26 See J. Basinger, 1993, for a very entertaining example of how genre and star study can be re-focused on how audiences actually 'use' films.



### FURTHER VIEWING

If you wish to engage in a detailed study of *New York, New York* the following are some of the films that will place it in context:

Scorsese:

*Who's That Knocking at My Door* (1969)

*Mean Streets* (1973)

*Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1975)

*Taxi Driver* (1976)

*New York, New York* (1977)

*Raging Bull* (1980)

*King of Comedy* (1982)

The musical:

*On the Town* (Donen/Kelly, 1949)

*The Band Wagon* (Minnelli, 1953)

*A Star is Born* (Cukor, 1954)

*The Glenn Miller Story* (Mann, 1954)

*Funny Girl* (Wyler, 1968)

*Cabaret* (Fosse, 1972)

It is also useful to compare Scorsese's film with Coppola's *One from the Heart* (1982) in relation to its homage to the studio film.

The study of genre, star and auteur invites list-making. Over sixty films are referred to in this chapter. You may find it useful to use some of them as the basis for constructing such lists. These lists may be based on conventional generic or star or auteur identities: a list of westerns, for example; a chronological list of films by star or auteur. However, it is in the construction of more imaginative lists which go across

these obvious categories that critical discussion is opened up. This may be along the lines of Schatz's 'Genres of Order' and 'Genres of Integration' (p.131) or Collins' 'eclecticism' and 'authenticity' (p. 136). It may be in terms of grouping stars by their leanings towards impersonation or personification (pp. 143-6). The vital thing to remember is that criticism is a creative act and the construction of shapes and patterns within film studies is merely a particular example of the way we engage in complexities of all kinds, attempting to disentangle and make sense through language.