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Contemporary American Cinema:
Thrills to Narratives and Back

When *The Life of an American Fireman* by Edwin Stanton Porter was released in 1903[1], the audience was still unprepared for the visual "tricks" this film offered and which later on became foundational for successful cinematic storytelling.[2] The 7-minute-long film depicts the rescue by a fireman of a woman and a child from a burning building. After showing the street action, the camera cuts several times from exterior to interior and back, thus demonstrating the workings of cross-cutting, at present one of the most common (continuity) editing devices.[3] For Porter's audience, however, the fact of the "street suddenly disappearing from the screen and being magically replaced by… the room" (Cousins 37) was confusing as, unlike in the theater, it required following the flow of action from one space to another. Thus, *The Life…* became a cinematic landmark in that it facilitated the transition of cinema (and cinematic reception), so far conceived in tableau-like terms, into a medium of pure kinetic action. In time, the conceptual scheme of this particular cinema would receive global recognition as "purely American."

There is no doubt that the American cinema understood in the above terms occupied a special place in the global audiovisual culture of the twentieth century. American cinema owed its special place in the world of film to its peculiar storytelling style, today referred to as classical Hollywood narration, and commonly known as "zero style."[4] It defines the type of narrative logic which follows a cause-and-effect course and is therefore spatially and temporally coherent as well as continuous, linear, uniform, and psychologically motivated at that. The objective of such a narration is to provide the viewer with a representative image of reality, and thus to advance the illusion that spectators can directly partake of

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1   The other film which Porter shot and released in the same year was the much acclaimed *The Great Train Robbery*; a production within the director's oeuvre so far the most extensively examined in the literature on the subject. For an extended discussion of the film see e.g. Syska 148-54.

2   The film's total of nine shots is inclusive of several innovative cinematic techniques; a close-up or a tracking shot among them. In this Introduction, however, I am referring to only one of them, namely, cross-cutting, for this particular filmmaking device is believed to have revolutionised the new medium as a narrative platform (rather than a technological gimmick).

3   Typically for the silent cinema, there exist several versions of the film: earlier versions show the street action in one shot only to move on to the interior action sequence. After Porter's alleged having tuned the film, the latter offered itself as an intercut version, temporarily coherent yet fragmented spatially (Cousins 37-38). All of them, however, use cross-cutting as a continuity editing- (i.e. an equivalent of the verbal "and then") and not parallel editing ("in the meantime") device.

4   The seminal work on this aspect of cinema still remains Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film*, see especially 156-204. In the Polish context, Ostaszewsk or Przylipiak.

the fiction onscreen as if it were an extension of real life (Ostaszewski 31)—a very "literary" perception of audiovisuality. Hence, the global success of twentieth-century American cinema stemmed from the ability of its narrative style to perform cinematic reception as a "comfortably familiar"—for another medium-tested and, therefore, easy—practice.

This culturally snug, as it were, style of what may be approached as "global American" cinema, however, was not without its critics. For one, the overall unambiguity of classical Hollywood narration, evoking, on the part of the viewer, almost all-too-smooth an identification with the image projected could—and did—raise concerns about cinema's possibilities of ideological manipulation. Suffice it to mention the in/famous 1915 production *The Birth of a Nation* by D.W. Griffith whose (allegedly) racist interpretation of the American North-South conflict of 1860 and its after effects contributed to the further limitation of African-American (and Jewish) cultural representation, and not only in cinema.[5] The accusations of stereotyping in turn brought forth the far weightier critique of American cinema as unrealistic, this being visible via, for example, the temporal limitations—chronology and retrospection *only*—that the classical Hollywood narrative depended on.[6] In time, therefore, American cinema began to be identified with an efficient colonizing force, in need of a compliant viewer so as to maintain its position of a cultural superpower on the global arena; a position on the wane since the end of the Cold War in the early 1980s.

Digital technology, changing both the aesthetics and the ethics of audio-visual culture, managed to reinvent a negative perception of American cinema as well. Computer generated image (CGI), eliminating representation as a basis for cinematic identification with diegesis, has introduced the viewer to the concept of film as a total world: a melange of unendingly manageable "tricks" which, taken together, advance cinema as one huge special effect, as it were. In such a world the efficacy of the cinematic medium as regards the presentation of its "(self-)sculpting" possibilities matters more than the photographic faithfulness to the "original"—which, in turn, also reinvents the reception concerns of contemporary cinematic audiences. Watching a film's digital "motions," chameleon-like and therefore always spectacular, viewers of contemporary American cinema are no longer in for the contemplation that the realistic cinema imposed. The depth of texture or the density of visual information and sound, mandatory in the digital cinematic context which favors immersion as a reaction from its audiences, prevents such a rational approach to films. Instead, viewers are supposed to get sensually engaged in the digital cinematic diegesis so as to be able to affectively establish how (virtually) real their corporal sensations are.

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5   For a fine discussion of racism as slanted through melodrama which *The Birth*… uses to appease its ideological message see e.g. Williams 96-135. For a discussion of racism in the service of antisemitism which Griffith's film propounds see e.g. Robinson 112-14.

6   Until the 1980s, the commencement of the postmodern revolution in cinema, only a few film productions, e.g. French New Wave director Alain Resnais's films Hiroshima Mon Amour (1959) or Last Year in Marienbad (1961), experimented with the cinematic use of alternative, future, indefinite or simultaneous time.

Digitalization, therefore, has enabled American cinema to let go of its erstwhile "essence" i.e. being a global para-reality and begin functioning as the global reality's primary styler. Hinged on the idea of a stylistically diversified (to the point of posing as transcultural) show, contemporary American films often appear to be all-impressive performances. It is, particularly, this cinema's appeal directly to the senses, hence the body, that calls for acknowledging the medium in corporeal terms as well—and for responding to it accordingly, namely, also on the level of instincts and emotions rather than merely intellectually. The role of contemporary American cinema in the global cultural context is, in effect, not to be overestimated because it seems to linger there as para-humanity or else, to paraphrase the words of film theoreticians Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, a "meta-reflection on [post/human] agency" (185) as such.

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This thematic section includes three texts which discuss various perceptions of American cinema. "Is It Gender or Is It Race?: *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Its Film Adaptation" by Constante González Groba shows how the silver screen version of Harper Lee's timeless novel, filmed by Alan Pakula in 1962 in accordance with all the principles of a classical Hollywood story, actually reveals its unruly potential. Groba successfully demonstrates that each and every element of the film adaptation of the said book, for example, the way the characters are drawn, certain episodes of the main story, even the omitted parts of Lee's novel, have been performed so that they appear different than in the original. Cinema adaptation, to be effective, must always crop up as divergent from its literary "original"[7]; yet, with reference to Pakula's *To Kill a Mockingbird,* which consciously shifts the book's racial or gender focus, such divergence is also suggestive of a call for a greater cultural tolerance. The subtlety of this message, realized within the frames of zero-style narration, may also have been the reason why the film has been (mis)criticized as too timid as regards its views on culture.

Małgorzata Martynuska's article "Intertextuality in Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown"* confirms the subversive potential of a Hollywood-made film adaptation. Martynuska shows how Tarantino's film adaptation of Elmore Leonard's crime novel *Rum Punch* (1992), realized as "semi-*noir"* and hence ambiguity-oriented, uses the characteristics of this particular cinematic style to cleverly reinvent the image of African-American culture. She claims that even though *Jackie Brown* seems to reproduce the cliches of the blaxploitation genre, back in the 1970s considered a bulwark of "true" African-American culture but actually continuing the devaluation of blackness, the film does so self-consciously. As such, it is more a tribute and a farewell to the cinematic blackness of the bygone days of classical Hollywood (and white power behind it); a form of creating the tension between oppositional cinematic "currencies" (in this case classical and postmodern), rather than a filmic advancement of any "objective" reality.

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7   This, now all too obvious, rule of adapting literature to film cleverly demonstrated Gus Van Sant via his in/famous 1998 remake of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). Van Sant realised his film in the shot-for-shot manner—and earned a Golden Raspberry Award for it, thereby confirming cinematic adaptation (of literature) as not at all a recreative format.

That American cinema's capacity for transformation encompasses the entirety of its film-making context, from production to reception, is demonstrated in Grażyna Zygadło's article "We're Missing the Latino Attorney or Astronaut as the Hero": Latinx Presence in Hollywood in the 20th and 21st century." Zygadło looks at the history of the Latinx presence the Hollywood cinema in order to discuss how American film industry retroactively copes with the stereotypes it once helped to spread. Regardless of the still existing gaps in the Latin participation in American cinematic culture, Hollywood has eventually embraced this ethnic group, as the author sees it, as a "fully-fledged members of American society telling their stories and wanting them to be heard and recognized." This, curiously, brings to mind the example of *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, 1996), the first fully digitalized filmic narration which allegorizes the transformation of cinema from the analogous medium to electronic. *Toy Story* begins with a Western-like scene, only it is toys that *act* there[8]; in Elsaesser and Hagener's view, such a scene performs as a confirmation, on the part of the film that, despite the cultural change the digital revolution brings about, the medium will stay the same (171). In view of Zygadło's article, therefore, does the instance of *Toy Story* suggest that that the contemporary—vast—Latinix representation in Hollywood is, too, a ruse? Or does that mean that Latinos/as and other ethnic groups act out the significance of contemporary Hollywood and, by extension, American cinema in the global context because it is the only way they are able to secure their own cultural interests? Zygadło leaves these questions open, thus suggestively pointing to our need to accept, as viewers, the shifting power relations within American cinema as its most tangible present-day cultural quality.

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8   The word "act" provides the key to this interpretation; the toys in the film seem to be manipulated by a little boy—until he leaves the play room. It is only then the viewer realizes the toys have a life of their own. For a brilliant discussion of *Toy Story* in the context of digital cinema, see Elsaesser and Hagener 170-87.

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Films

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Hiroshima Mon Amour, dir. Alain Resnais*,* 1959.

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