

To Be or Not to Be Post-Classical

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Thomas Elsaesser's fascination with word plays and double meanings was what perturbed me the most when I started attending his theory and history classes in the Master's program at the University of Amsterdam. Having no background in film studies at the time and being as pragmatic as I am, I had very little use for terms like "*mise en abyme*," "deep structure" or "sliding signifiers." Gradually, however, as I began to understand the value of metaphors and rhetorical strategies in the theoretical discourse, I found it intriguing to analyze and dissect Elsaesser's own writings with the very same tools he used to analyze films. After a several-year-long practice, I sometimes now feel that I can crack his code and find the algorithms that copiously produce such meandering and far-reaching reflections.

In this article, I would like to venture a decryption by focusing on one of Elsaesser's major areas of interest: Hollywood cinema in the post-studio era from the 1970s to this day. In film studies, this amounts to a highly contested terrain that has traditionally forced scholars to divide into two opposing camps; the one would accommodate those who wished to assert an almost seamless continuity between the classical and the post-1960s Hollywood filmmaking, while the other would shelter those who detected a significant break between the two phases. From the outset, Elsaesser was eager to succumb to the allure of "what is different" in contemporary American films rather than adhere to "what is still the same," and thus chose to take a clear, albeit nuanced, position in the debate at the time.

By 1975, he had already published a seminal essay entitled "The Pathos of Failure: Notes on the Unmotivated Hero,"¹ where he launched a compelling rhetoric that called attention to a number of innovations that the younger generation of filmmakers had brought to New Hollywood. Without the privilege of historical distance and emotional detachment, Elsaesser observed a number of changes that were under way and elaborated on the finer nuances of this transitional period with unprecedented insight. For him, the films of New Hollywood were the instigators of a double play; they manipulated a number of classical signifiers in order to create a meta-cinematic layer where the New could voice a critical reflection on the Old. One of the salient features of this trend was the combination of the classical motif of the journey with heroes that lacked clear-cut motivation. Using examples such as *TWO-LANE BLACKTOP* (1971), *FIVE EASY PIECES* (1970),

THE LAST DETAIL (1973) and CALIFORNIA SPLIT (1974), he distinguished a tension between the familiar formula of the journey, which by convention bears a strong logic of purpose and intention, and the characters in these films, who failed to embody a determinate goal. According to Elsaesser, the lack of motive in the characters' actions and the loose progression of the plot were indicative of a skepticism towards the ideals of American society and its traditional belief in personal initiative. Whereas classical Hollywood maintained a solid faith in human agency and the ability to accomplish any mission, the emerging sensibility of New Hollywood adopted a more pessimistic stance about the possibility to solve all problems, to face all obstacles.

However, as the rebelliousness of the 1970s wore off and Hollywood returned to the more familiar paths of studio dominance in a post-Fordist model at this time, the unmotivated heroes soon gave way to diehard males who not only reclaimed their motivations but also reveled in the mass-market fanfare of the conglomerated New New Hollywood.² At that point, Elsaesser once more had to face the question of whether there is a difference between these contemporary films and their classical Hollywood antecedents. Again, he responded with a stubborn "yes." It is this response that I would like to scrutinize here in order to serve a twofold goal; on the one hand, I would like to critically engage "the code" used by Elsaesser to theorize post-classical cinema, while, on the other, I would like to verify its validity through the analysis of an example of the most recent Hollywood output.

Inside Post-Classical Hollywood

When Elsaesser decided to conceptualize the developments in American cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, he not only maintained his focus on "what is different" but also sought to craft a consistent method for constructing a post-classical reading of popular blockbusters. In a lengthy chapter entitled "Classical/Post-Classical Narrative" in the book *Studying Contemporary American Film*³ he carried out a very carefully balanced analysis of a blockbuster hit, John McTiernan's DIE HARD, as a typical Hollywood product of the late 1980s.

The working hypothesis for his investigation was that the film can be both classical and post-classical depending on the analyst's theoretical and conceptual agenda. In order to demonstrate how different questions about the same film can generate entirely different answers, Elsaesser ventured on a rather lengthy exposition of some of the key theoretical approaches to classical cinema, namely David Bordwell's neo-formalist poetics and the structuralist approach inspired by Vladimir Propp and Claude Lévi-Strauss. With these theories and their respective

methodological tools in hand, Elsaesser was able to trace all of the traditional classical elements in *DIE HARD*. The thorough reading of the film's narrative construction showed that it constituted a textbook case of classical cinema, as it faithfully incorporated all the norms and principles of classical filmmaking: the three-act structure, the goal-oriented hero who has to accomplish a mission and win the heart of a woman, the oedipal trajectory, the enigmas and the repetitions, to name but a few. Thus, Elsaesser's analysis of this popular blockbuster explicitly confirmed the claims of Bordwell and others about the continuity of the classical formulas in contemporary cinema and the resilience of classical narration over the course of time.

And yet, despite the persistence of formal classicism in contemporary films, Elsaesser's long-standing interest in "what is different" made him test the limits of his intellectual resources in an effort to map a set of differences in a sea of overwhelming similarities. A minute reading of *DIE HARD* with the help of a multifaceted conceptual sieve led him to formulate the following five key observations:

- a. The post-classical narratives do not reject the canonical story format, but entail a multiple layering of plotlines and characters that can be readily transferred to a video game format.
- b. They express a kind of "knowingness" about the heuristic distinction between surface and deep structure, and in a literal sense they play with these conceptual categories.
- c. They address issues of race, gender and the male body more openly and explicitly, although not necessarily in a more progressive way.
- d. They acknowledge their presence in a transnational/post-colonial/globalized world and simultaneously provide a commentary on the situation at the same time, thus adopting an inside-outside position.
- e. They are replete with sliding signifiers, i.e., verbal and visual puns that denote the sophistication and professionalism of New Hollywood.⁴

All of these aspects constituted different facets of the quintessential quality of post-classical cinema, its "knowingness," described as "a special sort of awareness of the codes that govern classical representation and its genre conventions, along with a willingness to display this knowingness and make the audience share it, by letting it in on the game."⁵ In other words, post-classical Hollywood has absorbed the classical rules to such a degree that the only way it can use them anymore is through an excessive mastery and display.

Elsaesser's scheme for constructing a post-classical reading of Hollywood films, despite its sophistication and insight, has thus far not reached a canonical status in film theory. Elsaesser himself has not supported this theory any further

in other publications, which is partly due to the fact that he has already moved on to other concepts, like “world cinema” or “mind-game film,” and partly due to his own dissatisfaction with the term and his search for a post-post-classical cinema.⁶ However, I would like to cling to this “post-classical” a little bit longer. Having built my own academic identity with Bordwell and Elsaesser as my two father figures, I would like to use the former’s persistence to support the latter’s claims about post-classical cinema.⁷ My motivation is not based on any obligation but on genuine belief. In fact, the more I watch contemporary Hollywood blockbusters, the more impressed I am by the acuteness of Elsaesser’s observations. For that reason, I would like to examine a recent Hollywood release to see how effective the five-tier method of post-classical analysis holds up after almost two decades of New New Hollywood filmmaking.

Into INSIDE MAN

INSIDE MAN is Spike Lee’s latest full-length film released in 2006 by Universal Pictures. It was produced by the Academy Award-winning producer Brian Grazer on a budget of \$45 million, which was more than amply recuperated at the box office.⁸ Even though Lee has occasionally attempted more alternative formulas, here he delivers a typical crime thriller, featuring an acclaimed cast of Hollywood actors in a story about a bank robbery. The plot is not easy to summarize due to the various generic twists and turns but the main lines of action go like this. Dalton Russell (Clive Owen) leads a group of robbers into the Manhattan Trust bank posing as painters. They take everyone in the building hostage, forcing everyone to wear identical uniforms so that villains and victims look identical for the cameras. The NYPD puts Detective Keith Frazier (Denzel Washington) in charge of the hostage negotiations. Frazier tries to figure out the eccentric plan of the robbers and deal with this critical situation. Parallel to these developments, we see the founder of the bank, Arthur Case (Christopher Plummer), being informed about the heist who then takes things into his own hands. He promptly hires a power broker named Madeleine White (Jodie Foster) to protect the contents of his safety deposit box, which seems of exceptional value to him. These four key players, who all have their own agendas in the case, meet and interact with one another throughout the 129-minute film in order to resolve the situation. Russell’s plan works, and he walks out of the bank with his loot, Frazier gets promoted as he solves the case without any apparent casualties, White adds another successful deal to her résumé, while Case is condemned for his sinful past after his secret leaks out.

These main plot elements attest to the presence of a conventional Hollywood formula that builds a suspenseful story through the careful arrangement of classical compositional and generic elements such as character-centered causality, a tight causal chain of events, a series of twists and reversals, a cat-and-mouse chase between the cops and the villains and, finally, a clear resolution or even a happy ending. In other words, if we employed the analytical tool of narrative analysis à la Bordwell, we would be happy to conclude that *INSIDE MAN* is another instance of classical narration that abides, to a large extent, to the same norms of narrative construction that crystallized in the studio period from 1917 to 1960. There is nothing wrong with this line of reasoning, since it faithfully serves the principles of historical poetics, which strictly measures the poetic elements of a film and the way they evolve in history. But this is not the only thing we should analyze here, and this is where Elsaesser's theory comes in handy. By subjecting *INSIDE MAN* to the post-classical method of inquiry, its true nature becomes more than manifest. In the following, I will structure my reading of Lee's film based on Elsaesser's five criteria.

a. Narrative Structure

Even though the plot development largely follows the classical trajectory of Exposition, Conflict, Complication, Crisis and Denouement, the film layers its characters and entangles their actions in a way that surpasses the linear logic of the classical storylines and allows the various plot components to relate laterally as if they formed a network with interconnected nodes. The four main characters – Russell, Frazier, Case and White – offer the viewer separate entry points into the story, as the plot allows each one of them sufficient screen time to unfold their plans and claim their stakes in the robbery case, which turns out to be a game rife with opportunities. The plot becomes difficult to summarize precisely because its classical premises can be reconfigured in various ways depending on which character you place in charge and which link you choose to follow every time these four people meet to negotiate. The story can be about an ingenious and self-assured robber who implements the perfect plan or about a decent cop who gets a second chance or about a corrupt banker who is finally exposed or about a ferocious power broker who works on the margins of legitimacy, running immensely profitable errands for the rich and the powerful.

The painstakingly layered screenplay allows the four protagonists to take turns in the villain-victim position, creating a tension that is never fully resolved. Is Russell the real villain, or is he the savior who punishes a Nazi collaborator and even rewards Frazier with a diamond? Is Case the ultimate villain since he built his empire on stealing from the Jews during the Second World War or should

years of philanthropy have cleansed him of his guilt? Is Frazier the honest cop, or is he gradually seduced by the cleverness of Russell's plan and thus turned into an accomplice? And finally, is White the one who quintessentially poses the dilemma of agency with her never quite being guilty of anything while she as a hired hand facilitates the dubious activities of people with blood – or at least dirt – on their hands? Overall, the multiple layers in the narrative structure of the film seem to confirm Elsaesser's claim that post-classical cinema might not have abolished the canonical story format but has imbued it with a nodal logic that facilitates the convergence of the filmic narrative with the ones we find in new media and, particularly, video games.

b. Surface Structure and Deep Structure

When we look at *INSIDE MAN*, the heuristic distinction between “surface structure,” which amounts to the characters' actions, and “deep structure,” which regards the characters' hidden desires, becomes particularly tangible through the ingenious play between false appearances and hidden truths from start to finish. The notion of a character's oedipal trajectory is here played out in the open, as the plot offers us the obvious plan of the bank robbery as a façade for a deeper and darker story which is not revealed to us until the closing moments. Russell's scheme is not to empty the bank's treasury, as we initially assumed; it is to steal the contents of a tiny portion of that wealth and, at the same time, atone for his crime by uncovering the crime of the respectable, respected banker who stands in for the Law. Thus, the hero almost literally displaces the Father to satisfy his Oedipus complex and then takes his position in the symbolic order, i.e., he serves the purposes of civil society where the good are rewarded (Frazier) and the bad are punished (Case). In other words, a post-classical film like this dares to depict an almost literal realization of the oedipal trajectory by emulating, at the plot level, the distinction between “surface structure” and “deep structure,” which in classical films was usually identified at the level of interpretation.

In addition to the oedipal trajectory, Lee's film plays with other psychoanalytical concepts that were applied in the analysis of classical Hollywood cinema. Firstly, there is a post-classical femme fatale, Madeleine White, who bears all the characteristics of her classical archetype, such as charm, elegance and wit combined with a predatory attitude, but the subliminal threat to male masculinity and the fear of castration that she embodies here become verbally exposed on numerous occasions and particularly when the profane Mayor tells her: “You are a magnificent cunt.” The same explicitness is brought to the fore regarding Lacan's notions of “voyeurism” and “misrecognition.” The use of masks and disguises as well as the staging of a false murder, in an outspoken manner, seems to aid in the

investigation of the problematics of the look and the identification process that it instigates. By using the masks or manipulating the surveillance cameras, Russell consciously blocks the gaze of the police and denies them access to the reality of the moment. He as both a hero and as our frame narrator seeks to problematize the deeper issue of identification by preventing the actual identification of the robbers and by triggering off, from the start, a game of constant misrecognition: nobody and nothing in this film are what they appear to be. In view of these dramaturgical strategies, *INSIDE MAN* seems to display a profound knowingness by performing in a self-conscious way what was previously reserved for the unconscious.

c. Race, Gender and the Male Body

One of the most salient features of the film is the wide racial palette of its characters. The various hostages in the bank, the policemen and the passersby comprise a broad racial mix, which is regularly foregrounded in the dialogues, especially during the interrogation process. Apart from the fact that the very core of the story – the Holocaust – hinges on the issue of racism, the film relentlessly evokes the problematics of race and stirs up an overt discussion not only about multi-raciality but also the use of politically correct registers. When a police officer begins to tell the story of a shooting using the word “spic” to refer to a Spanish-American, Frazier asks him to “tone down the color commentary” and forces him to carry on his account using the politically correct hyphenated terminology.

When it comes to gender, the agenda is equally crammed with explicit references to femininity and masculinity, starting with White’s aggressive behavior, which, combined with Jodie Foster’s lesbian profile, creates a very ambiguous sexual identity. However, what pervades the entire story is the jocular homoeroticism between Russell and Frazier and the sexually loaded phrases they constantly use. The following verbal exchange is indicative.

Russell: “Soon I’m gonna be sucking down piña coladas in a hot tub with six girls named Amber and Tiffany.”

Frazier: “No, it’s more like in the shower with two guys named Jamal and Jesus... and here’s the bad news; that thing you’re sucking on? It’s not a piña colada!”

The selection of names in this quote also confirms the constant slippage or “trade-off”⁹ between race and gender in contemporary Hollywood that becomes even more palpable in the following dialogue between Frazier and White:

White: “Don’t take this personally, but I don’t think you can afford me.”

Frazier: “Don’t take this personally, Miss White, but kiss my black ass.”

The characters' preoccupation with their racial and sexual characteristics permeates the creative options in ways that I could not possibly hope to cover in this essay. But it would certainly provide the "race-gender studies" people with a field day, to paraphrase Elsaesser once more.¹⁰

d. The transnational/Post-colonial/Globalization Theme

If we look at *INSIDE MAN* through the prism of this fourth analytical pillar, the observations we generate are again copious. Set in a post-9/11 New York City, the film consciously seeks to acknowledge its place in a multicultural and globalized environment where all nationalities co-exist but not without friction or prejudice. In downtown Manhattan, you can find an Albanian-speaking person just around any corner, and anyone wearing a turban is immediately considered an Arab, hence a threat. Lee pays his respect to the 9/11 victims by foregrounding a "WE WILL NEVER FORGET" poster, but he offers a scathing critique of the paranoia against the Arabs that followed this tragedy. In addition to the initial fear that the heist might be an Al-Qaeda job, the film stages another relevant incident with a hostage named Vikram Walia. When he exits the bank, the police start to harass him and take his turban, all the while calling him "a fucking Arab." Walia protests his treatment and demands his turban back, explaining that he is a Sikh and wears it as a part of his religion. Later on, during his interrogation, he is offered the opportunity to voice his resentment against the bias he encounters everywhere he goes.

In general, the characters in the story underline an awareness of the social reality in the era of post-colonialism and globalization, where borders are blurring, where ethnic identities become hybrid and where traditional binaries such as friend/enemy or, most importantly, inside/outside collapse.

e. Sliding Signifiers

The title *INSIDE MAN* is itself the key sliding signifier of the film, as what is signified keeps shifting as the various narrative twists unfold. Initially, we assume that Russell is a lawbreaker or a blackmailer who wants to rob the bank, but as the plot thickens and Case's dubious past emerges, we begin to wonder whether this "inside man" is not some sort of a double agent. However, the final revelations offer a very different view, attributing to the title a strictly literal meaning, i.e. the man who stays inside. In fact, Russell has prepared us from the very start. In the opening scene, he warns: "Pay strict attention to what I say because I choose my words very carefully." He earnestly describes his whereabouts as a "prison cell" and rushes to explain that there is "a vast difference between being

stuck in a tiny cell and being in prison.” This wordplay is accompanied by its visual equivalent that shows Russell confined in a tiny space that resembles a prison cell. This image haunts us throughout the film, encouraging us to believe that Russell is eventually imprisoned. It is only in the final moments that we come to realize the “vast difference” between the two places he had pointed out.

This preoccupation with space stimulates various other verbal puns, but I will mention here just two. Firstly, the robbers use a van with a fake company logo which says, “Perfectly Planned Painting: We Never Leave Until the Job Is Done,” foreshadowing Russell’s escape plan to remain inside until the job is done. Secondly, the line “When there’s blood on the streets, buy property” is repeated twice and refers to how Case profited during WWII, while, in fact, its signification slides over another more contemporary figure, namely Bin Laden’s nephew, who is supposedly buying a co-op in Park Avenue. This double entendre is particularly difficult to miss, especially given the aforementioned post-9/11 atmosphere in New York.

These few examples indeed denote the sophistication of the professionals in New New Hollywood who, apart from the usual film references,¹¹ manage to imbue the films’ basic compositional elements with multiple signifieds, which ascribe the film with an exceedingly dense texture and flaunt the knowingness of what Elsaesser calls “the classical-plus.”¹²

Epilogue

Elsaesser’s post-classical method of analysis enabled me to perform a close analysis of *INSIDE MAN* and bring to the surface a series of elements that would go unnoticed using the standard tools of narrative analysis. The five criteria above function as a conceptual grid that isolates the differences between contemporary American films and their classical origins and further highlights the relation between the cinematic discourse and the wider historical and cultural context. It is important to keep all five of these criteria together and apply them complementarily because, otherwise, we risk undermining their heuristic value and reducing them to minor distinctive features that easily lose their critical value under the pressure of the similarities at the level of narration. This was the strategy that Bordwell deployed to debunk Elsaesser’s theory in his latest book entitled *The Way Hollywood Tells It* (2006), where he once again tried to sustain his standard thesis about the stability of the classical Hollywood system to this very day. In his critique, Bordwell concentrated almost exclusively on the issue of “playful knowingness,” claiming that this element called “knowingness” was as old as the (Hollywood) hills, as it could be found in many Marx Brothers films or even in Bugs

Bunny cartoons.¹³ Ironically enough, neither slapstick comedy nor animation has ever been regarded as quintessentially classical. Quite the contrary. Both of these genres have regularly underlined the weaknesses of the classical mode of narration and its tight cause-and-effect logic. The fact that Elsaesser's argument about knowingness reminded Bordwell of some of the most anomalous instances in the history of classical studio filmmaking is quite indicative of the nerve that the former's theory is able to touch.

At any rate, contemporary Hollywood will continue to be a battleground for some of the most fascinating theoretical struggles, and the line between the classical and the post-classical will continue to be redrawn. With each charting, what matters is the consistency of the methodological tools and the application of the theoretical premises to a sufficient sample of films. Thomas Elsaesser ensured the former with the clarity and precision that characterizes his "Classical/Post-Classical Narrative" account. Hopefully, my analysis of *INSIDE MAN* will contribute to the latter.

Notes

1. Thomas Elsaesser, "The Pathos of Failure: Notes on the Unmotivated Hero," *Mono-gram* 6 (1975): 13-19; reprinted in *The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s*, eds. Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwath and Noel King (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004) 279-292.
2. Elsaesser uses the terms Old, New and New New Hollywood to distinguish three major phases in Hollywood cinema, mainly in terms of production practices. Old Hollywood refers to the studio years from 1917 to 1960 and is characterized by the Fordist principles of industrial production. New Hollywood is a transitional phase that lasts through the 1970s and is characterized by a more personal type of filmmaking. Finally, New New Hollywood emerges in the 1980s and is still the dominant system, signals a return to a strictly industrialized mode of production according to post-Fordist principles. Each phase is also characterized by, even if it is not reducible to, a specific type of film product: with Old Hollywood we find the classical narratives, with New Hollywood we have the unmotivated heroes, while New New Hollywood is dominated by blockbusters. See the introduction to *The Last Great American Picture Show* 37-69.
3. Thomas Elsaesser, "Classical / Post-Classical Narrative," *Studying Contemporary American Film* (London: Arnold, 2002) 26-79. The book was co-authored by Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland, but this particular chapter was written by Elsaesser, as noted in the Preface. Thus, I will attribute this approach to Elsaesser, despite Buckland's contribution to the overall structure and editing of the book.
4. Elsaesser, "Classical / Post-Classical Narrative" 66.
5. Elsaesser, "Classical / Post-Classical Narrative" 78. Here we can observe a slight shift in the terms he uses, which can be elaborated as follows; in the article on New Holly-

- wood and unmotivated heroes, Elsaesser was discussing a distinction between Old and New Hollywood. In his analysis of *DIE HARD*, the distinction is made between classical and post-classical cinema. The question is where the 1970s films fit in, in the classical-postclassical continuum. Elsaesser never answers this question directly, but what I could infer from his overall argumentation on the topic is that these films would not qualify as post-classical, at least not according to the post-classical method he developed in his chapter in *Studying Contemporary American Film*. They could be deemed as a transitional phase that was in dialogue both with the classical tradition as well as with the films of the European *auteurs* who had their heyday in the 1960s.
6. See, for example, Thomas Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film," *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. Warren Buckland (Oxford: Blackwell, forthcoming).
 7. In my own attempt to demarcate a post-classical cinema strictly in terms of narration, I had to disagree with both Elsaesser and Bordwell for different methodological reasons.
 8. Within the first year of its release, the film grossed a total of US\$183,960,186 worldwide.
 9. Elsaesser sums up Sharon Willis's argument about race in contemporary American films as follows: "Rather than the film translating racially coded issues into gender-coded ones, she sees a constant slippage and reversal, indicative of what she calls the 'trade-offs' between race and gender, from the point of view of masculinity in crisis, which then release different 'erotic economies' that entail the consequence that 'black' and 'female' emerge as incompatible with each other, unable to exist within the same discursive space." Elsaesser, "Classical / Post-Classical Narrative" 71.
 10. Elsaesser, "Classical / Post-Classical Narrative" 70.
 11. Lee's film is rife with explicit references to films such as *SERPICO* (1973), *DOG DAY AFTERNOON* (1975) and *THE GODFATHER* (1972).
 12. Elsaesser, "Classical / Post-Classical Narrative" 39.
 13. David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) 8.