

Edited by
Steve Neale

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The
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HOLLYWOOD
Reader

The Classical Hollywood Reader

The Classical Hollywood Reader brings together essential readings to provide a history of Hollywood from the 1910s to the mid-1960s.

Following on from a Prologue that discusses the aesthetic characteristics of Classical Hollywood films, Part I covers the period between the 1910s and the mid- to late 1920s. It deals with the advent of feature-length films in the US and the growing national and international dominance of the companies responsible for their production, distribution and exhibition. In doing so, it also deals with film making practices, aspects of style, the changing roles played by women in an increasingly business-oriented environment, and the different audiences in the US for which Hollywood sought to cater.

Part II covers the period between the coming of sound in the mid-1920s and the beginnings of the demise of the 'studio system' in the late 1940s. In doing so it deals with the impact of sound on films and film production in the US and Europe, the subsequent impact of the Depression and World War II on the industry and its audiences, the growth of unions, and the roles played by production managers and film stars at the height of the studio era.

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Steve Neale is Professor and Chair in Film Studies in the School of English at Exeter University, where he teaches Introduction to Film, Hollywood and Europe, Comedy, Comedians and Romance, and Film Noir. He is an internationally renowned film studies scholar. His research focuses principally on history and theory of Hollywood cinema and he has published several publications in these areas. Since 2004, Professor Neale has been the Academic Director for the Bill Douglas Centre for the History of Cinema and Popular Culture.

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For Karen

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Steve Neale

INTRODUCTION

BY PUBLISHING OR REPUBLISHING A SERIES of articles, chapters and extracts from a variety of different sources, this book aims to introduce its readers to the major facets of classical Hollywood cinema and its history. In doing so, it deals with issues of style and aesthetics, design and technology, censorship and regulation, organisation and management, and economics and politics. It also deals with the policies and practices of national and international film production, distribution and exhibition pursued by a small but industrially dominant group of companies from the mid-1910s to the early 1960s.

The precise configuration of these groups and the nature and names of these and other companies changed over time. First National, for example, was a major company in the 1920s but was bought out by Warner Bros. in 1929. Warner Bros. itself was a minor company until the late 1920s, when it successfully pioneered the adoption of sound. It was joined, among others, by RKO (Radio-Keith-Orpheum), which was set up by the Radio Corporation of America in 1928. The Fox Film Corporation, which was founded in 1915, became Twentieth Century-Fox when it merged with Twentieth Century Pictures in 1935. Paramount Pictures, initially a distribution company, became part of Famous Players-Lasky in 1916. Famous Players-Lasky became Paramount-Famous Lasky in 1927 then Paramount-Publix in 1930. Cohn-Brand-Cohn Film Sales became Columbia Pictures and Metro Pictures, Goldwyn Pictures Corporation and Louis B. Mayer Pictures were merged to become MGM (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer) in 1924. The Universal Film Manufacturing Company became the Universal Pictures Company the following year. And so on and so forth. With the exception of United Artists, which was founded in 1919 and which distributed the films produced by its members and other independents, these companies all possessed production facilities housed in studio lots in and around Los Angeles in Southern California. These lots were staffed by artists and technicians of various kinds (cinematographers, set designers, script writers, carpenters, electricians, editors, costume designers, and so on and so forth) and were organised into departments. This was one of their distinguishing features. But it was by no means the only one.

Only three of these companies, Columbia, Paramount and RKO, possessed production facilities in the suburb of Hollywood (an area of Los Angeles now approximately bounded by Western Avenue, La Brea Avenue, Franklin Avenue and Santa Monica Boulevard). However, just as 'studio' became a synonym for 'film company', so 'Hollywood' became a synonym for the

mainstream film industry in the US, a term that evoked not only the companies, their production centres, their films and their stars, but the aura of glamour that surrounded them all. In doing so, however, these synonyms only partly identified the nature, structure, location and scope of the industry and its activities. For the corporate headquarters of the studios were not in Hollywood or Southern California, but in New York. It was here that finance was raised from banks and investors, that decisions about the cost, scale and nature of each season's programme of films were taken, that publicity campaigns were mounted, that national and international distribution plans were made, and that the booking and circulation of film prints were organised. It was here, too, especially in the late 1910s, the 1920s and the early 1930s, long after its dominance as a centre of production in earlier years, that some of the films produced by some of the companies and their affiliates continued to be made. And it was here that the major companies organised the acquisition, administration and programming of their cinema chains.

As industrially oriented accounts of classical Hollywood cinema have repeatedly stressed, and as will be discussed at greater length in a number of contributions to this book, it was access to cinemas and cinema chains in key city centres and markets that provided the principal film companies with a guaranteed outlet for their films and, hence, with guaranteed income. By the late 1920s, the Big Five companies (Fox, MGM, Paramount, RKO and Warner Bros.) all owned cinemas and cinema chains. With the temporary exception of United Artists and Universal, the Little Three (which also included Columbia), did not. But they did possess national and international distribution facilities; they did subscribe to most of the principles and practices subscribed to by the Big Five (including those associated with the Production Code, Hollywood's system of self-censorship); and they did cooperate with the Big Five and the Big Five with them. The Big Five were 'vertically integrated': they were involved in all three branches of an industry (manufacture, wholesale and retail); along with the Little Three, they constituted an 'oligopoly': a group of companies that colluded to control it.

Despite tensions, minor modifications and major changes in historical circumstance (notably the advent of the Great Depression and the advent of World War Two), these structures and practices remained in place for over twenty years. After that, they were modified in more fundamental ways following anti-trust rulings by the US Supreme Court, the consequent sale of the Big Five's cinema chains, the advent of suburbanisation, the advent and spread of television and other leisure pursuits, and shrinking domestic attendances. These modifications took place during the late 1940s, the 1950s and the early 1960s. By the mid- to late 1960s, with the abandonment of the Production Code, the advent of independently owned multiplex cinemas in suburban shopping malls, the sale or scaling down of studio lots and their contents, and a series of crises, mergers and takeovers involving most of Hollywood's companies, classical Hollywood cinema was dead.

Throughout the classical era, dozens of 'classic' films – films of enduring public interest or appeal – were made. However, as we have already seen, 'classical Hollywood cinema' was more than the sum of its films (classic or otherwise). Insofar as a term like 'classical' implies a supra-personal system, a long-standing set of practices and norms, it applies as much to its industrial infrastructure as it does to the nature of its films, as much to its policies of distribution and exhibition as to its practices of production. It is in this wider sense that the term has been used to guide the scope and the contents of this book. Nevertheless, it is has been the nature of Hollywood's films and its practices of production that have attracted the most attention from scholars interested in issues of classicism. This is nowhere more apparent than in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson's groundbreaking book *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*,¹ and it is thus with debates about Bordwell's discussion of Hollywood films and their aesthetic characteristics that this Reader begins.

The Classical Hollywood Cinema was first published in 1985. Using an extensive array of published and archival sources and a sample of a hundred different films, its authors sought not

just to study the managerial and organisational practices governing film production in Hollywood's studios, nor just to study the studios' deployment of technologies and craft skills (particularly those involved in scriptwriting, set design, cinematography, sound and editing), but to relate them all to the fundamental features of its films. Conceptualising these features as 'norms', Bordwell argues, first of all, that classical Hollywood films tell stories, that these stories are character-centred, and that the fundamental premises of classical Hollywood story construction are 'causality, consequence, psychological motivations, the drive toward overcoming obstacles and achieving goals. Character-centered – i.e. personal or psychological – causality is the armature of the classical story'.² Characters are prime causal agents. They are defined by goals and traits that are often marked by recurrent motifs and that the familiar personas of Hollywood's stars often helped support. In addition, most classical films possess 'at least two lines of action, both causally linking the same group of characters. Almost invariably, one of these lines involves heterosexual romantic love'.³

Various forms of motivation (compositional, realistic, generic, artistic) help to unify classical films, justify the things that happen in them, explain why their characters do what they do, and normalise the use of otherwise unusual, self-conscious or blatantly artificial artistic devices. In telling their stories, classical films can draw on any technique as long as it 'can transmit story information. Conversations, figure positions, facial expressions, and well-timed encounters between characters all function just as narrationally as do camera movements, cuts, or bursts of music'.⁴ In classical films, 'the narration is omniscient, but it lets that omniscience come forward more at some points than others'. In their opening passages, 'the narration is moderately self-conscious and overtly suppressive'. As they proceed, 'the narration becomes less self-conscious and more communicative', though towards the end 'omniscience and self-consciousness are likely to be re-asserted'.⁵ The order of events in classical films can be varied, especially by using character-centred flashbacks. The narration only 'shows important events and skips the intervals between them'. However, 'the classical film creates a patterned duration not only by what it leaves out but by a specific, powerful device. The story action sets a limit to how long it must last. Sometimes this means a strictly confined duration, as in the familiar convention of one-night-in-a-mysterious house films'.⁶ More commonly, though, it does so by setting deadlines.

In general, in 'making narrative causality the dominant system in the film's total form, the classical Hollywood cinema chooses to subordinate space. Most obviously, the classical style makes the sheerly graphic space of the film image a vehicle for narrative', though in doing so it uses 'image composition and editing to create a powerful representation of three-dimensional space'.⁷ Its compositions, whether moving or still, tend to be balanced and centred. The human face tends to be 'positioned in full, three-quarter, or profile view; the body typically in three-quarter view. ... Standing groups are arranged along horizontal or diagonal lines or half circles'.⁸ Space 'is created in planes through various depth cues. To the usual cues of visual overlap (the object that overlaps must be closer) and familiar size, the classical image adds pattern, color, texture, lighting and focus to specify depth'.⁹ 'Classical continuity editing ... reinforces spatial orientation. Continuity of graphic qualities can invite us to look through the "plate-glass window" of the screen. From shot to shot, tonality, movement, and the center of compositional interest shift enough to be distinguishable but not enough to be disturbing'.¹⁰ Similar principles govern the staging, framing and editing of character positions, interactions, movements and looks.

Finally, while 'the shot is the basic unit of material' in classical Hollywood, and while the terms 'shot' and 'scene' were often used interchangeably (at least until the 1950s), scenes and sequences were important additional building blocks as well.¹¹ Scenes were often linked by sequences, which compress or summarise narrative space, time and action, 'but the straightforward scene – one or more persons acting in a limited locale over a continuous

duration ... remains the building-block of classical dramaturgy'. Scenes usually consist of 'two distinct phases, the exposition and the development'. The former 'specifies the time, place and relevant characters' and 'must immediately reveal two things about the characters: their relative spatial positions and their states of mind'.¹² Then, when the developmental phase begins, characters 'act toward their goals, enter into conflict, make choices, set deadlines, make appointments, and plan future actions'. 'Most scenes continue or close off' an 'old line of action' before beginning another. 'Other scenes may reintroduce the old line, toy with it, suspend it again, introduce a new causal line, then close out the old and introduce yet another before the scene ends'. This 'new causal line ... motivates the shift to the next scene'.¹³

Bordwell acknowledges the extent to which norms such as these could be varied or transgressed. A number of Hollywood's genres (among them its musicals, its melodramas and its slapstick comedies) licensed deviations from some of these norms, and a number of its films experimented with causal norms and the provision of narrative knowledge. But these experiments and deviations were rarely as extreme, as marked or as systematic as they were in avant-garde or modernist art films. Overall, the principles that Hollywood claimed as its own 'rely on notions of decorum, formal harmony, respect for tradition, mimesis, self-effacing craftsmanship, and cool control of the perceiver's response – canons which critics in any medium usually call "classical."' ¹⁴

Since the initial publication of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, a number of Bordwell's arguments have been subject to critique. Some of these critiques, notably those that question the dominance of linear causality and those that emphasise the importance of spectacle and emotional engagement, are discussed by Patrick Keating in 'Emotional Curves and Linear Narratives' (Chapter 1), which serves as a prologue to this reader. Keating argues that 'metaphors of "dominance" are not always helpful in understanding the relationship between narrative and other systems. Instead, narrative and other attractions can work together to produce an intensified emotional response'. In doing so, he offers a productive alternative to some of Bordwell's arguments. He also discusses the work of theorists and historians such as Rick Altman, Noël Carroll, Elizabeth Cowie, Donald Crafton, Dirk Eitzen, Richard Maltby and Linda Williams, many of whom have offered explicit or implicit criticisms of at least some of Bordwell's arguments. These criticisms have been augmented by Robert Knopf's discussion of a number of Buster Keaton's feature films and, implicitly at least, by Martin Rubin's discussion of the Busby Berkeley musical, *The Gang's All Here* (1943).¹⁵ However, few scholars have engaged in any detail with Bordwell's work on narration, duration, the construction of sequences and scenes, shot composition and editing, or the handling of narrative space and time. To that extent, his contributions to *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, along with those of Kristin Thompson, who traces the history of continuity editing, staging, acting and other key devices and conventions, still remain essential reading.¹⁶

Notes

- 1 David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985).
- 2 Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 13.
- 3 Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 16.
- 4 Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 24.
- 5 Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 25.
- 6 Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 44.
- 7 Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 50.
- 8 Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 51.
- 9 Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 52.

- 10 Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 55.
- 11 Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 60.
- 12 Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 63.
- 13 Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 64.
- 14 Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 3–4.
- 15 Robert Knopf, *The Theater and Cinema of Buster Keaton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 76–111; Martin Rubin, *Showstoppers: Busby Berkeley and the Tradition of Spectacle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 159–70. Plotless musical revues such as *King of Jazz* (1928) and *Ziegfeld Follies* (1946), animated 'package features' such as *Fantasia* (1940) and other instances of what David Scott Diffrient has called 'episodic cinema' might be cited as exceptions to Bordwell's model of the classical Hollywood feature film as well. See David Scott Diffrient, 'Cabinets of Cinematic Curiosities: A Critical History of the Animated "Package Feature"', From *Fantasia* (1940) to *Memories* (1995)', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 26 no. 4 (2006), 505–35.
- 16 For Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's own reflections on *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* and its critics, see 'The Classical Hollywood Cinema Twenty-Five Years Along', <http://davidbordwell.net/essays/classical.php> (September 2010).

Patrick Keating

PROLOGUE: EMOTIONAL CURVES AND LINEAR NARRATIVES

IN FRED NIBLO'S 1921 VERSION OF *The Three Musketeers* D'Artagnan, played by Douglas Fairbanks, first joins forces with the title characters during an extended fight scene. The scene is packed with gags and stunts as Fairbanks leaps around the set with knife and sword in hand. At one point he even throws his sword like a harpoon. While such moments of spectacle are common in Hollywood films, ranging from the gags of comedian comedy to the musical numbers of Busby Berkeley, historians have long argued about the best way to theorize Hollywood's strategies for combining narrative and other attractions.

We can usefully group the various theoretical models into three categories: a Classical model, which argues that a certain type of narrative operates as a dominant in relation to various subordinate systems; an Alternation model, which argues that the dominance of narrative alternates with the dominance of other systems; and an Affective model, which argues that linear narrative is itself subordinate to a more important goal, the production of emotion. After surveying these alternatives, I will propose my own version of the Affective model—a version that will, I hope, draw important insights from the other two models. My argument is that metaphors of “dominance” are not always helpful in understanding the relationship between narrative and other systems. Instead, narrative and other attractions can work together to produce an intensified emotional response. We can call this the Cooperation model, since the model explains how narrative and attractions can support each other.¹ Part 1 offers a brief summary of three existing models. Part 2 explains my proposal for a Cooperation model. Part 3 applies the model to a set of films that have long played a central role in debates about the status of narrative in Hollywood: the musicals of Busby Berkeley.

1 Three models

The most complete presentation of the Classical model appears in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. The book places particular emphasis on the importance of linear narrative. Bordwell writes, “Here in brief is the premise of Hollywood story construction: causality, consequence, psychological motivations, the drive toward overcoming obstacles and achieving goals. Character-centered—i.e., personal

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