
FILM

MOVIES AND MODERN AMERICA

BY RICHARD PELLIS

What is a “typical” American movie? People throughout the world are sure they know. A characteristic American film, they insist, has flamboyant special effects and a sumptuous décor, each a reflection of America’s nearly mythic affluence. Furthermore, American movies revel in fast-paced action and a celebration of individual ingenuity embodied in the heroics of an impeccably dressed, permanently youthful Hollywood star. And they feature love stories that lead, inevitably if often implausibly, to happy endings.

Yet over the past 15 years, for every high-tech, stunt-filled *Mission Impossible*, there are serious and even disturbing films such as *American Beauty* and *The Hours*. For every conventional Hollywood blockbuster apparently designed to appeal to the predilections of 12-year-old boys, there have been complex and sophisticated movies such as *Traffic*, *Shakespeare in Love*, *Magnolia*, and *About Schmidt* that are consciously made for grown-ups. What is therefore remarkable about contemporary American movies is their diversity, their effort to explore the social and psychological dimensions of life in modern America, and their ability to combine entertainment with artistry.



Gangs of New York director Martin Scorsese (right) with actor Leonardo DiCaprio.

TITANIC AND THE MYTHS ABOUT AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE Nevertheless, the stereotypes about Hollywood films are deeply ingrained. In 1998, while I was a visiting professor in Germany, I often gave lectures at various places in Europe on American movies. The reactions of my audiences were often the same. If, for example, I spoke to secondary school teachers in

Brussels, Berlin, or Barcelona, I would ask how many had seen *Titanic*. Half the teachers in the room would raise their hands, reluctantly. They would then look around to see if others were joining them in this confessional. Their embarrassment at having surrendered to yet another Hollywood seduction was palpable.

When I asked them why they saw the movie, they usually said that they wanted to understand better the tastes, however vulgar, of their students or their own children. Or that they were curious to see what all the pandemonium was about, all the marketing and publicity and hype on behalf of a \$200 million adolescent fantasy. Not one of the teachers would admit that they went to see *Titanic* because they had heard it was good, maybe even a work of art.

The teachers did not know it, but they had internalized the criticisms of American mass culture, and especially of American movies, that have persisted for nearly a century. Since the 1920s, people both in the United States and abroad have been told that Hollywood’s products are “bad” for

them. According to the defenders of high culture, American movies are brash, superficial, inane, and infantile. Worst of all, they are commercial. Like everything else in American life, movies are regarded as just another item available for consumption, perpetually for sale, a commodity to be advertised and merchandised, no different from detergents and washing machines.



Actor Jack Nicholson in Alexander Payne's *About Schmidt*.

No wonder, then, that the teachers felt guilty at having gone to see *Titanic*. No wonder, too, that they acted as if they'd been temporarily slumming. They had not been bewitched by Leonardo DiCaprio, not them. They knew the film was preposterous. The very mention of the movie got a laugh from the audience; it was a guaranteed punch line with audiences everywhere. Indeed, it is this laughter that enables people to enjoy America's movies without suffering any pangs of conscience about wasting their time on such trivia.

AMERICAN MOVIES IN THE 1960s AND 1970s

Despite these century-long preconceptions about Hollywood movies, we should recall that — not so long ago — the films people the world over cared and argued about, that seemed to speak directly to their personal or social dilemmas, came from the United States. From the late 1960s until the end of the 1970s, American filmmaking underwent an extraordinary renaissance. In few other periods were American directors so influential or their movies so central in shaping the experience and values of audiences everywhere.

One reason for this renaissance was that, with the advent of the counterculture, the major Hollywood studios were no longer certain about what sorts of movies would make money or about what the new, young audiences who came of age in the 1960s wanted. So the studios were willing, for a brief time, to let anyone with an idea make a movie. They turned over Hollywood to a group of gifted and often eccentric directors (Robert Altman, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, George

Lucas, Woody Allen) who wanted to make European-style movies: films that were mostly character studies, without conventional plots or linear narratives, and with lots of stylistic experimentation.

Beginning in 1967, with Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*, the Americans released a flood of improvisational and autobiographical movies,

many of them appealing especially to college students and young adults who were disaffected by the war in Vietnam and disillusioned with what had once been called, in a more innocent age, the American Dream. The movies included Mike Nichols's *The Graduate*; Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*; Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*; Peter Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show*; Bob Rafelson's *Five Easy Pieces*; Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (parts I and II), *The Conversation*, and *Apocalypse Now*; George Lucas's *American Graffiti* and *Star Wars*; Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*; Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *Nashville*; Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*; Alan Pakula's *All the President's Men*; Paul Mazursky's *An Unmarried Woman*; Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan*; Bob Fosse's *Cabaret* and *All That Jazz*; and the most wrenching film of the 1970s, Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*.

These movies offered a vision of an America drenched in loneliness, conspiracy and corruption, psychic injury, and death. Yet despite their melancholy view of American life, the films themselves were made with wit and exceptional exuberance, reinforced by the vitality of a new and distinctly un-Hollywood-like generation of stars — Warren Beatty, Dustin Hoffman, Robert De Niro, Al Pacino, Jack Nicholson, Gene Hackman, Faye Dunaway, Jill Clayburgh, Meryl Streep.

HOLLYWOOD AND THE END OF THE COLD WAR

During the 1980s, much of this cinematic inventiveness seemed to vanish. Yet even in a decade

when people in Washington and on Wall Street allegedly yearned to be masters of the universe, the most memorable films were not the Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger special-effects extravaganzas. They were instead the inexpensive, quieter films like *The Verdict* and *Driving Miss Daisy* — movies that savored the unexpected insights and triumphs of otherwise ordinary people, and that offered an antidote to the clichés about America’s adoration of wealth and global power

Despite Vietnam and the generational and cultural upheavals of the 1960s, American life was still shadowed during these years by the grimness of the Cold War. But at least the United States and the Soviet Union understood the rules of the diplomatic and ideological game; neither country was willing to embark on international adventures that might threaten the other’s sense of national security. All this changed with the end of the Cold War in 1989. The United States was now the planet’s sole superpower. Yet paradoxically, Americans found themselves living in a world of even greater moral uncertainties and political dangers — a world where terrorists respected no national boundaries or ethical restraints.

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN MOVIES

So having left the familiar parameters of the Cold War behind, Americans after 1989 could be equally moved by films with very different preoccupations. Two trends in American filmmaking were conspicuous, both inspired by the cinematic past. One was a passion (on the part of youthful directors like Quentin Tarantino, Steven Soderbergh, Joel and Ethan Coen, and Cameron Crowe) to replicate the unconventional, character-driven, movies of the 1960s and 1970s. This aspiration was exemplified in such films as *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, *Pulp Fiction*, *The Usual Suspects*, *Fargo*, *L.A. Confidential*, *High Fidelity*, and *The Royal Tenenbaums*. Thus, in its multiple narratives and sardonic dissection of American show business, Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Magnolia* was reminiscent of Robert Altman’s *Nashville*, while Rob Marshall’s *Chicago* was structured exactly like Bob Fosse’s *Cabaret*, with the events on stage mirroring the events in “real” life. In addition, American directors sought to resurrect the tradition, inherited from the 1960s, of the stylistically impressive, elliptical, and nightmarish excursions into

the world of tortured souls — an effort reflected in *Seven*, *Fight Club*, *Mulholland Drive*, *A Beautiful Mind*, and *Insomnia*.

The other trend seemed more atavistic: the longing to return to the epic themes and old-fashioned storytelling of an earlier America, to rekindle the moral certitudes of a *Gone With the Wind* or a *Casablanca*. No two films were more devoted to this project than James Cameron’s *Titanic* and Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* — each brilliantly made, both filled with trust in a better future after all the hard lessons of life were absorbed.

But for all their indebtedness to the cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, American movies of the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century portrayed a society that the filmmakers and audiences of the counterculture and the antiwar movement would not have recognized. Near the end of *Bonnie and Clyde*, Bonnie asks Clyde how he would live his life differently. Clyde responds by saying he’d rob banks in a different state from the one he lives in. The audience shares in, and possibly smiles at, the ironic disjunction between the question and the reply. There is no hope here, only an anticipation of doom. In contrast, *Pulp Fiction* and *Titanic* — otherwise antithetical in their subjects and emotions — both strain for faith and re-emphasize the typically American notion that individuals can transform their lives.

Films of the past 15 years also introduced to their audiences a fresh generation of actors who were less emblematic of an unorthodox America than were the actors who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. Nonetheless, Kevin Spacey, Russell Crowe, Brad Pitt, John Cusack, Matt Damon, Edward Norton, Frances McDormand, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Julianne Moore — none of whom conforms to the classic notion of a Hollywood star — have given performances as vivid and as idiosyncratic as their illustrious predecessors. Unlike the iconic stars of Hollywood’s classic era, who always seemed to be playing themselves — stars like Cary Grant, John Wayne, Gary Cooper, Clark Gable, Elizabeth Taylor — the current generation of American actors disappear into their roles, playing parts that differ from one movie to the next.

Most of their movies, although financed by Hollywood, are exceedingly offbeat, a testament to the variety of American filmmaking. One important

reason for this eclecticism is the impact of smaller, semi-independent studios — like Sony Pictures Classics and DreamWorks — that specialize in producing or distributing avant-garde movies. No studio head has been more influential or more successful in promoting innovative American as well as foreign-language films than Harvey Weinstein of Miramax.

In many ways, Weinstein is the crucial link between the movies of the 1960s and those of the past 15 years. Weinstein grew up in the 1960s, idolizing the films of François Truffaut, Federico Fellini, Martin Scorsese, Robert Altman, and Francis Ford Coppola. When Weinstein launched Miramax in 1979, he wanted to produce the sort of challenging films he had adored in his youth. Which is precisely what he has done. Miramax has been responsible for bringing to the United States foreign films like *The Crying Game*, *Cinema Paradiso*, *Il Postino*, *Life Is Beautiful*, and *Like Water for Chocolate*, all of which made money despite the presumption abroad that Americans will only pay to see blockbuster movies made in Hollywood. But Weinstein has also supplied both the funds and sometimes the inspiration for many of the finest American films of recent years: *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, *Pulp Fiction*, *The English Patient*, *Shakespeare in Love*, *In the Bedroom*, *The Hours*, *Chicago*, and Martin Scorsese's long-time project, *Gangs of New York*.

Still, no matter how important the convictions and contributions of particular producers, directors, or actors have been, what contemporary American movies have most in common with the films of the 1960s and 1970s is a seriousness of artistic purpose combined with an urge to enthrall the audience. These twin ambitions are by no means uniquely American. Wherever they have come from, the greatest directors — Charlie Chaplin, Orson Welles, Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, Howard Hawks, Federico Fellini, François Truffaut, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg — have always recognized the intimate relationship between entertainment and art.

So while American movies are undeniably commercial enterprises, there is no inherent contradiction between the desire to make a profit on a film and the yearning to create a work that is

original and provocative. Indeed, it may well be that the market-driven impulse to establish an emotional connection with moviegoers has served as a stimulant for art. Hence, some of the most unforgettable American films of the past 40 years, from *The Godfather* to *The Hours*, have been both commercially successful and artistically compelling.

THE UNIVERSALITY OF AMERICAN MOVIES

Yet in the end, what makes modern American films most “American” is their refusal to browbeat an audience with a social message. American movies have customarily focused on human relationships and private feelings, not on the problems of a particular time and place. They tell tales about romance (*Shakespeare in Love*, *High Fidelity*), intrigue (*The Usual Suspects*, *L.A. Confidential*), success and failure (*Chicago*, *American Beauty*), moral conflicts (*Pulp Fiction*, *The Insider*), and survival (*Titanic*, *Saving Private Ryan*). This approach to filmmaking reflects, in part, the traditional American faith in the centrality of the individual.

But American or not, such intensely personal dilemmas are what people everywhere wrestle with. So Europeans, Asians, and Latin Americans have flocked to modern American movies not because these films glorify America's political institutions or its economic values, but because audiences — no matter where they live — can see some part of their own lives reflected in Hollywood's dramatic stories of love and loss. As a result, like so many people all over the world in the 20th century, foreign moviegoers might at present disapprove of some of America's policies while embracing its culture as in some sense their own. ■

A professor of history at the University of Texas, Austin, Richard Pells is the author of several books, including Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II. He is currently at work on From Modernism to the Movies: The Globalization of American Culture in the 20th Century, to be published by Yale University Press. Pells has held Fulbright chairs and visiting professorships at universities in São Paulo, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Sydney, Bonn, Berlin, Cologne, and Vienna.

Profile: Filmmaker Alexander Payne

The sweeping vistas of the Nebraska countryside outside the city of Omaha in the movie *About Schmidt*, and the hushed, stoic visages within the city itself, represent a homecoming of sorts for filmmaker Alexander Payne.

The son of Greek parents who owned a prominent restaurant in Omaha, Payne left Nebraska after high school to study Spanish and history at Stanford University, with an eye toward becoming a foreign correspondent. His young adulthood took him to Spain, where he enrolled in a course in philology at the University of Salamanca, and later to Columbia, before pursuing a master of fine arts degree at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Payne's three feature films have focused on the terrain he knows so well — the American Midwest, and specifically Omaha. His early audiences — insiders and followers of low-budget, independent films — have expanded to embrace the traditional American moviegoer.

Citizen Ruth, a 1996 movie, starred Laura Dern as a young, pregnant indigent who, unwittingly, becomes a pawn of both sides in the pro-life/pro-choice debate about abortion in the United States.

Three years later, Payne wrote and directed



Alexander Payne

Election, an acerbic satire about American politics seen through the lens of a student council election in a midwestern high school. Payne received an Academy Award nomination for his screenplay, and the movie ignited the career of its young leading lady, Reese Witherspoon.

Most recently, Payne adapted *About Schmidt*, a novel by Louis Begley, for the screen. From the first moment,

when Schmidt, played by actor Jack Nicholson, is revealed as a man on the verge of his retirement, the movie is compelling. By the creator's own description, this is a movie about "loneliness, contempt, anger, regret." And yet Payne has embedded elements of humor within Schmidt's journey, as well as a suggestion of a certain redemption. In the end, Schmidt finds a purpose in his life through his sponsorship, via an international organization, of an impoverished African child.

For the self-described "restless" Payne, 41, who is preparing his next movie — about two friends who take a wine-tasting tour just before one is to be married — these are the best of times.

"I'm getting to make the films I want to make," he says.

A Conversation With Geoffrey Gilmore

For 10 days each January, the small winter sports community of Park City, Utah, is transformed into one of the most vital spots on the landscape of American movies. The Sundance Film Festival unfolding there serves as a bellwether of what is transpiring, creatively, in independent filmmaking in the United States — that is, films made by independent producers outside the Hollywood studio system. Since 1990, as co-director and director of film programming,



Geoffrey Gilmore

Geoffrey Gilmore has been responsible for film selection and the structure of the annual Sundance event.

Q: From your vantage point, what are the most exciting developments in American movies today?

A: Although independent filmmaking had its roots earlier than the last decade, the past few years have seen its tremendous development. There is a whole new generation of directors who are doing

movies on both sides of the line — independent, low-budget productions and major studio films. The idea that these two sectors would never meet was talked about at the beginning of the 1990s, but you can't say that anymore, not with directors like Todd Haynes (*Far From Heaven*) or Alexander Payne (*About Schmidt*) on the scene. Of course, there still are differences, not the least of which is that the average cost of a studio film is approaching \$60 million, plus another \$30 million for marketing and distribution, while the independent world has considerably lower budgets.

Q: But creatively speaking, you do have a blurring of lines, don't you?

A: There is, but I would argue that the kind of year we just had was somewhat unusual. Major studios, by their very nature, are commercially driven. If a project has a commercial aesthetic to it that also allows for creativity in direction, performance, and writing, that's fine. But the studios would rather be on a much more predictable course as to what works and what does not.

You asked about the biggest change recently. There are a whole range of films being distributed theatrically that in the 1980s or even the early 1990s would not have been distributed at all. There's been a change in the marketplace and in the kinds of films that are coming out. Some 250 studio films are produced each year, and another 350 or so independent/European art films are distributed. Also, you have more films independently directed by women — like Allison Anders, Nicole Holofcener, Rebecca Miller, and Lisa Cholodenko. And there are more works by people of color. There's always been a black-genre cinema that existed under the radar, and it is now completely visible, with people like Gina Prince-Bythewood, John Singleton, and the Hudlin brothers. There are Latino writer-directors like Robert Rodriguez and Gregory Nava. And two nights ago, there was a world premiere of *Better Luck*

Tomorrow, a film that came out of Sundance by an Asian-American filmmaker named Justin Lin.

The fact is that you have this range of work available says something about the transformation that has taken place. This isn't a marginal achievement; it's very significant, and, in some ways, it's only in its initial stages. The independent sector represents less than 10 percent of the total box office. But it has infused Hollywood with remarkable talent — leading actors like Renée Zellweger, Julianne Moore, Adrien Brody, and Nicole Kidman, and directors like Haynes, Steven Soderbergh, Quentin Tarantino, and Gus Van Zant. Now these directors can make films whenever and wherever they want — inside and outside the major studio system. And Sundance is very much part and parcel of helping those independent films find audiences.

Q: What is a significant challenge facing young filmmakers and the industry as a whole?

A: You could say that the good news is the number of films being made, and the bad news is the number of films being made. Distribution is a bottleneck, and I think it will be even more of an issue as the number of films produced increases and the democratization of film production continues. You don't need a lot of resources now to be able to make a movie with pretty good production quality. There were always people in the past who made films for \$5,000, but not that many. Today, using a good consumer-level camera and a final-cut pro program on a computer, you can make a movie with the level of production quality of a lot of things that are being bought.

A second major transition has been the "corporatization" of media. Today, almost all of Hollywood's major studios are part of media multinationals. So you're dealing with companies whose existence doesn't necessarily depend on whether they do well producing films out of Hollywood, but on their other revenue streams, like cable channels or book and music publishing companies. In some ways, this development has been more transforming than what has happened in the independent arena.

Q: And the challenge in all this?

A: The issue is finding ways in which formulaic and generic work, basically produced for a mass audience, doesn't overwhelm the originality or diversity that the independent arena brings to it.

Q: Do the creative giants of the past still dominate, or has a new generation truly taken hold?

A: The creative giants of the recent past, the generation that came along in the 1970s, still have an enormous power — the Coppolas, the Scorseses, the Spielbergs. But their dominance isn't singular. We're talking today about a different kind of filmmaking than when those guys grew up. You have a very different economic situation in Hollywood now as far as how films are financed and budgeted. Four directors have come out of Sundance in the last two years who are now stepping up to direct \$100 million movies.

Q: Do you see the economic downturn having ominous overtones for independent filmmaking?

A: The sources of funding that 20 years of stock market increases helped fund — the enormous amount of foreign sales and video-support work — are not going to be there anymore. There are fears, some of them well founded, that a lot of the production that particularly supported major independent films may not be around.

Q: Is that going to stop a young adult with a camera and a dream from making movies?

A: No. It means that instead of an independent film being made for \$5 million, it may have to be made for \$1 million. And then it's a question of whether or

not that kid can get his or her film seen.

Q: There's a sense that there's been a change in the demographics of the film audience. Is that how you see it?

A: People say that the audience is getting older — meaning that more diverse and more aesthetically challenging works are going to be permitted. And perhaps the more formulaic franchise work that's been put out there is not as dominant as it was. I'm hesitant to say that the franchise-driven work, the generically produced work, is disappearing. There's a run of "girl power" movies out now — directed straight toward young teenagers. And franchise "action movies" are still as powerful as ever in terms of certain seasonal audiences. But rather than getting worse, I think the demographics are getting better.

Q: To sum up, then, looking forward?

A: We've barely begun to see the impact of digital cinematography and digital filmmaking, and we can expect a lot of visual experimentation and stylization. From a broader perspective, though, the world has been introduced to a kind of independent production that cannot be labeled either as "art movie" or "studio film." That opens up a whole range of possibilities for storytelling and writer-driven films that promise a diversity of content. ■

The interview with Geoffrey Gilmore was conducted by Michael J. Bandler.