THREE FUNDAMENTAL STYLES: REALISM, MODERNISM, AND POSTMODERNISM

Realism as the Cornerstone of Film Style

Forms and styles change with time, but the times also change. Art inevitably draws from and responds to the historical moment of its creation. This relation between film and its historical context is true not only of realist cinema and Hollywood genres, but also of European art cinema, Third World cinema, the avant-garde, and documentary film. As the discussion of poetics, rhetoric, and narrative also indicated, individual films can belong to multiple stylistic categories. Several of these, from film genres to national cinemas, received consideration in Chapter 4. This chapter looks at the three overarching stylistic schools into which almost all art from the mid-nineteenth to the early twenty-first century falls: realist, modernist, and postmodern. These categories embrace film as much as they do novels, plays, painting, and architecture.

To see art shift from one major stylistic school to another raises the question of why. A basic premise is that major shifts involve both a

formal component (the aesthetic possibilities may seem played out or exhausted; a new way of seeing things is called for to reinvigorate the imagination) and a social component (society changes and as it does, the means of representation best equipped to address this change are new ones responsive to the social changes that surround them). Realism, particularly in the novel, for example, arose during the heights of the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century, and gave graphic representation to a new world of commerce, industry, urban growth, and a rising middle class. It supplanted art that focused on imaginary realms of the aristocracy, religion, myth and folklore. **Modernism** arose at the start of the twentieth century as a reaction against both the apparent sacrifice of a high art tradition to commercialism and the collapse of civilization and the social order signaled by the horrific carnage of World War I. (**High art** refers to the traditional arts—painting, sculpture, ballet, opera, and theater—especially as they flourished during the Renaissance and after. High art served the interests of a largely bourgeois and aristocratic audience and received patronage and support from these classes. Modernism often drew on this tradition to distinguish itself from popular culture and the more lower- and middle-class audience it served.) Postmodernism began after World War II. It rejects the high art aura of modernism and celebrates the popular art of the mass media in a way that tends to repeat and recycle previous work. Tradition is cut free from its historical anchorage; individual works float in a relativistic sea of references, citations, and nostalgia. We will examine these tendencies in further detail throughout this chapter.

Two Types of Realism

Considerations of realism can focus on either of two characteristics:

1) Formally, the film presents its story world in an unobtrusive, almost invisible manner so that characters, actions, situations, and

events simply seem to exist on their own. The process of narration, or storytelling, is relatively unnoticeable, and the narrative, or story, receives the bulk of the viewer's attention. Such work is rarely reflexive: it doesn't direct awareness to how it is constructed.

2) Socially, the film conveys a commonsense understanding of everyday reality as most people experience it. The world viewed bears a strong correspondence to aspects of the historical world. Realism in this sense breaks ranks with myths and folktales that tell of extraordinary worlds, magical feats, and remarkable characters. Realism, by contrast, aligns itself with the rising middle class and its public and private struggles; it also turns a fresh light on the working class and issues of poverty, injustice, and crime.

Realism as a self-effacing form of storytelling draws on the general tendency in much art to hide the process of its own making in favor of the impression that the world it represents exists on its own, autonomously. Realist films that nonetheless conjure up fantastic worlds, such as *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Peter Jackson, 2001–03, New Zealand/U.S.), adhere to realism in this sense. The film looks nothing like everyday reality, but the story unfolds effortlessly, as if propelled by nothing more than the actions of the characters themselves. Since our own actions seem self-propelled, this contributes a realist quotient to the film. The majority of genre films rely on realism in this sense to endow their imagined worlds with coherence and autonomy. This, in turn, encourages viewers to make an emotional investment in the situations and events, characters and actions that unfold in this unfamiliar space.

Realism as a representation of the everyday devotes the bulk of its attention to the lives of working-class and middle-class people rather than a social elite. This focus is in keeping with the rise of democracy and the spread of capitalism as an economic system in the nineteenth

century. It parallels the change in the social system with a style that speaks to the very classes that high art neglected and feudalism subordinated. Self-effacing storytelling is a formal quality of this style (the act of constructing a story is masked by techniques like continuity editing). The stress on a familiar world of everyday activity with its attendant conflicts and dilemmas is a social quality of the narrative (it focuses on aspects of the world that are already familiar to its principal viewers). Some films, sci-fi or horror films, for example, may possess the first quality but not the second; and, as we shall see below, some sci-fi, horror, or other genre films are made in a modernist or postmodernist style. When a film both masks its own storytelling efforts and focuses on the familiar world of everyday activity, it belongs most fully within the domain of realism.

Continuity editing, sync sound, naturalistic lighting, and **method acting**, among other things, all work to convey the impression of worlds that simply unfold before us, so that the viewer is absorbed in the experience of the story world rather than the storytelling. Most dramas, melodramas, and action films, for example, focus on characters who seem to step directly onto the screen from real life, even if their skills or personalities prove exceptional. Critics have praised the realism of films that capture the hopes and dangers, risks and dreams that run through the peaks and valleys of lived experience. Such praise went to William Wyler's hit *Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), about the struggles of three GIs returning home from World War II, and to Steven Spielberg's triumph, *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), about the effort to bring home safely the sole surviving son out of the four brothers who signed up for duty in World War II. Despite differences between these two films, critics and audiences valued both for their realistic portrayal of the pressures, anxieties, and courage that give familiar forms of experience complexity. (Both films received Oscar nominations for Best Picture; *Best Years of Our Lives* won the Oscar for 1946.)

LUMIÈRE AND MÉLIÈS: THE ORIGINAL REALISM/FANTASY POLARITY

When film historians looked back to the early days of motion pictures in the 1890s, the short films made by or for the Lumière brothers, Auguste and Louis, seemed to anchor the realist pole of cinema. Films like *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1896, France), *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1895, France), or *Hoser Hosed* (1895, France) gave a realist view of familiar activities and events. Meanwhile, another Frenchman, Georges Méliès, presented a fantastic world unlike anything anyone had ever seen before in films such as *A Trip to the Moon* (France), a fanciful tale of space travel in 1902. Both the Lumière and the Méliès films, though, adhered to a relatively invisible process of storytelling to create worlds that seemed to exist independent of the filmmaker's invention.

The Lumières' early films did not yet make great use of continuity editing (the long take or single shot was common), but they were often composed with an awareness of depth—with actions occurring at different distances from the camera. They were also shot to capture the most relevant action gracefully. "Graceful" here refers to how the camera position is not a random choice but reflects an awareness of composition and movement within the frame. For example, in *Workers Leaving the Factory* (*La sortie des usines Lumière*, 1895), they appear to have their "performers," their own workers in this case, move in specific directions at well-chosen angles to the camera, or, in other cases, to carry out particular actions in the center and the foreground of the frame. These choices heighten the naturalness and typicality of the scene without altering their normal everyday behavior so much that it seemed overtly staged or theatrical.

The departure of the workers from their factory has the aura of a Sunday afternoon outing. Everyone is well dressed and some appear aware of the camera. They move in a processional manner, with little

lingering, joking, or clustering into less photogenic groups (they all face toward the camera). Although there is the strong sense that this continuous long-take film is a document in the pure sense of the term, there are also lingering suspicions that, as with so much of cinema, there has been a negotiation or collaboration between filmmaker and subject to achieve a desired effect. The basic impression, though, is that this is something a passer-by might well have seen in reality.

On the other hand, Georges Méliès's *Trip to the Moon*, *The Impossible Dinner* (1904, France) and *Little Red Riding Hood* (1901, France) draw the viewer into a clearly fabricated world. The illusion that what viewers see matches what they might see in their everyday world no longer pertains. Manipulations of time and space, action and performance, are overt, but they are not designed to fracture the story world or make the viewer more aware of the filmmaking process. In that sense, his films remain realist. But they invoke commonsense notions of spatial and temporal continuity to produce magic instead of reinforcement for the familiar. The story world appears to come into existence on its own but with magical properties. Méliès gives the viewer an opportunity to take flights of fancy that go beyond what normal perception and everyday life offer, in a world designed to accommodate these flights.

Méliès was nothing if not inventive. A device others immediately understood as a way to record and document aspects of the everyday world was for him a means of inventing a magical reality just as convincingly. Méliès was a genius at realizing that cuts between shots needn't conform to the real-life logic of spatial and temporal continuity but could, instead, perform sleights of hand and other tricks in apparent defiance of everyday expectations. By performing magic with his editing, Méliès was able to make objects disappear and reappear, things jump from one location to another, or to reverse the course of time to restore an earlier state of affairs.

Méliès gave tangible expression to the imagination. His films demonstrated how the cinema makes possible the visible representation of unreal spaces and distorted temporalities. Georges Méliès, from this perspective, anchored the fantasy-oriented pole within a realist tradition. He maintained the illusion of an autonomous story world but made it appear magical instead of natural. It would be the realist pole that science fiction, animation, and full-blown fantasies like *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy or the *Harry Potter* series (Chris Columbus, Alfonso Cuarón, Mike Newell, and David Yates, 2001–07, UK/U.S.) would later populate.

Lumière and realism, Méliès and fantasy—this simple, suggestive dichotomy, therefore, does not quite capture the full range of cinematic possibility, something that would have been impossible to foretell from film's origins. It is little wonder that early film historians thought that the Lumières and Méliès epitomized the limits of film expression: they had not yet considered modernist and postmodernist alternatives.

The realism/fantasy dichotomy is therefore not a direct answer to the question of how the dominant aesthetic conventions of the last two centuries or so find tangible expression in the cinema. Fantasy, as a way of imagining distinctive worlds, goes back far beyond the nineteenth century to Greek myth and innumerable fairy tales. It persists in realist, modernist, and postmodernist incarnations. The fantastic end of the realist spectrum tells us something about the incredible range of work achieved in the first decade after the birth of the cinema, but it is in the history of film's encounter with all three major tendencies—realism, modernism, and postmodernism—that we can witness film's overall stylistic evolution.

HOLLYWOOD REALISM AND THE GENRE FILM

Hollywood realism is of a particular kind. It shares realist characteristics with nineteenth-century novels and plays and belongs to the realist tradition in painting and photography. Hollywood films, especially from the 1920s to the 1980s, almost always remain within the

realist tradition in the sense that character motivation and action is readily recognizable, and the storytelling process, with some notable exceptions, does not draw attention to itself so much as work unobtrusively to let an imagined world unfold before us.

Hollywood realism revolves around situations and events that are *plausible* within the terms and conventions of a given kind of world. The world may have fantastic qualities, but plausibility remains a key litmus test. In westerns, for example, we routinely find shoot-outs on the main streets of frontier towns, women who live in hard times but whose hair and costumes look impeccable, and bands of fierce warriors who nonetheless ride in circles around trapped wagon trains until the out-numbered defenders can pick them off. In horror film, we find monsters with a special affinity for women, either to defend or attack them, and in film noir, an abundance of scheming, manipulative characters eager to pull a double cross. In terms of genre conventions all these situations and qualities appear plausible. They may not be an accurate representation of everyday life, or history, but audiences come to regard them as a familiar, plausible representation of situations and events, characters and actions in the kind of world common to a given genre.

John Carpenter's offbeat science fiction film *They Live* (1988), for example, presents everyday reality as an illusion. *They Live* also enables its hero to *see* the illusion. When he puts on special sunglasses he sees traffic signs and billboards, TV shows and magazines as camouflage for a set of subliminal, ideological messages: what they actually say, in bold black and white letters, is "Obey," "Conform," "Consume." All public information reduces to basic imperatives. The film literally exposes a dominant ideology embedded in routine media messages that promotes conformity and consumerism.

They Live exaggerates and distorts everyday reality to make its point, but this does not mean it lacks artistic merit or social significance; the metaphor of sinister and subliminal advertising that it creates remains memorable. And the film belongs squarely in the realist

tradition in terms of familiar character types, linear causality, temporal continuity, and spatial coherence. Aspects of its world are fantastic, but continuity editing prevails throughout the film.

Realist representation does not duplicate the world; therefore, the analysis of such films can readily focus on the question of how reality gets altered. Viewers can adopt a dualistic social analysis of suspicion and appreciation regarding what aspects of lived experience become altered or distorted to allow the story to achieve resolution, on the one hand, and what aspects of lived experience are seen from a fresh, revealing perspective, on the other. In a formal context, the same dual analysis would ask what aspects of a film rely on the uncritical adoption of established genre conventions and what aspects represent innovative transformations.

SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE REALIST FILM

From a realist perspective, men and women are social animals whose identity arises not in isolation but from active participation in the lives of others. For example, individuals typically share in the practices, values, and beliefs that underpin community. We adopt shared perspectives that foster a sense of belonging. The commonsense tenets of realism—a coherent organization of time and space, the creation of character types with recognizable personalities and needs, a linear narrative of actions, reactions, and results that moves toward the resolution of familiar problems or issues, reliance on highly realistic or utterly fantastic settings for a story world that seems to exist autonomously—attest to this common perspective. These tenets affirm a sense of common cause and enduring community over the alienation and disenchantment of modernist narrative or the irony and cynicism that underlies much of postmodernist art.

Realism, in this sense, fits comfortably with the ideology of the nation-state as a melting pot that produces social unity or an "imaginary

community" (rather than an uneasy and perhaps incompatible amalgam of different class, religious, ethnic, and linguistic or cultural groups). In pre-classic Hollywood cinema it is genre films, with their base in a predominantly white, middle-class world, that stand for this all-embracing sense of community. Most genre films suggest that we live in a world beset by identifiable and remediable problems. These problems catalyze the hero to act. Heroes are able do for others what others cannot do for themselves. The world may be threatened from without or from within in westerns (Indians, the environment, greedy cattle barons), science fiction (aliens and marauding colonizers), horror films (monsters and psychopaths), melodramas (disturbed or dysfunctional family members), or comedies (mavericks, oddballs, and dreamers). The triumph or defeat of the central community becomes a key measure of how any realist film locates itself in relation to the dominant culture of its time.

Realism is hardly a rubber stamp for the existing status quo. Its search for conflicts that can be imaginatively modified and, in one way or another, resolved demands that realism address real issues. It does so in a way that makes these issues highly recognizable even when the setting and events are not part of most viewers' everyday lives. For example, in *The Departed* (Martin Scorsese, 2006, U.S./Hong Kong), Billy Costigan's (Leonardo DiCaprio) father was a criminal, but Billy wants to be a cop. The cops want him to be an informer. He must penetrate the crime world he thought he was escaping. A genuine sense of community eludes him. A realist style strengthens the profound feelings of deception and betrayal that he, along with the other central characters, experience. The emotional issues are familiar even though the cop and criminal setting is not part of most peoples' everyday experience.

Anguish is not an uncommon experience: in *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005, Canada/U.S.) Alma (Michelle Williams) watches with pained disbelief as her husband, Ennis (Heath Ledger), eagerly awaits the arrival of his old buddy and lover, Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhall). Meanwhile, in *Dreamgirls* (Bill Condon, 2006) Effie White (Jennifer

Hudson) suffers the painful rejection visited on her by the Dreamettes' manager, Curtis Taylor, Jr. (Jamie Foxx), who has decided that her voice and appearance are not conventional enough to cross over to a mainstream (that is, predominantly white) audience.

These three films are far more realist than modernist or postmodern. They examine significant questions involving loss, loyalty, and belonging. They focus on the ways in which the sense of a community may unravel, driving individuals to strive to discover alternatives. Close-ups, point-of-view shots, and continuity editing all serve to boost the intensity of pivotal dramatic moments. Each film also conveys a skeptical view of the health of the surrounding culture's dominant values and beliefs.

Another way to understand the social characteristics of realism is to compare it to the Greek philosopher Plato's allegory of the cave. In his famous allegory, Plato suggested that people live their lives inside a cave, fascinated by a series of sounds and images projected onto a wall from a source behind them. Facing the wall and the images moving across it—not unlike the images that surround Neo as he moves through the apparently real-life matrix in *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999, U.S./Australia)—the average individual mistakes this complex illusion for reality, never turning around to see how such a shared perception is actively produced by the culture as a whole, or to step outside the cave to explore realities of a different order. For Plato, these projected sounds and images are, in fact, a distraction from less visible ideal forms like beauty or truth, which only take material, tangible shape as copies or imitations. Platonic philosophy strove to attain knowledge of the forms that exist apart from or beyond the reality of sensory perception and everyday experience.

Presumably, the shadows cast on the walls of Plato's cave were highly realistic ones, which bolstered their credibility and heightened their dangerous allure as distractions. For some critics and theorists, realism is a representational style that supports the **dominant**

ideology (the values and beliefs that reinforce the status quo). Realism reinforces a commonsense belief that the way things appear to be is the way they are, that individuals rather than collectivities or social forces are the primary source of change, and that the social world possesses a high degree of stability so that problems or conflicts can be identified, addressed, and resolved.

As the discussion of *The Departed*, *Brokeback Mountain*, and *Dreamgirls* suggests, realism is not entirely devoted to supporting or maintaining the social status quo or the dominant ideology that supports it. This style also conveys the hardship and suffering that may be part of everyday existence. Linking any one style with any one specific ideology or political position is a risky business. To claim that realism serves any one master, be it a dominant ideology (capitalism, democracy, commercialism, ethnocentrism, or any other) or produces any one result (distraction, entertainment, reinforcement of the status quo, and so on) overstates the case. Realism may represent familiar forms of experience in a plausible manner, but it need not endorse the status quo. The discussion of *They Live* demonstrates how a realist genre film can, in fact, present a critique of the existing order of things.

The Mythical and the Historical

A powerful effect of film realism is that everyday qualities, reinforced by a commonsense understanding of what society is and how it operates, may strike viewers as timeless. Realism can *naturalize* a way of seeing the world or an ideology, so that it no longer appears contingent, constructed, or debatable. Certain values and beliefs and the social practices that embody them come to appear as far beyond human design as nature itself. The nuclear family, for example, which realist dramas and melodramas explore in great detail, may come to feel like a universal attribute of human experience, whereas many cul-

tures value extended families, clans, and kinship systems more than the nuclear family per se.

Dominant ideology commonly offers a mythic as opposed to an historical view of the world. A mythic view sees the social world as a fixed, permanent reality, with values and beliefs that lie beyond question. Values and beliefs appear to derive from timeless principles considered natural and obvious by all. The future shape of society will preserve the values and beliefs that already prevail. Conservative and reactionary political perspectives tend to be mythical in this sense. The dominant ideology of patriarchy, for example, sees male privilege as perfectly natural. It is not something to alter but a foundation stone for the construction of culture. An alternative, feminist ideology regards gender roles as historically variable. This perspective argues that channeling women's talents into functions such as motherhood, to the exclusion of other possibilities available to men, represents an ideology rather than a law of nature, and is, therefore, open to challenge.

A historical view understands the social world as a place populated by contending forces and competing ideologies even if one happens to dominate. The future shape of society derives from the complex process by which social conflicts arise, provoke struggle, and achieve at least partial resolution. Liberal and radical political perspectives tend to be historical in this sense. They question the evocation of timeless principles; they attempt to understand how such principles—such as male privilege (versus female equality), class privilege (versus equal opportunity), ethnic superiority (versus ethnic differences)—arise under certain conditions and serve particular interests.

Realism has the capacity to support either a mythical or an historical view of the world. Rather than a fault, its flexible adaptability to either goal is one of its greatest strengths and sources of appeal: it serves many masters. This is a major reason why realism remains the stylistic mode of choice for filmmakers and artists across the political spectrum.

Modernism

Two Emphases in Modernism

Modernism consciously takes issue with the tenets of realism. The two types of realism—invisible storytelling and representations based on commonsensical assumptions about everyday life—no longer prevail. Instead, modernism exhibits two alternative characteristics:

1) Formally, a very noticeable storytelling process, replacing the effort to make it seem as if the story world possesses an existence of its own. Reliance on collage and montage, discussed below, is a key element in this new emphasis on narration or the storytelling process.

(2) Socially, an exploration of the interior, subjective life of characters, in which characters drift into their own imagined worlds regardless of their surroundings. The individual reality of consciousness, memory, and desire receives a weight equal to or greater than a shared social reality

Historical Background: Modernism and Modernity

Modernism was, in many ways, a critique of **modernity**, the conditions of life in the period of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century capitalism, especially in the urban centers of industrialized nations. **Modernity** referred to the consolidation of capitalism into large, corporate, often international or colonial forms and to the ascendancy of finance capital as a way to control development at one remove from actual production. (This latter quality of control at a remove reaches new heights with the rise of a global economy and

postmodernism.) The benefits and defects of the industrial revolution had become apparent by the mid-nineteenth century, when Karl Marx wrote his major works. For some, industrialization had run its course as a dynamic liberator that freed individuals from the rigid hierarchies of feudal, aristocratic society. It not only brought untold fortunes to some and new levels of comfort and convenience to many but had become responsible for urban poverty, human degradation, and a despoiled environment on an unparalleled scale. The enormous carnage of World War I dramatized as no Marxist writings could the realization that a dangerous force was now afoot. The unprecedented magnitude of death and destruction was a direct result of industrial technology used for military ends (poison gas, powerful artillery, highly efficient machine guns, land mines, bomber planes, etc.). Many artists and intellectuals recoiled from the transformations wrought by industrialization and modern warfare.

Modernism questioned the independence and wisdom of the individual. Techniques of fragmentation characterized a world that no longer seemed to have a moral center or a unifying agent of the sort that the heroic central character of realism represented. Fragmentation, disconnection, alienation, and anonymity were in the air. Modernism became the movement that sought a new aesthetic form to convey a new social reality.

As a result modernism rejected many of the conventions of nineteenth-century art: novels did not need to create fully rounded characters; paintings did not need to offer realistic depictions of external reality, and architecture did not need to disguise a building's function with embellishments of form. The international style of architecture, for example, pioneered by Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus architects, stressed basic, unadorned shapes that made the function of the building as factory, office building, museum, or apartment complex self-evident. Like constructivism (discussed below), this style also drew attention to the physical qualities of the actual building materials (slab-like

expanses of concrete, exposed girders, and beams of steel) as a prominent feature. This form of stripped-down architecture was seen as a kind of honesty or truth-telling about the actual nature of architectural form. Like collage, it drew attention to the structural foundation of a work rather than to the aesthetic elaboration that had traditionally disguised this basic quality.

Modernist cinema seeks less to compete with mainstream, Hollywood-style cinema on its own terms by inventing new genres or stars, for example, than to develop a different conception of narrative form. Like realism, it responds to the social realities of the early twentieth century. As discussed in Chapter 2, the avant-garde, heavily indebted to modernist principles, stressed the poetic dimension of cinema over storytelling. Since the 1920s, avant-garde filmmakers have identified their efforts with various modernist currents such as surrealism, Dada, constructivism, and German expressionism more than with realism. In the period following the Russian Revolution of 1917 and in Europe during the 1950s and '60s, modernism also made a distinct contribution to narrative fiction film. The Soviet period stressed the principle of montage to engage the viewer in a radically new way, whereas the European postwar period stressed the interiority or subjectivity of characters who no longer seemed to belong to a shared social reality.

MAJOR STYLISTIC VARIATIONS WITHIN MODERNISM

Modernist work draws attention to the act of narration and to construction of a story world. It gives high priority to **collage** or **montage**, principles that allow unrelated, dissimilar elements to be joined together to form a complex whole. Fragmentation often disrupts the sense of a unified, coherent work, one that obeys the classic unities of time and place or that arrives at a clear sense of resolution. An encounter with fragments in a collage style presses home the idea that the story world is not self-contained and autonomous but the product

of many fragments cobbled together, precisely what editing typically does, whether the editing is noticeable or not.

Collage involves combining different types of material in the same work. This technique is a vivid demonstration of fragmentation, since a single painting might contain a cigarette butt, grains of sand, newspaper clippings, and oil paint. Some critics consider Jean-Luc Godard's films collages, given his tendency to draw on a wide variety of disparate source materials—other films both documentary and fiction, interviews, staged interviews, asides to the camera by actors, voice-over commentary by Godard himself, dialogue that is actually extended quotations of other people's work from philosophers to art critics, and so on. **Montage** is a more specifically cinematic technique exemplified by the films of Sergei Eisenstein, discussed further below. He saw individual shots as raw material. The real art, and power, of cinema came from the juxtaposition of these shots to unsettle the viewer and provoke new insights.

Surrealism took collage principles in the direction of the unconscious by rejecting realism and substituting the more bizarre and fantastic principles of dreams. Salvador Dali painted pocket watches drooped over the limb of a tree as if they were made of melted plastic. Luis Buñuel mocked social conventions in ways that challenged the normalcy and obviousness of habit. In *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974, France) he offers a notorious reversal of dining etiquette: participants at a well-heeled dinner party converse around a table, but they sit on toilets. At discreet intervals the members excuse themselves to slip off to a small, tile-paneled dining room where a waiter slips them a tray of food through a slit in the wall. The reversal violates common sense, and maybe decency; it certainly throws the viewer's ability to make assumptions based on past experience into serious jeopardy.

Dada was a small but influential movement at the start of the twentieth century that used shock, strange juxtapositions, and collage to create work that often had a political overtone. The Dadaists rejected the idea of aesthetics as a form of detachment. They believed

that art should be a provocation or attack on the status quo and favored shock, disgust, and outrage as visceral responses that could provoke change. Marcel Duchamp, for example, installed a urinal in an art gallery and relabeled it art. Dada was often more overtly political than other modernist movements, but, unlike constructivism, its politics emphasized shock more than any particular alternative to the existing social structure.

Dusan Makavayev's *WR—Mysteries of the Organism* (1971, Yugoslavia/West Germany) presents a biography of Wilhelm Reich, an important but eccentric psychiatrist who linked fascism to repressed sexuality and invented the "orgone box" to capture and channel sexual energy. The film mixes 1960s-style guerrilla street theater with a decapitation (a Russian ice-skater uses the blade of his skate as Luis Buñuel used a razor at the start of *Un chien andalou* [1929, France]—to stylized but gruesome effect). In true Dada fashion, the film sets out to shock and offend more than to entertain or inform.

Constructivism was a movement peculiar to the Soviet Union. It began before the revolution of 1917 and continued, in different forms, after. Constructivism helped pave the way for the great silent films of the Soviet cinema by breaking with realist representation. Form and the physical materiality of objects received prominent attention. New materials such as concrete, steel, and plastic replaced the classic materials of stone and oil paint. Like Dada, constructivism rejected the traditional role of art, which was now seen as a handmaiden to the aristocracy and bourgeoisie, the very classes the revolution had overthrown. Constructivism sought to establish a new way of seeing and organizing reality rather than stressing shock for the sake of shock as Dada did.

Expressionism, which arose in Germany and spread to many countries, gave visual expression to inner, typically conflicted or disturbed states of mind. It emphasized what it feels like to experience emotional turmoil more than it sought out the social causes for this turmoil. Broken or jagged lines, deep shadows, and anguished expressions all spoke

to inner, emotional turbulence. Edvard Munch's famous painting *The Scream* is one vivid example of this tendency, but numerous artists adopted it, including filmmakers. Expressionism relies less on fragmentation than on stylistic exaggeration, and it draws less attention to the medium or formal qualities than, say, cubism or constructivism. Expressionism significantly influenced the visual style of American film noir in the postwar period and more recent neo-noir such as *Body Heat* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1981), *L.A. Confidential* (Curtis Hanson, 1997), *The Last Seduction* (John Dahl, 1994), and *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000).

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Robert Wiene, 1920, Germany) was one of the first German films to capture the expressionist spirit in a vivid, successful way. The film's distorted sets and exaggerated acting style create a world compatible with the nightmarish, demented views of a mad doctor, who controls a somnambulant creature, Cesar, who roams the city at night killing innocent victims. Many critics interpreted the film as a symptomatic display of middle-class anxiety in a time of rampant inflation and social instability. It also expresses the fear that authority, represented by the apparently respectable doctor, could become a tool of terror and social control. The filmmakers added a not entirely convincing coda that put Doctor Caligari in charge of a mental hospital where the narrator of this bizarre tale turns out to be a deluded patient. The film leaves many viewers with the vivid sense that all is not well despite the ostensibly happy ending provided by the coda.

CHARACTERISTICS OF MODERNIST STYLE

FRAGMENTATION Modernism stresses the fragmented nature of reality. Techniques of collage and montage give formal expression to this idea. Even the individual may no longer exhibit the qualities of consistency and coherence that realism typically provides. Eruptions of unpredictable urges, displays of uncharacteristic attitudes, a lack of

moral compass, and a general inability to demonstrate that consciousness holds the upper hand over unconscious impulses and desires makes the modernist character a more fractured, if not wholly divided, figure than the typical realist hero.

Fragmentation bears a close relationship to Sergei Eisenstein's theories of montage, where new impressions—emotional and cognitive—arise as a result of the juxtaposition of shots that lack the seamless flow achieved by continuity editing. Walter Benjamin, in his seminal essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," celebrated the transformative potential of montage this way:

> Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. (*Illuminations*, p. 236)

Fragments draw attention to the surface of things, but their juxtaposition suggests linkages that are not at first apparent. In describing his efforts to make *Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925, Soviet Union), for example, Eisenstein wrote,

> The shot is a montage *cell*.
>
> Just as cells in their division form a phenomenon of another order, the organism or embryo, so, on the other side of the dialectical leap from the shot, there is montage.
>
> By what, then, is montage characterized, and, consequently, its cell—the shot?
>
> By collision. By the conflict of two pieces in opposition to each other. By conflict. By collision. (*Film Form*, p. 37)

Eisenstein sought to recreate the actual experience of conflict in the collision of one shot against another, one scene against another, over and over, during the course of a film. What did it feel like to think and act in a revolutionary manner? Answering this question meant, for Eisenstein, stressing the emotional impact and conceptual understanding that follow from making new connections rather than accepting the prevailing ones.

The most cited example is the "Odessa Steps" sequence in *Battleship Potemkin*, where Eisenstein crosscuts the attack of the Cossacks on the citizens of Odessa with their flight, on the one hand, and their defense by the rebellious battleship crew, on the other. This is the classic "hero to the rescue of the damsel in distress" narrative, but told without individual heroes or villains and in a thoroughly modernist style. Eisenstein emphasizes groups and classes of people. He cuts from aiming a rifle to the shattering of an eye piece, from shooting a mother to the baby carriage tumbling down the Odessa Steps, from the advance of soldiers to the retreat of the people, and from the Cossacks' bloody attack to the battleship's retaliation. The "thesis" of repressive violence is propelled to another level by the "antithesis" of the people's defiance. The rebel sailors of the Battleship Potemkin achieve a momentary "synthesis" in which repression and resistance yield to a new form of collective solidarity. (These terms—"thesis," "antithesis" and "synthesis"—are classic Marxist concepts and speak to Marx's understanding of society as an arena in which conflicting forces, such as classes, confront each other (thesis/antithesis) and produce an outcome that transforms the original forces. For example, for Marx, Communism would result from the defeat of the ruling class by the working class.) The film, set during the failed revolt of 1905, concludes with the newly forged unity among the people that will eventually, in 1917, prove capable of overthrowing the czar and his feudalistic reign.

FORMALISM Modernist art often engages in a dialogue with its medium, making the brushstrokes of a painting, the flatness of a canvas, the concrete and steel of a building, the presence of words on a page, or disruptions in time and space produced by film editing the subject of the work as much as the external world to which the work refers. This self-referential quality is also known as **formalism**. *The Conformist* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1970, Italy/France/West Germany), for example, draws attention to its own exaggerated style and disjointed representation of time, even as it also addresses the nature of fascism.

Formalism steers the viewer's attention to the formal processes, usually unnoticed and taken for granted, that construct the story world. Continuity editing, for example, is usually unnoticed, but montage editing is highly noticeable. Such editing can have a political effect, as when Sergei Eisenstein edits between the slaughter of striking workers by the czar's armed Cossacks and the slaughter of cattle in *Strike* (1925, Soviet Union), his first feature film.

Many modernist films stress the fragmentary nature of the shot or scene by editing that throws continuity into disarray. The convolutions that ravel past and present into complex tangles of memory, fantasy, and fact in *The Conformist*, *Hiroshima mon amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959, France/Japan), or *Memories of Underdevelopment* (*Memorias del desarrollo*, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1968, Cuba) overwhelm any sense of a causal, linear progression. Spatially, the coordinates of where actions occur and how they relate to one another may also remain vague or indeterminate. Subjective, inconsistent, often inexplicable motivations drive characters forward in irrational or unexplainable ways. Ambiguity or the sense of a fundamental enigma to existence that no realism can cure often looms as an overriding impression.

HEIGHTENED SUBJECTIVITY Modernism frequently explores the subjective interior of its characters' thoughts and consciousness, without attempting to link them to a fixed reference point in external reality.

Techniques like stream of consciousness, as used by Virginia Woolf or James Joyce, and the strange, dreamlike sequences in surrealist films fracture the sense of a temporal and spatial continuum, they disconnect effects from causes, and they present a mysteriousness to life that reason cannot explain. Characters seem trapped inside a subjectivity they cannot share with others. In Jean Cocteau's stunning films *The Blood of a Poet* (*Le sang de un poète*, 1930, France) and *Orpheus* (*Orphée*, 1950, France), social reality completely dissolves into a mysterious world of magic and wonder based on classic myths. In other words, subjectivity goes hand in hand with a profound sense of social alienation.

Michelangelo Antonioni's films render the subjective dimension to individual lives with a powerfully enigmatic quality. Communication and comprehension no longer seem possible. His early trilogy of *L'avventura* (1960, Italy/France), *La notte* (1961, Italy/France), and *L'eclisse* (*The Eclipse*, 1962, Italy/France) present striking representations of characters who drift through urban environments, share what should be intimate moments, and shuffle to the next encounter without ever establishing a clear sense of intimacy.

Antonioni uses existing social space (city streets, apartment rooms, urban architecture) brilliantly to suggest that this manmade world has turned against its creators, isolating individuals from one another and making genuine relationships impossible. Antonioni makes no attempt to assign causes to this condition. He explores effects, not causes, and makes no diagnosis of the sources of alienation and offers no proposals for its elimination. His social perspective dwells on what it feels like to be spiritually adrift but in the presence of others.

The European art cinema associated with great postwar auteurs like Antonioni, Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, Jean-Luc Godard, and Alain Resnais often adopted a modernist tone in its examination of subjective states of mind and new ways of representing social reality. Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (*L'année dernière à Marienbad*, 1961, France/Italy), for example, like his earlier film, *Hiroshima mon amour*,

and his stunning documentary, *Night and Fog* (1955, France), explores questions of memory as a subjective experience. Social engagement, in fact, becomes an endless series of conversations that attempt to establish a common past for the central characters at the Marienbad spa, a traditional resort destination for the leisured classes of Europe. These efforts to affirm a common past and shared experience prove unsuccessful. The trademark modernist qualities of heightened subjectivity, ambiguity of motivation, and uncertainty of time and place abound. The hero's world possesses a past (encounters tied to monuments, architecture, landscape) but it lacks continuity, meaning, or connection. Characters drift through the gardens and baroque palace as if in a dream, talking and meeting. The seemingly aimless or random encounters draw attention to the capacity of film to arrange realistic images into patterns that become subjective and surreal.

BRECHTIAN ALIENATION

For the Dadaists, constructivists, and other socially engaged artists, modernism was a tool to equip an audience to engage with a new social reality. The playwright Bertolt Brecht (discussed further in Chapter 8) questioned the commodification of art and the limitations of realism as a style, but continued to value the pleasures of art as a means of expression. Brecht adopted techniques to distance the viewer from emotional involvement with individual characters but did so in order to intensify involvement with underlying social issues and conflicts. The strategy of distancing viewers from emotional identification and heightening engagement with a broader social perspective became known as the "**alienation effect**."

Brecht adopted many popular elements of theater and the circus to produce lively, engaging plays. He had little patience with high art

limited to a select elite; accessibility was a key quality to all his work. Brecht called for the separation or fragmentation of formal elements (music, speech, acting, set design, projected titles or images, and so on) to generate a conscious awareness of how these different elements contribute to an overall effect. He wanted each scene to stand on its own, separated from what came before or after by various devices. An assembly of fragments exposed the work of constructing a story rather than reproducing a social reality; it also conveyed the idea that reality consisted of splintered pieces that modernist technique could reassemble into a fresh way of seeing the world.

Many directors have adapted Brecht's modernist ideas. Godard, for example, uses segments of black leader (film that has been completely exposed to light so that is entirely black), chapter numbers, and titles to break down his film *Vivre sa vie* (1962, France) into twelve discrete segments. It tells the story of Nana, a young prostitute trying to free herself from others so she can live her own life. The film has strongly Brechtian overtones in its high degree of fragmentation and in the collage-like mixture of different source materials, from *The Passion of Jeanne d'Arc* (Carl Dreyer, 1928, France) to an interview between Nana and an actual philosopher (Brice Parain) who offers apparently off-the-cuff insights into the relationship between contemplation and action. Similarly, director Luis Valdez brings a Brechtian aesthetic to *Zoot Suit* (1981). He casts Edward James Olmos as a flamboyant, critically astute commentator on the actions of the characters, together with fragmentation, vivid stylization, and thematically pertinent songs. The film, adapted from Valdez's play, retells the history of racial and class conflict that led to the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943 in Los Angeles. The film is highly theatrical and engaging; it addresses an important historical event but does so in a thoroughly modernist, and decidedly Brechtian, manner.

Postmodernism

The most recent of the three major stylistic schools, **postmodernism** presents two alternative characteristics to those of realism and modernism:

1) Formally, the storytelling process draws attention to itself through a high degree of quotation, homage, borrowing, copying, and otherwise recycling previous work. Postmodernism lacks the anti-commercial, elite quality of much modernism; it readily mixes popular and high art references, traditions, and conventions to stress the artifice of any imagined world.

2) Socially, postmodernism emphasizes how any one imagined world is more like other imagined worlds than like reality itself. This autonomy, and isolation, of art from life licenses rampant borrowing from previous works in any medium. Consequently, the sense of an external social referent (a shared social reality) decreases as the story world positions itself in relation to other imagined worlds governed by the same formal conventions.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Postmodernism represents a radical transformation of realism and a rejection of modernist elitism. In contrast to most modernist work, postmodernism embraces the marketplace, although it often takes an ironic or cynical attitude toward the process that converts art into a commodity to be traded for a profit. In terms of social context, postmodernism responds to issues of transnational globalization since World War II in which the nation-state and its distinctive culture fade from a position of centrality. Issues like exile, diaspora, ethnic cleansing, immigration, the global economy, and terrorism all take place across national borders. Individual nations no longer act in isolation

from other nations to any significant degree. Under these conditions, the traditional association of art with national identity (French films, British comedy, the Russian novel, and so on) through a distinct cultural tradition breaks down. Postmodernists detach fragments of existing works from their local context and throw them into a global stew. The phenomenon of world music is one example of postmodern art. Its borrowings of rhythms and instruments from an eclectic array of sources create a new form that has no base in any one national or local context and does not represent any one national culture. (Paul Simon's *Graceland* epitomizes this process.)

The individual, firmly rooted in realist time and space, and whose subjective experience of a fragmented world occupies a key position in modernism, becomes just one more ingredient in the postmodern aesthetic stew. That is to say, if the hero of realist films embodied qualities of agency and self-determination that were characteristic of early capitalism, and if the hero of modernist films embodied qualities of uncertainty and doubt that were characteristic of late capitalism, the hero of postmodern films embodies qualities of interchangeability and adaptability characteristic of transnational capitalism. Like the migrant worker, he functions as a small cog in a global economy.

CHARACTERISTICS OF POSTMODERN STYLE

MIXING AND MATCHING SOURCE MATERIAL As a subversion of realism and a rejection of modernism, postmodernism makes use of similar techniques and emphases but to different ends. To a large extent the difference is one of perspective or attitude. Postmodern work often adopts a seemingly devil-may-care attitude toward recycling such as we find in films like *Brazil* (1985, UK) or *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998) by Terry Gilliam or Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Films like *Pulp Fiction* and *Run, Lola, Run* (Tom Tykwer, 1998, Germany) shuffle the temporal sequence of events in ways that violate realist conventions.

Postmodernist mixing and matching spans high and low culture. References to *I Love Lucy* may be as common as references to Shakespeare. Familiarity with the great tradition of high culture is no longer an implicit prerequisite for appreciating the work. Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), for example, which constructs an image of the Vietnam War that rejects both jingoistic patriotism and radical protest, mixes references to Playboy bunnies and water skiing with allusions to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. Awareness of these references may enrich the experience of the film, but they are far from essential to enjoying it.

QUESTIONING INDIVIDUALISM Like modernism, postmodernism questions the power, autonomy, and self-control of the individual, but places less stress on interiority and subjectivity. The prevalence of **irony**—where what is said is not necessarily what is meant, or where what is said is said as if in quotes, as if it didn't quite mean what it appears to mean—undercuts the sense of a character's autonomy. Characters turn into pawns in the author's own game, a condition stressed in films like Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill, Volume 1* and *2* (2003–04), where Uma Thurman plays "The Bride," a figure who embodies the principle of revenge more than the traits of a well-developed character in the realist or modernist traditions.

Draining characters of their apparent autonomy is also at work in *Performance* (Donald Cammell and Nicolas Roeg, 1970, UK), where a gangster (James Fox) and a rock musician (Mick Jagger) coyly interact with each other until their identities merge into a single entity, and in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975, UK), where the characters seem to be little more than a witty, irreverent amalgam of stock characters from earlier, realist genre films, now uprooted to the blatantly stylized world of an imaginary Transylvania where the usually displaced sexual motifs of horror films blossom into full view. In such cases, characters are less realistically portrayed individuals than citations from or allusions to a treasure chest of previous film characters, and

none more so in *Rocky Horror* than Dr. Frankenfurter himself. The desire to bring a new life into being, which the original *Frankenstein* portrays as a flagrant case of male hubris, becomes in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*'s postmodern view of things, an explicitly homoerotic desire to "make me a man," as Frankenfurter says—and by a man he clearly means more a hunk than a monster.

Characters can also seem like pawns in the larger, extra-cinematic game of the global economy, as in Gianni Amelio's *Lamerica* (1994, Italy/France/Germany), where a somewhat naïve Italian con artist goes to Albania in the hopes of pulling off a financial scam and making a fortune, only to find himself abused and exploited by those whom he assumed would be no more than pawns in his game. A similar theme runs through Franco Brusati's *Bread and Chocolate* (*Pane e cioccolata*,1973, Italy), a comic tale of an Italian worker who goes to Switzerland to better himself, only to discover that betterment is far less common than exploitation no matter in what nation he finds himself. Identity, nationality, and professional standing all dissolve in these films to suggest how a global economy makes such qualities, which were once sufficient to define someone, anachronistic figments of a bygone world.

POSTMODERNIST ALLUSION AND CITATION Postmodernism uses quotation or allusion as a more casual form of borrowing or "sampling" that is not tied to invoking a hallowed tradition. This allows the filmmaker to build his own work from the fragments of previous work without claiming the originality of form characteristic of most realist and modernist work. Quentin Tarantino, for example, playfully adapts and quotes from several Hong Kong films in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and in *Kill Bill*, but these allusions do not identify him as part of that tradition or in serious dialogue with its themes and style so much as a **bricoleur** (someone who "makes do" with what's available) who uses these "ready-mades," or found objects, for his own ends.

Quentin Tarantino has readily professed his admiration for Ringo Lam's *City on Fire* (1987, Hong Kong). Tarantino's famous scene of the

climactic four-way shoot-out, clearly borrowed, has itself been imitated by others and is sometimes credited to Tarantino as purely his own invention. But as he has said in an interview, "I steal from every movie… Great artists *steal*, they don't do *homages*" (in Jeffrey Dawson, *Quentin Tarantino: The Cinema of Cool*, p. 91). This use of the word "theft" marks a sharp division from the references and allusions of the modernists who wanted their work to be in serious ongoing dialogue with previous work. Tarantino measures originality by how well he can produce novelty more than engage in artistic dialogue.

Postmodern works can offer a serious meditation or commentary on popular forms as well as elite forms. Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995, U.S./Germany), for example, does so by presenting a self-conscious, stylized version of the western. *Dead Man* features a hero, William Blake (Johnny Depp), who lacks the charismatic powers of the traditional hero, who fails in his effort to find a place for himself in the West, whose only friend is an Indian named Nobody (Gary Farmer), and whose journey through the wilderness includes a series of surreal encounters that involve perversion, destruction, and loss. Not unlike Antonioni's *The Passenger* (*Professione: Reporter*, 1975, Italy/Spain/France), Jarmusch's film unfolds as if it were reenacting the subjective experience of a man who is emotionally and spiritually lost. Jarmusch uses that experience as a critical commentary on the larger culture from which Blake comes and on the traditional celebration of rugged individualism in westerns.

FORMALISM IN A NEW KEY: THE COLLAPSE OF SUBJECTIVITY For the most part, postmodernism rejects the complex explorations of subjectivity that make modernist works difficult to comprehend. If modernism sought to give aesthetic form to reality as a fragmented, subjective terrain, postmodernism treats reality as a grab bag of cultural debris from movies to websites, comics to paintings, whose highest purpose is to be recycled. Postmodernism possesses a political dimension, discussed below, but the assumption that history is no

longer accessible or meaningful except through the recycling of previous styles can diminish its political bite significantly. Sometimes the result is cynical detachment or nostalgia for something lost, but as *Dead Man* or *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* (Nelson Pereira dos Santos, 1971, Brazil), a critique of colonial exploitation, demonstrate, critical engagement with previous forms of historical understanding remains possible. These alternative perspectives of detachment or engagement relate to the two political emphases within postmodernism discussed below, resistance and reaction.

THE SURFACE OF THINGS AND THE LOSS OF HISTORY Postmodernism stresses the surface of things. Best epitomized by the work of Andy Warhol with his reproductions of soup cans and newspaper photographs, it is also a basic feature of Peter Greenaway's stunning films such as *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989, France/UK) and *The Pillow Book* (1996, France/UK/Netherlands). The refusal to hint at a hidden depth can signify a capitulation to superficiality, or it can mean an insistence that it is only through our various signifying systems such as language, painting, or film that we can allude to a depth that cannot be represented any more directly. Depth becomes a dubious category for postmodernism. Signifiers now seem to refer mainly to other signifiers, one work to other works, one moment to other equally fleeting moments.

One consequence of the loss of depth is the simultaneous loss of a sense of depth in time, or history. References to the past function like quotations or cutouts, elements of earlier moments and discourses that recirculate as reminders, mementos, or as an overall nostalgia for histories that are no longer directly accessible or meaningful. The dense invocation of the world of Louis XIV in Roberto Rossellini's realist study, *The Rise to Power of Louis XIV* (*La prise de pouvoir par Louis XIV*, 1966, France), turns into the disjointed bits and pieces of American history that Forrest Gump wanders through as if they were little more

than stage props for his own life in *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994). History becomes a scrapbook, a playing field for nostalgic recall, rather than a vital force that gives shape to the present and future.

Robert Zemeckis's *Back to the Future* (1985) takes nostalgia for the past to an extreme. The past is no longer over and done with, exerting the pressure of its enduring presence on the current moment. It has become, instead, a gigantic sketchbook that a character, Marty McFly, can enter, erase, and transform in order to produce the future he desires. Technology and resourcefulness (part of the great myth of American know-how) have found a way to banish fate and, along with it, history as a repository of what has happened with a finality that can be understood but never altered.

Without the orientation historical awareness provides, characters lack a social compass. This can encourage paranoia. Characters can readily fall victim to a belief that a giant conspiracy controls their destiny and that what has gone before offers no principles or ideals with which to confront an unseen, immoral foe. *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991), for example, is a postmodern film that tries to provide a clear interpretation to an historical event, the assassination of President Kennedy, but does so by presenting evidence of a conspiracy of vast proportions. Facts, propelled by leaps of imagination, drawn from numerous sources both real and imagined, and mixed together into a complex brew, yield a paranoid tale of industrial-military intrigue that propels historical narrative into the realm of speculation. This conspiracy functions as a metaphor for global capital and the postmodern condition: large, impersonal forces drive the system forward but remain unseen and therefore beyond the reach of direct confrontation. Political criticism joins forces with a psychotic state of mind (paranoia) as the very system it scrutinizes becomes nebulous, far-reaching, and beyond control.

POSTMODERNISMS OF REACTION AND RESISTANCE

Postmodern work, like realist and modernist work, need not be aloof, neutral, or apolitical. Conservative and reactionary postmodernism tends to look backward with nostalgic eyes, whereas liberal and radical postmodernism takes up a position of resistance to the dominant social forms and practices. Nostalgia and resistance are terms that themselves suggest a weak form of political engagement, distinct from the strongly political *Battleship Potemkin*, which sets out to remake reality, or *They Live*, which sharply criticizes the status quo.

Films such as *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, *Apocalypse Now*, *House of Games* (David Mamet, 1987), *Pulp Fiction*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and *Forrest Gump* belong more fully to a postmodernism of reaction than resistance. Films of reaction abandon history as a decisive concept in favor of nostalgia, reinventing the history one wishes to have (as in *Back to the Future*), or simple forgetting, a tendency epitomized by *Forrest Gump*. Such films typically adopt a conservative perspective that sanctions the status quo through their inability to imagine an alternative. *Apocalypse Now* follows the journey of a confused assassin as he seeks out the infamous Kurtz, a renegade soldier who has "gone native." This displacement of the socio-political context for the Vietnam War into a vague allegory about evil eliminates the need for protest or understanding: war is hell; bad apples corrupt others, men journey to the heart of darkness to find individual redemption.

The development of a postmodernism of resistance is most strongly evident in work by members of ethnic minorities and in **Third Cinema**. Third Cinema, from developing countries in the 1960s and '70s, rejected both the Hollywood model and the state-controlled cinemas of Communist states. Third Cinema typically adopted a liberal or radical perspective on social issues, and it often used fragmentation and irony to examine the effects of colonialism and globalization. The Brazilian film

Macunaíma (Joaquim Pedro de Andrade, 1969) and the Philippine film *Perfumed Nightmare* (Kidlat Tahimik, 1977), for example, mix and match lively visual styles and popular narrative techniques to tell stories that undercut the naturalness of a postcolonial world order.

In a similar spirit, Nelson Pereira dos Santos's *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* interjects close-ups of authentic engravings from the sixteenth century along with quotes from the journals and diaries of the first colonialists to arrive in Brazil to fragment the tale of a Frenchman who, mistaken for Portuguese, is captured by an indigenous tribe loyal to the French and assigned by the chief to various members of the tribe—after he is slain, barbecued, and "absorbed" on both a literal and metaphorical level. The main character, who has no name, is a prime example of the individual as an interchangeable, disposable cog in a much larger system, colonialism in this case. The film adopts techniques of modernist fragmentation but couples them to an ironic, postmodern treatment of history and memory. Rather than turn such a treatment into a nostalgic longing for a primitive, pre-contact past, the film celebrates the subversion of colonial power by indigenous people who learn how to assimilate a foreign culture before it can overwhelm their way of life.

How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman also draws on a bold, surrealist-influenced movement in Brazil in the 1920s known as the "anthropophagist movement." Artists in this movement defiantly assimilated and transformed elements of European art to make something distinctly Brazilian and wholly their own. They spoke of it as a form of creative cannibalism. As a postmodern recycling of this earlier movement, *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* demonstrates how postmodernism can function to tell a story of history from below, from the perspective of ordinary participants and everyday events, that subverts the official version of an epic clash between cultures at the time of colonialism.

6

THE INSTITUTIONAL AND NATIONAL CONTEXTS: HOLLYWOOD AND BEYOND

Four Social Contexts: Constraints and Opportunities

The study of the social context for film involves understanding how social forces and historical conflicts find representation in films, in the specific style and structure of individual films, and in the ways in which films function in society at large. Larger social issues manifest themselves in both the specific issues taken up by films (issues of ethnicity and identity, or the consequences of committing a crime, for example) and in the operating assumptions that govern each part of the infrastructure for the production, distribution, and exhibition of films. This **infrastructure,** or basic system of organization that exists to achieve particular goals such as the transportation of goods or the production of films, includes:

1) Film-oriented institutions and organizations like the Library of Congress (which stores and preserves films), the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (which maintains an extensive film archive and library, and sponsors the Academy Awards, or