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The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies by David Bordwell

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of a white man who is captivated by an 'oriental beauty' and thus relies on stereotypical figures of sexual and racial Otherness, Brandt argues that "the film also seeks to subvert and destabilise the authority of these myths" (130). In a similar way, though arguing from a psychoanalytic perspective, Elisabeth Bronfen emphasizes a sense of ambiguity about one of Browning's best-known films, *Dracula* (1931). She interprets the figure of Dracula as the "monstrous Other," to which the culturally and socially marginalized are drawn, and which serves as "the embodiment of a rotten kernel at the heart of the West" (163). Though the eventual victory over the vampire may indicate the West's superiority, Bronfen argues that facing up to his evil power generates a desire for omnipotence that reaches a similarly all-encompassing, and ultimately destructive, quality.

Finally, Bernd Herzogenrath develops a poststructuralist framework for his interpretation of *Freaks* (1932), which, again, focuses on a sense of ambiguity. Drawing on Lacan's famous notion of the mirror stage, the experience of bodily wholeness is connected irrevocably to images of the fragmented body, haunting and subverting the illusion of wholeness. Herzogenrath relates *Freaks* to a long discourse on allegorical images of the body representing the American nation, and he stresses that the freaks, as a body politic, stand for group strength, not individualism. Though this unusual production was often advertised as an exploitation film, Herzogenrath sees it as a complex oscillation between self-images and images of the Other.

As indicated, one of the few critical points about this essay collection is the choice of Vivian Sobchack's research exercise, written as a graduate student in 1974, as the opening, and in a sense, frame-establishing piece (Herzogenrath even calls it the "introduction proper" [12] to the volume). Sobchack seems to anticipate this critique, feeling obliged to preface her article with an "apologia for the essay's indiscriminate delight at every scrap of information I was able to find" (21). In this respect, by giving short plot synopses and by drawing on contemporaneous newspaper reviews, the essay is indeed highly informative as an overview of Browning's work.

However, I believe the book would have profited from a more contemporary reassessment of Tod Browning's career within the studio system of the 1920s and 1930s. Some of the doubts that surface in various places—wheth-

er Tod Browning can be seen as a 'genuine' auteur, how important his collaborations were for his creative output (e.g. with Lon Chaney or Irving Thalberg), how we should contextualize him in the B-movie sector—would have benefitted from a more complex understanding of auteurism, if, indeed, this is to be the main focus. But does it have to be? If we are dealing with a 'cult director,' maybe the answer has to be yes, but the individual essays suggest many connections between Browning and the general film culture that go beyond an auteurist framework.

Some of these connections—such as the relation between melodrama and morality, sensationalism, and the stigmatization of the Other, or the cinema of attractions and the production of thrills—are well-researched and fairly common phenomena in the first three decades of American film history. They could fruitfully have provided less auteur-centred and thus more systemic approaches to the peculiar aesthetic of Tod Browning's films which an introductory chapter could at least have sketched out. This criticism, however, must be seen in perspective. Overall this volume, richly illustrated and lovingly designed, serves as an excellent introduction to the neglected films of Tod Browning, drawing on a number of established approaches but also suggesting new paths to be taken by future researchers.

München

Christof Decker

DAVID BORDWELL, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2006), 298 pp.

In 1985, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson published what has since become a classic: *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. This magisterial volume—easily one of the most thoroughly researched and influential books coming out of American film studies—tracked the development of a distinct, pervasive film style that crystallized around 1917. Back then, the three authors admitted their somewhat arbitrary decision to stop their account in the year 1960. This is where Bordwell's new project *The Way Hollywood Tells It* comes in. The book takes up the thread the year Bordwell and his co-authors had cut it off, asking the obvious, yet intriguing question: what has happened since?

Apart from an introduction, meticulous notes, and a useful 48-page timetable of the major economic and technological changes, the book contains two essays of roughly 80 to 90 pages each. The first one deals with storytelling; the second one looks at visual style. Both prove Bordwell as the outstanding narratologist and neo-formalist that he is. As always, he displays an intimidating knowledge of film history, spotting influential shifts in production and technology and cross-referencing forgotten films. As always, he rejects over-the-top zeitgeist inferences in favor of a piecemeal approach (whose results, rest assured, will serve as a springboard for the interpretive somersaults of many lesser critics). And as always, he writes eminently accessibly. In the majority of cases he even manages to ship elegantly around the dangerous rocks of *ekphrasis*: those necessary, but sometimes tiresome descriptions of scenes under analysis.

In the first essay, focused on storytelling, Bordwell lists a number of reasons for the narrative innovations of contemporary Hollywood. First, the introduction of video and DVD allowed for repeated viewing—and therefore suggested movies that merit re-reading. Second, a generation of filmmakers deeply enmeshed in TV, comic books, video games, and pulp-fiction novels entered the scene, adapting different storytelling traditions. A third push that got change going was the need for distinction. Younger filmmakers had to challenge the superb legacy of the classical tradition if they did not want to fall into oblivion. As a consequence, they searched for roads less traveled and began to push the premises. Formerly disreputable genres like crime movies, science-fiction, fantasy and horror films achieved prominence. The narration became more action-driven. The films are characterized by “worldmaking”: the creation of rich, layered worlds that could be rummaged for details. Finally, the 1990s turned out to be an “era of experimental storytelling” (73): now there are “puzzle films” like *The Sixth Sense* in which a misleading narrative plays intricate games with the viewer; there are “network narratives” with multiple protagonists such as *Short Cuts*; and there are films with scrambled time schemes (*Pulp Fiction*) and even reversed-order structures (*Memento*).

The second essay consists of a long hard look at what Bordwell dubs ‘intensified continuity’—a visual cinematic style that has not only become the dominant way movies look in the

United States since the 1960s, but has also been adopted by many other national cinemas. Four aesthetic strategies distinguish it from classical continuity: rapid editing, use of extreme wide-angle and long lenses, reliance on close shots, and constant, wide-ranging camera movements. Once again he makes you see things that you have almost certainly overlooked: David Bordwell is all eyes—which is, unfortunately, also to say that he is not all ears. (To criticize his iconocentric tendency is more than mere nit-picking, a point that I will return to.)

Why did this new visual style come into being? Bordwell weaves an intricate net of reasons. The small television box not only favors medium shots and close-ups, but the distracted viewing position also demands constant visual change to hold the viewer’s attention. Technological innovations like lighter cameras and digital editing made the prowling camera and short shot length a much more likely option. A younger generation of filmmakers wanted to emulate its proto-intense forefathers (e.g. Orson Welles and Hitchcock). Et cetera.

To say the least, Bordwell is not an outrageous aficionado of Hollywood’s version of intensified continuity. On the one hand, it could be more elegant and precisely choreographed: its “aesthetic of broad but forceful effects, often showing strain” (180) clearly pales in comparison to the counterpart from Hong Kong. On the other hand, telling the tale of intensified continuity also implies chronicling a narrative of loss: the range of choice is narrowed, excluding other stylistic options, some of which are quite dear to Bordwell. The loss is threefold. First, due to a strong trust in fast editing, there is practically no American filmmaker left who uses long takes in the way, say, Theo Angelopoulos or Michael Haneke do. Second, turning camerawork and editing into its hallmark, current Hollywood cinema does not know how to stage actors in space and work with complex blocking.<sup>1</sup> Third, actors’ performances are more constrained. The dependence on short takes and close-ups privileges facial expression at the expense of body posture, stance, and movement.

<sup>1</sup> This argument is put forward more elaborately in Bordwell’s books *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997); and *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2005).

However, Bordwell's goal is not only to track the changes—which he does with venerable acuity and rigor—but also to underscore the continuity. It is here that his book becomes more controversial. Bordwell maintains that the principles of the classical system of narration and style are still flourishing, even if the favored choices have changed: “nearly all scenes in nearly all contemporary mass-market movies (and in most ‘independent’ films) are staged, shot, and cut according to principles that crystallized in the 1910s and 1920s” (180). This is, of course, a broadside against those film critics and historians who dared to suggest that some films have left the ‘classical’ paradigm behind and have turned ‘post-classical’: from Thomas Elsaesser to Richard Maltby and beyond.<sup>2</sup> In these passages, we encounter Bordwell's famous penchant for polemics—a highly entertaining and enlightening combination of lucid rhetoric and the boisterous will to defend a position. Apart from his former University of Wisconsin-Madison colleague Noël Carroll, there is probably no film scholar writing in the English language today who is more strongly and eloquently opposed to wish-wash relativism and fuzzy concepts than Bordwell. Granted, Bordwell is slightly less antagonistic this time. Whoever wants to see him in full throttle should go back to *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (1989), an enormously valuable attack on purely interpretive approaches, or consult his website ([www.davidbordwell.net](http://www.davidbordwell.net)) where he picks to pieces the stilted style and overblown arguments of Slavoj Žižek.

Why is he more restrained this time? A good guess would be that Bordwell, so deeply steeped in cognitive psychology, senses that

this argumentative battle is fought on the slippery grounds of concept formation. He admits that American films “have changed enormously” (1). But does this merit the introduction of a new category? Bordwell thinks not. His main argument rests on numbers: movies that stand out are few and far between. Fair enough. Yet it does not solve the problem, because films that stick out do exist. One hesitates to pigeon-hole crime movies like *Natural Born Killers* or *Memento* into the same category as *The Maltese Falcon*, just as a drug drama like *Requiem for a Dream* does not sit comfortably next to *The Man with the Golden Arm*. Even if they rely on *some* classical precepts, these new films enable very different cinematic experiences—particularly if we take into consideration the afore-mentioned element that Bordwell ignores: Dolby (surround) sound, foregrounding three-dimensionality and immersion.<sup>3</sup> The question is therefore: how far can one stretch a category before it turns vague? And: when does it become helpful to introduce a new one? As one classical introduction into the field has it, “concepts are critical for perceiving, remembering, talking and thinking about objects and events in the world.”<sup>4</sup> As pattern-recognition devices they help to classify novel entities and draw inferences.

One underlying problem is Bordwell's insinuation that post-classical implies anti-classical (16). This is not the case. Eleftheria Thanouli, for one, frankly admits the “strong affiliation of this new paradigm with the classical Hollywood cinema and the sense of historical continuity that binds them.”<sup>5</sup> Bordwell is right when he questions extravagant arguments about radical shifts in general. But why not grant that some films are post-classical (or whatever notion one prefers), even if the majority is not? At the very end, Bordwell—unwittingly?—ventures into this direction: comparing the ‘stylish style’ of post-1960 American cinema to sixteenth century Man-

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Peter Krämer, “Post-Classical Hollywood,” *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, ed. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 289-309; Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003); Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland, *Studying Contemporary American Film: A Guide to Movie Analysis* (London: Arnold, 2002); Robert Blanchet, *Blockbuster: Ästhetik, Ökonomie und Geschichte des postklassischen Kinos* (Marburg: Schüren, 2003); Eleftheria Thanouli, “Post-Classical Narration: A New Paradigm in Contemporary Cinema,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 4.3 (2006): 183-96.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Gianluca Sergi, *The Dolby Era: Film Sound in Contemporary Hollywood* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Edward E. Smith and Douglas Medin, *Categories and Concepts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981) 1.

<sup>5</sup> Thanouli 195. Or think of Elsaesser and Buckland's discussion of *Die Hard* as both classical and post-classical (Elsaesser and Buckland 26-79).

nerism, he acknowledges the existence of a new style. Renaissance and Mannerism did, after all, mark two distinct art historical epochs. Just as Mannerist artists did not throw all prior insights overboard (e.g., central and atmospheric perspective), so do today's Oliver Stone, Baz Luhrmann, and Darren Aronofsky

still cling to many (if not all) of the classical features. Reading Bordwell's highly perceptive but at times unnecessarily dogged book one gets the impression: this debate is not over.

Berlin

Julian Hanich