A CERTAIN TENDENCY
OF THE HOLLYWOOD CINEMA
1930-1980
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1. A Certain Tendency of the American Cinema: Classic Hollywood's Formal and Thematic Paradigms

To SENSE quickly the importance of the years 1930-1945 for the history of the American Cinema, one only has to realize that:

1. All of the nine major studios (MGM, Twentieth Century-Fox, Warner Brothers, RKO, Paramount, Columbia, Universal, United Artists, and Disney) that have produced and distributed the vast majority of American films came to prominence before 1945. The commonly used term for the 1930-1945 period suggests the extraordinary role of these enterprises during the first two decades of talkies—The Studio Era.

2. Of the great movie stars (Bogart, Cagney, Gable, Wayne, Stewart, Cooper, Rooney, Flynn, Tracy and Hepburn, Astaire and Rogers, Lombard, Loy, Dietrich, Garbo, Davis, Garland, Harlow, and Elizabeth Taylor), only Wayne, Stewart, and Taylor found their greatest success after 1945. Of the postwar stars, none (with the possible exceptions of Brando, Dean, and Monroe) approached the glamor of their predecessors.

3. Of the principal genres that have made up the bulk of American movies (western, gangster, horror, science fiction, screwball comedy, women's melodrama, musical, biography, swashbuckler, costume drama), only the western, science fiction, and horror genres achieved their richest forms after 1945.

Understandably, therefore, film historians have designated the years 1930-1945 as "The Classic Period" of American movies. For despite the American Cinema's enormous silent-era success, the arrival of sound saw Hollywood reach the peak of its narrative and commercial efficiency. Statistics tell part of the story. For those sixteen years, the movies *averaged* 80 million in weekly attendance, a sum representing more than half of the U.S. population of the time. Translated another way, from 1930 to 1945,

the movies attracted 83 cents of every U.S. dollar spent on recreation.[1]

Even these remarkable numbers, however, fail to convey the extent of Hollywood's influence. By also dominating the international market,[2] the American Cinema insured that for the vast majority of the audience, both here and abroad, Hollywood's Classic Period films would establish the definition of the medium itself. Henceforth, different ways of making movies would appear as aberrations from some "intrinsic essence of cinema" rather than simply as alternatives to a particular form that had resulted from a unique coincidence of historical accidents—aesthetic, economic, technological, political, cultural, and even geographic. Given the economics of the medium, such a perception had immense consequences: because departures from the American Cinema's dominant paradigms risked not only commercial disaster but critical incomprehension, one form of cinema threatened to drive out all others.

We should realize, therefore, that in examining the movies of Hollywood's Classic Period, we are studying the single most important body of films in the history of cinema, the one that set the terms by which all movies, made before or after, would be seen. The preeminent influence of these films would seem to call for a theoretical description of the basic patterns of Classic Hollywood, locating the sources of those patterns and their connection to the rest of American culture, and accounting for their durability in the face of external and internal pressures for change. Such a theory would not only clarify the shape of American film history; it would also explain why movies operating under different patterns necessarily seem "wrong." It would perhaps provide perspective on the typically normative language of this admonitory passage from a cinematography textbook:

> It is important . . . that ambitious movie makers first *learn the rules* before breaking them. Learn the *right* way to film, learn the *acceptable* methods, learn how audiences become involved in the screen story. . . . Experiment; be bold, shoot in an unorthodox fashion! But, first *learn* the *correct* way.[3]

The particular path of cinema's evolution has made it especially susceptible to influences from without and within.[4] As an international medium, limited only by a language barrier (appearing long after the movies' establishment and promptly overcome by dubbing and subtitles), film has always been quick to assimilate new cinematic developments as they occur around the world. As an expensive medium, it has generally responded to cultural moods in order to guarantee audience support; at times, it has sought active governmental backing.

The historical nature of American Cinema has made it uniquely vulnerable to influence. Hollywood's early success, the appeal of the United States as a country, and a European political situation that remained unstable from 1914 to 1945 combined to insure that the American film industry would lure many of international cinema's most important figures. Thus actors like Garbo, Jannings, Dietrich, Laughton, Colman, Lamarr, and Negri and directors like Eisenstein, Murnau, Lang, Renoir, Clair, and Pabst all came to Hollywood during the Classic Period, contributing to the melting pot of American Cinema. Innumerable other lesser-known figures—character actors, cameramen, lighting technicians—arrived during the 1930s, bringing with them the modes of German Expressionism and East European, Soviet-influenced montage and making the American style the closest thing to a truly international cinema. *Casablanca*'s extreme cosmopolitanism is merely another sign of its representativeness. Indeed, of that movie's principal contributors, only Bogart, Dooley Wilson, and scriptwriter Howard Koch were Americans. A Hungarian director (Curtiz) orchestrated a cast of one Swede (Bergman), one Austrian (Henreid), two Englishmen (Rains and Greenstreet), one German (Veidt), two Hungarians (Lorre and Sakall), one Norwegian (Qualen), one Russian (Kinskey), and one Frenchman (Dalio) to a musical score composed by an Austrian (Steiner).

If Hollywood's eagerness to exploit any available talent made the American cinematic style a composite of influences, the determinedly commercial nature of the U.S. film industry compelled a kind of filmmaking peculiarly responsive to the dominant ideologies of American life. As Charles Eckert observed,

> the industry . . . was possibly more exposed to influences emanating from society, and in particular from its economic base, than any other.

To the disruption of production, distribution and consumption shared by all industries [due to the Depression] one must add the intense economically determined ideological pressures that bore upon an industry whose commodities were emotions and ideas.[5]

The self-perpetuating nature of Classic Hollywood's forms, however, made American movies a sociological barometer of the subtlest type. Because commercial exigencies forbade radical departures from established patterns, significant real-world developments often appeared only in the subtexts of superficially traditional movies (as we will see in *Casablanca, It's a Wonderful Life*, and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*). And often, a brief run of movies offering even these slight challenges to Classic Hollywood's paradigms would be followed by a longer string in which the old forms reasserted themselves (as in the post-*Godfather* 1970s with *Star Wars, Heaven Can Wait, Saturday Night Fever, Grease*, and *Urban Cowboy*).

Nevertheless, the sound era American Cinema has been continously besieged by internal and external factors demanding modifications of the movies' basic strategies. The briefest outline of those factors would include the following:

Internal Influences

1. Technological innovations specific to the cinema (e.g., sound, color, improved lenses and editing facilities, porto-cams)
2. Stylistic innovations (e.g., *Citizen Kane*'s proto-*noir* foregroundings of normally motivated stylistics, Italian Neo-Realism's minimal plots and location shooting, the French New Wave's stylistic self-consciousness)[6]
3. Evolving conditions of production, distribution, and consumption: having deliberately abandoned its original artisanal mode, the American film industry has since evolved from an industrial form (marked by high degrees of standardization, vertical and horizontal integration, and centralized production) to a postindustrial form (distinguished by relative diversification, lack of integration, and centralized distribution)[7]

External Influences

1. Technological developments outside the cinema, particularly television
2. The increasing popularity of other forms of entertainment, particularly popular music and spectator/participant sports

3. Historical events (e.g., the Depression, World War II, the Cold War, Vietnam, Watergate, the energy crisis)

Given this array of stimuli, Hollywood's stability may seem remarkable. In practice, that stability rested on the strategy of avoiding sudden saltations for gradual, often imperceptible modulations. Thus, Hollywood typically adopted only diluted versions of stylistic innovations, which it subsequently devitalized or discarded (the fate of most of the borrowings from the French New Wave). Historical crises, on the other hand (the Depression, World War II, the OPEC embargo), often prompted the most conservative films, as Hollywood sought to fulfill its self-appointed role as public comforter. Inevitably, therefore, most of Hollywood's "new" movies looked like the old ones: *Norma Rae*, for example, as I suggested in the Introduction, provided no surprises for someone who had seen *Grapes of Wrath* forty years earlier.

At times, internal and external influences in concert determined the course of American Cinema. Thus, the beginning of Hollywood's Classic Period saw two key factors converge to encourage a kind of filmmaking that would for the first time draw systematically on a basic American mythology.

The internal factor was sound. Stylistically, sound merely solidified a continuity system that was already highly evolved. In other ways, however, it forced American movies to shed the Victorian trappings which the immense influences of Griffith and Chaplin had encouraged in silent film. First, and most obviously, sound revolutionized cinematic acting. It forced a style that was declamatory, grandiose, and abstract to give way to one that was intimate, vernacular, and specific. "You ain't heard nothin' yet" was the perfect opening for the new age, a slangy wisecrack that banished the universalized mime of the silent era—and with it, many of the European actors who had been playing Americans without being able to speak English. Overnight, merely by the addition of voices, Hollywood films became more American. The movies crackled with the localized inflections that drew an aural map of the United States: Cagney's New Yorkese complementing Cooper's Western laconicism, Hepburn's high-toned Connecticut broad *a*'s matching Jean Arthur's Texas drawl.

Almost immediately, the movie audience rejected the rhetorical manner of the silent era. Henceforth that style would be available to an actor only as a parodic resource, a way of making fun of "acting" that furthered the illusion of the ongoing performance's realism (John Barrymore's 1934 performance in *Twentieth Century* as a hammy impresario being the classic instance). More important, sound and the new indigenous acting style encouraged the flourishing of genres that silence and grandiloquent acting had previously hindered: the musical, the gangster film, the detective story, screwball comedy, and humor that depended on language rather than slapstick (W. C. Fields, the Marx Brothers, Mae West).

Another effect of sound also encouraged the Americanization of Classic Hollywood, albeit indirectly. RCA's and Western Electric's sole control of sound technology and the added expense of producing talkies forced the U.S. film industry, already oligopolistic, into further concentration. Indeed, by 1936, all of Hollywood's major studios had come under the financial control of either the Morgan or Rockefeller interests,[8] a factor that would influence the American Cinema in two ways. First, such concentration clearly led to a homogenized product, fostering Classic Hollywood's tactic of working endless variations around a few basic patterns—a tactic further stimulated by the time pressures involved in producing Classic Hollywood's average of 476 films a year (compared to the 256 per year average of the 1946–1976 period). Second, the financial nature of such control intensified the existing commerciality of the American Cinema, dictating a filmmaking that, for the sake of a regular audience, would consistently deploy the basic ideologies and myths of American culture. The coming of sound, in other words, helped determine two permanent habits of the American Cinema: the tendency to repeat what had worked before, and the inclination, particularly evident during times of financial stress, to return to standard American stories.

Coincidentally, the principal external influences on Classical Hollywood (the Depression and World War II) also encouraged a reformulation of the American Cinema around more traditionally American preoccupations. As perhaps the first significant

challenges to American optimism since the Civil War, these two events fostered a moviemaking whose cultural responsiveness revealed itself primarily in displacement and repression.[9] Put simply, the American Cinema was established as escapist. Robert Sklar summarizes the impact of these external factors:

> What was different about the movies in the 1930's was not that they were beginning to communicate myths and dreams—they had done that from the beginning—but that the moviemakers were aware in a more sophisticated way of their mythmaking powers, responsibilities and opportunities. Among intellectuals and in centers of political power, the importance of cultural myths to social stability was a seriously debated topic. The Depression had shaken some of the oldest and strongest American cultural myths, particularly the middle-class homilies about the virtues of deferred gratification and assurance that hard work and perseverance would bring success. . . . The widespread doubt about traditional American myths threatened to become a dangerous political weakness. In politics, industry and the media there were men and women . . . who saw the necessity, almost as a patriotic duty, to revitalize and refashion a cultural mythology.[10]

From the outset, that mythology was deliberately traditional, a reassertion of the most fundamental American beliefs in individualism, ad hoc solutions, and the impermanence of all political problems. "We're in the money," Ginger Rogers sang ironically in *The Gold Diggers of 1933*, when one-fourth of the civilian labor force was unemployed, the highest percentage in the history of the United States.

The conservative nature of American Cinema's mythological product should not surprise us. "Statistically," Roland Barthes observed, "myth is on the right," for "*left-wing myth is inessential.*"[11] That nature, however, should alert us to the indirectness of the relationship that American films have consistently maintained with external events. To a great extent, American history's major crises appear in American movies only as "structuring absences"[12]—the unspoken subjects that have determined an aesthetic form designed precisely to conceal these crises' real implications. As we will see in *Casablanca* and *It's a Wonderful Life*, the genuine threats posed by World War II to traditional American ideologies surface only in the cracks of films consciously intended to minimize them. As Sklar observes:

> Even satirical movies like the screwball comedies, or socially aware films like the *Grapes of Wrath*, were carefully constructed to stay within the bounds of essential American cultural and political beliefs. . . . Hollywood's contribution to American culture was essentially one of affirmation.[13]

Thus, these historical accidents—the arrival of sound, intensifying economic concentration, and political crisis—resulted in the formation of Classic Hollywood, a cinema whose deliberate evocations of traditional myths effected a new continuity with American culture. Certainly that cinema was never utterly uniform. From the beginning, however, it did display "a certain tendency" that took on both a formal and a thematic pattern. We need now to look more closely at these two patterns, and to observe how both serve the same ideological purpose: the concealment of the necessity for choice.

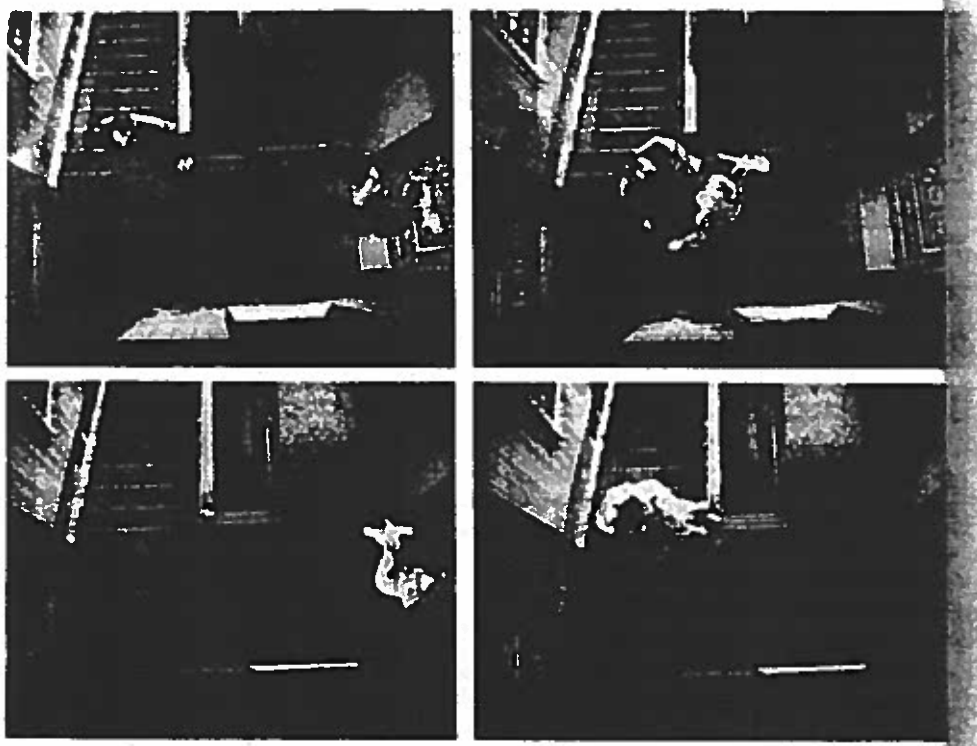
THE FORMAL PARADIGM—THE INVISIBLE STYLE

Film as a medium, David Thompson has noted, is "intensely decision-based."[14] Each shot results from dozens of choices about such elements as camera placement, lighting, focus, casting, and framing (the components of *mise en scène*); editing adds the further possibilities inherent in every shot-to-shot articulation. Not only do things on the screen appear at the expense of others not shown, the manner in which they appear depends on a selection of one perspective that eliminates (at least temporarily) all others.

The American Cinema's formal paradigm, however, developed precisely as a means for concealing these choices. Its ability to do so turned on this style's most basic procedure: the systematic subordination of every cinematic element to the interests of a movie's narrative. Thus, lighting remained unobtrusive, camera angles predominantly at eye-level, framing centered on the principal business of a scene. Similarly, cuts occurred at logical points in the action and dialogue. Certainly there were shots, scenes, and even movies that did not adhere completely to this tactic. The dominance of this procedure, however, insured the commercial failure of those few Classic Period filmmakers who consistently made style itself the center of attention (Sternberg, Welles).

The American Cinema's habitual subordination of style to story encouraged the audience to assume the existence of an implied contract: at any moment in a movie, the audience was to be given the optimum vantage point on what was occurring on screen. Anything important would not only be shown, but shown from the best angle. This contract could be violated only in the rarest moments, particularly in detective stories, where the audience yielded its normal right to omniscience for the sake of the whodunit game. But because these abridgments, too, were determined by narrative necessity, they went unnoticed. Thus, *The Maltese Falcon*'s deliberately tight framing that conceals Miles Archer's murderer did not shock the audience as a radical departure from the formal paradigm's basic contract.

This tacit guarantee of a constantly optimum vantage point constituted so fundamental a part of Hollywood's stylistic that the best filmmakers, even when working in the detective genre, violated it only surreptitiously. In *Psycho*, Hitchcock twice used an extreme high angle in order to conceal the murderer's identity without appearing to do so. "I deliberately placed the camera very high," Hitchock told Truffaut, "so that I could shoot down on top of the mother, because if I had shown her back, it might have looked as if I was deliberately concealing her face and the audience would have been leery. I used that angle in order not to give the impression that I was trying to avoid showing her."[15]



The American Cinema's apparently natural subjection of style to narrative in fact depended on a historical accident: the movies' origins lay in a late nineteenth century whose predominant popular arts were the novel and the theater. Had cinema appeared in the Enlightenment or the Romantic period, it might have assumed the shape of the essay or lyric poem. Instead, it adopted the basic tactic and goal of the realistic novel. Conscious "style" would be effaced both to establish the cinema's illusion of reality and to encourage audience identification with the characters on the screen.

This link between Hollywood's continuity style and the narrative tactics of the nineteenth-century novel has been made most compellingly in English by Noël Burch and the *Screen* group of

writers, particularly Colin MacCabe and Stephen Heath.[16] The ideological aspect of this argument (that regards a self-effacing, "realistic" style as the embodiment of bourgeois class interests) descends from Roland Barthes's influential critique of nineteenth-century fiction, *Writing Degree Zero*.[17] The counterargument to "the *Screen* position," however, consists in demonstrating the inappropriateness of the novel-film analogy.

This dissent, couched in *Screen*'s own semiotic language, might begin by insisting that realism is merely an effect produced by aesthetic conventions to which an audience has grown accustomed.[18] But since the predominantly working-class audience for the first movies differed significantly in its aesthetic "competencies"[19] from the largely middle-class audience for the nineteenth-century realistic novel, the conventions established by this earlier form would have no effect on the film audience.

In fact, however, this exclusively working-class audience was at most a short-lived phenomenon. Film historians have demonstrated that, from the start, the American movie industry sought to attract the middle-class ticket-buyer.[20] Burch has argued that the industry succeeded in this goal by decisively shifting from the *presentational* modes of such proletarian forms as vaudeville, the circus, and magic shows to the *representational* modes of the bourgeoisie, realistic theater and fiction. Burch insists that Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse, The Gambler* confirms that a cinematic version of this latter mode was perfected as early as 1922.[21] I would disagree and insist on sound as an indispensable unit of the continuity project. In any case, Hollywood's sound era audience (the audience that concerns me in this book) was clearly no longer exclusively (or even primarily) working-class, and was thus unlikely to have received most of its prior aesthetic "training" from presentational modes.

The counterargument poses a second question: how can we be sure that Classic Hollywood's audiences regarded the movies as "real" when so many contemporary filmgoers (those whom I will later describe as the "ironic audience") have learned to see through the cinematic representation to the aesthetic conventions that produce them? The answer is, of course, that we cannot be sure. Indeed, French psychiatrist Octave Mannoni has warned that we have a persisting need to posit "an other scene" of absolute, un-

troubled faith, whether that "other scene" be primitive cultures, an epoch's own past, an individual's childhood, or even the bumpkin who interrupts a performance of *Julius Caesar* by standing to warn the emperor that his enemies are armed.[22] Certainly, film history has its own version of this last "other scene": the accounts of the frightened first audiences for Lumière's *Arrival of a Train at a Station*.

Mannoni's two articles, "Je sais bien, mais quand même . . ." and "L'illusion comique ou le théâtre du point de vue de l'imaginaire," contain superb discussions of how beliefs in illusions (whether theatrical, religious, or traditional) always rest on a delicate balance of faith and disavowal. Moreover, even after such illusions have been exposed, a former believer retains some version of his old faith, a version expressed in what Mannoni observed to be a common formulation: "je sais bien, mais quand même . . ." That is, "I know very well that this illusion is only an illusion, but nevertheless, some part of me still believes in it." While Mannoni makes an analogy between this diluted belief and superstition and fetishism, it also seems to approximate precisely the double system of consciousness operating in those moviegoers who "know very well" that onscreen events are not "real" but who "nevertheless" become absorbed in them as if they were.[23]

Just as the transparency (the "realism") of aesthetic conventions depends on their being thoroughly (albeit unconsciously) learned by their audience, the recognition of conventions as conventions also requires learning (or unlearning). Mannoni argues that abandoning a naïve faith in a particular illusion typically involves an *initiation*, a formal process in which the illusion is systematically and thoroughly exposed. An isolated, unintentional revelation will not normally suffice. In support of this assertion, Mannoni cites a story told by a Hopi boy regarding a rite in which masked figures (*Katcina*) appear in the village courting the children with gifts whose sole purpose consists in attracting the children so that the Katcina can eat them. In this grisly version of the Santa Claus story, however, the children win: the parents buy back their children with pieces of meat, and the Katcina seal the bargain by offering magically red ears of corn. During an annual Katcina appearance, the boy happened upon his mother dyeing ears of corn the appropriate red. Despite this revelation of the secret of the Katcina (who were the adult males of the tribe), the boy continued to believe in the illusion until his own proper initiation into the ceremony took place years later.

For film theory, Mannoni's story suggests that any loss of faith in the continuity style as "realistic" would require more than isolated incidental exposures. How are aesthetic conventions systematically exposed as mere convention? I would argue in four ways:

1. When material events consistently contradict the conventions supposedly embodying them. Although I cannot imagine that many ex-prisoners of war would find *Stalag 17* or "Hogan's Heroes" to be accurate portrayals of their own experiences, this mechanism of exposure seems to me to be the *least* important. Hollywood's formulae, after all, proved able to survive such minor distractions as the Depression and World War II.

2. When a commercial art form, trapped by the apparent need to repeat successful formulae, repeats them so often and so obviously that the audience begins to recognize how much of what once seemed "real" is actually convention. This mechanism of exposure, the development of camp responses, arose in the 1960s and 1970s, at the tail end of Hollywood's genre period. It was unlikely to work during the Studio Years when Hollywood was intent on *developing* the genres which still remained relatively fresh.

3. When a consistent pattern of internal self-criticism and self-consciousness foregrounds cinematic mechanisms. This process has never existed systematically in any body of cinema other than the avant-garde. Certainly, Classic Hollywood's films contained few "Godardian" foregroundings of conventions. Comedians occasionally violated certain standard principles of continuity: one thinks of Groucho Marx in *Horsefeathers* turning to address the camera as brother Chico began a piano solo: "I've got to stay here, but there's no reason why you folks shouldn't go out into the lobby until this thing blows over." But such violations were recuperated by being identified precisely as elements of "comedy."

4. When another similar art form intersects obliquely with the

medium in question, thereby providing an unexpected exposure of the latter's established procedures. I will discuss this mechanism at some length in my analysis of television's effect on the film audience.

In sum, none of these mechanisms of exposure operated with any real force during Hollywood's Classic Period. Their weakness was furthered by the industry's self-propagated myth of entertainment which forestalled critical examination of the movies' devices.[24]

Mannoni has also proposed that belief in an illusion rests on identification with some element of the illusion—in the case of theater, for example, with the characters. (Here Mannoni clearly depends on Jacques Lacan's notion of "the mirror stage," a term whose relevance for the American Cinema I wish to raise in a later chapter.[25]) Certainly, as we will see, Hollywood's strategies (formal and thematic) consistently urged the spectator to merge himself with the movies' heroes and heroines. Nevertheless, Hollywood cinema's illusion of reality depended on a far more substantial identification with the film's whole diegesis, that nonexistent, fictional space fabricated out of temporal and spatial fragments, which came to seem more rich, interesting, and fully constituted than the actual, material space of the audience's own lives. It was no accident that such different characters as Buster Keaton's Sherlock Junior and Godard's *carabiniers* would attempt to take up residence there, within the world projected on the screen.

The components of the invisible style gathered around cinema's two fundamental means: *mise en scène* and editing. In *mise en scène*, the invisible style evolved what Burch has called the principal of "centering."[26] Lighting, focus, camera angle, framing, character blocking, set design, costuming, and camera distance all worked to keep what the ongoing narrative defined as the main object of interest in the foreground and center of the frame. The inherent discontinuity of editing, on the other hand, was disguised by rules designed to maintain spatial and temporal continuity from shot to shot. Matching successive shots by graphic similarities, continuing action, connecting glances, or common sounds provided one connecting tactic. Another depended on the 180° system, a procedure of filming all takes in an establishing shot-breakdown shot sequence from the same side of an imaginary 180° axis. The 180° system not only allowed the filmmaker to maintain constant screen direction (particularly important with horizontal movement in the frame); it also enabled him to break down the overall space of a scene into smaller units without confusing the audience about their spatial relationship.[27]

Burch and other French theoreticians have argued that of all the components of the American Cinema's formal paradigm, the most important was the shot-reverse shot figure based on eyeline matches. As Burch puts the case:

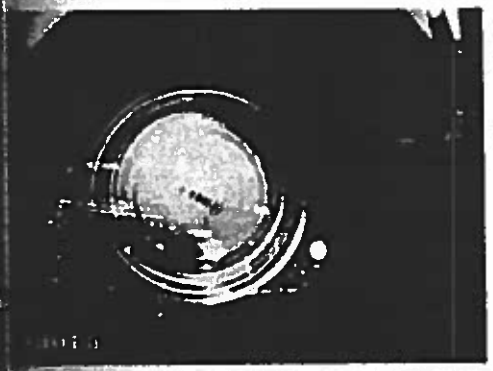
> The reverse-field figure with matching eyelines . . . was not merely the last component of the dominant Western editing system; it was, as well, the most crucial. It was this procedure which made it possible to implicate the spectator in the eye contacts of the actor (and ultimately in their "word contacts"), to *include* him or her in the mental and "physical" space of the diegesis. Clearly such a procedure was basic to the illusionist fantasy/identification situation.[28]

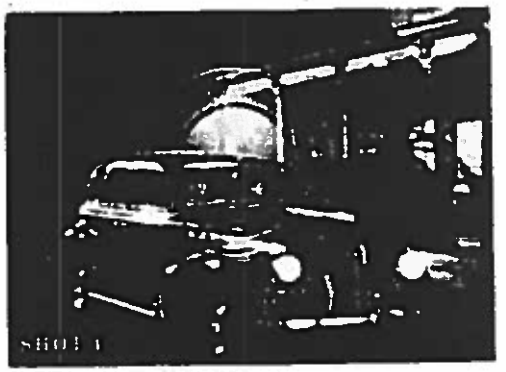
Other writers see this trope's importance in its power to attribute a high percentage of a movie's shots to a source within the film, a process that "naturalized" the cinematic narrative by concealing the role of the filmmaker.[29] Thus, while a single shot of a house might have provoked the spectator to wonder "who is showing me this?" a following shot of a man looking offscreen identified the previous image as "his." This "suturing" procedure, whereby one shot "completed" a predecessor, prevented the viewer from becoming conscious of a film's status as an object made by individuals with particular biases. Things on the screen appeared real, unsponsored, and inevitable while the thousands of choices that created the film disappeared.

The shot-reverse shot figure, therefore, played a crucial role in a formal paradigm whose basic tactic was the concealment of the necessity of choice. Whether or not this figure was, as Burch claims, "the keystone" of the whole invisible system, at a minimum it isolated for the viewer a seam of significance within a potentially infinite visual field. For example, when a film narrowed the larger space of a room to the smaller units of a reverse

…: Do you know where Ancho Street or …se is in Burlingame? FRANK: Nope. But if …there we can find her.

SPADE: Well, twenty-six is the number and the sooner the better. FRANK: Correct!





…: Say, Frank?

FRANK: Oh, hello, Mr. Spade. SPADE: You got plenty of gas? FRANK: Sure thing.

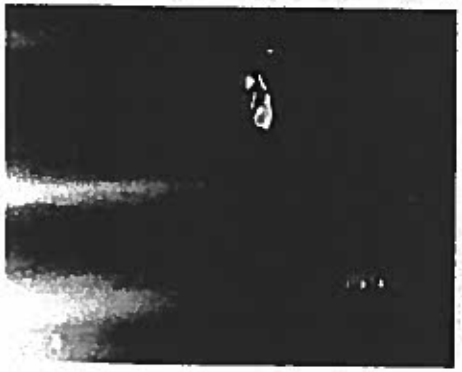
SPADE: Keep your motor running.

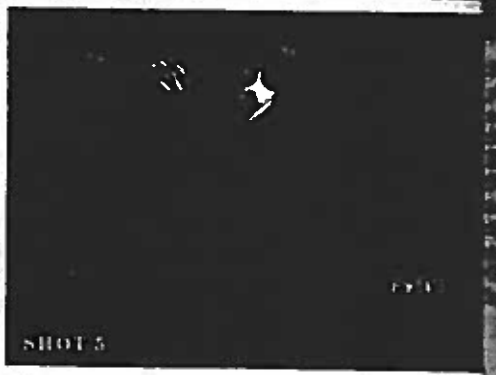
[illegible]: Bum steer, Mr. Spade?

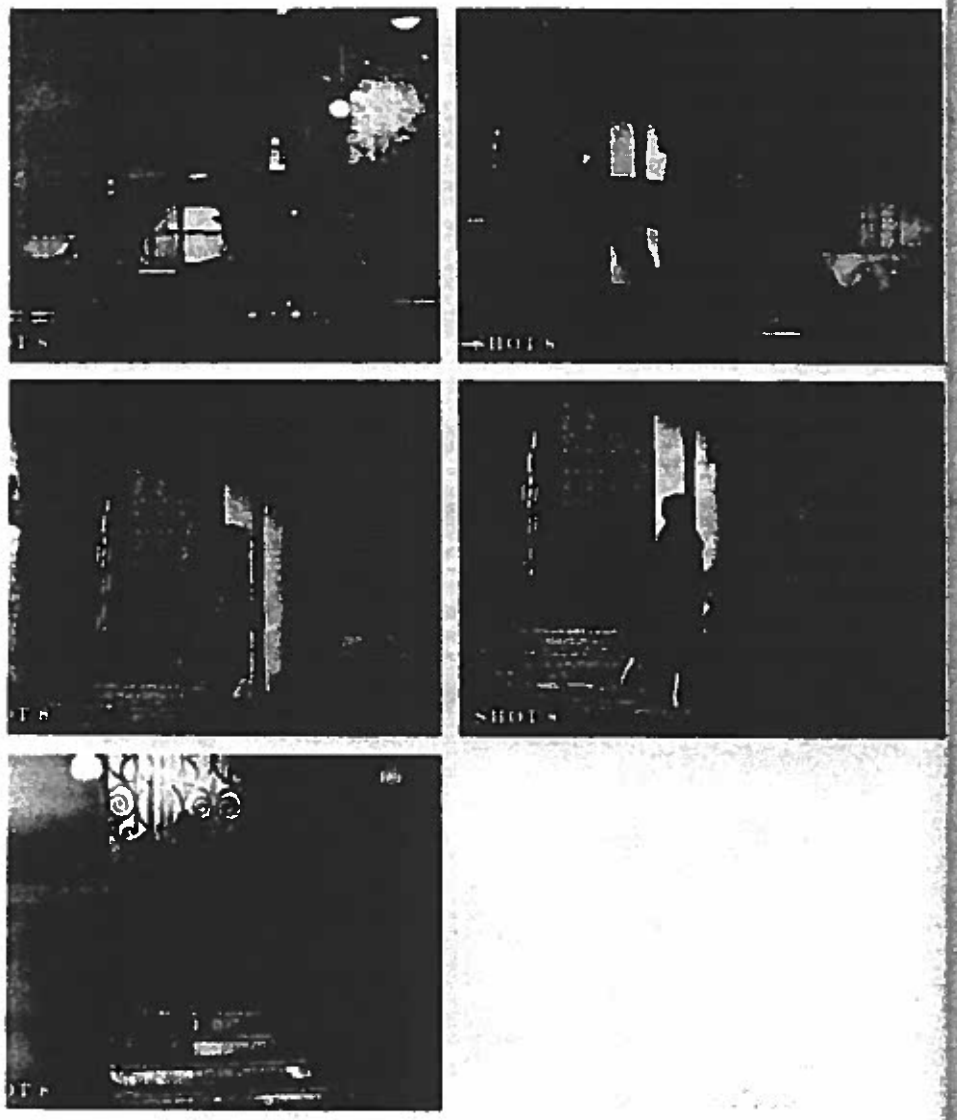
SPADE: Yeah. Let's get to a phone booth.

[illegible]: Hello, Mrs. Perine. Effie there? Yes, [illegible]. . . . Hello, precious, what's the good [illegible]? No, no, it was a bum steer. Are you sure [illegible] was her voice? . . . Well, it was hooey. [illegible]ything go all right? . . . Nothing said about [illegible] bundle, huh? . . . That's swell. Did they [illegible] you down to the hall? . . . Um-huh. All [illegible], precious. You'd better hit the hay and [illegible] a good night's rest. You sound all in. . . . [illegible]na. Save it for tomorrow. I'm going on [illegible].

SPADE: Thanks. Good night, Frank. FRANK: Good night.







n: Mr. Spade! I've been hiding in a
ay up the street. I thought you'd never

field (say, a man and a woman exchanging glances), the audience assumed that *this* space, at least for the duration of the shot-reverse shots, was the only important one.

Whatever this figure's psychological effect, certainly it constituted a major portion of Classic Hollywood's shot transitions—an average of 30-40 percent according to one researcher. Here again, *Casablanca* provides a perfect example of the period, with fully 50 percent of its transitions employing the reverse-field structure.[20]

Classic Hollywood's invisible style succeeded so well in effacing itself in strong narratives that detecting its workings requires concentration. We can observe its procedures most effectively in short sequences from movies that we know well enough to be able momentarily to suspend our normal interest in the story line. I offer two examples, the first of which involves both spatial and temporal discontinuity, the latter only spatial.

The first sequence is from *The Maltese Falcon*. Having received a phone call from a hysterical and apparently endangered Brigid O'Shaughnessy, Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) emerges from a railroad station where he has checked the falcon given him by the dying Captain Jacoby. He takes a cab to an address mentioned by O'Shaughnessy, but the address is a vacant lot. After telephoning further instructions to his secretary, he returns home to find O'Shaughnessy waiting for him.

This sequence compresses an incident requiring at least an hour of real time into eight shots lasting exactly two minutes on the screen. Classic Hollywood's formal conventions also conceal the spatial discontinuity of Spade's roundtrip ride between downtown San Francisco and the Peninsula suburb of Burlingame. No viewer watching this sequence is likely to become aware of the operations of style.

How is this stylistic invisibility accomplished? First, we should note that Classic Hollywood's formal paradigm worked its tricks most effectively around compelling narratives. In bad movies, where the plot's insufficiency allowed the spectator's mind to wander, stylistic mechanics often became glaring. In *The Maltese Falcon*'s scene, on the other hand, one tantalizing narrative movement flows into another, leaving no empty moments where

the storyline might stall. The sequence begins immediately after Spade's capture of the falcon, the object previously established as the movie's focus of interest. It shifts to a new development, Brigid's distress call. The vacant lot initiates still another puzzle which Brigid's subsequent appearance at Spade's doorway only partially solves. Thus, even in this two-minute sequence, the narrative's sheer relentlessness forestalls attention to style.

The sequence's eight individual shots and the transitions between them operate further to conceal the traces of the movie's status as manufactured product.

1. Shot 1's framing centers Bogart as he gradually walks into the foreground, the people on the sidewalk seeming to part for his entrance. At this stage in the film, the spectator's concern with Spade has merged with his extra-*Falcon* recognition of Bogart-as-star; the movie trades on the mingling of these two sources of interest to hide the selectivity of a shot that "naturally" finds Bogart-Spade in the center of a street scene.

2. The direct cut to Shot 2 completes the centering begun by Shot 1. The medium shot brings Spade farther into the foreground while keeping him in the middle of the frame. In addition, Shot 2 defines the 180° axis (here, horizontally bisecting the image) for the rest of the sequence and enables the camera following Spade to establish the consistent left-to-right movement of the roundtrip's first half. The dialogue evinces another continuity tactic, as verbal clues smooth the potentially disrupting temporal and spatial ellipses that follow. Spade's question to the cabbie, "You got plenty of gas?" tells the viewer that the forthcoming trip is a relatively long one. For a spectator who knows San Francisco's geography, the name "Burlingame" conveys information still more precise. Although the exact amount of real time elided by the sequence remains indefinite, these verbal clues (and the sequence's consistent night lighting) suggest a duration of only a few hours.

3. The overlapping dissolve connecting Shots 2 and 3 conveys to the spectator that only a brief amount of time has elapsed. (A full fade-out would signal a much larger time gap.) Further, the sustained left-to-right movement of the single tire (a typical Hollywood synecdoche for traveling) implies the continuation of the journey begun in Shot 2.

4. Another dissolve leads to Shot 4, which shows the cab arriving in Burlingame's Ancho Street. Because the camera remains on the same side of the 180° axis as in Shots 1, 2, and 3, the repeated left-to-right motion conveys a trip completed.

5. Shot 5's tracking motion, which keeps Spade center-frame, repeats the pattern of Shot 2. Again, the camera's movement is motivated—i.e., it does not act on its own to scan the neighborhood (an activity whose independence would call attention to the process of filming), but rather moves only to follow a character whose importance to the narrative goes unquestioned. Thus, by either linking most camera movements to a moving character or object, or by attributing them to a source within the story (through reverse-field figures that imply the motions are subjective, point-of-view shots), the invisible style concealed the operations of what otherwise might have been a readily apparent formal mechanism.

As Spade discovers the vacant lot and stops to think, the background music that continues throughout the entire sequence (and thus binds the individual shots together in yet another way) idles momentarily, imitating Spade's hesitation. Because the camera has remained on the same side of the sequence's original 180° axis, Spade's glance and wave to the left invoke the cab sitting in what has become offscreen space.

6. The direct cut to Shot 6 shows the cab pulling up beside Spade, still moving in the left-to-right direction of the trip to Burlingame. Spade's instructions to the cabbie, "Let's get to a phone booth," provide the verbal transition to Shot 7.

7. The dissolve to Shot 7 elides the real time required to reach the phone booth—a period omitted because the narrative defines it as unimportant. The invisible style's continual judgments about the importance of persons, incidents, or activities were powerful precisely because their self-effacing form caused them to go unnoticed. In fact, the sustained use of narratively motivated abridgments encouraged the spectator to regard the vast majority of his own waking hours as insignificant—indeed, all hours that did not fit immediately into some ongoing "plot."

The potential tedium of Shot 7's long take (30 seconds) is overcome by the rapid-fire, bantering dialogue, partially designed to reconfirm the plot turn of the previous shot—that Brigid's ad-

dress was "a bum steer." Classic Hollywood typically repeated points from shot to shot and scene to scene, removing any potential ambiguity that might cause a viewer confusion. Note, too, that Shot 7 uses an obvious chiaroscuro effect to increase the centering of Spade.

8. Still another dissolve leads to Shot 8, in which the cab's arrival from right-to-left suggests the completion of the round-trip begun in Shot 2. Another motivated camera movement follows the cab leaving, only to pick up Brigid "hiding in a doorway down the street" (thus, a doubled motivation). The camera remains with her as she runs back to Spade, and, perfectly centered, the two enter the building, still accompanied by the background music.

While *The Maltese Falcon* sequence illustrates the ability of Hollywood's formal paradigm to conceal spatial and temporal discontinuities, another example, from *Casablanca*, demonstrates the subtle effects of the shot-reverse shot figure.

This sequence is composed of three linking shot-reverse shot figures: Figure A (Shots 1-3) serves to introduce the movie's protagonist/star (Rick Blaine/Humphrey Bogart); Figure B (Shots 4-8) conveys hints about both Rick's power and his political sympathies; Figure C (Shots 9-11) continues the confrontation between Rick and the German begun in Figure B while introducing, apparently in passing, a character (Ugarte) who possesses the key to the whole film, but whose importance will become apparent only retroactively. Each figure demonstrates a particular facet of Classic Hollywood's formal paradigm.

Figure A: By withholding a view of Rick's face, Shots 1-3 increase the suspense that the film has already established around his character. We have heard Vichy Captain Renault tell the German Major Strasser that "Tonight [the murderer will] be at Rick's. Everybody comes to Rick's." We have also heard Strasser's portentous reply: "I have already heard about this café. And also about Mr. Rick himself." From Carl the waiter, we have gathered another curious bit of information about Rick: "He never drinks with customers. Never! I have never seen him." Shot 1 builds on these mysterious hints, using the waiter's glance to make what is offscreen more intriguing than what is on. The hand extending into the frame further invokes the presence off-

[illegible]: I'm sorry, sir. This is a private room.

GERMAN: Of all the nerve! Who do you think—I know there is gambling in there. There is no secret. You dare not keep me out of here.

: Yes? What's the trouble? ABDUL: Er, this leman . . . GERMAN: I have been in every bling room between Honolulu and Berlin.

GERMAN: If you think I'm going to be kept out of a saloon like this, you're very much mistaken.

ITE: Um, excuse me, please. Hello, Rick.

RICK: Your cash is good at the bar. GERMAN: What? Do you know who I am? RICK: I do. You're lucky the bar's open to you.

MAN: This is outrageous! I shall report it to Angriff!

screen and provides a linking match that connects Shots 1 and 2.

As is often the case of shot-reverse shot figures, the reverse field editing in this first unit pivots around both an object and an action match—here, the check handed to Rick in Shot 1 and signed by him in Shot 2. Both the object and the continued action that flows over the cut enable a viewer to read Shots 1 and 2 as occurring in the same immediate space and time.

The reverse Shot 3's initially odd framing emphasizes objects whose meaning has become coded through repeatedly similar use in Classic Hollywood films: the champagne glass and cigarette suggest both sophistication and jadedness, the solo chess game (an intellectual's solitaire) cleverness and a solitude simultaneously proud and melancholy. In a motivated shot following the hand lifting the cigarette, the camera moves up to reveal Rick's face for the first time. Lighting, framing, and focus keep him perfectly centered.

Figure B: This figure actually begins near the end of Shot 3 with the jaunty piano music (diegetic but offscreen) whose continuation through Shot 11 subtly conveys constant spatial and temporal continuity. Shot 4 begins the sequence proper. As an establishing shot, it sets the 180° axis as a diagonal connecting Rick and the doorman; all subsequent shots in Figure B will be taken from the near side of this line. For the viewer, Shot 4 also determines a temporary seam of significance within the larger space of the café. For the next seven shots, only events occurring within this seam will appear on the screen. Hollywood's implicit contract always to provide the optimum vantage point forestalls the spectator from wondering what might be happening elsewhere.

Shots 5 and 6 are breakdowns, connected by an eyeline match, of Shot 4's two poles. In Shot 5, the doorman, acting on Rick's Shot 4 nod, allows the couple to enter the gambling room; when the German arrives, the doorman looks back at Rick for new instructions. Rick's negative shake in Shot 6 causes the doorman's refusal which begins in Shot 7 and flows over the cut into Shot 8 taken from the other side of the door. During this exchange, adherence to the 180° rule insures that the doorman's and Rick's glances appear to meet.

Figure B's most interesting tactic, however, concerns the way this particular reverse field encourages the viewer to identify with Rick, a process already begun in Shot 2, where one sees the check being signed as if one were in Rick's body. Here, the effect is more subtle, but because of cumulative similar uses throughout the movie, no less powerful: in Shot 5, the doorman's glance directly into the camera suggests that the spectator is seeing him from Rick's point of view. Rick's eyes, on the other hand, do not look into the camera, but rather offscreen-right. This oblique angle replaces the doorman's viewpoint with an apparently neutral perspective. The effectiveness of Classic Hollywood's means of encouraging audience identification always depended on the selectiveness with which they were used. Here, for example, the point-of-view manipulations encourage identification with the protagonist Rick, but not with the inconsequential doorman.

Figure C: Shots 8-11 illustrate how Classic Hollywood's *mise en scène* tactics frequently operate within shot-reverse units. Here, after Shot 8's completion of the action begun in Shot 7, Shot 9 establishes a new 180° axis (extending from just to Rick's left to a point between the doorman and the German). Subsequently, all the visual elements conspire with the dialogue to convey Rick's preeminence over his adversary. First, the normal superiority of the German's centered position is undercut by the blocking that pins him between Rick and Rick's ally the doorman. In contrast to this crowded frame, Shot 10 provides Rick with a much stronger position. Second, the German's centered position, already weakened, is temporarily dislodged by the arrival of a character (Ugarte) who, for the moment, seems unimportant. Finally, Shot 11 sees the exasperated German abandon the privileged center, walking to the rear and out of frame, confirming Rick's victory. In the chapter on *Casablanca*, we will see the ideological effects of mixing *mise en scène* and reverse field strategies.

THESE two examples show Classic Hollywood's formal paradigm at work. In sum, that paradigm disguised an "intensely decision-based" medium as an apparently natural one, concealing the pattern of choices that constitute style in any art form. By eliding all events extraneous to the narrative at hand, by providing

the viewer with a constantly shifting, but always ideal, perspective (thereby seeming to anticipate his desires), Classic Hollywood movies already matched Stanislaw Lem's description of an imaginary art form of the future, "the real":

> "And what is a real?"
>
> "A real is . . . a real . . ." she repeated helplessly. "They are . . . stories. It's for watching. . . . A real is artificial, but one can't tell the difference. . . ."
>
> My first impression was of sitting near the stage of a theater, or no—on the stage itself, so close were the actors. As though one could reach out and touch them. . . .
>
> The real was more than just a film, because whenever I concentrated on some portion of the scene, it grew larger and expanded; in other words, the viewer himself, by his own choice, determined whether he would see a close-up of the whole picture. Meanwhile the proportions of what remained on the periphery of his field of vision underwent no distortion. It was a diabolically clever optical trick producing an illusion of an extraordinarily vivid, an almost magnified reality.[21]

The ideological power of Classic Hollywood's procedure is obvious: under its sponsorship, even the most manufactured narratives came to seem spontaneous and "real." A spectator prevented from detecting style's role in a mythology's articulation could only accede to that mythology's "truth." When that mythology also denied the necessity for choice, the result was a doubling effect that made the American Cinema one of the most potent ideological tools ever constructed.

THE THEMATIC PARADIGM—THE RESOLUTION OF INCOMPATIBLE VALUES

With Classic Hollywood's formal paradigm, sound technology merely provided the final element in a continuity system that had been evolving since the early days of the silents. With Classic Hollywood's thematic paradigm, on the other hand, sound effected a major shift. Subject to intensifying oligopolistic concentration, increasingly controlled by profit-oriented financiers, more and more standardized, the American film industry perforce took new steps to guarantee a large, regular audience for its product. The key move lay in the thematic paradigm's adop-

tion of the traditional American mythology, a maneuver that involved a decisive break with the silent era. For while the American silent film grew demonstrably out of Victorian melodrama, the talkies clearly derived from an alternate mode, the romance form that Richard Chase has shown to be the basis of nineteenth-century American fiction.[32]

The traditional task of American historians has been the attempt to authenticate this mythology by providing it with indigenously material sources: hence Turner's frontier, David Potter's material abundance, and Erikson's psychological expansiveness. In fact, however, nineteenth-century American fiction's own reliance on preexisting myths suggests that the traditional "American" mythology taken up by the talkies occurs only as part of an infinitely regressing chain of texts, flowing backward from American sound films, to W. S. Hart westerns, to Horatio Alger stories, to Chase's classic nineteenth-century authors (Twain, Cooper, Melville), to frontier tall tales, to Pilgrim captivity narratives, to prospectuses for America, to pre-Columbian myths of the New World, to Eden itself.[33]

American commentators' longstanding pursuit of this mythology's immediate origins, however, indicates the power of that fictional system to assert itself as "true." Ultimately, therefore, the source of this mythology becomes less enlightening than an understanding of the historical circumstances that sustain and modify its particular incarnations.

The American Cinema's version of this traditional mythology rested on two factors. First, Hollywood's power (and need) to produce a steady flow of variations provided the myth with the repetitive elaborations that it required to become convincing. Second, the audience's sense of American exceptionalism (in part authentic, in part itself the product of the myth) encouraged acceptance of a mythology whose fundamental premise was optimistic. For to a large extent, American space, economic abundance, and geographic isolation—and the fictions embroidered around these things—had long been unavailable to the European imagination.

We can begin to describe this mythology by observing that, like the invisible style, it concealed the necessity for choice. As

the formal paradigm depended on consciously established rules for shooting and editing, Hollywood's thematic conventions rested on an industrywide consensus defining commercially acceptable filmmaking. This consensus's underlying premise dictated the conversion of all political, sociological, and economic dilemmas into personal melodramas. Thus, *Meet John Doe* transformed unemployment's challenge to American ideology into an individual's credibility crisis. Similarly, *Casablanca* displaced American anxiety about intervention in World War II into Rick's hesitation about helping Victor Laszlo. Even the rare movies purporting to deal directly with general economic and political issues (e.g., *Our Daily Bread*, *The Grapes of Wrath*) slid inevitably into dramatizations of individual solutions. Warner Brothers, paying lip service to theories of environmental determinism, frequently reduced the Depression to a Vorkapich montage that only briefly interrupted the action (e.g., *The Roaring Twenties*).

Such displacement turned on Classic Hollywood's basic thematic procedure: repeatedly, these movies raised, and then appeared to solve, problems associated with the troubling incompatibility of traditional American myths. *Meet Me in St. Louis*, for example, overcame the opposition inherent in the myth of family (encouraging contentment and permanence) and the myth of success (encouraging ambition and mobility). Similarly, *Gone With the Wind* triumphed over the conflict between Scarlett's incarnation of a classically American self-reliance and her betrayal of the ideal wife and mother image.

This reconciliatory pattern, itself derived largely from earlier American forms, increasingly became the self-perpetuating norm of the American Cinema. Movies that refused to resolve contradictory myths typically found themselves without the large audiences expected by the industry; as a result, directors of such films found themselves without chances to work. Orson Welles's case is the most famous. By basing its story on the life of William Randolph Hearst, Welles was able to make his first film, *Citizen Kane*, a *succès de scandale*. But the movie's dramatization of the irresolvable conflict between American myths of success (celebrating energy and ambition) and of the simple life (warning that power and wealth corrupt) made audiences uneasy and cost

Welles RKO's complete confidence. When his second movie (*The Magnificent Ambersons*) demonstrated the stark incompatibility of nineteenth-century small-town values with those of the modern industrial age, the studio tacked on a wildly inappropriate happy ending and opened the film as the bottom half of double features. Thereafter, Welles rarely worked in America.

In contrast to Welles, the dominant tradition of American Cinema consistently found ways to overcome dichotomies. Often, the movies' reconciliatory pattern concentrated on a single character magically embodying diametrically opposite traits. A sensitive violinist was also a tough boxer (*Golden Boy*); a boxer was a gentle man who cared for pigeons (*On the Waterfront*). A gangster became a coward because he was brave (*Angels with Dirty Faces*); a soldier became brave because he was a coward (*Lives of a Bengal Lancer*). A war hero was a former pacifist (*Sergeant York*); a pacifist was a former war hero (*Billy Jack*). The ideal was a kind of inclusiveness that would permit all decisions to be undertaken with the knowledge that the alternative was equally available. The attractiveness of Destry's refusal to use guns (*Destry Rides Again*) depended on the tacit understanding that he could shoot with the best of them, Katharine Hepburn's and Claudette Colbert's revolts against conventionality (*Holiday, It Happened One Night*) on their status as aristocrats.

Such two-sided characters seemed particularly designed to appeal to a collective American imagination steeped in myths of inclusiveness. Indeed, in creating such characters, Classic Hollywood had connected with what Erik Erikson has described as the fundamental American psychological pattern:

> The functioning American, as the heir of a history of extreme contrasts and abrupt changes, bases his final ego identity on some tentative combination of dynamic polarities such as migratory and sedentary, individualistic and standardized, competitive and co-operative, pious and free-thinking, responsible and cynical, etc. . . .
>
> To leave his choices open, the American, on the whole, lives with two sets of "truths."[34]

The movies traded on one opposition in particular, American culture's traditional dichotomy of individual and community that had generated the most significant pair of competing myths: the

outlaw hero and the official hero.[35] Embodied in the adventurer, explorer, gunfighter, wanderer, and loner, the outlaw hero stood for that part of the American imagination valuing self-determination and freedom from entanglements. By contrast, the official hero, normally portrayed as a teacher, lawyer, politician, farmer, or family man, represented the American belief in collective action, and the objective legal process that superseded private notions of right and wrong. While the outlaw hero found incarnations in the mythic figures of Davy Crockett, Jesse James, Huck Finn, and all of Leslie Fiedler's "Good Bad Boys" and Daniel Boorstin's "ring-tailed roarers," the official hero developed around legends associated with Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Lee, and other "Good Good Boys."

An extraordinary amount of the traditional American mythology adopted by Classic Hollywood derived from the variations worked by American ideology around this opposition of natural man versus civilized man. To the extent that these variations constituted the main tendency of American literature and legends, Hollywood, in relying on this mythology, committed itself to becoming what Robert Bresson has called "the Cinema."[36] A brief description of the competing values associated with this outlaw hero-official hero opposition will begin to suggest its pervasiveness in traditional American culture.

1. *Aging*: The attractiveness of the outlaw hero's childishness and propensity to whims, tantrums, and emotional decisions derived from America's cult of childhood. Fiedler observed that American literature celebrated "the notion that a mere falling short of adulthood is a guarantee of insight and even innocence." From Huck to Holden Caulfield, children in American literature were privileged, existing beyond society's confining rules. Often, they set the plot in motion (e.g., *Intruder in the Dust, To Kill a Mockingbird*), acting for the adults encumbered by daily affairs. As Fiedler also pointed out, this image of childhood "has impinged upon adult life itself, has become a 'career' like everything else in America,"[37] generating stories like *On the Road* or *Easy Rider* in which adults try desperately to postpone responsibilities by clinging to adolescent lifestyles.

While the outlaw heroes represented a flight from maturity,

the official heroes embodied the best attributes of adulthood: sound reasoning and judgment, wisdom and sympathy based on experience. Franklin's *Autobiography* and *Poor Richard's Almanack* constituted this opposing tradition's basic texts, persuasive enough to appeal even to outsiders (*The Great Gatsby*). Despite the legends surrounding Franklin and the other Founding Fathers, however, the scarcity of mature heroes in American literature and mythology indicated American ideology's fundamental preference for youth, a quality that came to be associated with the country itself. Indeed, American stories often distorted the stock figure of the Wise Old Man, portraying him as mad (Ahab), useless (Rip Van Winkle), or evil (The Godfather).

2. *Society and Women*: The outlaw hero's distrust of civilization, typically represented by women and marriage, constituted a stock motif in American mythology. In his *Studies in Classic American Literature*, D. H. Lawrence detected the recurring pattern of flight, observing that the Founding Fathers had come to America "largely to get *away*. . . . Away from what? In the long run, away from themselves. Away from everything."[38] Sometimes, these heroes undertook this flight alone (Thoreau, *Catcher in the Rye*); more often, they joined ranks with other men: Huck with Jim, Ishmael with Queequeg, Jake Barnes with Bill Gorton. Women were avoided as representing the very entanglements this tradition sought to escape: society, the "settled life," confining responsibilities. The outlaw hero sought only uncompromising relationships, involving either a "bad" woman (whose morals deprived her of all rights to entangling domesticity) or other males (who themselves remained independent). Even the "bad" woman posed a threat, since marriage often uncovered the clinging "good" girl underneath. Typically, therefore, American stories avoided this problem by killing off the "bad" woman before the marriage could transpire (*Destry Rides Again, The Big Heat, The Far Country*). Subsequently, within the all-male group, women became taboo, except as the objects of lust.

The exceptional extent of American outlaw legends suggests an ideological anxiety about civilized life. Often, that anxiety took shape as a romanticizing of the dispossessed, as in the Beat Generation's cult of the bum, or the characters of Huck and

"Thoreau," who worked to remain idle, unemployed, and unattached. A passage from Jerzy Kosinski's *Steps* demonstrated the extreme modern version of this romanticizing:

> I envied those [the poor and the criminals] who lived here and seemed so free, having nothing to regret and nothing to look forward to. In the world of birth certificates, medical examinations, punch cards, and computers, in the world of telephone books, passports, bank accounts, insurance plans, wills, credit cards, pensions, mortgages and loans, they lived unattached.[39]

In contrast to the outlaw heroes, the official heroes were preeminently worldly, comfortable in society, and willing to undertake even those public duties demanding personal sacrifice. Political figures, particularly Washington and Lincoln, provided the principal examples of this tradition, but images of family also persisted in popular literature from *Little Women* to *Life with Father* and *Cheaper by the Dozen*. The most crucial figure in this tradition, however, was Horatio Alger, whose heroes' ambition provided the complement to Huck's disinterest. Alger's characters subscribed fully to the codes of civilization, devoting themselves to proper dress, manners, and behavior, and the attainment of the very things despised by the opposing tradition: the settled life and respectability.[40]

3. *Politics and the Law*: Writing about "The Philosophical Approach of the Americans," Tocqueville noted "a general distaste for accepting any man's word as proof of anything." That distaste took shape as a traditional distrust of politics as collective activity, and of ideology as that activity's rationale. Such a disavowal of ideology was, of course, itself ideological, a tactic for discouraging systematic political intervention in a nineteenth-century America whose political and economic power remained in the hands of a privileged few. Tocqueville himself noted the results of this mythology of individualism which "disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself."[41]

This hostility toward political solutions manifested itself fur-

ther in an ambivalence about the law. The outlaw mythology portrayed the law, the sum of society's standards, as a collective, impersonal ideology imposed on the individual from without. Thus, the law represented the very thing this mythology sought to avoid. In its place, this tradition offered a natural law discovered intuitively by each man. As Tocqueville observed, Americans wanted

> To escape from imposed systems . . . to seek by themselves and in themselves for the only reason for things . . . in most mental operations each American relies on individual effort and judgment. (p. 429)

This sense of the law's inadequacy to needs detectable only by the heart generated a rich tradition of legends celebrating legal defiance in the name of some "natural" standard: Thoreau went to jail rather than pay taxes, Huck helped Jim (legally a slave) to escape, Billy the Kid murdered the sheriff's posse that had ambushed his boss, Hester Prynne resisted the community's sexual mores. This mythology transformed all outlaws into Robin Hoods, who "correct" socially unjust laws (Jesse James, Bonnie and Clyde, John Wesley Hardin). Furthermore, by customarily portraying the law as the tool of villains (who used it to revoke mining claims, foreclose on mortgages, and disallow election results—all on legal technicalities), this mythology betrayed a profound pessimism about the individual's access to the legal system.

If the outlaw hero's motto was "I don't know what the law says, but I do know what's right and wrong," the official hero's was "We are a nation of laws, not of men," or "No man can place himself above the law." To the outlaw hero's insistence on private standards of right and wrong, the official hero offered the admonition, "You cannot take the law into your own hands." Often, these official heroes were lawyers or politicians, at times (as with Washington and Lincoln), even the executors of the legal system itself. The values accompanying such heroes modified the assurance of Crockett's advice, "Be sure you're right, then go ahead."

In sum, the values associated with these two different sets of heroes contrasted markedly. Clearly, too, each tradition had its good and bad points. If the extreme individualism of the outlaw

hero always verged on selfishness, the respectability of the official hero always threatened to involve either blandness or repression. If the outlaw tradition promised adventure and freedom, it also offered danger and loneliness. If the official tradition promised safety and comfort, it also offered entanglements and boredom.

The evident contradiction between these heroes provoked Daniel Boorstin's observation that "Never did a more incongruous pair than Davy Crockett and George Washington live together in a national Valhalla." And yet, as Boorstin admits, "both Crockett and Washington were popular heroes, and both emerged into legendary fame during the first half of the 19th century."[42]

The parallel existence of these two contradictory traditions evinced the general pattern of American mythology: the denial of the necessity for choice. In fact, this mythology often portrayed situations requiring decision as temporary aberrations from American life's normal course. By discouraging commitment to any single set of values, this mythology fostered an ideology of improvisation, individualism, and ad hoc solutions for problems depicted as crises. American writers have repeatedly attempted to justify this mythology in terms of material sources. Hence, Irving Howe's "explanation":

> It is when men no longer feel that they have adequate choices in their styles of life, when they conclude that there are no longer possibilities of honorable maneuver and compromise, when they decide that the time has come for "ultimate" social loyalties and political decisions—it is then that ideology begins to flourish. Ideology reflects a hardening of commitment, the freezing of opinion into system. . . . The uniqueness of our history, the freshness of our land, the plenitude of our resources—all these have made possible, and rendered plausible, a style of political improvisation and intellectual free-wheeling.[43]

Despite such an account's pretext of objectivity, its language betrays an acceptance of the mythology it purports to describe: "honorable maneuver and compromise," "hardening," "freezing," "uniqueness," "freshness," and "plenitude" are all assumptive words from an ideology that denies its own status. Furthermore, even granting the legitimacy of the historians' authenticating causes, we are left with a persisting mythology increasingly dis-

credited by historical developments. (In fact, such invalidation began in the early nineteenth century, and perhaps even before.)

The American mythology's refusal to choose between its two heroes went beyond the normal reconciliatory function attributed to myth by Lévi-Strauss. For the American tradition not only overcame binary oppositions; it systematically mythologized the certainty of being able to do so. Part of this process involved blurring the lines between the two sets of heroes. First, legends often brought the solemn official heroes back down to earth, providing the sober Washington with the cherry tree, the prudent Franklin with illegitimate children, and even the upright Jefferson with a slave mistress. On the other side, stories modified the outlaw hero's most potentially damaging quality, his tendency to selfish isolationism, by demonstrating that, however reluctantly, he would act for causes beyond himself. Thus, Huck grudgingly helped Jim escape, and Davy Crockett left the woods for three terms in Congress before dying in the Alamo for Texas independence. In this blurring process, Lincoln, a composite of opposing traits, emerged as the great American figure. His status as president made him an ex officio official hero. But his Western origins, melancholy solitude, and unaided decision-making all qualified him as a member of the other side. Finally, his ambivalent attitude toward the law played the most crucial role in his complex legend. As the Chief Executive, he inevitably stood for the principle that "we are a nation of laws and not men"; as the Great Emancipator, on the other hand, he provided the prime example of taking the law into one's own hands in the name of some higher standard.

Classic Hollywood's gallery of composite heroes (boxing musicians, rebellious aristocrats, pacifist soldiers) clearly derived from this mythology's rejection of final choices, a tendency whose traces Erikson detected in American psychology:

> The process of American identity formation seems to support an individual's ego identity as long as he can preserve a certain element of deliberate tentativeness of autonomous choice. The individual must be able to convince himself that the next step is up to him and that no matter where he is staying or going he always has the choice of leaving or turning in the opposite direction if he chooses to do so. In this country the migrant does not want to be told to move on, nor the sedentary man to stay where he is; for the life style (and the family history) of each contains the opposite element as a potential alternative which he wishes to consider his most private and individual decision.[44]

The reconciliatory pattern found its most typical incarnation, however, in one particular narrative: the story of the private man attempting to keep from being drawn into action on any but his own terms. In this story, the reluctant hero's ultimate willingness to help the community satisfied the official values. But by portraying this aid as demanding only a temporary involvement, the story preserved the values of individualism as well.

Like the contrasting heroes' epitomization of basic American dichotomies, the reluctant hero story provided a locus for displacement. Its most famous version, for example, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, offered a typically individualistic solution to the nation's unresolved racial and sectional anxieties, thereby helping to forestall more systematic governmental measures. In adopting this story, Classic Hollywood retained its censoring power, using it, for example, in *Casablanca* to conceal the realistic threats to American self-determination posed by World War II.

Because the reluctant hero story was clearly the basis of the western, American literature's repeated use of it prompted Leslie Fiedler to call the classic American novels "disguised westerns."[45] In the movies, too, this story appeared in every genre: in westerns, of course (with *Shane* its most schematic articulation), but also in gangster movies (*Angels with Dirty Faces*, *Key Largo*), musicals (*Swing Time*), detective stories (*The Thin Man*), war films (*Air Force*), screwball comedy (*The Philadelphia Story*), "problem pictures" (*On the Waterfront*), and even science fiction (the Han Solo character in *Star Wars*). *Gone With the Wind*, in fact, had two selfish heroes who came around at the last moment, Scarlett (taking care of Melanie) and Rhett (running the Union blockade), incompatible only because they were so much alike. The natural culmination of this pattern, perfected by Hollywood in the 1930s and early 1940s, was *Casablanca*. Its version of the outlaw hero-official hero struggle (Rick versus Laszlo) proved

stunningly effective, its resolution (their collaboration on the war effort) the prototypical Hollywood ending.

The reluctant hero story's tendency to minimize the official hero's role (by making him dependent on the outsider's intervention) suggested an imbalance basic to the American mythology: despite the existence of both heroes, the national ideology clearly preferred the outlaw. This ideology strove to make that figure's origins seem spontaneous, concealing the calculated, commercial efforts behind the mythologizing of typical examples like Billy the Kid and Davy Crockett. Its willingness, on the other hand, to allow the official hero's traces to show enables Daniel Boorstin to observe of one such myth, "There were elements of spontaneity, of course, in the Washington legend, too, but it was, for the most part, a self-conscious product."[46]

The apparent spontaneity of the outlaw heroes assured their popularity. By contrast, the official values had to rely on a rational allegiance that often wavered. These heroes' different statuses accounted for a structure fundamental to American literature, and assumed by Classic Hollywood: a split between the moral center and the interest center of a story. Thus, while the typical western contained warnings against violence as a solution, taking the law into one's own hands, and moral isolationism, it simultaneously glamorized the outlaw hero's intense self-possession and willingness to use force to settle what the law could not. In other circumstances, Ishmael's evenhanded philosophy paled beside Ahab's moral vehemence, consciously recognizable as destructive.

D. H. Lawrence called this split the profound "duplicity" at the heart of nineteenth-century American fiction, charging that the classic novels evinced "a tight mental allegiance to a morality which all [the author's] passion goes to destroy." Certainly, too, this "duplicity" involved the mythology's pattern of obscuring the necessity for choosing between contrasting values. Richard Chase has put the matter less pejoratively in an account that applies equally to the American Cinema:

> The American novel tends to rest in contradictions and among extreme ranges of experience. When it attempts to resolve contradictions, it does so in oblique, morally equivocal ways. As a general rule it does so either in melodramatic actions or in pastoral idylls, although intermixed with both one may find the stirring instabilities of "American humor."[47]

Or, in other words, when faced with a difficult choice, American stories resolved it either simplistically (by refusing to acknowledge that a choice is necessary), sentimentally (by blurring the differences between the two sides), or by laughing the whole thing off.

Turner's frontier thesis was the great justification for this pattern, an argument that physical and psychological space had removed American culture from a European imagination whose norms centered on the recognition of limits. Clearly, however, that explanation constituted a key part of the very mythology it pretended to explain. Indeed, in attributing American culture to the values and abilities of a prototypical frontiersman, Turner celebrated a figure whose appeal depended on its remoteness from even his own contemporaries' experience.[48]

The American Cinema's dependence on the mass audience, however, made the truth or falsity of Turner's account irrelevant. For far from relying on historical accuracy for its popularity, Hollywood traded on (and helped to further) an existing ideological projection with a life of its own. Thus, the reluctant hero story's inappropriateness as a solution for contemporary problems mattered far less than the enormous weight of the tradition promoting it. Indeed, the movies' commercial success derived from their ability to insert themselves into the long chain of texts (Turner's being among the most prominent) whose persistent articulation of American exceptionalism had portrayed final choices as unnecessary violations of the national spirit. To a great extent, this tradition of texts operated independently, sustained less by its correspondence to material circumstances than by its own internal determinants. (The reception accorded the frontier thesis, for example, has as much to do with the American Historical Association's imprimatur as with its own historical verifiability.) Further, by the time the movies connected with this tradition, this tradition had long since begun to assert its own authority, often helping to shape historical events. (Turner's frontier thesis, for example, provided the rationale for Woodrow Wilson's interventions into the Mexican War and World War I.)[49]

As a crucial part of this ideological projection, therefore, the American Cinema never simply reflected contemporary events. At the most, the movies responded to what Althusser calls the mass audience's "relationship" to those events[50]—a perception of them determined to a large extent by the movies themselves and the historical weight of the tradition the cinema had adopted. Thus, because external occurrences reached Hollywood only through a filter of its own making, the course of the American Cinema's evolution was always influenced less by external, real-world events than by the self-perpetuating momentum of its own tradition. Not surprisingly, therefore, the majority of American movies of the 1970s looked remarkably similar to those of the 1930s.

The autonomous strength of the American Cinema's mythology not only made it resistant to external pressures for change; it also made the movies an enormously powerful influence on American life. Occasionally, like the frontier thesis, they helped determine major historical events: Nixon's repeated 1970 viewings of *Patton*, for example, directly preceded that year's Cambodian bombings.[51] Less dramatic, but far more pervasive, the American Cinema's significant role in consumer merchandising (through brand-name "tie-ins" of products displayed in films) completed the industrial age's fusion of base and superstructure. For, as Charles Eckert noted, Hollywood's eagerness to use its movies as "living display windows"[52] permanently blurred the lines between material circumstances and the cultural forms previously presumed to be dependent on them. Indeed, by helping to create desires, by reinforcing ideological proclivities, by encouraging certain forms of political action (or inaction), the movies worked to create the very reality they then "reflected."

THE HISTORY of the American Cinema (and to an extent, of world cinema) is the history of the formal and thematic paradigms achieved by Classic Hollywood. Although both paradigms unraveled slightly after World War II, their self-perpetuating authority insured that modifications to them would result only from the convergence of internal and external stimuli for change. (Such changes, in Althusser's terms, would be "overdetermined.") We

have observed that the movies' original adoption of the traditional American mythology was prompted both by internal developments (the coming of sound, oligopolistic concentration) and by external factors (the Depression). As we will see, post-World War II changes required a similar confluence of events. In order to understand their impact, however, we need first to look more closely at the variations Classic Hollywood worked around its chosen thematic paradigm—the avoidance of choice.