

**Postmodern Hollywood:
What's New in Film and
Why It Makes Us Feel So
Strange**

M. Keith Booker

PRAEGER

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*For Amy, Adam, Marcus,
Dakota, Skylor, and Benjamin*

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| INTRODUCTION: POSTMODERNISM AND POPULAR FILM | ix |
| 1 BREAKING UP IS HARD TO AVOID: FRAGMENTATION IN POSTMODERN FILM | 1 |
| 2 AS TIME JUST SITS THERE: THE MUSIC OF POSTMODERN NOSTALGIA | 47 |
| 3 LIKE SOMETHING FROM A MOVIE: FILM AS THE OBJECT OF REPRESENTATION IN POSTMODERN POPULAR FILM | 89 |
| 4 AS SEEN ON TV: TELEVISION AND POSTMODERN FILM | 151 |
| CONCLUSION: CREATIVITY, ORIGINALITY, AND POSTMODERN FILM | 187 |
| APPENDIX: FILMS CITED | 191 |
| NOTES | 199 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 203 |
| INDEX | 207 |

INTRODUCTION: POSTMODERNISM AND POPULAR FILM

Postmodernism, as both a historical and a cultural phenomenon, has been a central topic of academic discussions of culture and history in the past few decades. Partly because of the sometimes arcane nature of these discussions, the phenomenon of postmodernism has gained a reputation for complexity and inaccessibility, and it is certainly the case that some elements of postmodern thought, because they run counter to the dictates of what has come to be regarded as “common sense,” are a bit difficult for the ordinary person to grasp. It is also the case that the specific films used by academic critics to illustrate the phenomenon of postmodernism in film have sometimes been difficult and abstruse, though most theories of postmodernism suggest that it is a far-reaching phenomenon that should have an impact on virtually every area of contemporary cultural production.

For example, the films of David Lynch, widely regarded as a director of confusing “art films,” have been front and center in academic discussions of postmodern film. Thus, Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* (1986) is one of the principal films discussed by Fredric Jameson as exemplary cultural products of the postmodern era in his seminal work *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). *Blue Velvet* is also a primary example cited by Norman Denzin in *Images of Postmodern Society*, his sociological discussion of the postmodern cultural terrain. Denzin notes in particular the film’s refusal to identify its historical setting, freely

mixing images that appear to derive from different historical periods: “This is a film which evokes, mocks, yet lends quasi-reverence for the icons of the past, while it places them in the present” (469). In addition, this film repeatedly states its central message (“It’s a strange world”) almost like a mantra, but this message is entirely trite, suggesting that Lynch is more interested in creating artistic images than in any sort of critical engagement with real-world issues. The catchphrase “It’s a strange world” may go a long way toward explaining the tendency toward strangeness in Lynch’s films, and thereby simply becomes mimetic.

Blue Velvet departs from Hollywood convention in a number of ways, but it is not really an inaccessible film. In it, teenage protagonists (played by Kyle MacLachlan and Laura Dern) discover their sexuality in their budding mutual passion, at the same time making the parallel discovery that the seemingly idyllic life of their town of Lumberton is underwritten by a dark world of crime and perversion that lies just beneath that placid surface. This is a film that openly invites Freudian readings—so much so that any such readings would be superfluous.

However, what Lynch’s films represent is emphatically not reality but other representations of reality—which explains why they are sometimes so confusing to viewers who attempt to interpret them as being “about” the real world. Thus, the superficial tranquility of Lumberton—with its blooming flowers, singing birds, white picket fences, and friendly firemen—is quite transparently derived from nostalgic clichés of the American 1950s, with a look reminiscent more of a Disneyesque version of a town than any real town that ever existed in the 1950s or any other time. Meanwhile, the dark underside of Lumberton society seems equally stereotypical, deriving its material and look (cozy suburban homes suddenly replaced by stark urban red-brick buildings) from film noir—or what film noir might have been like without the Production Code. There are, actually, hints that the dark side of Lumberton might be a bit more authentic than the beautiful side, primarily in the way Lynch employs reminders of the tooth-and-claw nature of life in the animal kingdom, which, like Lumberton, can be both beautiful and violent—as signaled by the film’s final image of a robin that lands on a window sill announcing the town’s return to tranquility, but is at the same time eating an insect it has captured.

As noted by Denzin, *Blue Velvet* includes a number of inconsistent historical markers, though its principal historical roots lie between the mid-1980s, when the film was made, and the 1950s, from whence many of the characters seem to emerge and for which the film shows a certain nostalgia (another key tendency of postmodern culture), though quite

vaguely defined. The 1950s are never overtly identified as an object of nostalgia, while much of the logic of the film seems specifically meant to undermine the kinds of idealized visions of small-town, nuclear-family life that are more typically associated with wistful visions of the 1950s. Much the same sort of hazy nostalgia informs *Twin Peaks*, the 1990–1991 television series in which Lynch was centrally involved, as it does Lynch's recent film *Mulholland Drive* (2001).¹ Indeed, the nostalgia of *Mulholland Drive* might be seen as especially postmodern in that the setting of the film is quite clearly contemporary with its making, yet its atmosphere and visual style show the clear influence of the noir films of the 1950s while it also draws upon a panoply of motifs from older films for its plot and characterization.

If postmodern films such as *Blue Velvet* and *Mulholland Drive* can, in fact, be understood by fairly broad audiences if approached properly, it is also the case that many extremely popular (and seemingly very accessible) films also epitomize the characteristics associated by critics such as Jameson and Denzin with postmodernism. Tim Burton's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005), for example, is widely regarded as a children's film. It is, after all, a remake of a classic children's film, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971). But *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is far more than a children's entertainment. For one thing, it is a gorgeous film, filled with treats for the eyes and ears that are every bit as sweet as the confections whipped up in the factory of the title. It is also an exemplary postmodern film, both because of its emphasis on spectacular images and because of a playful tone underwritten by darkness. Among other things, the hints of darkness make the spirit of the film much closer to that of the source material in Roald Dahl's novel of the same title than was the original 1971 film adaptation. But all of Burton's films tend to contain dark elements, and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is quintessential Burton, even if the previous works of Dahl and director Mel Stuart provided the basic materials with which he worked. In particular, the film epitomizes Burton's trademark focus on visual imagery over plot and characterization. In this case, of course, the production of impressive images is aided by the film's ultrahigh budget, though in many ways the film resembles nothing more than *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* (1985), Burton's first, relatively low-budget feature film. Indeed, the similarity between these two films may go a long way toward demonstrating the limitations in Burton's work, with its single clichéd message that imagination and creativity are the only antidotes to the crushing banality of day-to-day life in the late capitalist world.

In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the poverty of young Charlie Bucket (Freddie Highmore) and his family might represent one of the dark undertones in Burton's film, except that Burton seems little concerned with social commentary, and the entirely stylized depiction of it is clearly a mere simulation of poverty. We need not worry that anyone in the family will actually starve, and we are even invited to believe that the poverty of the family brings them closer together and makes their lives ultimately richer than those of the more economically fortunate. They live in a sagging, leaning, decaying home that seems a hybrid of Dickens and Disney, signifying poverty more as an idea than as a reality with real, human suffering attached.

The real darkness of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* resides in the factory itself, that traditional locus of sweaty, grimy capitalist misery, here transformed into a sort of brightly lit museum of luscious consumerist fantasy objects. In good postmodern (but also mythic) fashion, this factory resides in an entirely nonspecific location, as signaled by the fact that the denizens of the surrounding area speak with English accents but employ American currency. This factory, meanwhile, is no home to oppressed workers, its traditional labor force having been expelled years earlier. Instead, it is manned by hundreds of tiny, identical "Oompa Loompas," all played by the digitally multiplied Deep Roy, an actor from Kenya but of Indian descent, who thus serves as a sort of one-man embodiment of the former colonial world. Indeed, in the original version of Dahl's book, the Oompa Loompas were dark-skinned Pygmies from Africa, though they were made white in a 1973 revision that was released due to complaints that the original book was racist. The fact that all of the Oompa Loompas are identical invites comparison to both racist stereotypes about how members of nonwhite races all look alike and the way in which workers under capitalism are treated as interchangeable economic quantities, rather than human beings.

But there are no oppressed Third World workers here: we are apparently meant to believe that the Oompa Loompas genuinely love their work and revel (they frequently dance and sing) in the opportunity to inhabit the glorious factory, having been rescued from some horrid Third World locale by the factory's owner, renowned chocolateer Willy Wonka (Johnny Depp). Of course, it is also the case that the diminutive workers are held in thrall by the cocoa beans (their favorite delicacy) with which Wonka supplies them, almost like a pusher feeding drugs to an addict—or a First World corporation luring Third World workers with cheap wages. Burton pointedly ignores any possible metaphorical implications of this arrangement (in terms of colonialism, globalization, capitalism, or

even slavery) and opts instead to ask us to take all of this at face value: the Oompa Loompas really *are* happy and better off in the factory.

The dark implications of the factory thus reside, for the purposes of the film, not in its workforce, but in its owner, whom Depp plays as a strange, creepy recluse of clearly questionable sexuality—inevitably triggering comparisons with Michael Jackson on the part of numerous critics. We are even given some psychological background to Wonka's strangeness, which is stipulated to be the result of his oppressive upbringing at the hands of his equally creepy dentist father (Christopher Lee), who sought in every way possible to stifle young Willy's budding creativity (and love of chocolate).

Wonka's response is to rebel by becoming as creative as possible and by channeling that creativity into the production of innovative candies (here obviously a metaphor for art), meanwhile paternally presiding over his domain of Oompa Loompas, who have replaced his former, more conventional workers because those workers were less tractable and posed more of a possible barrier to Wonka's creativity. But Depp's Wonka is hardly an unmitigated demonstration of the value of creativity. He remains psychically scarred by his childhood, so deeply alienated that he is unable to relate to ordinary human beings as anything other than the consumers of the goods produced by his factory or the workers who inhabit that factory but presumably never leave it and have no connection to the world outside of it. Depp's performance, widely derided by critics as entirely inappropriate for the presumably good-natured, pro-family film that he is inhabiting, thus presents us with a perfect postmodern character, all surface and no depth, his entire life consisting of his economic function as a designer and producer of sweets.

Indeed, given Depp's characterization of Wonka, there is something decidedly ominous about his project of attempting to lure Charlie to live with him in his factory, with the stipulation that he can never see his family again. The saintly Charlie, of course, turns him down, opting for family over riches, and by the end of the film the Buckets have taught even Wonka to value family, but this message has a sort of obligatory, tacked-on feel, as if Burton's heart wasn't really in it and he felt he had to include it only in order to secure the vast funding needed to produce the stunning array of images that constitute the interior of the factory. The other lessons presumably taught by the film are similarly half-hearted and obligatory, as the sad states of the children (other than the admirable Charlie) who tour the factory teach us that gluttony is bad for children, television is bad for children, it is bad to spoil children, and it is bad to push children to become overly competitive.

Here, however, the lessons, like the plot, are beside the point. Image is everything, and the unending barrage of spectacular images can match anything ever put on the screen in terms of their extravagant richness. In this and many other ways, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is representative of postmodern film as a whole, its unabashed sense of itself as spectacle being perfectly in tune with the postmodern world, famously described by Guy Debord as the “society of the spectacle.” The factory itself is a sort of Disney World of film images, each being more a representation of other images than of anything in reality. The film thus exemplifies Jean Baudrillard’s vision of postmodern society as increasingly dominated by technologically generated forms of culture and experience, leading to the death of conventional reality and the growth of “hyperreality,” in which all is simulation and all experience is mediated through images—particularly “simulacra,” images that exist only in their own right, representing nothing in reality.

In fact, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is a consummate postmodern film in a number of ways, though postmodernism is an extremely complex historical and cultural phenomenon that is still evolving and is therefore difficult to define. In the following readings of individual films, I will assume that postmodern culture is characterized by a number of basic attributes. For example, postmodernism participates in a general crisis of belief, of the kind indicated perhaps most famously by Jean-François Lyotard’s influential suggestion that postmodernism is informed by a radical suspicion toward “totalizing metanarratives.” This suspicion grows from, among other things, the fact that virtually all aspects of life in the postmodern era have experienced a dizzying and accelerating rate of change. This facet of postmodernism involves fundamental challenges to the Western philosophical tradition, but it often results in cultural products that are playful and lighthearted. In addition, the vapid nature of the messages delivered by films such as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Blue Velvet* can be attributed to a half-heartedness that results from a lack of faith in the viability of *any* messages. Meanwhile, this distrust of totalizing metanarratives has led to a strong tendency toward pluralism in postmodern thought, which in the aesthetic realm often leads to the production of works that participate in multiple genres and styles within a single work. The tour of Burton’s chocolate factory is, among other things, a tour of various film and television genres, thus exemplifying this side of postmodern culture as well.

The vertiginous pace of change in the postmodern era has also contributed to an increasing sense of the instability of personal identity, which accompanies the growing sense of alienation experienced by

individuals during the era. After all, individual identity attains its stability through a perception of continuity of selfhood over time. But this perception is increasingly difficult to maintain in an age in which so many things have changed so radically over such short periods of time. Thus, Jameson, probably the single most influential theorist of postmodernism, has argued that the “psychic fragmentation” of the postmodern subject has become so radical that individuals no longer have a stable enough psyche to undergo the fundamentally modernist experience of alienation (*Postmodernism*, 90). Willy Wonka’s seeming lack of any real identity epitomizes this phenomenon, as does Frank Booth’s in *Blue Velvet*.

This schizophrenic sense of a loss of individual temporal continuity also contributes to a larger loss of any sense of historical continuity. Beginning in the 1950s, individuals in advanced Western societies have increasingly felt that they were living in unprecedented situations to which the experience of the past was irrelevant. For example, how could any lessons about history and politics learned before the nuclear bomb really apply to a world in which the bomb made sudden global annihilation a constant threat? Moreover, the pace of change was so rapid that the present also became disconnected from the future, which became more and more unpredictable. Thus, the totalizing systems that were called into question beginning in the 1950s included any and all scientific and theoretical models of history. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* takes place in a sort of timeless, fairy-tale world where history does not even occur, while Lumberton seems removed from history as well.

As I describe in my book *The Post-Utopian Imagination*, the loss of faith in historical metanarratives during the postmodern era has been accompanied by a weakening of the utopian imagination, and in particular by a loss of faith in the possibility that utopian dreams might actually be realized. If history did not make sense, how could it be expected to lead to an ideal conclusion? Thus, the postmodern era’s sense of rapid and even terrifying change has been accompanied by an equally horrifying sense that, within the context of late capitalism, nothing ever really changes after all. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Blue Velvet* contain a number of potentially utopian images, but they are all both dreamlike and thoroughly commodified. None seem meant as actual possibilities for the real world.

Also closely related to the collapse of belief in totalizing systems is the demise of the tradition of Aristotelian logic, through which Western society had long defined itself via a series of polar oppositions, the central of which were Good versus Evil and Us versus Them—both of which, in the Western tradition, ultimately amount to pretty much the

same thing. Without such clear distinctions to rely on, postmodernist thought tends toward a radical relativism, in which no point of view can be maintained as absolutely superior to any other. The lack of any real message in films such as *Blue Velvet* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* again comes into play here, as does the fact that so many aspects of the films don't really make sense from a logical perspective.

The collapse of belief in polar oppositions has a number of aesthetic consequences, including a growing sense of doubt about the distinction between art and reality. Of course, this particular crisis was furthered by the increasing aestheticization of life in the 1950s, as new communications and media technologies made it possible for culture to penetrate everyday life in an unprecedented way. The unstable boundary between fiction and reality is a key element of what Brian McHale has described, in his *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), as a general postmodernist confusion of ontological levels and boundaries. Lynch's Lumberton clearly exists in a sort of alternative universe, where reality is constructed from fiction. Similarly, the children entering Burton's chocolate factory seem to enter an alternative reality, somewhat like Dorothy's arrival in Oz, except that the latter is ultimately recuperated as a dream.

Related to this confusion of levels is a questioning of the traditional distinction between high and low culture. Many critics, such as Andreas Huyssen, have seen this feature of postmodernism as a sign that it is more democratic than an elitist modernism. If nothing else, this deconstruction of the boundary between high and low art opened opportunities for popular culture, such as film, to assume a new importance in American society as a whole. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is an avowedly popular cultural artifact, yet one would be hard pressed to find, in the annals of "high" art, images of superior aesthetic power. Similarly, *Blue Velvet* is an "art film" constructed from materials derived from the "lowest" forms of pulp culture.

The postmodernist questioning of traditional standards of aesthetic judgment leads to a general mode of playfulness and satire in which postmodernist art, often resorting to campy self-parody, seems to have difficulty taking itself seriously. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* again exemplifies this aspect of postmodernist art, which is related to the film's focus on superficial appearance rather than thematic depth. *Blue Velvet* seems more serious, but it is also campy, intentionally exaggerated in ways that tend to undermine any interpretation of the film as a serious examination of the issues upon which it seems to touch.

Of course, different observers have seen postmodernism in different ways. However, the very fact that highly popular films such as *Charlie*

and the *Chocolate Factory* can illustrate so many academic conceptualizations of postmodern culture suggests that these conceptualizations have a much broader relevance. Indeed, even the most rarefied academic discussions of postmodernism, such as Jameson's *Postmodernism*, have often argued the usefulness of the concept of postmodernism for anyone who would attempt to come to grips with the complexities of day-to-day life in the contemporary world. Thus, while Jameson notes the importance to postmodernist culture of arcane works of performance art and experimental video, he also insists that postmodernism is now a cultural dominant and that even the most mundane products of popular culture are heavily conditioned by a postmodernist paradigm.

Jameson does not write for a popular audience, but his work certainly implies that such audiences could profit greatly from a better understanding of the phenomenon of postmodernism. Indeed, recent "beginner's guides" to postmodernism have been produced in an attempt to introduce the movement to broader audiences, though these guides are probably used most often as textbooks in college-level introductory courses on the subject. These texts include such works as *Introducing Postmodernism* by Richard Appignanesi and others (first published in 1995, but now available in a third edition, published in 2005), Tim Wood's *Beginning Postmodernism* (1999), and Kevin Hart's *Postmodernism: A Beginner's Guide* (2004). There is even an introduction in comic book format, in the form of James M. Powell and Joe Lee's *Postmodernism for Beginners* (1998).

Such primers can be useful for those who are attempting to get their bearings within the topic of postmodernism, though they provide very little in terms of the discussion of specific cultural texts as representative examples of postmodern culture. Works such as Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) and Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) provide good introductions to the topic of postmodernism in fiction, especially the novel, though they are intended largely for academic audiences—just as the novels they discuss are, by and large, experimental literary efforts that are not necessarily intended to appeal to a mass audience. For the broader public, postmodernism resides primarily on television and in film. I myself have discussed postmodern television in my book *Strange TV* (2002), though much more work certainly remains to be done in that area, especially in terms of making discussions of postmodern television accessible to a popular readership. Postmodern film has received even less critical treatment. Many of the leading academic treatises on postmodernism—such as Jameson's *Postmodernism*, David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990), and especially Denzin's *Images of Postmodern Society*—contain substantial

discussions of film as an element of postmodern culture. The collections of essays edited by Cristina Degli-Esposti (1998) and by Peter and Will Brooker (1997) provide the most extensive discussions of postmodern film. However, these are again intended for academic audiences. Furthermore, essay collections, by their nature, do not provide comprehensive coverage but instead focus on spot coverage of specific films or phenomena.

The current volume is an attempt to contribute to the popular understanding of postmodernism as a cultural phenomenon by providing a comprehensive discussion of postmodern film that is accessible to a fairly broad audience—focusing on popular, accessible films in this discussion. My understanding of postmodernism derives most importantly from the work of Jameson, which, however difficult his work might be for most readers, is in many ways quite simple and straightforward. At the level of form and technique, for example, Jameson argues that postmodernist art (especially narrative art such as cinema or the novel) is characterized by two central tendencies: formal fragmentation and a reliance on styles that mimic those of earlier works or artists in a mode of pastiche.

For Jameson, however, these relatively straightforward formal characteristics are aesthetic symptoms of far more profound developments in postmodern society as a whole, caused by the fact that capitalism, in the wake of the dismantling of the great European colonial empires (primarily in the 1950s) has entered a new “late” phase characterized by the rapidly increasing global hegemony of consumer capitalism and capitalist modernization. Jameson’s view of late capitalism builds primarily on the work of Ernest Mandel, though it is Jameson’s particular contribution to suggest that postmodernism is the “cultural logic” of late capitalism, directly expressing its characteristics in aesthetic form. Thus, the formal fragmentation of postmodern texts is closely related to the increasing psychic fragmentation of individual subjects. Meanwhile, this psychic fragmentation itself implies that the mind of the individual artist is no longer stable enough to be the source of a unique personal style, resulting in the necessity of borrowing styles from others via pastiche. This tendency is further enhanced by the way in which the rapid rate of change in the postmodern era makes it virtually impossible for individuals to maintain any genuine sense of historical continuity. One result of this loss is a tendency for contemporary artists to regard the styles of the past as a sort of aesthetic cafeteria from whose menu they can nostalgically pick and choose without concern for the historical context in which those styles originally arose.

It is the reproduction of both the style and the content of earlier works from various periods that Jameson describes as “pastiche,” which is,

like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of any laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. (*Postmodernism*, 17)

Among other things, Jameson sees this reliance on the styles of the past as an indication of the particular kind of nostalgia that is one of the defining characteristics of postmodern art. In addition, this “random cannibalization of all the styles of the past” reduces the past to a series of spectacles, a collection of images disconnected from any genuine sense of historical process.

An obvious implication of Jameson’s reading of postmodernism is that, given the growing global hegemony of capitalism, postmodernism (as the cultural logic of late capitalism) should be hegemonic in the cultural sphere. As a result, a wide variety of cultural products should reflect the postmodern worldview in a number of different ways. This volume looks at the manifestations of postmodernism in a diverse array of films (mostly American) from the 1950s forward. Following Jameson’s lead, chapter 1 examines the prevalence of narrative, formal, and thematic fragmentation in recent postmodern films, focusing on such examples as *Timecode*, *Moulin Rouge!*, *Run Lola Run*, *Zelig*, *Memento*, *Fight Club*, *Natural Born Killers*, and *Requiem for a Dream*. It also discusses the phenomenon of “hyperlink” cinema, of which Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* may be the best-known example. The chapter also includes a discussion of the films of the Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu, who, in a series of films, has produced a sort of counterexample that employs the hyperlink form in ways that are more politically motivated than is typical of American postmodern films.

Chapter 2 focuses on nostalgia as a prevalent mode in postmodern film, with special concentration on the use of music both to evoke a nostalgic atmosphere and as an object of nostalgia in its own right. It includes discussions of such films as *Blue Velvet*, *A Midsummer Night’s Sex Comedy*, *A Knight’s Tale*, *Moulin Rouge!*, *American Graffiti*, *The Last Picture Show*, *Phantom of the Paradise*, *Grease*, *Hairspray*, *Cry-Baby*, *Back to the Future*, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, *Pleasantville*, *Austin Powers*, *Wayne’s World*, *Sweet and Lowdown*, *Kansas City*, *O Brother, Where Art*

Thou?, *Pennies from Heaven*, and *Dancer in the Dark*. Chapter 3 also deals with postmodern nostalgia in recent films, this time as it is directed toward earlier motion pictures. In particular, it discusses the extent to which postmodern films borrow styles, motifs, and material from their predecessors—and are to an extent often *about* previous films, treating films and filmmaking as their principal objects of representation. Films discussed include the special case of Brian De Palma's numerous pastiches of Alfred Hitchcock's movies, Gus Van Sant's shot-by-shot remake of Hitchcock's *Psycho*, and the use of generic pastiche in the Coen brothers' *The Man Who Wasn't There*. Films that address the movie industry in various ways include *Blow Out*, *8½*, *Stardust Memories*, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, *Barton Fink*, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, *Cecil B. Demented*, *Ed Wood*, and *The Player*.

Chapter 4 concludes my survey of pastiche in postmodern film with a discussion of the use of television and other media as a source of both style and content in recent American motion pictures. It includes a consideration of the phenomenon of the adaptation of television series to film, as well as movies that treat television as their subject matter, including *Stay Tuned*, *Wayne's World*, *Soapdish*, *Josie and the Pussycats*, *The Truman Show*, *Edtv*, *Being There*, *To Die For*, *Videodrome*, and *Click*.

The final chapter sums up the findings of the previous chapters, while also specifically addressing the implications of these findings in terms of the distinctive personal styles of postmodern filmmakers. It focuses on the films of Lynch, Burton, Tarantino, and David Cronenberg, all of whom are generally regarded as postmodern directors and all of whom are known for making films that bear their easily identifiable personal stamp. A look at the films of these directors suggests that they do indeed employ the strategies of fragmentation and pastiche associated by Jameson with postmodernism; however, it also demonstrates that their films show a new kind of postmodern creativity that goes beyond conventional notions of personal style. All in all, the extensive review of recent American cinema in this volume tends to verify Jameson's vision of both the aesthetic and ideological tendencies of postmodern film, while also demonstrating that a wide variety of recent American films can be considered postmodern.

Chapter 1

BREAKING UP IS HARD TO AVOID

FRAGMENTATION IN POSTMODERN FILM

In the distinctive opening sequence of Robert Altman's *The Player* (1992), Walter Stuckel (Fred Ward), security chief of a major film studio, complains that "the pictures they make now are all MTV: cut, cut, cut, cut. The opening shot of Welles's *Touch of Evil* was 6½ minutes long." Actually, the famous tracking shot that opens Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958) runs less than four minutes until the first cut, but Stuckel's point remains and is reinforced by his later references in this same scene to Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), the entire length of which consists of a sequence of extended shots, each of nearly ten minutes in length (the maximum amount of film that would fit in a camera at the time). And Stuckel is certainly correct both that film editing in the late twentieth century was increasingly frenetic and that this editing was strongly influenced by the fragmented visual style of MTV music videos.

Of course, MTV is not the only fragmented form of popular culture in the late twentieth century, and this editing style also marks a more general characteristic of postmodern culture, as indicated by Fredric Jameson in his insightful *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). Indeed, films were becoming more and more fragmentary even before the founding of MTV in the early 1980s. For example, many of the editing techniques that have come to be associated with postmodern film were already prominent in the films of the French New Wave, as in the famous jump cuts of Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1959) or the whip pans, quick cuts, and fast zooms of François Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* (1961).

The Player itself seems to eschew such intrusive editing by opening with a complex tracking shot that runs more than eight minutes until the

first cut, accompanied by music that alludes to the opening music of *Touch of Evil*. Yet *Touch of Evil* is hardly a paradigm of classic Hollywood film, and its whacked-out, excessive self-parody was already postmodern. In addition, the opening tracking shot of Welles's film is impressive partly because of the complexity with which it conveys a sense of fragmentation and frenetic activity even without cuts. The opening shot of *The Player* does much the same thing, managing to shift from character to character and scene to scene even within the same continuous shot. In any case, the opening tracking shots of both *Touch of Evil* and *The Player* call such attention to themselves as tours de force that they are every bit as intrusive (and, in a sense, fragmentary) as MTV-style quick cutting.

Much of the ironic humor of *The Player*, in fact, comes from the self-conscious way in which it continually exemplifies the very Hollywood stereotypes that it seems designed to criticize. As such, the film is largely about its own making, while at the same time declaring the incapability of certain tendencies that it identifies primarily as being the result of the market forces that drive Hollywood film, but which might also be attributed at least in part to the growing cultural hegemony of postmodernism. Indeed, by Jameson's reading of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism, these two factors, in a sense, amount to essentially the same thing. The MTV-style editing mentioned by Stuckel is no doubt designed to attract young audiences to movie theaters, but surely there is a reason why such frenetic, fragmentary editing would appeal to young audiences at this particular point in history.

Then again, the increasing fragmentation of postmodern film can in many ways be seen as a logical extension of older montage techniques and indeed of the evolution of film itself as a medium. In his crucial essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin singles out film as the "most powerful agent" of the shattering of the traditional quasi-religious aura of the work of art by modern, mechanically reproduced art forms (223). Film, after all, is always already mechanically reproduced. There is no "original" film of which the various prints distributed are mere copies: each film exists *only* as mechanically reproduced copies. Further, film is inherently fragmented in both its construction and its presentation to audiences; each film is shot as separate scenes and presented as a montage in which these scenes are joined by a sequence of cuts that, for Benjamin, disrupt the sense of wholeness that gives traditional art much of its religious flavor. Unlike a painting, which is available for immersion and contemplation, the image constantly changes in film, leading to a "shock effect" that, in Benjamin's view, can increase perception and awareness on the part of the spectator (240).

According to Benjamin, this shattering of the aura, however unsettling, has the potential to make a major contribution to a revolutionary democratization of human societies, to “the adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality” (225). Unable to ignore the fragmentation of the film or to associate the film with the godlike hand of a single creating artist, audiences experience a kind of defamiliarization that fosters reception in a mode of thoughtful critique rather than admiring awe. In turn, this new form of engagement with art might help individuals better to question authority in their day-to-day political lives. Subsequent developments, such as the rise of the cultic *auteur*-director, suggest that traditional forms of artistic reception may be more difficult to overcome than Benjamin realized. In addition, the fragmentation of ordinary experience in the postmodern era removes much of the defamiliarizing power that Benjamin finds in the inherent fragmentation of film, which now becomes perfectly familiar and hardly shocking.

Benjamin’s vision of film as a mechanically reproduced copy of which there is no original also foreshadows postmodernism in the way it resembles Jean Baudrillard’s important concept of the *simulacrum* as a crucial element of postmodern experience. In addition, Benjamin’s discussion of film anticipates Jameson’s later characterization of postmodernism, even if Benjamin sees fragmentation in film as a potential challenge to capitalism, while Jameson sees such fragmentation as a reflection of the character of life in the late capitalist world.

For Jameson, one of the key markers of the postmodern condition is the psychic fragmentation of the individual subject. Drawing upon the work of Jacques Lacan, Jameson argues that, amid the increasing complexity and fragmentation of experience in the postmodern world, the individual subject experiences a loss of temporal continuity that causes him or her to experience the world somewhat in the manner of a schizophrenic who, Jameson says,

is condemned to live in a perpetual present with which the various moments of his or her past have little connection and for which there is no conceivable future on the horizon. In other words, schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link into a coherent sequence. The schizophrenic does not know personal identity in our sense, since our feeling of identity depends on our sense of the persistence of the “I” and the “me” over time. (“Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” 119)

Not surprisingly, Jameson suggests that this schizophrenic fragmentation in personal identity strongly influences postmodern narratives, in

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