Impressive Failures: Mavericks of Film Authorship and the Impossibility of Success in Hollywood

Tom S. Davies

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds

Part of the American Film Studies Commons, American Popular Culture Commons, Other Film and Media Studies Commons, Television Commons, and the Theory and Criticism Commons

Recommended Citation


https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/2170

This Dissertation is brought to you by CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact deposit@gc.cuny.edu.
Impressive Failures: Mavericks of Film Authorship and the Impossibility of Success in Hollywood

by

Tom Davies

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2017
Impressive Failures: Mavericks of Film Authorship and the Impossibility of Success in Hollywood

by

Tom Davies

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

____________________  ________________________
Date  Peter Hitchcock

Chair of Examining Committee

____________________  ________________________
Date  Mario Di Gangi

Executive Officer

Supervisory Committee:

Peter Hitchcock

Jerry W. Carlson

Morris Dickstein

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

Impressive Failures: Mavericks of Film Authorship and the Impossibility of Success in Hollywood

by

Tom Davies

Advisor: Peter Hitchcock

This dissertation directly challenges the critical and commercial primacy of success attached to Hollywood films and their filmmakers, especially when one argues for or against their quality and/or importance within cinematic history. Through a process of shifting and multiplying perspectives within a broader narrative that is critical of what separates success and failure, certain films and filmmakers that were judged as failures or disappointments under impossible prerequisites of creating a successful film—commercially, aesthetically, or both—are, instead, reconsidered as constructive counterpoints to the expectations of the Hollywood economic field of production as well as to the inevitable disappointment of the anticipated cinematic effect desired by critics and popular audiences. Following a deep revision of how the signatures of filmmakers constitute a larger nexus of creative forces that are always in perpetual negotiation with their emergence within the industry as well as with their lasting effects throughout their history, each chapter isolates specific figures of cinematic authorship throughout the history of Hollywood that represent a certain brand of maverick whose failure to completely satisfy its industry and audience is unavoidable and arguably intentional. Instead, these mavericks offer alternative approaches to standardized practices of Hollywood filmmaking, and these “failures” become foundational. Rather than being exiled from the system, they are more often absorbed into those Hollywood practices to form new expectations of cinema’s potential and its future.
Preface and Acknowledgements

Some may think it pointless to read a book that pays more attention to the failures of cinema than its successes throughout the history of Hollywood. What greater understanding could possibly be gained by returning to those films that were written off at some point by some people who agreed they fell short of their expectations because of some fuzzy universal standard of success? After all, these failed projects must have been relegated from the successful film category through some sort of critical or popular consensus for obvious reasons (even though those reasons may be long forgotten). Or perhaps some may be more forgiving with the subject of cinematic failure because they are more inclined to be critical of such a prejudicial preference towards success as defined by Hollywood and the limited imagination of the blockbuster-producing monster that it has become. But even with this provisional attitude of failure as an industrial by-product, being too quick to resolutely blame most failures on the shortsighted nature of the commercially-driven motion picture business is fast recognized as an equally unfair prejudicial stance.

This is because both competing positions still stem from expectations shared by a similar sort of myopic cinematic idealism. In fact, predicting any expectations of a book on cinematic failure is doomed to fail because the very definitions of failure and success are diversified by each individual expectation of cinema, and these individual expectations themselves change over time. To start with such an impossible task of trying to imagine individual preconceptions of failure does indeed lead one full circle and may seem futile, but I begin with this impossibility intentionally because I want to be clear out of the gate that failure is always a conditional and indeterminate state. Keeping this in mind, I will leave the definition of failure somewhat vague
and as open to as many interpretations as possible. The following chapters are more interested in those events which shape and transform one’s preconceptions of cinematic failure over time.

But beyond investigating what constitutes these initial reservations to reading and thinking about failure in Hollywood filmmaking today, what remains almost completely unexplored is the more ludic nature of failure that appears if one, rather than trying to avoid or ignore it, chooses to let it remain in play as a functional force without a fixed definition or a sense of closure. This playfulness of failure within the history of the Hollywood system is where, for me, all film conversations emerge. All those films that do not perform up to standards created by certain anticipated results—whether these results are based on parameters that are specifically commercial, cultural, aesthetic or whatever—tend to be, in fact, the most fascinating films to argue over. Ironically, failed features are the ones that viewers return to most frequently. The question of whether a film or filmmaker did or did not fail is at the core of every debate as to whether a film deserves to be remembered or not, and, if so, under what conditions? This book entertains the assumption that failure is ever-present throughout a constellation of unresolved discussions over films, filmmakers and filmmaking in Hollywood’s history, and it begs the question: Why do we so readily disavow an element of the cinematic work that is so common, so familiar, and, at times, so deliberately at odds with what we expect from movies?

Moreover, this book searches for what or who carries the burden of that failure and why? In the ongoing debates over failure, there usually stands a figure held accountable for it. Most frequently—no matter how it is constructed—that responsible figure is the filmmaker, the cinematic author, the cineaste, the auteur. Within critical discourse, no one these days wants to get pulled into the tired and endless funeral of the outdated notion of an individual cinematic genius of expression. But it is hard to avoid questions of the former and future stakes of
cinematic authorship when there is an insistent question of “who or what made this failure” that echoes throughout the entire history of Hollywood that both fascinates and holds us. Because the film author is where the assumed responsibility of cinematic failure often gets placed, it is natural to assume that, inversely, failure necessarily gets embedded in the signature of authorship in film.

So, why with auteurs is it more often failure than success? Success has no problem these days walking around anonymously in blockbuster Hollywood while the auteur has always struggled to keep its brand from being stained with failure. This has been the case from the beginnings of Hollywood until modern day. To remain a bankable commodity, critically respected, or simply for the possibility of its next work, the cinematic author has always had to negotiate with its failure, and almost never with its success. With this bias in mind, this book replays a few of these struggles of cinematic authorship throughout the transformations of the Hollywood system in hopes of fostering a new respect for how large a role failure has played throughout a narrative that was allegedly built solely on aesthetic and commercial success. By way of this reconsideration, one likewise reimagines the dependency upon success as a bellwether for critical and commercial merit in the process of filmmaking. If the preference of success can be pushed aside, one may be able to conceive of failure in different and constructive ways. And even if failure can never be free of the shadow cast by the impossibility of success in Hollywood, if failure remains a player on the critical field there will always be something to argue about in cinema studies.

On par with its subject, this book was built on a series of failures and false starts as it began to articulate itself. Like the cinematic authors it considers, my writing depended on more
than a little healthy commercial and critical interference to help it take shape. Because of this, this book has never lost its confidence in the face of its necessary failures. I would like to thank my students at the City College of New York for being such willing listeners to my stubborn defenses of “failed filmmakers” as well as my team of Fellows at LaGuardia led by the unflappable Karen Miller, who gave me more confidence in engaging with historiography than she probably realizes. Thanks to Morris Dickstein, who, when I thought my work had frustrated him beyond repair, gave the greatest of compliments and support. Thanks to the Chair of the MCA program at CCNY, Jerry Carlson, who trusted me enough to get others to care about the moving image, and his two awesome lieutenants, David Ranghelli and Wayne Grofik, whose many impromptu conversations made their way into this book. Thanks to the staff and friends at Snowdonia, who found me a secret space to work. Additional thanks to the staff at The Astor Room, who hid me from Snowdonia when my cover was blown, and let me work amongst the ghosts of Mary Pickford and Adolph Zukor in the basement of Kaufman Astoria Studios. From these safe havens, a secret thanks to Sheets, James, and Tracey (who kept me right on the edge), Frank (yes, Frank), Mark, Matty, Scout (who has finished twenty features by the time you have read this), Megan, Jhon, Owen and Liz, and the very classy Mike Bell (who can rock a block party until his hair turns grey). Much deserved thanks to Heather Hendershot, who made it safe to talk about trash culture and television-binging while in polite company. Two decades of thanks to the patient charmer, Peter Hitchcock, who always had my back in an academy where I always felt lost and invisible, and who made time for me when he really had none left. And finally, thanks to Carrie without whom this page and all the others would still be blank
### Table of Contents

**Preface**  
iv  
  
**Introduction: The Fear of Failure in Hollywood**  
1  
  
**Chapter 1: The Intentional Failure of Cinematic Authorship**  
21  
  
  The Many Conceptual Failures Surrounding the Idea of the Filmmaker  
24  
  
  Every Film Will Fail (Eventually)  
31  
  
  The Historical Struggles of Auteurism  
35  
  
  i. Auteurism as Expressionism  
36  
  
  ii. Auteurism as Formalism  
44  
  
  iii. Auteurism as Strategic Branding and Consumer Product  
49  
  
**Chapter 2: The Birth of Failure at the Rise of Hollywood**  
55  
  
  D. W. Griffith, the Proto-Auteur and the Event Horizon of Failure  
59  
  
  Geniuses of the System, or the Corporate Auteurs of Classical Hollywood  
77  
  
  Stroheim vs. Thalberg: A Founding Myth of Conflict and Creativity  
87  
  
  A Certain Tendency to Personify Classical Hollywood  
96  
  
**Chapter 3: The Maverick: Orson Welles and Failures of Independence**  
106  
  
  The Stranger, or Welles’s Most Successful Failure  
110  
  
  Becoming Falstaff: A Note on Welles’s Exile  
125  
  
  The Other Side of the Wind, or an Unfinished Film about Not Finishing a Film  
132
Failures of Independence and the Ideological Failure of the System 140

Chapter 4: Figures of Revolution, or the Future Failures of New Hollywood 145

The Auteur Will Be Televised 153

The People's Cinema: The Genre Picture and the Counterculture 161

A Different Kind of Maverick: New Authors of Contempt and Adoration 169

Chapter 5: The Copycat: Brian De Palma and Failures of Imitation 186

The Trouble With Hitchcock 189

The Lady Never Vanishes 196

Critical Blindness 210

“Peep Art,” or Godard Does Hitchcock 216

A New Hope for Old Victims: De Palma’s Millennium Films 228

Chapter 6: The Rise of the Blockbuster and the Impossibility of Success 238

The Simultaneous Rise of the American Auteur and New Hollywood 240

The Shark and the Permanent Failure of Auteurism 248

The Empire of New Hollywood and The Apocalypse of Auteurism 254

The Blame Game: United Artists and Michael Cimino’s Heaven’s Gate 260

Auteurland: American Zoetrope and One From the Heart 273

Chapter 7: The Quixotic: Terry Gilliam and the Failures of Blockbuster Fantasy 286

Imagination without Parental Guidance 292
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Brazil will be on my gravestone”</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Will Become of the Baron?</td>
<td>304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big “Little” Films and Unmaking Quixote</td>
<td>312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Failure on Two Fronts and a Strategic Apology</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: Failing to Succeed</td>
<td>332</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction: The Fear of Failure in Hollywood

_The question now is whether one can be both a genius and a failure. I believe, to the contrary, that failure is a talent. To succeed is to fail._

—François Truffaut

In the Marvel Studios superhero movie, _Doctor Strange_ (2016), the title character, Stephen Strange, is an accomplished-yet-arrogant neurosurgeon that loses the use of his hands in a car crash. Strange searches out all commercial medical resources to repair the use of his hands to reestablish the former glory of his singular creativity as a surgeon. The now-handicapped medical artist is fully convinced that the only doctor who could accomplish this impossible feat would be himself if he only had his original dexterity. Having exhausted his fortunes, Strange travels to Nepal in search of the temple Kamar-Taj, where an earlier paraplegic he had refused to heal had impossibly learned to walk again. At the temple, Strange is forced to rethink reality as he knew it to broaden his perception and discover the ability to achieve the impossible. He excels in his magic training, but still cannot repair his hands. In the film’s climax, an entity from a dark dimension that exists without any sort of temporality threatens to “suspend” reality for all eternity. His sensei is mortally wounded in the battle to save reality, and her last words to Strange convey that his selfish obsession with the failure of fixing his hands so that he can return to his former fame and fortune is what truly holds him back. It is his fear of “getting to know” this personal failure that obscures the true potential of his character. What has always really handicapped Strange is not his damaged hands but that he is afraid to fail and, until he overcomes this fear, he will never realize the possibility for him succeed in other ways. Strange accepts that he will never regain the use of his hands, and by admitting to and embracing this permanent failure, he is able to realize his larger cosmic abilities. Thus, through a creative interpretation of magic that traverses the boundaries of Kamer-Taj’s non-interference policy with
temporal mechanics, and a near-infinitely repetitive act of self-sacrifice in the timeless dimension, Doctor Strange prevents a potential apocalypse, and rescues reality from a stagnant existence of “sameness” in an eternity without temporality of any kind.

In terms of plot, there is nothing extraordinary here. Just a simple melodramatic conceit: A hero overcomes his own personal issues to save the world. But what draws my attention to this particular fantasy is that, for me, its cinematic narrative is a familiar allegory that challenges so many misrepresentations of film authorship still at large in the new millennium of Hollywood filmmaking, especially the negative representations of failure within an authorial figure’s many configurations throughout cinematic history. I do not wish to force a personal and arbitrary connection upon the narrative, but the story of Doctor Strange reads to me as a fantasy about overcoming a fear of failure leading to the path of a more complete worldview. After his accident, Strange interprets the loss of his particular creative and technical abilities as an inevitable result of the inefficiencies and lack of creative risk-taking within the commercial institution—an institution where he was once considered its most accomplished asset. While he is correct that his path in life has irrevocably changed, the commercial surrounding did not shift its perspective of him in as much as Strange anticipated and fulfilled its inevitable rejection of his creative purposefulness. Strange could only imagine success as the impossible return to his older self, much like Hollywood executives, critics and fans who expect their auteurs to make the same film over and over with equal impact each time. Such a demand can never honestly be fulfilled. In the larger potential world made available to Strange, failure is unavoidable, essential and constructive in his passage of artistic transformation, and he must shift his perception of failure across all dimensions of its historical production and its variegated reception to truly appreciate the foundational possibilities it can establish.
For the purposes of my argument which follows, I will make a loose analogy between Strange’s narrative of overcoming his fear of failure, and the critical spectrum of the historical figure of the cinematic author: The earlier, arrogant Strange would be related to those critics against auteurism, who foreclose upon the cinematic author as just a romanticized maverick—a maverick with only its arrogance and none of its humility. The transformed figure of Strange as a new creative power formed out of failure, however, would afford a critical interpretation of the figure as a more sensitive construction that would consider the collaborative forces of creativity involved in filmmaking and expose the figure’s larger potential of being a complicated creative figure that is not afraid to fail powerfully.

It may seem somewhat disingenuous to begin a critical survey of film authorship—no matter how particular—by comparing it to a blockbuster superhero fantasy, or, more precisely, to a corporate-branded factory product recognized under the name of its former comic book publisher rather than its director or screenwriter. But to afford an argument that reconsiders the state of cinematic authorship throughout the many transformations of Hollywood, especially within an industry that has always been skeptical of an auteur’s value as an aesthetic commodity since its inception, it is best to engage directly and immediately with the type of filmmaking that portends to eliminate the auteur altogether. At the time of this writing, Marvel is a blockbuster behemoth owned and distributed by Disney that shows no signs of failing any time soon. With over ten films completed in their pipeline, most viewers would be hard-pressed to name more than three of each of these film’s writers or directors. Marvel is a corporate entity that holds an endless reserve of stories—many with nameless or forgotten authors—that translate easily into Hollywood blockbusters because they carry simple moral issues within a spectacular framework of fantasy. In the second decade of the 21st century, the comic book and its superhero templates
have garnered the highest respect from the commercial end of Hollywood filmmaking as being the most successful “high-concept” franchise yet. At first glance, Marvel pictures is an epitaph of traditional cinematic authorship. Their blockbusters—with due respect to the company’s commitment to a uniform artistry—are recognized under the brand name of a corporate franchise, which seem to have finally succeeded in replacing the individual names of blockbuster forefathers with trademarks. Lucas and Spielberg become Marvel and Pixar. It would seem the continued success of these corporate-branded films marks a steady commercial progression of ultimately removing the author from filmmaking entirely, and that by retiring auteurism altogether, Hollywood has finally overcome its own fear of failure—especially the fear of a feature that fails to be accessible to a mass audience by being too complicated, too “artsy,” too intelligent, or basically too original.

But if Hollywood in the new millennium still lays claim to its commercial successes via shifting attention away from its financial failures, and by turning the artistic forces that created those failures into “branded auteurist failures” and economic pariahs, then the debates surrounding the larger field of cinematic authorship in Hollywood are far from being over. Instead, the configuration of cinematic authorship has merely shifted once again towards a new set of values. And what of the responsibilities of critical discourse and the larger fields of popular reception that are supposed to encourage the creative act of filmmaking by championing those aesthetic merits eclipsed by the socio-economic machinery of Hollywood and its short-sighted obsession with box-office returns and action figure sales? What sort of cinematic authorship remains after so many failures have been written off by Hollywood under the auteurist loophole? What are the stakes of remaining supportive of an auteurism that has allegedly been abandoned by the industry, its critics, or even its eclectic and fickle fan base? Is
this figure of failure literally a signpost at the end of the road where all modes of stylized filmmaking converge into one monolithic dead end of factory production, or, like Doctor Strange in the face of a monotone eternity, is it the figural promise of an indestructible faith in creative variation poised for yet another smack-down in the eternal dark dimension of the ever-present Hollywood blockbuster?

Cinematic authorship has gone through many permutations in the last five decades or so. It has been a Romanticized individual creative force, a mythic figure of the Hollywood dream factory, a phantom subject sutured to a cinematic text, a function of critical filmic discourse, a hegemonic presence that overshadows the work of the subaltern, a fantasy of the socioeconomic unconscious, a sense of agency in the blockbuster model of global marketing, a star composite of the social media machine, an economic brand name, the promise of an aesthetic trademark, and so on. Today, it continues to be each of these figural variations, depending on where it is placed in the critical narratives of cinema. One would think with these many vestiges of cinematic authorship that recent critical practice in academic Film Studies would refrain from using the cinematic author as an obvious all-inclusive means of grouping certain films. To do so would be dangerous because the figure can be manipulated by so many critical strategies to represent so many different positions. And yet, while so much writing on cinema has been warned to avoid interpretation based solely on a singular author's contribution to a film, books on an individual filmmaker's aesthetic contributions to cinema continue to proliferate on the digital shelves of the new millennium.

Why maintain this practice of author-centric literature on film if the term is never clear as to what it represents beyond a singular source of creativity? Is it because the cinematic author as
an aesthetic organizing tool is so common that it anticipates a critical apprehension so wary of the arrogance implied in creative authority, that any book on, say, Howard Hawks or David Lynch is always-already assumed to be merely populist adoration based on outdated romantic criticism? Or are these books automatically problematized by their use of the author as a category that the “secret” collaborations with many other creative forces are bracketed off for deeper critical study? Or does cinema retain so much vulgarity as a commercial entity that the common audience will always default to a film’s "creator" for its expectations rather than endure the mind-numbing task of engaging with the complicated nexus of film authorship? Any of these propositions would be a fair and apologetic explanation for why cinematic authorship is such a cloudy undertaking, but none of them explain away its continued popularity as a heuristic critical method. Cinematic authorship basically does its job as a means of organizing films under a specific name, but, for the sociocultural critic of identity politics within cinema, it is well advised not to unpack that name’s figural construction and unleash its complex mythic structure into the textual discourse of materialist sociocultural and vulgar expectations until it reformulates itself into an ideological strategy. Of course, I am being intentionally and sarcastically academic here, but only to hammer home the point that this slippery figure of creativity is indeed extremely troubled. And yet, despite this instability, it is still the most common practice of aesthetic and commercial categorization in cinema to this day.

Even with all these pitfalls surrounding its configuration, the cinematic author remains a resilient and stubborn categorical method. This book, once again, engages with the indeterminable field of cinematic authorship for what, at first, may seem to be the same old arbitrary reasons: to argue the importance of certain cinematic authors beyond mere appreciation or similar modes of adoration. But before anti-authorial readers foreclose upon my study, I want
to assert and maintain that my following critical investigation into the complicated authorial figure(s) of cinema will not ignore this volatile uncertainty within the term “author.” Even if one prefers the more common cinematic term, auteur, (as I provisionally do) in hopes of utilizing the semantic fuzziness that the French language so proudly deploys, one is still stuck with a term that has a limited historical reading—that of the writings of Cahiers du Cinema in France in the 1950s—as well as with a term that still contains an unresolved dispute as to its critical agenda and usefulness.

For me, the real trouble with the auteur lies not in its figural value as a cultural and critical commodity, but, rather, in the fact that regardless of how this figure is conceived and/or constructed, it is always burdened with an inevitable failure. It can never please the field of its reception entirely. It will never satisfy the expectations, both critical and popular, of writing on the cinema. Because the auteur is primarily a method of categorization that grew out of an appreciation for individual styles within a group of films, this appreciation will always be laced with disappointment. Stylistic consistency will eventually fail—certain works should have contained as much style as the last one did, and other let downs of the sort. There is always a point at which both the critic and the viewer become frustrated with the auteur—where the auteur fails to deliver what is expected. It is funny, then, that so many critics of the cinematic author have ignored the possibility that perhaps the reason why the auteur has had such a fragmented and diffuse existence in its short tenure in cinema history is that it has been mostly undone by the fickle demands of those same critics. The troubles of the auteur, it would seem, lie in its reception, critical or otherwise, and not in itself.

Acknowledging this inevitable and unavoidable disappointment, I want to revisit certain filmmaker’s narratives—narratives embedded within each one’s commercial and critical
surroundings—whose work represents a sounding board for failed expectations at specific historical thresholds of systemic transformation. I do not mean to argue that they are failures because the system hamstrung them or denied them in some way. After all, these filmmakers are never fully in complete opposition to their relevant system of production (this ideal opposition is the real problematic myth of the auteur). Neither are they asynchronous to it. Although they can be configured as being stuck in the past (which they often are), or ahead of the system (which they also often are), they are always interacting with their contemporary mode of production in some form or another. These figures exert a creative influence inside the conventions of the Hollywood system even if they are in exile of it. This is because, the Hollywood system itself is as dependent and contingent on its marginal forces as it is on its internal momentum and conditions. Hollywood is primarily a system of aesthetic and cultural absorption, not one of exclusion. Squarely embedded in each filmmaker’s historical places and conditions, my interests lie in how each figure acts as a diverting force—not as a private, external creative force, but as a differential—within the commercial systems of production.

By concentrating on the auteur as an embedded historical figure of cinema that is a collaborative force of cinematic production instead of the outmoded prefiguration of a Romantic artist battling the system into his or her own obscurity, I hope to better understand how auteurism functions as a vehicle for negotiating a space for referencing the authorial figure and metacinematic commentary within the vacillating authorities of creative figure(s) and the transformative Hollywood system. But beyond this I wish to show that if authorial failures of cinema are viewed correctly—or at least compassionately—they can be reconsidered as creative acts that are an integral part of Hollywood’s own perpetual act of revision, as well as its preferred practice of narrative repetition plainly visible in its constant remakes and sequels. For
me, a failed auteur offers more critical insight than the supposedly successful ones. The critical
disappointment that measures the author retrospectively only by its successes—as either pure
potential, or as a fading figure of stylistic grandeur—obscures the immediate constructive
failures that pave the way to the transformation of cinematic practice as well as to lasting
aesthetic contributions.

To demonstrate the types of filmmakers who represent this constructive method of
failure, I have chosen the figures of Orson Welles, Brian De Palma and Terry Gilliam to act as
milestones of cinematic authorship because each figure deploys specific methods of what I will
argue as *intentional failure*, and I have dedicated a chapter to elaborate each one. These figures
are not meant to be read as case studies since I have not chosen these figures arbitrarily to merely
prove a point. Each of these figures, if their critical reception and its varying investments are
rigorously analyzed, mark a unique rhetorical configuration of alternate energy and agency to the
commercial and critical assumptions of cinematic authorship under very different historical
modes and conditions of Hollywood production.

All three filmmakers negotiate their creative space by managing their failure in different
ways: Welles was dedicated to the more canonical of narratives for his works, but he
consistently placed new demands on the technical abilities of whatever media he used to enhance
these narratives. These technical challenges and accomplishments proliferated throughout his
entire life’s work. For many of his detractors, his work was a series of worsening failures after
his masterpiece, *Citizen Kane* (1941)—regardless of numerous periods of exile and their
economic restraints. De Palma creates films under the assumption that most cinematic
expression has been technically fulfilled by his predecessors so by the time he enters into
cinema, his work is always one of repetition and pastiche—an approach he fully acknowledges
and embraces. His cinema draws attention to the inherent political and aesthetic failure of “new cinema” or other revolutionary approaches to filmmaking. With this skepticism in mind, he practices a very specific cinema of quotation. Gilliam utilizes the trope of fantasy to represent his rhetorical strategy of treating each of his films as a battleground with the industry and its financial structures so that he can maintain a reflexive critical element within his work while remaining thematically consistent on the surface, regardless of whatever cinematic conventions he uses—sci-fi, adventure, children’s film, biopic, cyberpunk, etc. His combative approach to contemporary blockbuster filmmaking not only resists and critiques the easily-digestible, highly-marketable fantasy productions of contemporary Hollywood, but also incorporates the “ruins” of Classical Hollywood filmmaking into the consumer culture of the now-globalized Hollywood with its ancillary markets and proliferation of digital formats.

Each filmmaker represents a different modality of failed authorship that negotiates within the various transformations of the Hollywood industry as well as its surrounding critical discourse. I have characterized these three facets to differentiate each filmmaker, and have labelled them respectively thus: The maverick, the copycat, and the quixotic. My overarching configuration and argument is that these characterizations are not exclusive to each other but, rather, they are cardinal rather than ordinal. They are included in each other, and can be triangulated to form multiple strategies within a single figure of authorship to demonstrate how films can be made (and unmade) in the ever-changing expectations of the Hollywood industry and its audience.

It must be reiterated that the purpose of this book is not to champion or to pity these three filmmakers over others, but, rather, to thoroughly challenge the critical (and popular) investments in these specific figures as failures by shifting perspective within Hollywood’s
construction of commercial success and the critical parallel of aesthetic achievement. Therefore, each figural chapter in this book is “balanced” by a relative interstitial chapter that charts the transformations of the industry and cinematic authorship in and around the events where Hollywood both exiled and absorbed these figures of intentional failure. These chapters historicize each filmmaker within their contemporary cinematic narratives, and point to other numerous possible auteurs that could be equally considered as intentional failures in Hollywood.

At this point, some readers may have already noticed that my reference to the cinematic system of production refers solely to the Hollywood system. By doing so, I am not trying to ignore alternatives to the American model of the studio system, nor am I avoiding auteurism as it can be and has been conceived by systems “outside” Hollywood, or within other alternatives existing throughout world cinema. Rather, I am pointing out that what “Hollywood” references has expanded and disseminated into so many globalized fields of production and distribution that it is as problematic to identify Hollywood as a unified field of production as it is to identify the auteur as a singular source of creativity. Hollywood can represent an antiquated classical model of production, the commercial desires within the industry of filmmaking, or a placeholder for a post-geographical network of global production and finance. Throughout the book, Hollywood will also face and reinterpret its own failures much like the figures of cinematic authorship. Because the auteur is always in a position of negotiation with the system, it will be important to be sensitive to certain shifts in Hollywood’s investment in cinematic authorship in each historical period. I will do my best to define these variations of Hollywood in each of these chapters as I go along.

One final caveat is that this book should not be read as a comprehensive overview of cinematic history because there are so many other possible narratives of success and failure that
have been omitted. To try and include them all would become an endless effort. Instead, this book isolates select historical moments of flux in the system and compares these moments to filmmakers that have been labelled as disappointments regardless of their potential—critically, commercially, or both. By shifting perspective of each filmmaker within the larger material events of success, failure—and all else in between—at select moments within Hollywood’s periods of transformations, one can better question the present stakes of cinematic authorship. Because the structure of this book takes certain liberties by not taking the straightest, most linear path of cinematic narrative, the reader does not have to necessarily abide by the continuity I have chosen. Instead, the reader is encouraged to hopscotch through the chapters at will. For example, if one is interested in the historical thresholds where auteurism goes through its many shifts of conception, one can concentrate on Chapters 1, 2, 4 and 6. Or, if one prefers to witness examples of single representative figures of intentional failure, one can read Chapters 3, 5 and 7. The chapters proceed as follows:

The first chapter more clearly defines how I am using the term “failure” and how it is embedded in the arguments surrounding cinematic authorship. To consider failure as a constructive quality, this chapter bolsters my assumption of cinematic authorship put forth above: I have already implied that the arguments over the existence and necessity of the cinematic author must remain an unresolvable tension within the figurative term. And, I have also claimed that this fractured figure is destined to fail in its reception. To make clear why these claims are important to uphold for those that rely on authorship as a useful critical category, it is important to define cinematic authorship as both an on-going generic argument and a specific historical event. Or put more precisely, as both a generic category that posits an ideal and trans-historical source of intention and artistic creation, and as a historical phenomenon
that occurs in the 1950s and becomes increasingly problematic as the academic discourse of Film Studies emerges throughout the 1960s and 1970s. This chapter ultimately challenges such a binary conceptual opposition of the cinematic author, and introduces a great deal of play between the ideal and material concepts to reveal a performative space where the nexus of creative forces that make up the cinematic author occurs. Throughout this primer, I bring into question the necessity of intentionality that is so crucial to arguments of literary authorship, and attempt to complicate said intentionality with the collaborative nature of filmmaking. For me, intentionality is fragmented by numerous creative inputs, but is then reconditioned and rebuilt by the inevitable failure within its reception. I posit a commutative but paradoxical concept of intentional failure as a synergy of this restructuring that occurs when the intentionality of a fragmented nexus of authorship is considered alongside the failure of fulfilling critical and popular anticipation. Under these reconsiderations of both figure and concept, the following chapters will alternate between the specific historical thresholds and authorial figures that hold specific interest in the intentional failure of cinematic authorship.

The second chapter considers how failure becomes embedded at the inception of cinematic authorship—wherever and whenever this emergence may occur. By considering “auteurism before auteurism,” or “proto-auteurs,” during the early formation of the Classical Hollywood studio system, this archeology researches certain figures within the historical space between Edison’s Motion Picture Patent Company (MPPC) with its particular attempts at monopolistic practices in the first two decades of the twentieth century, and the gradual rise of the independents against Edison to form the Classical Hollywood oligopoly, or, as it is better known, the “studio system” by the end of the 1920s. The chapter compares the rise and fall narratives of these transformations to those narratives of the mythic failures attributed to the
names of emerging directorial figures—specifically the careers of D.W. Griffith, Thomas Ince, and Erich von Stroheim. These figures demonstrate how the narratives of failure occur within cinema’s history before the concept of an auteur is even fully constructed, never mind embraced or discarded. These figures reify the auteurist myth of studio opposition before either side becomes concrete. They become warning signs for so many other early artists that would be forgotten as the system solidified itself. This chapter delves into their histories to understand why each name is critically fused with a type of melancholy and victimization. Griffith’s massive success with *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) is followed by a steady decline of failed attempts to control his own means of production, and ends with Griffith’s obscurity under contract at Paramount. Ince acts as a sort of counter-point to Griffith’s decline in that he establishes the future studio system, but at the arguable cost of his own professional effacement. Stroheim becomes a classic example of the arrogant spendthrift that must be either controlled or exiled under the central production units governed by Irving Thalberg. This chapter argues whether these thresholds are a possible place of origin for the general assumptions surrounding the auteur that establishes artistic ambition as deadly to the industrial demands of the studio system. And if so, how do these failures, which are all grounded in early attempts at creative autonomy within the system, prefigure the later success of, say, a Selznick or a Hitchcock that achieved complete creative and financial authority within a more confident and concrete studio system?

These subsequent successes would be underpinned by a studio dependence upon independent production units which would replace the central production units of the 1920s and 1930s. At the rise of these independents in the 1940s emerges the figure of Orson Welles, who straddles, the failed aspirations of Griffith and Stroheim and the collapse of the Classical
Hollywood System. In the third chapter, Welles brings a different type of “failure narrative” to the playing field: A life-long shadow of “failures” is cast after the success of a single film, *Citizen Kane*. The common assumption of Welles—even to this day—is that he burned too bright from the beginning of his career, and his arrogance cast him into exile. But this sweeping commentary critically enables both Welles’s detractors and supporters to posit the figure of Welles as either a redundant victim of the system (like Griffith) or an arrogant, spoiled brat that wasted his potential (like Stroheim). Either configuration betrays the rhetorical strategy of humility and resignation that Welles deployed to create so many other works, both finished and unfinished, as well as the economical sparsity and cleverness needed to create them. It also masks the fact that, despite periods of self-imposed European exile, Welles remained somehow bound to the Hollywood system that, in his estimation, treated him so poorly. This chapter explores this relationship by considering two historical points in Welles’s long and bumpy career: First, a period of resignation to the Hollywood system to produce his film *The Stranger* in 1946. Second, his final return from exile into the newly-opened field of New Hollywood of the 1970s and its reinvestment into auteurism to complete his unfinished, self-purported masterpiece, *The Other Side of the Wind*, which remains incomplete and undistributed to this day.

The fourth chapter returns to the thresholds of rise and fall narratives to focus on the first half, or the “rising” of, the artistic, historical, and socioeconomic anomaly that is now referred to as The New American Cinema, or The New Hollywood. Developing an auteur-as-star and other various types of promotional branding, the age of the auteur in American cinema is commonly believed to have begun and ended with the New Hollywood of the late 1960s and early 1970s. During the conglomeration of Classical Hollywood into larger corporate entities, the rising
popularity of television and the revolutionary shifts in cultural consciousness, Nouvelle Vague auteurism had its beginnings in the history of American cinema. Much credit for this cinematic period of revolution is given to the collaboration of young Turks like Warren Beatty and Mike Nichols with older studio filmmakers like Arthur Penn and Robert Altman, who took advantage of the counter-cultural shifts in politics and aesthetics to create socially relevant films that plugged into the Zeitgeist of the times. Watershed films like Bonnie and Clyde (1967) and M.A.S.H. (1970) connected with over-exposure to violence from all ends: The Vietnam War, the student protests, and growing tensions surrounding race and gender issues. But also within this period, independent production companies from early low-budget genre factories like American International Pictures (AIP) to the youth-run, rebellion-oriented BBS Productions created spaces for a younger generation of filmmakers, who took advantage of the shaky corporate existence of the studio system. This chapter traces how the transformations of Hollywood of the 1950s and 1960s, forced by conglomeration, television, and the emerging counter-culture, afforded the influential pockets of these short-lived companies to explore new freedoms in cinematic narrative and alternative filmmaking. This chapter ends with the genesis of the revered American auteurs of the 1970s, many of whom had the novelty of constructing their own figure of cinematic importance, and who also in one way or another would all come to represent some variation of personal cinematic failure.

Of all these figures, however, Brian De Palma has maintained the most intriguing relationship with his specific brand of failure, and I dedicate the fifth chapter to reconsidering De Palma’s polemical relationship to his critics and their expectations of his work. By retaining an unapologetic devotion to the reworking of established technical contributions of prior authors—most notably Hitchcock but so many others—De Palma has most consistently constructed his
own obsessive field of cinema that not only draws attention to the functions of cinematic authorship, but builds a meta-field of self-reference around how films quote and rewrite stylistic patterns derived from older masters. Not only does De Palma enter most directly into a reverential relationship with the cinema of the past and its authors (and their failures), but it assumes a new set of authorial intentions within the older set. This chapter interrogates the critical dismissal of De Palma as a copycat that rightly or wrongly inherits and indulges in certain cinematic predecessor’s acts of alleged misogyny and pornographic violence. It attempts to look past these accusations to recognize De Palma’s imitation as an intentional repositioning of authorship as a necessary act of quotation.

The final segment of historical thresholds in chapter six considers the impact of the contemporary blockbuster and its absorption and/or expulsion of the multiple auteurs that had risen from the thresholds of chapter four. It charts “extreme” Hollywood auteurs, Coppola and Cimino, as potentially dangerous to the newly evolving blockbuster system, and considers them against the more obedient tactics of Spielberg and Lucas. This chapter pits certain auteur’s attempts to purchase and control certain elements of the studio system, and demonstrates how, in most cases, the system rewrites the auteur brand to cement the blockbuster as marketable object. This chapter charts a very specific transition into the trademark of the auteur, and how the system uses a strategic absorption of the auteur. The auteur’s only recourse is to attempt to redirect the system’s designation, and to intentionally polarize the brand to work on audiences at different levels. There was an auteurism that Hollywood disavowed and an auteurism that it provisionally embraced. But those names that better survived the rise of the blockbuster and its need for ever growing commodification of the cinematic product, most notably Spielberg and Lucas, had their constructive periods of failure as well. They were held critically responsible for
selling out their technical prowess and obfuscating the artistic promise of their fellow cinema brat siblings by setting up near-impossible commercial expectations of their future brands.7

The final chapter revises the idea of the maverick and the copycat by considering both of their quixotic relationships to the blockbuster-centric Hollywood of present day through an analysis of the stubborn master fantasist, Terry Gilliam, who arrived too late for both the Classical Hollywood System and the New Hollywood auteurist wave. Gilliam represents an alternative to branding one’s self as a studio promise of a certain brand. His ability to rhetorically structure every film as a battle that he will ultimately lose with the studio has been a deceptively successful strategy for getting his films made under his desired conditions. Gilliam, more than any other auteur, directly faces his inevitable failure with a sort of strategic irreverence. Gilliam calls into question the practical applications of building oneself as “hated by the system.” Almost every film of his from Brazil (1985) forward is intentionally placed in peril by Gilliam. In fact, his fantasies mirror his figural narrative in that they become either pyrrhic victories within, or mentally unhinged from a myth of foundational reality. These fantasies reflect exactly his quixotic relationship with the socioeconomic field of the global network of Hollywood production. Gilliam manipulates and exhausts all different venues of financing his films, and posits the studio system as the unfeeling devil. But beyond this rhetoric, Gilliam, in truth, remains perhaps the last auteur completely dedicated to the Classical Hollywood style of filmmaking, and its lasting ability to create progressively riveting films, especially after the movie theater as a community of exhibition has once again been replaced by the phantasm of a streaming audience. More to the problem of the auteur’s future in contemporary cinema, Gilliam’s preoccupation with the layers of cinematic fantasy call into question the ability to create a narrative foundation of auteurism at all in the new millennium.
without fully acknowledging the inevitable fiction that is the figure of the cinematic author. His intentionally delusional relationship to the globalized studio system has led him to a new world of creating films via private distributors using streaming possibilities and their ancillary sources of financing that inevitably complicate the importance of authorship in the larger fields of internet viewership and their demands. More than most of his predecessors, his failures, which are rooted in nostalgic fantasy, have adapted and utilized new possibilities of cinema production and distribution for future intentional failures to explore for the rest of the century.

After all this hopscotching from threshold to threshold, from figure to figure, there should be enough lasting evidence that the cinematic author shows no signs of vanishing from contemporary critical practice any time soon despite so many attempts to discard it. In fact, all these figures of failure may indeed prove to be more useful towards understanding certain personal investments in what we each expect from filmmaking in general as either indulgent viewers or potential critics. Hopefully this book will, at least, reverse some of the unfair prejudices surrounding the demands upon the auteur and the critical and commercial dismissal of its failure. Or, put another way, perhaps these chapters can salvage the auteur from the impossibility of success.

Revisiting the tenuous constructions of the cinematic author not only preserves its use as a method of categorization, but argues for a deeper respect for the larger collaborative figure of the entire filmmaking process which it represents. Throughout these pages, failure will show itself to be as constructive a force as success, if not more so because there is so much more of it. Critical discussions might indeed be enriched and expanded by the inclusion of failure because its addition to the field would encourage a larger, more variegated space of interest, especially
regarding those films that have been marginalized by parameters set by the narrow standards of commercial expectations or the impossible demands of the “pure cinemas” imagined by highbrow critical aesthetes and other elitist ideologues. While the auteur will never cease to be a complicated and multifaceted figure, it makes no sense to bracket it off as a necessary myth only to replace it with another one—as a kind of corporate vacuum. Instead, if we leave it where it is as a series of constructive failures, we may recognize this figure as a possible future of cinema—as a specific type of creative force that is never afraid to fail when exploring the undiscovered potential of cinema.
Chapter 1: The Intentional Failure of Cinematic Authorship

A writer needs a pen, a painter a brush, but a filmmaker needs an army.
—Orson Welles

There is always a certain amount of irony in spinning a narrative around authorship, especially within such a volatile and unresolved polemical discourse as that surrounding the existence, use, and function of authorship within cinema. Implicit in its loose definition as a creative force that organizes itself structurally and stylistically into a body of work, an exploration of authorship in any medium must recognize the figure as an integral part of the act of narration in and around that body of work—an act that the authorial figure also allegedly deploys to leave a trace of its arguable existence. Even if one acknowledges this paradoxical construction of an articulated fictional creative source, an investigation that hopes to tease out the complex strands that make up the figure of the cinematic author is best conceived as only one of many possible narratives produced in and around that work. In this case, as a narrative that articulates the possible origins of a very specific story of emergence within the nexus of many larger narratives, all the while recognizing such an origin story as a necessary fiction. By looking backwards to find a place to start, the narrative folds back upon itself to conceive of the emergence of a figure that arguably initiates that narrative which constructs it. But one needs not overly complicate such a beginning if one admits that any specific beginning or origin is always troubled by its fictional existence as one possible narrative amongst others. To recall the polemic surrounding cinematic authorship, one must playfully determine where the cinematic author begins to function as a creative force that is always tangled up in a larger system of authority, but one must do so without foreclosing upon other possible narratives of where authorship does or does not begin. With all this in mind, the narrative of cinematic authorship might begin something like this:
At the dawn of cinema, there were no authors of motion pictures. The only names associated with creating cinematic product were either the alleged inventors or the patent holders of its technology. The Lumiere Brothers, Melies and Porter were not considered authors, or even directors, but, rather, were recognized as technicians of the mechanical novelty that was cinema. And especially in American early cinema, the persons responsible for creating each film remained unknown to the masses, subsumed under the corporate titles of the major patent holders, such as Edison, Eastman, Selig, and the rest. The audiences of early cinema did not flock to the nickelodeons to see author-produced works of art. They came to see the spectacle of film itself—to marvel at the wonder of what Tom Gunning has called “the cinema of attractions.”\textsuperscript{8} It was only until narrative conventions became the norm that this began to change. The story became more of a draw than the spectacle of cinematic technology itself. So, early production companies such as Biograph and Vitagraph reluctantly began to market and exhibit their films under the promise of individual presences. At first, the demand was the growing popularity of certain screen actors, who repeated certain recognizable characters from reel to reel, and this demand witnessed the birth of the star system circa 1910. But, as “story films” grew into feature length films with more complex narratives that required the sublimation of the technical to the narrative structure, it is no wonder that audiences’ attention became more attuned to the names or presences that were supposedly in charge of delivering these stories. And thus, the names of Edison and Selig were slowly replaced with the names Griffith and DeMille, and the authorial director of the new cinema of narrative integration was born.

This is a compact, oversimplified, Romanticized, mythical "Hollywood" version of one of the possible historical narratives in which cinematic authorship begins. Critical conversations about film’s creative sources are as old as cinema itself. Depending on where one’s research
leads, one will find numerous possible narratives as to how cinematic authorship became a popular source of discovering filmic origin and style. They will also find a perpetual point of contention in the larger field of socioeconomic production. Thus, more accurate narratives of cinematic authorship are structured to incorporate these contentions like so: For every critical move to elevate a certain cinematic author above the Hollywood factory, a passionate counter-argument insisting that an author is just a mythic figure obscuring a technical machine of entertainment will follow, claiming that cinema more realistically requires a multiplicity of nameless inputs to bring each film into existence. Since inception, this is the fundamental division over cinematic authorship that prevails to this day.⁹

So, any narrative of the emergence of cinematic authorship is accompanied by a narrative that seeks to erase it. To better approach an understanding of cinematic authorship one must not only carefully define what one configures when using the term, but one must see how it is reconfigured in its reception. The polemic surrounding authorship in film as a general category and/or rhetorical figure applied to the larger, “grand narrative” of cinema can thus be outlined with three interrelated sets of questioning: First, where and how does the figure of the cinematic author arise out of the mechanical, technological, and socio-economical systems of film production, and does it emerge as an imagined theoretical construction, or as a material by-product of these systems—as an internal creative figure that shapes the system from within. Second, is the question of the existence of authorial intention—inherited from cinema’s literary and theatrical predecessors—that asks whether the figure of the cinematic author can maintain some sort of expressive and/or commercial control over each film despite being part of a much more collaborative and technologically dependent field of aesthetic and/or commercial production. And third, who or what posits the figure of the cinematic author as a creative figure
or as a promise of a certain style or expression. With enough careful consideration of these questions, the positing of the cinematic author and its intention forms the bridge across which the inevitable disappointment travels back into and becomes embedded within the figure of the cinematic author.

The Many Conceptual Failures Surrounding the Idea of the Filmmaker

Any argument against a singular creative figure will always to some degree be valid because cinema’s historical emergence at the end of the nineteenth century is largely understood to be first and foremost a technology rather than as an art. This preference of technology over other sites of expression or enunciation is supported by most historical-materialist approaches that demote the figure of the cinematic author to the position of employee in service of the system. This "tendency" is because many contemporary film historians place a greater importance on the industrial evolution of cinema—affectuating its vulgar components, and rendering cinema reducible to a strict popular mode of entertainment—rather than focusing on its importance as an art form. Within this materialist scope, cinema is a horizontal plane of historical existence where each film is only a commodity, and this undermines the theorization of a singular creative presence, or for that matter, any other construct of “pure” cinema—an ideal universal aesthetic approach to cinema—that would be posited outside the industrial demands of its production.

The limit of this mechanical approach, however, is that, at its most extreme, it effectively treats every film as qualitatively equal and therefore indistinguishable from each other. A cinematic work’s only distinguishing features would be its date, cost, and profit margin. This
approach acknowledges the technical, but not the technique. Under this understanding, it is no wonder, then, that the figure of an author would not be necessary to create a factory product. To moderate such a Fordist consideration of cinema, theoreticians of film add color to the factory product by reorganizing these products categorically via their qualitative differences—usually restructuring categorization in a contrasting vertical manner e.g. low-art vs. high-art, bad vs. good, etc. The theoretical camps complicate materialist demands by questioning how much attention should be given to the stylistic anomalies that divert the production machine by adding an artistic and progressive element to each cinematic work. They insist that shifts in style can restructure commercial demands and reconfigure certain market assumptions of audience reception.

Alongside the more general question of the indeterminate existence and/or necessity of the cinematic author, both theoretical and material approaches are always similarly at play within the figural designation of the cinematic author. This is what keeps the figure, to varying degrees, in a perpetual argument as to whether it operates inside or outside, with or against, the system, making the figure’s position and importance to film production very difficult to nail down. Because of this difficulty, the cinematic author, which represents a qualitative differentiation of style, is often relegated completely—and somewhat unfairly—to the theoretical domain. This is because the materialist presumption is that the desire for creative expression is always ancillary to the economic realities of production, and thus the author and its intention is outside the requirements to fulfill production. For materialists, the cinematic author is a luxury of the factory that is unnecessary to production. While it is true that theoretical camps largely promote trans-historical models of categorization—of which the cinematic author in its most Romantic form is, most definitely, one—they do so to organize and consider cinema in a qualitative
manner that differentiates between cinema products. They sustain cinema’s alternative to commercial existence by promoting its variegated aesthetic mode of existence. And yet, as legitimate and innocent as this shift in categorical practice may seem, the materialist approach still provides a basis for each film’s production, or, put another way, its existence. By this reasoning, the cinematic author should never be configured independently of material production and its sociocultural realities. It should, rather, be embedded in it.

While it may seem that I am favoring a materialist approach, my point here is that the author is not necessarily a theoretical construct. Historical and materialistic camps need not be so ready to exclude the cinematic author as an idealist's fantasy. To be sure, practical methods are dedicated to untying the strings of these theoretical balloons of aesthetic categorization to ground the socioeconomic infrastructure that produces the cinematic object as an object that either conforms to or constructs audience demand. But why do most materialistic arguments unilaterally refuse the possibility of configuring an author—whether as psycho-biographical persona(s), creative nexus, or function—instead of considering it as another materialistic means of achieving the exact same goal? It is true that with cinema’s technological complexity and its multiple inroads of creative input, the cinematic author must be rethought beyond an outdated literary model of Romantic genius that creates works outside of its contextual element, but the cinematic author can exist as more than just an ideological apparatus that deploys the myth of artistic intention as a means of audience interpellation. In other words, the cinematic author is much more than just a socioeconomic myth to sustain a materialist infrastructure.

So even though a more rigorous definition of cinematic authorship is needed to defend its more practical applications, I would argue that the cinematic author can easily coexist in both critical camps. The dismissal of an author-as-theory does not dismiss the existence of—if not the
need for—authorship in cinema. The author does emerge as an idea or figure from the technological foundation of cinema, but it is not independent of it. So, the question with cinematic authorship is not whether it is theoretical or practical by nature—it operates within both fields as producer and product—but, rather, is this: Can one “insert” the cinematic author respectfully into the larger labor force of production and still have it operate as a means of qualifying difference in cinema?

The cinematic author as a qualifier of differentiation that would allow one to recognize a certain group of films would not posit an individual body above the socioeconomic conditions that shape and condition each work. If the use of cinematic authorship as an organizing tool, as I have so far argued, is both a means of qualitative categorization and a means of meeting industrial and audience demands, would it imply that the intention of the cinematic author best represents both facets? Probably not. I doubt an auteur would worry primarily with the category in which it is ultimately placed, but instead would be more concerned with how it can get the film to exist. The intention of an auteur in cinema is first and foremost to get a film made. So can there truly be intention in cinema if cinema is actually a technological collaboration that has multiple and indefinite sources of creation? To what degree would this intention function—or not function—within the cinematic object or work? Put another way, can one divine an aesthetic purpose for a film’s creation and existence if the cinematic author itself can never be fully determined as a singular source of creativity? Can this purpose be discovered—if at all—if it is immediately diluted, diverted, or disappears after factoring in all of the other forces that enter into a film’s creation?

Arguing for the intention of a cinematic work is complicated because the cinematic author almost never has a singular psycho-biographical source, and it rarely, if ever, retains full
Many creative forces shape the style of each piece. Therefore, the intention of writers or directors is immediately fractured and collaborative. Intention in cinema, for me, is best considered as a force without a definitive, singular source—a source that demarcates the emergence of the cinematic author and archives an initial purpose within the cinematic work. After all, even when conceived as a nexus of multiple creative forces, cinematic authors are perceived to make films for certain reasons. Even if the cinematic author is rendered as a textual embodiment or a discursive function there is still presumably a physical and intentional force that pushes the film to emerge in a certain way, and this force can be conceived of as intention at least figuratively. This force does not have to be determinately or singularly placed within the certain bodies of directors, producers, or writers, but something has inevitably called the work into being. To wax Deleuzian, intention is the becoming of a film.

To reiterate, this force is not alone in the construction of the cinematic object. There are many inevitable happy and unhappy “accidents” along the way. A film gets shaped by all these other forces as it evolves, and this intention gets embedded somewhere in its codification. As a composite of many creative forces and personalities, a film’s author as configured under these conditions is provisionally accepted in critical writing on cinema as a heuristic—and often apologetic—method of considering a certain set of films. But if we insist on realizing this force of intention as an archival element embedded in the film, the cinematic author has a more practical and identifiable existence albeit an existence whose intention is always subject to interpretation. Studying authorship in cinema is an attempt to understand how some films intentionally get made while others do not. It is a means to know how some films remain in critical discourse while others are expelled or forgotten. It carefully considers how creative
forces redirect the material workflow of studio systems, and how they get exiled from or absorbed into those systems, or, in some cases, both.

To be clear, I am not saying that the figure of the cinematic author and its diffused intention—whatever it's manifestation, be it aesthetic or commercial—does not get “lost” within the bumpy socioeconomic field of industrial and popular demand. I would agree that a film almost never ends up where or as it was intended to be (this is the anticipated failure of cinematic intention which occurs in a film’s reception). Nor am I arguing for a reinvestment in authorial intention as a path to discovering a film’s meaning. Instead, I am trying to properly place the cinematic author and its intention as a figure and function that represents a certain critical investment in the expectations of cinema itself. I am saying that, by careful definition, the cinematic author and its intention can be found embedded in the work and its history. The cinematic author is not an imaginary construct haunting actual production. It is, rather, a material force or agency that makes films.

As much as one can argue that cinema is primarily a vulgar and base form of entertainment that does not need or rely on an authorial presence, no matter how variegated or diffused, (and I must stress that a “cinema without authors” is extremely difficult to maintain throughout the entirety of cinema’s historical transformations of production, distribution, exhibition and ancillary markets), cinema at its most base and most popular level still provokes intense interactive conversations on many aesthetic and qualitative levels. This engagement with cinema as to its sociocultural importance throughout its history circularly leads back to what, or who, created each specific film and for what purpose. If we can allow a practical authorship in film to exist as a tenuous figure of material production, the important final critical hurdle is how
to carefully consider cinema's relationship with its authors while not ignoring its primary commercial elements: its capacity to entertain an audience and make a profit.

I stress "carefully" because the cinematic author is a figural construction of identity that produces not only certain films, but, as we will see, can also produce *itself*. It can build its own aesthetic and commercial image as well as be identified with and subjugated to images associated with its signature and the material conditions of each film's production. The figure of the cinematic author, just like a film, can be produced by the author(s), by the system, or, more commonly, by a blend of the two. Therefore, one must be attentive when coaxing out the specific figure one wants to connect to a film's production. Most confusing is that the cinematic author utilizing a performative strategy in its practical capacity may configure itself as an independent and solitary force of creation in cinema, and this is where one gets lost in a topological maze of pure myth-building.

As we will see throughout the following chapters, most cinematic authors are all too adept at constructing their own fantastic identities, as are their critics. Here is an example of the risks of misreading critical manipulations and rhetorical strategies exerted on the figure: Studies of certain cinematic authors commonly position the artists *against* the industrial demands of studio systems. More than likely because it is an easy way to differentiate the author from the system rhetorically. This argument sympathetically places cinematic authors as underdogs in a contest of oppositional authority that they will always inevitably lose (at least the inevitability of failure would be consistent in this construction!). If authors stray too far from the demands of the system then a film gets taken away from their control, gets made outside of that system's pipeline of visibility and availability, or does not get made at all—the Stroheim or Welles *mythos*. If it becomes too difficult to differentiate the authors from the system, then the authors
become indistinguishable from the system—the De Mille or Spielberg *mythos*. Placing authors into a simple binary opposition against the system denies the multiple strategies it takes for any individual or group entering the nexus of film production, never mind the difficulties of independent distribution and exhibition to get what they want from the filmmakers.

Any consideration of cinematic authorship, instead, should conceive acts of creative filmmaking as a field that respectfully considers both successful and failed relations with the system of production. These successes and failures function, for me, not in developing and maintaining an aesthetic style against studio conventionality, but as a negotiation that creates a specific signature while discovering and maintaining a means of getting films made. This signature includes within it the conditions it is willing—or not willing—to endure to produce a work. This signature is always embedded in the demands and expectations of the vulgar entertainment industry, as well as subject to other creative forces, whether harmonious or dissonant, that shape each work. The cinematic author is at once subject to a plurality of creative forces and is also an inseparable fusion of artist and employee. This multifaceted figure reflects the whole of cinema itself, which is a constellation of numerous modalities of types, genres and forms that functions to varying degrees as both art and commodity simultaneously.

Every Film Will Fail (Eventually)

To maintain all these facets of variegated creative input, the cinematic author's definition must be rethought as a system of play between the two ideal extremes of conformity and resistance.11 I like to conceive of this play as a vertiginous series of rise and fall narratives within other rise and fall narratives of the Hollywood system, and each rising and falling is
contingent on varying perspectives from narrative to narrative as both art and industry. As it has been argued so far, cinema as an object of critical discussion since its inception is accustomed to being both an artistic and popular medium at once. It has always resisted being just an art form, and so the cinematic author must also resist being conceived of as just an artist. In his bracing study of the more vulgar expectations of cinema, Jeffery Sconce repositions the consideration of movies as representing a “century of failure,” especially when magnified by an over-investment in the cinema-as-art-form that he bundles under the popular term, cinephilia.¹² Sconce insists that both critical and popular expectations of cinema are inevitably too high and this leads to automatic disappointment. In other words, cinema never lives up to its potential for the lover of cinema. Tracing a path historically through the vanguard criticism of Farber and Tyler of the postwar generation into Pauline Kael of the New Hollywood generation of criticism, he points out a consistent lamentation that movies were always regressing into mediocre commodities instead of recognizing them as always already being commodities. Against these expectations of cinema as high-art, Sconce devotes considerable attention to the cult and camp qualities of trash cinema—specifically horror and sexploitation—because he believes their audiences expect, nay demand, a “bad object,” and this expectation represents a more naturalized approach to what cinema provides because it directly confronts cinema as a “cinema of negative guarantees.”

For Sconce, no film as a piece of art stands the test of time, and this denies every film the ahistorical dimension that classical conceptions of art must have to be art. Movie polls, like the American Film Institute that annually select their “Top 100” lists, wrongly assemble their film canons based on alleged “timeless” pictures that resist becoming dated and act as trans-historical masterworks. Their very nature of being historical landmarks of cinema betrays this canonical elevation.¹³ The very historical experience of film stands to document how all strategies
deployed to hold the audience’s (and critical) attention become immediately outdated by newer strategies to shock, sustain, or entice the viewer. They become archival proof of outdated strategies that now fail to be effective. As Sconce puts it: “As they [the films] and we [the viewer] get older, it becomes increasingly difficult to sort out artistic power from personal memories of their former power” (292).

What interests me here is how the unfulfilled expectations and disappointment of the audience—the failure of cinema to its viewer—feeds back into questions of cinematic authorship and its archived intentions. While his definition of cinematic authorship, or auteurism, for this argument will need to be clarified, Sconce grants auteurism a very crucial position in his cinema of failure. He states:

In its halcyon days, auteurism presented a valiant attempt to organize film art around a more manageable and familiar model of individual creativity, but [...] the emphasis was as much on failure as success. Consider for a moment, all of the elaborate auteurist mythologies that cinephiles have generated over the years, stories of failure, conflict, and compromise that endlessly rehearse Michelson’s ‘trauma of dissociation,’ pitting art and capital against one another in a death struggle for the cinema’s very soul. (285)

This not only reiterates the pitfalls of an oppositional approach to artist and system, but it also points to the implicit failure on both sides of the relationship between the artist and system when interpreted by its field of reception. If failure is an inevitable factor in the reception of all cinematic works, then conceiving of the auteur as an oppositional creative force against the Hollywood system would be not only redundant, but an act of futility. However, if we reconsider this failure not as an inevitable result of an all-consuming totalitarian system, but as a natural result of a perpetual negotiation—not only between the cinematic author and the
Hollywood system that factors both commercial and aesthetic goals, but a negotiation that also includes its popular and critical reception—one may get better results. Starting with an inevitable failure, one can reconstruct the means of an artist getting its work produced in the system. It does not deny or ignore the frustrations and disappointments of so many potential incomplete and/or invisible works, but it includes the actual historical realities and conditions that create existing versions, however multiple and unfinished, of an artist’s work.

Failure is intrinsic to the expectations and interpretations of cinema. In this light, cinematic authors always fail. They do not rescue the system from failure like an aesthetic paladin. They are integral to and directly responsible for failure in cinema. This statement would be anathema to those that have triumphed the experimental failures of Griffith, Stroheim, Hitchcock, Welles, Coppola, De Palma, and Gilliam—to name only a few—as ideological challenges and alternatives to the Hollywood system’s preconceived notions of success. But, by Sconce’s logic, all films fail eventually. One should not posit the failures of these figure’s ignored masterpieces as simply being victims of a blind machine of commercial production. Instead, would it not be more critically sensitive to acknowledge failure a priori and see how these relationships between author and studio fell in and out of harmony with each other? At some point each cinematic author invested in a studio system, and the studio system invested in each of them. Where and when in cinematic history does success shift into failure, or vice versa, and in which discourse? Were these failures necessary to the progression of the system in its entirety?

As I will argue throughout this book, the figure of the author and its failure is always rewriting the industrial narrative from within. Even if the author is exiled from the system, voluntarily or not, that presence continues to function within the critical history of cinema. As
always, the body of an author is not necessary, only some ghostly manifestation of its intention and what critical and popular discourse interpret from it. And therefore, if this elusive figure of authorship is reducible to its equally elusive intention, and can always be identified by its failure to completely fulfill its intention within the field of reception, then can we understand the figure of the cinematic author’s primary function as the inevitable failure of its intention? Or, the auteur as an intentional failure? This would offer one so much more, critically speaking, than just an oppositional creative resistance to the commercial studio system. It would include strategic moments of resignation to the system, intentionally repeating and quoting failures from earlier cinematic breaks from convention, and rhetorical ploys to render the system as an obstruction to creative forces to tactically deflect audience response and critical reaction. Intentional failure would anticipate the shifts in its reception, affording a constructive revision of what cinematic authorship brings to each work. The possibilities of cinematic authorship would undoubtedly be critically expanded beyond being a simple placeholder of stylistic origin.

The Historical Struggles of Auteurism

Before moving into specific figural and historical examples of intentional failure, I must own up to my own intentional failure: I have put off the narrative of auteurism as an historical critical phenomenon and its falling in and out of favor over the last half century to establish my own specific argument within the general polemic of cinematic authorship. So far, I have outlined a rather wide overview of the arguments concerning cinematic authorship without yet directly engaging with actual critical moments in cinema history and Film Studies where the cinematic author was either directly championed or defeated. The historical path of the auteur emerges in the 1950s from the interests of *Cahiers du Cinema* in Classical Hollywood cinema as
an art form. The figure quickly becomes engulfed in the greater polemical issues I have already established, but before exploring specific historical moments of intentional failure within cinematic authorship, it seems best to strengthen an historical understanding of all the critical modifications that film authorship has undergone from the 1950s forward with a quick primer on the historical phenomenon of auteurism and its many reformulations. My hope is that not only will this quick review fortify what I mean by “cinematic authorship” and all its historical synonyms, such as “auteurism” and “cineaste,” throughout the rest of these chapters, but also to reread this history with an understanding of its implicit investment in failure as a means of cinematic production of both an aesthetic object and a commodity of popular consumption.

i. *Auteurism as Expressionism*

By the 1950s, the Classical Hollywood system with its central production units that controlled aesthetic decisions as well as economic ones were already extinct. The Hollywood studios had become outsourced. They had become primarily a means of financing for independent producers. The retired Classical system and its products now seemed ripe for reflection, especially from foreign vantage points. After World War II, Europe had been flooded with 1940s Hollywood products by the Marshall Plan. Experiencing these films without any apparent economic control of distribution or marketing plan, the uncategorized films were reorganized with new critical eyes. Writing on Classical Hollywood products began to proliferate. There was a new interest in cinema’s ability to interact with mass audiences. In France, writing on cinema had reached a sort of meta-critical stage where instead of marveling at a cinematic object and its technical achievement, the critic became more and more interested in how certain creative forces could alter studio conventions and keep reinventing the possibilities
of cinema. The French critic and “godfather” of *Cahiers du Cinema*, Andre Bazin, had introduced a skepticism that doubted any possibility of a “pure cinema.” For Bazin, cinema was a strange amalgam—both a Classical art form and a popular one that admitted all types of vulgar variations. Bazin’s younger cohorts saw these latter variations as spaces within which an artist could usher in a new cinema for its native country, and the young critics sought out these cinematic possibilities by categorizing Hollywood directors and writers as historical examples that had accomplished these cinematic possibilities. Thus, the *auteur* was born.

In his 1954 article, “A Certain Tendency in French Cinema,” François Truffaut championed a new reverence for the film director—more specifically, the writer-director. The cinematic author, or *auteur*, for Truffaut, was the creative solution to a national cinema that he felt was too dependent on older literary and theatrical models. It is important to point out that this seminal essay did not immediately elevate the figure of the *auteur* into an individual creative force, but instead offered up the *auteur* as a creative solution to what Truffaut felt was a failure in his contemporary national cinema. The call for *auteurs* was an aesthetic demand for a creative reformulation of narrative convention in his native France. Truffaut lamented the lack of individuality and originality in his national cinema, and quite directly encouraged new creative forces to rewrite it.

However, Truffaut’s argument was not initially intended to be interpreted as an aesthetic means of valuation and qualification. It was, more correctly, an ethical one—a call for change in the system, a *politique* regarding the *auteur*. Using this political motivation, Truffaut argued that to change cinema writers and directors needed to make *more cinematic* films. Unfortunately, Truffaut was not clear by what he meant by “cinematic.” He left it to be intuited, and this is a critical problem with the construction of the *auteur* as purely a mode of expression.
from its inception. Whereas a literary author directly works with language and its grammatical and syntactical regulations, it is an assumption of Truffaut’s that cinema naturally has similar properties to language. The question of how an auteur makes a work more cinematic is as opaque as to how a writer makes language more poetic. This may explain why his essay remains substantially a critique of narrative instead of a critique of cinema. For Truffaut, cinema was still limited to a means of storytelling. His essay specifically critiqued writers that refused to play with narrative conventions, but it did not provide an alternative means of storytelling in cinema. The auteur at this early stage remained simply a fusion of the theatrical authority of the director and the literary authority of the script writer, and its cinematic function remained to be flushed out.  

Regardless of his enthusiastic oversights, his colleagues at Cahiers responded energetically to Truffaut’s call for change in the French cinema. They parsed through Hollywood factory directors in search of mavericks like Nicholas Ray and Samuel Fuller who, for them, marked a personal stylistic means to redirect commercial cinema. They disagreed, often violently, amongst themselves, and argued about which directors were auteurs and which were merely metteurs-en-scene. This distinction is one of the original critical configurations that pitted the artist against the studio system. The difference between the two authorial figures was that regardless of how tied to the system, the auteur’s signature represented a consistent formal style that transcended studio convention. The metteur no matter how engaging and entertaining remained indistinguishable from those conventions. In other words, the metteur could be replaced by another metteur and achieve the exact same picture. For the Cahiers writers, Ford, Welles and Ray were “obviously” auteurs because they reinvented genre conventions with their style and broke through technical boundaries and industrial limits. On the other hand, depending
on whoever’s critical taste, Huston or Minnelli were metteurs because they refused to break out of the conformity of the continuity system of editing and remained exemplary of traditional convention. The distinctions were always arbitrary and their arguments always suited each critic’s individual taste.

After three effusive years of unregulated writing on the revolutionary power of the auteur, Bazin felt it necessary to step in and moderate the auteurist takeover of Cahier du Cinema. In his essay, “De la Politique des Auteurs,” Bazin supported the fierce passion of his younger colleagues, but he was wary of the fact that the politique was trying to discover Classical and Romantic models of Genius in a contemporary modern medium. He pleaded for the young critics to consider the artist in relation to its dependence on the system, to consider the “genius of the system”—a phrase that is habitually read that the auteur is only as valuable as the system it emerges from. But this interpretation is not entirely accurate. Bazin was suggesting the young critics embrace a broader aesthetic playing field than the single auteur. As he argues: “The American cinema is a classical art, but why not then admire in it what is most admirable, i.e. not only the talent of this or that filmmaker, but the genius of the system, the richness of its ever-vigorous tradition, and its fertility when it comes into contact with new elements” (Grant 27). Bazin insisted that auteurism not be limited to the individual. For Bazin, cinema was a system that provided not only auteurist works championed by critical taste, but also included “accidental” masterpieces without an identifiable auteur. Bazin’s essay defended the system of production while he encouraged the energy of appreciation implicit in the politique. He also demonstrated how psycho-biographical limitations were fundamentally problematic within the larger historical machinery of cinema.
Specifically, he pressed that the politique ignored specific historical conditions that opened or closed possibilities of auteurist expression. According to the politique, artistic “failure” was a product of old age or senility, and this explained certain auteurs’ inevitable loss of Genius. But Bazin saw it more as the system outgrowing the auteur. His example compared Welles’s two films, Citizen Kane (1941) and Confidential Report (1955). Placing emphasis on the two films similar narrative interests, he elevated Citizen Kane because, for him, the film ushered in a new era for American filmmaking whereas Confidentiality Report was a second-rate forgettable feature that simply repeated the first film. Bazin’s still conceived of Welles as an individual figure of expression who represented as a classical individual artist that had redirected the system. For Bazin, had Welles continued to “break cinematic ground” as Kane did, he would not have been so quickly discarded by Hollywood after Kane. More importantly to Bazin’s argument is that while Welles-as-artist did effect an aesthetic shift within the system, the film was still primarily dependent on RKO’s system for its emergence and existence.

Bazin’s critique of the unfailing auteur of the young Cahiers critics was to suggest that the “timeliness” of Welles’s original masterpiece—his auteur moment, if you will—was paramount to understanding the variegation of his later “failures” within the subsequent history of the Hollywood system. Drawing a larger conclusion from his Welles comparison, he delivered his point:

The drama does not reside in the growing old of men but in that of the cinema: those who do not know how to grow old with it will be overtaken by its evolution. This is why it has been possible for there to have been a series of failures leading to complete catastrophe without it being necessary to suppose that the genius of yesterday has become an imbecile. Once again, it is simply a question of the appearance of a clash between the
subjective inspiration of the creator and the objective situation of the cinema, and this is what the *politique des auteurs* refuses to see. (25)

Bazin introduces Truffaut and his colleagues to the tectonic shifts between the narrative of the *auteur* and the larger narrative system of cinema. He basically *historicizes* the auteur. He was arguably the first critic to immerse the *politique des auteur’s* Romantic figure of expression into the realities of the systems of cinema production. While his presupposition of cinema was ultimately positivist and progressive, he repositioned the auteur’s failure as an auteur’s relationship to the timeline of cinema itself. More than a result of old age or senility, Bazin distinguishes the variations throughout an auteur’s *entire historical and temporal relationship* to the systems of production. When considering Bazin’s critique, it is as important to hold up the same limitations of change and transformation to the “genius of the system” as Bazin does for the auteur. But with that in mind, Bazin gives us an early example of the implicit systemic failure of the revolutionary creative force of expression put forth by Truffaut and the *politique des auteurs*.

After Bazin’s critique, the figure of the *auteur* would undergo rigorous structural changes to its definition in Europe throughout the 1960s, and would wrestle with textual and discursive solutions to the psycho-biographical model of the auteur. However, let us follow the Romantic strain to its “end” first. Auteurism’s Romantic and expressionist foundations remained intact for most of the decade upon its import into American film criticism. Auteurism was picked up in the States by Andrew Sarris in 1962. Most antitheses of *auteurism* as a pure mode of expression as divined by critical taste begin and remain with Sarris’s interpretation of it. In his “Notes on the Auteur Theory,” Sarris’s essay is a rereading of Bazin that almost completely ignores Bazin’s original critique that laid out the misprision of the auteur as an independent creative figure. 20
Sarris only paid attention to the apologies that Bazin made for his colleagues’ enthusiasm. Sarris ignored the initial agenda for the Cahiers group—that the politique des auteurs was a practical and historical means for new French filmmakers to clear out a creative space for themselves by countering the traditional conventions in French filmmaking. Basically, Sarris just invoked the auteur to embrace his own private set of mavericks in the Hollywood system. Sarris ignored the politique of the former argument, and transformed their call to action for auteurs into a theory of pure reverence for certain Hollywood directors. His “theory” consisted of three concentric circles of valuation: The outer circle as an intuitively agreed upon technical proficiency of the auteur. The middle circle was dedicated to a certain auteur’s style, or what made a film consistently its own. The final and most problematic circle contained “interior meaning” —an extremely vague means of critical determination. Like Truffaut, Sarris did not elaborate on how meaning was to be divined from technical skill and personal style, nor did he develop examples of what an auteur truly was beyond an arbitrary system of taste. The skill, style and meaning of Ford or Hitchcock was to be taken for granted.

The weakness of Sarris’s theory made it exceptionally easily for anti-auteurist writers like Pauline Kael to attack it, and “attack” is a mild term for the tone of her counter-argument entitled “Circles and Squares.” Kael easily dismantled Sarris’s system in three broad strokes: First, she pointed out that style could always exist independent of technical skill. Sarris’s argument depended on a non-commutative passage from skill to style. For Sarris, a filmmaker could be a skilled technician without a definitive style, and was thus by his rule not an auteur—this is like the metteur of the original Cahiers group. However, Kael argued that style, when defined in this reductive way, inversely did not necessarily depend on technical skill. One could have style without technical skill. and could still technically be an auteur because style was the main
determinant in knighting the auteur. Second, Kael pointed out that style as a consistent marker of a certain auteur could only be considered as a repetitive act, and this would be contrary to the claim that the figure of the auteur was always an act of artistic originality within the system. Where Sarris found style, Kael reinterpreted it as repetitive and unoriginal. By dismantling the first two of Sarris’s circles, the circle of interior meaning was the easiest to rebuke. Kael discarded any hope of finding meaning in the author’s intention using a model of interiority. To Kael, there was no inside to film, only a response to its surface. The true champion of meaning in Sarris’s article was Sarris himself.

Kael’s position crystallizes the general critical issue against the auteur as a psycho-biographical source of individual expression, and this is the reason I have sparingly used the term so far until it has been properly historicized. The term “auteur,” up to this point historically, remains mainly literary and Romantic, and it presupposes cinema as a classical art form (to a certain degree, this is Bazin’s fault). The turning point in auteurism comes when the critic is exposed as the real figure in charge of designating an auteur, not the actual filmmaker. Because the auteur in this figural construction is built within its critical reception, the figure is vulnerable to two easy attacks: First, it is determined solely by critical preference, and can easily be deposed and rewritten from subject to subject according to taste. Second, it is too deeply entrenched in the larger context of the classical theories of art, and can again be dismissed by promoting cinema’s fundamental commercial existence.

Thus, by the end of the 1960s, the failure of the auteur as an artist becomes the failure of the critic. The fact that the auteur may truly exist only in the critic led to more structural and formalist configurations of the auteur as an incorporeal mode of expression within the larger field of socio-cultural production. This is historically relevant because the skepticism
surrounding the expressionist figure of an individual creative subject that exerted full authority over a film began to become more and more suspect when the historical attitudes of the late 1960s in both America and Europe were becoming more and more violent towards any or all figures of authority.

ii. Auteurism as Formalism

Almost as if to parallel the failures of revolutionary politics throughout the 1960s, critical conversations became more and more wary of the individual creative genius as a false representation of authority in filmmaking. Coincidentally, this is also when Film Studies began to appear on the horizons of academic campuses. Film Studies was less interested in fostering appreciation for moviemaking and more interested in cinema as an ideological force that contributed to the formation of all different types of subjects.21 But, critics were still reluctant to entirely give up the auteur as a tool of categorization so they sought out a means referring to authorship as a critical template that disavowed its psycho-biographical elements. Film Studies began to borrow from the structuralism of Levi Strauss to retain the ability to categorize under certain names by intentionally recognizing the physical auteur as a myth. The critics of the British journal, Screen, acknowledged the impossibility of discovering an original source of meaning, and began utilizing various “textualizations” of the auteur. The historian of film authorship, C. Paul Sellors, refers to these effacements as “author surrogates.”22 In an attempt to avoid anthropomorphizing the figure of the author, thinker like Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, in different ways, privileged the text as the source of interactive meaning, and, for them, the author was a product or a function of the text. Barthes opted to discard the author altogether by establishing his death in very Nietzschean overtones. Foucault wished to retain the
author as a function that could determine the calculus of possible meanings within discourse. These “replacements” of both thinkers were themselves, undoubtedly historically motivated by the revolutionary attitudes that led up to May 1968 in their native France. Just as faith in the formation of political subjects was thrown in question, so was the author in doubt as an authoritative source of meaning.

These surrogate theories were largely anti-intentionalist in their methods of interpreting a cinematic work. Structural readings of film authorship tried to address and adopt the literary argument of the intentional fallacy where the true source of meaning was wrongly located in the author and was to be discovered in the interpreting critic or reader of the text, not the auteur. These methods substituted the psycho-biographical and Romantic interpretations of authorship into textual and rhetorical strategies. The author’s intention became immediately reformulated into a text or a discourse, and the author–as-creative-source took on a function that managed both critical and audience interpretations without admitting to a person, or persons, behind the textual curtain. Specific to cinematic authorship, the immediate critical figuration of the author became a variegated field of creative input that was only a reflection of the viewer's interpretation, which was configured under a single name, but this name represented a function, a discourse or a field of multiple creative forces. Alongside the structural attempts of Peter Wollen and Edmund Buscombe to reposition the auteur as a textual entity arose the other elements of Film Studies in historical succession: psychoanalysis, cultural studies and identity politics. All these relied heavily on cinema as a textual or discursive field to some degree as the study of cinema began to turn its attention towards methods of constructing subjectivity and the formation of specific audiences. However, as the critical focus exposed itself to be preoccupied with the viewer’s subjectivity, the ghost of the author remained.
And so, criticism suffered the many deaths of the *auteur*. Any “post-Romantic” study of cinematic authorship started at the tombstone of the *auteur*, who was repeatedly killed by the industrial realities of economic conditions, demands of convention, and corporate ownership of the late capitalist era. And yet, auteurism was and is one of those terms that perpetually rises from its grave and continues to haunt the variegated systematic approaches of Film Studies. As I have already pointed out, it keeps being used as a heuristic model of valuation and qualification even though most critics are fully aware of its unreliable and phantasmal presence. Auteurism, under more formal and cognitive models, explained away a certain dependence of the actual body of the cinematic author by recognizing auteurism as a historically specific and textually dependent category, but it was still interpreted and kept as a mode of expression. Under these models, auteurism was clearly demarcated as a “post-Classical” historical figure that was a by-product of the tumultuous systemic shifts effected *a fortiori* by the divestment of its exhibition wing by the Paramount decree, the advent of television, and the absorption of the studios into larger conglomerates. It was inextricably linked to the rise of the “art cinema” of the sixties and the seventies that was in direct counter-cultural opposition to the corporatization of the Hollywood system. This historical era is extremely complex because it was supposed to be an alternative cinema developed within the dismantling and transformation of the failed Classical system. It was to represent and bear witness to an explosion of revolutionary cinematic strategies and techniques that engaged more marginal audiences.

From the vantage point of this marginality, however, the concept of the auteur was dangerously close to being absorbed by those hegemonic authorities that the “art cinema” was supposed to be rallying against. Auteurs who were expected to be ushering in a revolutionary cinema always skirted the possibility that if they “succeeded” they would eventually become the
system. This was always the danger of the political element—as well as its implicit failure—of the auteur, and even though its project was doomed from the start—to be either absorbed or exiled by the system—the auteur was still something that formal and cognitive thinkers could not let go of unless they could replace it with a stronger formal means of organization. For example, David Bordwell considered the expressionist configuration of auteurism as a necessary myth of an extra-textual source of filmmaking that was a phantom of the overtly self-conscious narration that was historically specific to “art cinema.” The auteur had a specific historicity, and could not be applied retrospectively because the Classical System did not manufacture auteurs as an ideological strategy. The post-war auteur had had its historical moment and, for the most part, as the author was viewed more and more as textual residue and was replaceable by surrogates to appease the field of reception, the inherited literary dimension of the auteur also became suspect because the narrative aspect of filmmaking was contrary to its value as “art.” As critic Dudley Andrew notes:

In the postwar era, the auteur was the strongest tie linking cinema to the literary function: The auteur proved that Film could be an art, an expression of personal thought and feeling, opposed to the externality of spectacle, opposed also perhaps to the universal appeal of most movies. The mention of literature calls to mind a cinema that is viewed in private … in short, a cinema to be read rather than consumed….literature and cinema have in common the futile and pathetic struggle to preserve the value of thought, of feeling, of art, in a world that decreasingly cares about such things. (Andrew 82)

The connections to the literary and Classical system’s precursors were either closed off or of little interest to the growing importance placed on cinema as a site of consumerism. As
Hollywood began to reconfigure itself and the blockbuster loomed as the singular model of Hollywood filmmaking in the future, only the field of cinematic consumerism lay ahead.

By the end of the 1970s, Film Studies had become more suspect of the political and corporate power of the Hollywood “dream factory.” It became less of a field of artistic expression and appreciation and more a machinery that produced certain types of subjects. It began to pay strict attention to the ideological functions of cinematic authors. Auteurism, in effect, became a genre. If genre is technically the act of applying generic properties to a group of specific films to organize them, then, for example, John Ford’s films are all films associated with the name “Ford.” Beyond this tautological construction, certain films will retain more qualities attributed to Ford than others, thus there is a spectrum as to the intensity of each Ford film. Some will argue that *Stagecoach* (1939) and *The Searchers* (1956) are intensely Ford films, whereas *Mister Roberts* (1955) and *Donovan’s Reef* (1963) are less intensely Ford films. Here is where the great need for critical caution shows itself, and the multiple spaces for opinions as to what constitutes the actual grouping of films under Ford are created. If we follow this through, the name of Ford provides an exclusive space where collaborative input from other creative sources are allowed, but each specific film must be attributed to Ford. Thus, a film under the name Hawks can have all the specific qualities of a Ford film, but is not a Ford film because it is a Hawks film. This is where the hope for a clearly defined border based only upon the name breaks down. There are too many interacting factors that go into the production, distribution and exhibition of a film—and this is true as well for other works of art as well—that speak to the plasticity of a name.

This slippery method of grouping a set of films made holding the name of the auteur accountable for its ideological content more than a little problematic. What if a film is started by
one name and finished by another as in the case with Erich Stroheim, who was kicked off *Merry Go Round* (1923) by Irving Thalberg at Universal? If only the director is replaced, but the remaining production crew remains, then does the signature remain intact or does it change? How much authorial input is lost? This can never clearly be defined. Even in the famous case of *Spartacus* (1960) where the subtle style choices of the fired Anthony Mann are so evidently opposed to the bold stylistic choices of the young Stanley Kubrick, it is still impossible to draw out two separate films from each authorial strand. And using these two examples of *Merry Go Round* and *Spartacus*, does not the true authority rest in Thalberg and *Spartacus*’s producer/star Kirk Douglas respectively, rather than that of the directors or the writers?

Indeed, whether the critical intent was to deride or uphold aesthetic merits within the genre of the auteur, all these formalist solutions for the auteur could not shelter the failures of the auteur by relegateing it to being a stylistic container for a consistent group of films under a single name. At this historical moment where the auteur seemed hopelessly outdated and problematic—–a completely disseminated body and soul lost to the commercial field of cinematic production—–and was growing more and more distasteful to Film Studies, which had become too involved in the various constructions of subjectivity and subalterns to care about creators, in a surprising reversal of fortune, the auteur steadily returned in force as both a strategy and an agency in the budding blockbuster era.

### iii. Auteurism as Strategic Branding and Consumer Product

As cinema settled into the 1980s, Hollywood had made almost a full economic recovery from the 1960s conglomerates, and was becoming the international blockbuster-producing system it is recognized as today. Right when auteurs had begun to establish themselves as
alternatives to a failed Classical system, their “method of becoming” would be intrinsically
modified from an aestheticized and historicized figure of progression into a self-modeled
construction of marketable reliability. So, at the point where the auteur had been completely
evacuated of its importance as a mode of expression, it was being reconfigured as a mode of
commerce. As Timothy Corrigan puts it: “[I]f, in conjunction with the so-called international art
cinema of the sixties and seventies, the auteur had been absorbed as a phantom presence, he or
she has rematerialized in the eighties and nineties as an agent of commercial performance of the
business of being an auteur” (The New American Cinema 42). Indeed, as our overview of the
greater debate over the author as a practical means of control contends, the cinematic author has
always existed as a commercial identity long before it was introduced as a symbol of expression
and creativity. However, as the new millennium of film approached, there was a clear
transformative shift in the system to deploy the auteur as a brand instead of as a literary remnant.
The need for a new trademark of authorship seemed increased by the international audience
sweep of the blockbuster and the expansion of private home viewing created by VCR technology
and its successors. Auteurism shifted completely from a mode of expression into a means of
commercial agency.

This agency developed out of the auteur-star construction of the New Hollywood, where
the filmmaker strategically plugged into the expectations of a certain spectacle. To different
degrees, filmmakers such as Coppola, Lucas, Spielberg, Scorsese, Bogdanovich and Friedkin
worked within the system to self-promote their name—and to some degree their physical image–
–as a brand. The brand, in turn, would fulfill the promise that the film’s reception would know
what to expect from each brand. The brand would reify authorial intentionality. As it progressed
under the simple differential equation of cost-effectiveness versus profit margin, the auteur-star
status foreclosed upon an evaluative critical relation to the movie. In certain cases, such as Spielberg, Lucas or Cameron, the filmmaker could no longer be damaged by critical disappointment because they were directly delivering product expected of their brand. Critics no longer needed to interpret a film because they were instructed in advance how to receive it. An investment in an aesthetic qualification was unnecessary to the brand of the commercial auteur. In other words, the auteur had strayed very far from a qualitative method of expression to be valued by critical reception. With the commodity of the cinematic experience branching past the theater experience into home viewing and ancillary markets, the auteur was a direct reflection of such globalization and market stratification. Recognition of the auteur’s celebrity or agency exceeded the movie itself both before and after its existence. Like its earlier Romantic conception, the figure of the auteur seemed to be more important than the work, but in this case its brand remained embedded throughout the entire historical existence of the work, not its artistic integrity—an integrity that still had not been clearly defined.

Francis Ford Coppola is a great example of the historical differentiation between the expressionist figure and the commercial one. As the self-branded auteur, Coppola is intentionally mirroring the Romantic figure of, say, Welles as a myth of the maverick against the system. But instead of becoming purely exiled by the system as is the arguable case with Welles, Coppola manipulated that system even through his excesses, his failures. He could promote and control his own Wellesian position to create sympathy as a controlled expectation. Coppola markets Welles as an exile or a failure to different results. This is not to say that Coppola does not find himself in similar failed relations to his contemporary Hollywood system, but his agency is wholly founded upon his responsibility to market himself as a maverick figure. I am not comparing the two auteurs’ works to validate a better historical position. Instead, I am
showing how auteurism reinvests itself as a promotional tool and productive force regardless of an auteur’s success or failure.

The auteur as brand cleverly manipulates the expressive and formal expectations of the older figures of auteurs into an act of rhetorical force that produces a work with this figure attached to its imagery. The purpose of this figure, or as I prefer it, its signature marks a very specific temporal moment in which the work is stamped with its inception and promise. This is the closest one can get to cinematic intention. The historical modes of authorship that we have traced thus far are mainly spatial representations of those shifting modalities that configure creative acts of filmmaking, but the signature of the author also has a temporal dimension—it retains an element of its own duration. In a Deleuzian sense, the figure of the author has embedded within the film the temporal process that brought the film into being in the first place and includes the emergent thought of the spectator. The temporal dimension is key because when placed in the post-modern speed of consumerism, the celebrity of the auteur is brief and the effort to self-promote is fraught with missteps that lead to the failure of the brand as an effective means to stay in communication with the image the auteur has produced. As Dudley Andrew puts it: The auteur can "thicken a text with duration, with the past of its coming into being and with the future of our being with it" (Andrew 85). But if the temporality of its inception is embedded in the author’s signature, then intention briefly remains intact even if it is now a commercial strategy more so than an aesthetic one. The celebrity status of the contemporary auteur is much less stable and long-lived as one imagines it to be in earlier remnants of retro-auteurism—the auteurism of Cahiers du Cinema as applied to Hawks, Ford and Hitchcock. Perhaps this is because each historical figure’s ignorance of their “auteur status” relieved any pressure to maintain a public figural supplement in relation to their cinematic
images. The instantaneity of today’s celebrity only makes more apparent its implicit failure in that this failure tends to be more immediate and more public due to the increased delivery speeds and accessibility of media and information. The cinematic author is the quickening recurrence of disappointment in those auteurs that race to be recognized within a postmodern field of consumer reception. But regardless of this disappointment, the cinematic author is still temporal signature contained in the promise of the auteur: the promise of its intentional failure.

If I have fitted the historical evolutions of auteurism and the general polemic surrounding its conceptualization sufficiently to the particular focus on intentional failure inherent in any of its configurations, then we can now effectively move forward with more specific examples that reconsider failure as a constructive element in filmmaking rather than as a critical or commercial excuse for ostracizing an auteur from the filmmaking process and denying each “failure” the credit it may rightfully deserve. In all its variations, the figure of the cinematic author and the archival trace of its intention is always embedded in each work, and this fact supports the claim that the cinematic author may be absorbed into the system more often than it is supposedly exiled or marginalized. Throughout these following critical studies, the myth of artistic opposition to the Hollywood system will seem to reify itself again and again, but with this primer, we have seen that such opposition is more often a rhetorical construction that is formed from an earlier series of negotiations—a nexus that includes, but is not exclusive to, financial, critical and aesthetic concerns of production, distribution, exhibition and other ancillary or horizontal interests—that lead to the collaborative construction of each film regardless of how its author is configured. Whether the auteur is rendered as a body, surrogate or brand there remains a signature to the work that distinguishes what a film hopes to achieve. Even if it cannot be
resolutely determined or is completely ignored, the creative intention is archived and stored within the film’s temporality. Most importantly, however, is that the inevitability of failure in each creative endeavor—a failure that resides firmly in its popular and critical reception—is not meant to provoke sympathy for, or to exonerate, an auteur’s less appreciated features. It is meant to open the critical field beyond those points of artistic and commercial success to reveal a much larger expanse of work that acknowledges all those “other works” that are interwoven into and underpin those successes. Instead of just reiterating the cliché of “failing to succeed,” our argument from here on in focuses on failure as the larger playing field where success intermittently occurs throughout the many transformations of Hollywood filmmaking and its critical and popular reception.
Chapter 2: The Birth of Failure at the Rise of Hollywood

*A historical succession of art styles bases itself in transformations.*

—Tom Gunning

To be sure, there are many differences in tone and perspective between the narratives of various auteurist critical positions and the narratives of Hollywood’s many transformations throughout its history. But, while each narrative becomes more and more complicated as it reaches the present, at the core of both there is often a similar tendency towards a nostalgia that pines for a simpler era of cinematic production. Nostalgia for a studio system that represented a “better way of cinema” is as much of a romantic reconstruction as the critical reduction of auteurism is to a single psychobiological source of genius and intention. Unlike auteurist narratives, historical narratives of the Hollywood studio system claim to avoid romanticizing at all costs. The more rigorous they are, the more supposedly detached they are from the individual struggles of certain auteurs to capture the system’s evolution as impartially as possible. But when retelling Hollywood’s various past modes of production—whether its successes or failures are grounded economically, aesthetically, or both—the system itself still tends to become personified and/or anthropomorphized in the process. Put another way, the “character” of Hollywood tends to play a central role in its own script—a similar rise and fall narrative *a la* auteurism where a formerly successful system inevitably fails and must give way to alternative modes of cinematic practice. At the end of this chapter, I shall address this “certain tendency of the personification of the system” as an example of how auteurism surreptitiously prevails as an expansive genre system of singular creative brands from the beginnings of the Classical Hollywood system forward—although with the caveat that these brands should always admit to a multiplicity of creative sources, and are in no way ahistorical or trans-historical as traditional genre studies suggests. But, for now, let us adopt this practice of historical “character study” as
it neatly parallels our investigation into the stakes of auteurism’s investment in predestined “rise and fall” narratives quite nicely.

So where does Hollywood itself as a figure first begin to “rise?” Early industrial practices that evolved into the standardized Classical Hollywood system emerged roughly between 1907 and 1920, and became fully institutionalized by the entrance of sound circa 1927. The standard Hollywood picture’s commodification as an object of entertainment is often articulated as a natural progression towards meeting the requirements of certain qualitative shifts in the cinematic product: First, film’s general increase in length from one and two reel films to a longer feature length. Second, the growing industrial dependence on a narrative-infused product that helped to sell a certain story to a certain audience. And third, the formation of a production pyramid arguably motivated more by profit margins than creative concerns. Left as is, these reductions echo an inexorable march towards the popular blockbuster format and its numerous ancillary markets now “perfected” in our contemporary age.

But this progression is hardly natural, and even less linear. It does not fulfill a necessary nor certain industrial destiny. It is fraught with failures and mistakes that are unevenly patched over to make Hollywood seem to be the most efficient and practical method of industrial survival. It is difficult to look backwards past this illusion of natural progression, as it is equally hard to dismiss the blockbuster mindset and conditioning of present Hollywood. Perhaps this is the reason so many cinematic histories are lamentations for a more independent and collaborative system of production that doubtfully ever existed. To us, the present Hollywood studio system has been disseminated into so many privatized “spaces” of production and distribution that locating an “authentic” field of collaborative creative output seems futile and so we must look backwards to imagine one. Through a retrospective lens, the rise of the Classical
Hollywood system, its narrative structure, and its auteurs are interpreted (and often unfairly judged) by its future. Viewed this way, Classical Hollywood is witnessed only through the historical prism of its demise and the emergence of the New Hollywood and its blockbuster mentality. Likewise, the New Hollywood is considered only through the New New Hollywood and its multi-platform streaming media, and so on.

To some degree, this “tinting” of the past is unavoidable. However, the older multiple narratives that are supposedly erased by the succeeding system are all still preserved—however mutated and perverted—in the new system that bears witness to their resignation and failure. Recent film historians such as Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson insist that, despite the economic and aesthetic shifts throughout the system’s history, Classical Hollywood has never really disappeared—that the dependence upon a particular narrative formalism, which itself evolved from older literary and theatrical models into a very specific code of editing techniques and narrative structure, is still predominant today. These historiographers of cinematic narratives point to a layering of events, of certain thresholds, where the system evolves and transforms itself to remain marketable to the certain economic shifts in sociocultural preferences and taste.

Because Hollywood always references its past models and comments on its own history by “borrowing and building” from earlier films (remakes and sequels are only the most obvious examples of this trend) while also editing and rewriting that history, these thresholds are moments or “events” where one mode of production reformulates itself into another mode of production while maintaining a narrative self-consciousness of its earlier accomplishments.

Thus, the Hollywood system is equally as adept—if not more so—at absorbing and institutionalizing its failures as the auteur. Moreover, it tends to be less emotional and/or apologetic about it. Traditionally in film criticism, the auteur is resignation to inevitable failure
(e.g. Bazin) and it is simply a matter of degree to what extent the auteur is held accountable for its intentions (e.g. Sarris or Kael). However, a failure of the system—perhaps because it is almost always at its base considered an economic failure—is considered transitional and often necessary: A threshold through which the system passes into a new set of production practices, branding, marketing, and financing. These thresholds in the system’s evolution and transformation shed a greater historical understanding of how certain cineastes can be considered failures from one historical vantage point of the system, and as pioneers of creative independence that contributed to the system’s “natural” progression from another.

Obviously, the idea here is not to render a complete historiography of the relationships between the Hollywood system and its various artists over the past century, nor is it to construct a specific timeline that supports only a historical reconsideration of—or apology for—my specific examples of “failed auteurs.” Rather, these thresholds merely show the complexity of maintaining a fixed configuration of any auteur because the Hollywood system habitually discards established practices and develops alternative ways to absorb these artists, who, by definition, restructure said established practices into the system even if—as it so often does—it marginalizes them in the process. As I suggested at the beginning of this book, rather than expecting a comprehensive historical overview of the Hollywood system’s crimes against the auteur, the reader should expect to move freely through the system’s history of fluctuation between the cineaste and the resources of the system because these moments are often where definitions of independence or resistance to the system—romanticized or not—often occur. The “failures” of independence and resistance often become concrete after the system regains a new sense of purpose and identity from passing through these thresholds.
Thresholds of failure and transformation of the Hollywood system correspond to moments that would relate to those who would argue that certain auteurs’ failures are to be excused because they are “out of time” with the system. But I want to conceive these failures in a different way than simply as a genius ahead of his/her time. Rather, these historical thresholds complicate narratives of cinematic evolution within narratives of “failed auteurs” (and vice versa). They become the horizon where auteurs become more than one possibility—more than a single stylistic gesture. They become a complex nexus through which multiple creative inputs are channeled. Analyzing these thresholds creates a multifaceted viewpoint of when and where cinematic authorship and its intentional failures occur within these transformative moments of the Hollywood system.

D. W. Griffith, the Proto-Auteur and the Event Horizon of Failure

When one searches for the earliest example of a possible auteur at the dawn of cinema, a few will argue for Lumiere, Melies, or Porter, but most are immediately drawn to the prolific progenitor of the blockbuster, D.W. Griffith. Griffith fortuitously leapt from being an aspiring actor and writer to become the director of almost five hundred one-reel and two-reel films created under contract at American Mutoscope and Biograph (later just Biograph) Company from 1908 to 1913. Seeking recognition for his output and greater creative independence to create longer features, he teamed up with Harry Aitken’s Reliance-Majestic Co, which was distributed by New York’s Mutual, to produce Griffith and Aitken’s epic project, The Clansman. The film’s growing expenses caused Mutual to back out financially, but Aitken and Griffith soldiered on, producing and distributing it themselves. Retitled The Birth of a Nation (1915), the
film and its risky racial content skyrocketed Griffith to fame. From there Griffith sought to expand his aesthetic achievements first with larger and larger budgets. He continuously sought contractual independence from the studios completely, but Griffith was never able to match the initial success—at least commercially—of his first feature-length masterpiece. Griffith’s cinematic output after 1915 has become a mixed bag of aesthetic oversteps and compromises, industrial grandiosity and poor debt management, and ultimately, the perfect historical starting point and template for the failure of cinematic authorship.

If not retroactively an auteur in his own right, David Wark Griffith is arguably the most obvious candidate to be at least its prototype. The originality of his contributions has been placed under rigorous questioning by contemporary film historians, but Griffith remains an ideal example of how the cinematic author as a figure of practical ingenuity and creativity emerged from the technological beginnings of film. This is because he spent a great deal of effort during his middle-to-late career trying to gain recognition for his work, most probably because of the earlier obscurity working without credit under Biograph. Griffith’s history is impressive in that he attempted to establish—and to varying degrees dangerously succeeded—a directorial brand before the industry had completely cemented itself as either a well-funded system, or as a profitable investment on Wall Street. Griffith’s brand contributed not only to the aesthetic development of cinema, but also to the “bankability” of film as a commodity of—and thus to the industrial advancement of—what would become the Classical Hollywood system. So, Griffith has the distinction of being one of the earliest possible figures who not only coincides with the emergence of a certain aesthetic approach—that of continuity or “narrative integration”—at the beginnings of Hollywood, but also as a brand-name that became exemplary of using said brand-name to acquire financial support for his aesthetic endeavors. His capitalization of his directorial
brand, following his success in 1915, paralleled the beginnings of certain industrial practices of production financing—as well as corporate financing—that solidified cinema production as a bankable commodity.

However, whereas Hollywood grew into a well-funded, vertically-integrated oligopoly throughout the twenties, Griffith’s practice of collateralizing his brand to enable a certain independence from studio control became a practice in debt management that backfired on Griffith. These uneven results show how both artists and the studio system, which emerge simultaneously as a complicated and evolving series of relationships with similar methods of branding and financing, become separated by different perspectives. It is worthwhile when considering Griffith as one of the earliest possible prototypes of the auteur—or as the “father of film” as he is admiringly referred to by many of his biographers—that both his aesthetic and his industrial relationships to the nascent Hollywood system be evenly explored. While what interests this study of “failure” most directly is the period of aesthetic and financial struggle starting with Intolerance (1918) to his final studio picture, aptly named The Struggle (1932), Griffith’s entire career was arguably fraught with attempts at various modes of “primitive” studio independence—attempts to move away from contractual obligations and early systems of control such as Edison’s Motion Picture Patent Company (MPPC), and, later, the quickly forming oligopolies such as Adolph Zukor’s Famous Players-Lasky and First National. These early attempts at creative independence are extremely valuable to understanding Griffith’s later period of failure—not only how he was alienated from the system he helped create, but also how the financial system differentiated itself from individual accomplishment as the “inhuman” factory model of the classical studio.
With careful attention to what we can call his “transitionality”—his straddling of the technological event of early cinema to the Classical Hollywood model of storytelling—Griffith configured as one of the earliest “victims” of the studio system becomes extremely complex, especially if one considers the sheer volume of work and the standardized practices of filmmaking this “victim” left behind. This is not to say that Griffith was not “phased out” of the industry he arguably helped create. He was. Instead, Griffith is one of the earliest examples of how his continual “failure” to achieve artistic independence colors the overall “success” of not only his entire career, but of the system that succeeded him. Rather than pointing to how quickly the Hollywood system absorbed and institutionalized his stylistic advancements into its own industrial practices, Griffith largely becomes one of the first cautionary tales that would grow into the presumptive myth that warned of the risks to any artist directly competing against the system. We know this to be unfair because, in many ways, all the way up to the advent of sound, Griffith arguably was the system. Therefore, Griffith’s failures do not to demarcate the origins of an opposition to the Hollywood system, but, instead, demonstrate how the system emerged from the bankable auteur. Or, at least, it reveals how interdependent authorial and industrial practices were at the inception of the Hollywood system.

Griffith’s failure within “his own system” is intensified by his glorification as an early innovator, and this is a typical rhetorical trope in most auteurist criticism: Those that glorified Griffith made his victimization more sympathetic. As if an auteur’s glory is only inherent in its inevitable sacrifice. But Griffith’s innovations need as much clarification as his failures. In recent decades, the tendency to elevate Griffith’s authority as the inventor of narrative via the techniques such as the close up and parallel editing has been rigorously debunked after a wave of what critic Thomas Elsaesser calls “a ritual act of parricide” by contemporary critics. To say
that Griffith invented narrative in film is not only wrong, it limits Griffith’s overall experimentation and play with the new technological medium before narrative film became institutionalized and regulated. In fact, the assumed natural progression of cinema towards narrative in general has been a heated point of historical contention. The turn to narrative in cinema was not due to a necessary need for storytelling. Rather, continuity in cinema emerged as a certain solution to early cinema’s use of spatial representation by inflecting it with a linearity. This linearity is itself a compromise between cinema’s temporal element and a causal chain.30 This is what makes Griffith’s work, especially between 1908 and 1915, such a rich period for the beginnings of narrative formalism in cinema. Griffith is not an originator of techniques as much as he is a transitional figure of this linearity that would become an accepted commodity. The narrative formalism specific to Classical Hollywood cinema is only one product of this linearity. Griffith’s work leads towards the Classical Hollywood model of transparent cinema, and not the other way around. His work cannot be reduced to only a more efficient way of storytelling. It affords more possibilities of cinema than just the Hollywood model.

   It is, perhaps, because of these potential alternatives to the Classical system that contemporary scholars of early cinema are more attentive to his pre-branding innovations. They tend to limit Griffith’s importance as a proto-auteur squarely in the decade between the cinema of technological effect (1895 to 1908) and the transparency of the Classical Hollywood cinema (1919 forward), and thus leave out his subsequent work as understandable “failures” because the system absorbed and moved past them. But not all of Griffith’s innovations were absorbed by Hollywood. His work also clearly contains elements of what Elsaesser refers to as “the cinema of non-continuity.” The cinema of non-continuity is not only an element of pre-narrative early
cinema, but is the reserved category for cinema’s alternatives to Hollywood filmmaking, specifically the avant-garde. It retains the primitive practices of cinema that resists the transparency of narrative cinema. The aesthetic components of Griffith’s cinema always contained experiments in shooting and cross-cutting that did not necessarily become standardized by the surrounding system. In short, Griffith’s work contained both continuous and non-continuous elements. The continuous elements of Griffith’s filmmaking can clearly be traced in the “progressive” editing practices of Hollywood, whereas the non-continuous elements can explain how the Soviet filmmakers, especially Eisenstein and Pudovkin, found the elements of discontinuity and montage in the same works. But the non-continuity in Griffith’s works could also be the “dated” elements that would account for his later industrial failures. If repeating methods of continuity became the institutionalized norm, it would not make sense that Griffith repeating his continuity would “date” his later films. The innovations of non-continuity that he developed at Biograph between 1908 and 1913 would be the exact same stylistic elements that would “date” him in future works—as a failure to remain contemporary within the system.

Let us, then, look closer at these earlier elements that are simultaneously foundational and outmoded within a single psycho-biographical timeline. In *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film*, Tom Gunning makes a strong case for how Griffith transitioned between what scholars of early cinema distinguish between the primitive mode of representation (PMR) and the institutionalized mode of representation (IMR). Gunning delves specifically into Griffith’s first year at Biograph between 1908 to 1909 to analyze how Griffith increasingly reorganized shots that moved away from a redundant proscenium staging/framing that mimicked theatrical staging. Rather than trying to contain dramatic action based on vaudeville and other
popular theater models of his time, Griffith instead moved the camera from an assumed audience position that mirrored a theatrical experience closer to his actors to develop a level of intensity and intimacy depending on the narrative effect he wished to achieve. The same narrative logic ran in reverse to create massive long shots to include densely populated landscapes to establish an overall redefinition of spatial construction that was exclusive to cinema’s technological ability to relocate the camera/specator. Griffith experimented liberally with the variegated spaces of each shot, but he edited them together to effectively intensify a new linear method of storytelling, one where the logic of editing was supposedly embedded into each of his shots.

Gunning elaborates this new method as the “cinema of narrative integration” in this way:

The cinema of narrative integration defines the mode of film practice of one specific slice of film history. The essence of this slice is its development of filmic discourse for the purpose of storytelling. All levels of filmic discourse become organized around the narrative task: pro-filmic elements such as acting, costuming, and settings; the arrangements of elements within the frame, and the elements of editing. The cinema of narrative integration can be distinguished from the cinema of attractions, exemplified by Porter and Méliés, in which the task of storytelling has not yet asserted absolute dominance over the free play of filmic discourse. (Gunning 290-1)

The earlier mode—the cinema of attractions—is a filmic discourse that clearly announces the camera’s position, whose relationship to the audience is the spectacle of the camera itself and its technological possibilities. The audience via the camera can participate in what the technology can capture and bring to the audience. The camera’s position and existence is always central and visible to the audience, overtly presenting the technology that make these attractions available to the viewer. The distinct presence of the camera is gradually erased as the cinema of narrative
integration begins to sublimate the camera’s existence into the story being told. The audience is encouraged to “forget” the camera’s existence.

While the audience remains the destination of both these modes, this shift towards the camera’s transparency begins to act in a more voyeuristic way, and this restructures not only the audience, but also the performances of the performers as well as their mise en scène—in other words, *it affects the film’s content*. As Gunning contends:

The camera is no longer the stand-in for the responsive audience of vaudeville theater. It becomes a more spectral presence, whose power forces the actor not to address or look at it directly. In the late Biograph films Griffith created a new relationship between performer and camera, one based on an understanding of the camera, and therefore the cinema spectator, as a powerful voyeur with the ability to penetrate into the character’s most private reaches. (261)

The thrust of Gunning’s argument is that Griffith’s early Biograph films act as an historical focal point that allows the contemporary critic and audience to recognize cinema’s transition into narrative. These films act as a horizon in which we can see the emergence of the narrative system. Since we contemporary viewers have already acclimated to the hegemony of narrative Hollywood cinema, we can clearly differentiate between films that have an awareness of the camera and those where the camera has become invisible. As Gunning concludes:

Griffith’s Biograph films address us as contemporaries through laying bare the narrative process of the cinema. For film viewers nurtured in a cinema that classically conceals its narrative operations through an “invisible” style, Griffith’s films reveal the encounter of filmic discourse with narrative purposes. In Griffith, what is rendered “invisible” in later
cinema still remains visible. We witness in these early films the transformation of filmic discourse into figures of narrative significance. (292)

For me, this transformation—this innovation—directly refers to a disappearance of the source of the picture—in this case, the technical apparatus itself, the camera. And this disappearance resonates with the difficulty of locating the author specific to cinema. To make the camera more transparent and spectral—to make the thing that manipulates watching *invisible*—deeply complicates Griffith’s battle to be recognized as a figure of authorial control and independence. This is the paradox of his cinematic brand.

The disappearance of the picture’s source can extend to the obfuscation of intentionality. The cinema of attraction’s intention is to show off the ability of the camera’s technology. What differentiates the camera from the author is some assumption of a consciousness that manipulates meaning instead of just a field of vision (the word “style” begins to gain definition for me here). This space between the technological and the psychobiological, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is where the crisis of auteurism occurs. At its earliest stages, the transition from an apparatus-centric spectacle to the transparency of narrative cinema has a singular auteur attributed to it that is simultaneously being erased. Griffith’s innovation is the effacement, the obfuscation of, his own creative input, and Griffith’s self-branding, it would seem, is an auteurist act that intends to counter-balance such a disappearance.

These complications of transparent authorship and counter-branding do not historically occupy Gunning’s argument because, as we have noted earlier, Griffith’s contributions under Biograph would have been uncredited and anonymous. But Griffith’s exit from Biograph seems to be motivated with the singular intention of getting more attention. In 1913, Griffith pushed the envelope at Biograph trying to create longer features, but, after finishing the four-reel *Judith*
and Bethuleah (1914), the company insisted that he either make only one reel films or oversee other filmmakers. Having been refused both recognition of his productivity and shares in the company, Griffith resigned from Biograph in September of that same year. This prompted Griffith shortly after leaving the company to famously take out a full-page advert in the New York Dramatic Mirror on December 3. This ad laid claim to his numerous “inventions,” such as the close-up, long-distance shots, the “switchback,” suspense via parallel editing, the fade out, and a better, more effective style of acting from his performers. The critic C. Paul Sellors marks the importance of this ad for cinematic authorship as being extremely timely because it parallels not only the burgeoning star system, but also the consolidation of labor movements in the film industry. He states: “At the time that scientific labor management was gaining strength across the industries, Griffith established that the films he was involved with were artisanal” (9).

But this move was prompted less to improve Griffith’s labor position, and more to promote his brand. Because he felt so strongly that the future of film was in longer feature-length product, and that he would have to “sell” his ability to make longer films to a new financial backer, Griffith promoted himself as a feature filmmaker before he was one. Griffith was aware of European feature productions such as Quo Vadis (1914) and Cabiria (1914) that were proving that viewers could sit through longer films. As well, he was aware that his contemporaries, especially fellow director Thomas Ince, knew this too and that they would beat Griffith to it if he wasn’t fast enough. Griffith’s advert was clearly an effort to gain some sort of recognition for his massive contributions to Biograph, but it also marks a clear attempt to market his potential to other production and distribution companies that would trust in his accomplishments, and grant him greater creative freedom. As we have seen, the branding
afforded Griffith the chance to create his most famous epic—the arguable first blockbuster—*The Birth of a Nation*, and created a large future of bankable possibilities.

This early branding directly corresponds to commodification of the cinematic product, and with a particularly auteurist bent. In Janet Wasko’s foundational study of the how Hollywood emerged as a commodity worthy of financial investment, she points out how Griffith was one of the first filmmakers to secure substantial financing for his films, and how this strategy mirrored the capitalization of the entire industry after World War I. As she says:

While Griffith criticized Hollywood and how he had been treated it must be said that he had been an active participant in the evolution of a capitalist film system, even to the extent of forming his own corporation, and participating in many others. Yet, one cannot help but wonder how his creative potential might have developed with these commercial restrictions that contributed so greatly to his downfall . . . He had helped create a new American art form, but he had also contributed to the growth of motion pictures as a new American industry with commercial considerations and restrictions similar to any other capitalist enterprise. (*Movies and Money* 41)

Despite *The Birth of a Nation*’s groundbreaking success, Griffith only netted $1 million by the end of the initial run of the film, which even for 1915 was not the greatest of profits. But more than his actual earnings, the industrial impact of a successful epic recouping its exorbitant production costs enabled Griffith, more so than any of his contemporaries, to borrow off his name alone.

From the collateral of his name, Griffith formed Wark Productions Co. The company was backed by fifty investors—a third of which were associated with Wall Street. Even though he was still primarily self-financed, he remained connected with the influential Harry Aitken,
who despite the success of *The Birth of a Nation*, had been ousted from his chairman position at Mutual by its board. Aitken quickly formed a new company called Triangle Films, taking with him Mutual’s biggest names: Griffith, Thomas Ince and Mack Sennet. But Griffith insisted on distancing himself from working under Aitken exclusively, and relied on self-funding to produce his next film, *Intolerance*. Griffith took on huge personal responsibility for *Intolerance*’s debts, and this was the beginning of Griffith’s struggles financially to subsidize his own work.

Without ever having made a film for Triangle, Griffith moved to Adolph Zukor’s Artcraft Company in 1917, but Griffith still felt he was being denied full credit and profits owed to his brand. When Griffith was approached by fellow artists to form a company whose production and distribution were to be controlled solely by the artists who created and funded them, this seemed to be exactly what Griffith had been looking for since he left Biograph. In 1919, United Artists (UA) was incorporated by Griffith, director and star Charlie Chaplin, and performers, Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks as a move towards independence from moguls like Adolf Zukor, who were buying up national theater chains and merging them with their production and distribution companies. Each founding artist of UA was to deliver several films per year and were responsible for finding their own funding. Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms* was the second film released by UA on October 20th, 1919. The film had been made while Griffith was still at Artcraft for $88,000, and was sold back to UA for $250,000. The film, however, still made a profit of approximately $700,000. The Griffith brand was still potent and promised good things for UA.

But while Griffith was a trained factory man and understood the importance of fulfilling the delivery of contracted product, the other artists were not as punctual, especially Chaplin who had yet to deliver any film at all. Because UA’s partners refused to go public or merge, this not
only made distribution difficult but it limited funding for production. Each stock holder was forced to finance and distribute their own productions and this severely limited cash flow. Thus, UA films’ profits, regardless of how well the Fairbanks, Pickford, and the still absent Chapin products did at the box office, were never enough to create the next set of films. Each film had to start from scratch, so to speak, and drum up new financing to get made. From the onset, Griffith was trying to distance himself from UA’s problems. Griffith purchased land in Mamaroneck, NY and built his own studio. Presumably, he chose New York to be close to the financial center of the industry. He then formed a public company, D. W. Griffith Inc, on August 30, 1920. The company was capitalized at $50 million and collateralized by his studio and land, his earlier films, and his UA stock. The irony of Griffith going public is that although his intention was to gain independence by owning and controlling his own studio and thus his own means of production, he opened himself, his films and his distribution company up to investment bankers.

As his own boss, Griffith completed successful features such as *Way Down East* (1920) and *Orphans of the Storm* (1921) for both his company and UA. Griffith had retained the sole rights to distribute these films overseas, and this strained the relations with Pickford and Fairbanks that felt withholding international sales was a betrayal of their ideal collaboration (even though Chaplin was guilty of doing the same thing). In turn, Griffith felt that the combination of his brand and his reliable productivity was “carrying” UA, and that the Hollywood contingent was siding against his New York business. Griffith clearly felt he was not supported by his UA partners and he secretly concluded a $250,000 deal, again with Zukor (now Paramount), on June 10, 1924. UA learned of Griffith’s deal after it hit the papers, but did not want to risk a lawsuit of breach of contract because UA was already in deficit of $50,000.
Griffith’s claim that he had been carrying UA was not entirely unfounded. At this point, Griffith’s domestic gross was equal to Fairbanks at $8 million, which was $1 million more than Pickford’s, and Chaplin had still only made one picture. In fact, Griffith had apparently made more money for UA than he had for his own company, which was now facing receivership. For Griffith Inc., only *Way Down East* had made a profit.

Griffith by this point had reached an incredible amount of debt surrounding his brand. Griffith’s loan obligations begin officially with the Central Union Trust at November 1919, but references to storage of negatives of *Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance* indicate Griffith was borrowing on his name as early as 1917. By the end of 1921, the Central Union Trust and Guaranty Trust Co. of New York showed that nearly $2 million had been borrowed from those two banks alone with interest of $43,000. Griffith at an early stage clearly assigned negative and positive prints as collateral and was also responsible for keeping a life insurance premium of $150,000. As his debt increased, his agreements worsened. In 1922, distribution of Griffith’s products was to be approved by the bank. The completed pictures were to be exhibited for the bank’s agents. Again in 1923, Griffith was forbidden to develop or produce any Griffith product without the bank’s approval. In addition to this, Griffith was forced to collateralize his debt with his unpaid salary and his stock in the flagging Griffith Inc. And there were loans from other banks with similar demands. In 1924, a loan from Empire Trust had the right in case of default to sell any Griffith product. In 1925, most of Griffith’s debt had been taken over by the Motion Picture Capital Company (MPCC), a finance company that was connected to Chase and other Morgan banking interests. While Griffith sat on the board of the MPCC, the president, Frank Wilson—who had convinced Griffith to incorporate in the first place—took control of the Griffith company as auditor. By this time, Griffith had borrowed over $4.5 million. This debt and the
fact that banks were now refusing loans to the failing brand name more than likely was the true force behind Griffith’s move back to Paramount.32

Thus, Griffith was also in no position to shoulder a lawsuit with his UA partners so to preserve friendships, Griffith was permitted to go to Paramount and his UA stock was placed in escrow. Having lost all hope of independence due to his debt, Griffith churned out three lackluster productions in Paramount Studios in Astoria, NY. Zukor, who, during this period, was facing heavy competition from Marcus Loew’s MGM, had initially snatched Griffith attempting to lure back Pickford and Fairbanks from their failing UA venture. But during Griffith’s absence, UA had hired Joe Schenk, brother of MGM’s chairman Marcus Loew’s right-hand man, Nick Schenk, to oversee production and distribution for the company. During Griffith’s absence, Schenk brought in new talent like Norma Talmadge, Buster Keaton and Gloria Swanson. He also convinced the powerhouse producer Samuel Goldwyn to join UA. Through Schenk, UA could bring in more independent projects to fulfill exhibition demands. And by 1928, Schenk had been able to turn a profit for UA. Right before this profitable turn, Griffith and Zukor split after the disappointing third contractual film, The Sorrows of Satan, and in 1927, Griffith returned to UA, still in deep debt, to fulfill his contractual obligations to UA.

When Griffith returned, Schenk had complete control of both UA and Griffith. Griffith was to direct five pictures, each costing no more than $400,000. Griffith was offered a salary of $4000 a week, but Griffith needed more to keep the Griffith corporation afloat, Schenk conceded under the condition that Griffith work as a consultant on any picture that UA required him to supervise—a job he had refused to do at both Biograph and Triangle. He directed four pictures for Schenk’s Art Cinema: Drums of Love (1928), The Battle of the Sexes (1928), The Lady of the Pavements (1929) and Abraham Lincoln (1930). Schenk and UA considered these
pictures failures in every respect, even though these pictures grossed an average of $625,000 which was more than all of Buster Keaton’s contributions, some of Goldwyn’s and even some of Schenck’s own Art Cinema productions. For Griffith’s fifth (and final) picture, he opted to produce it independently as allowed in his contract. Griffith produced *The Struggle* by himself as a desperate attempt to gain more of the profits. Against any argument that blamed Schenck for restricting Griffith’s creativity on *The Struggle*, Schenck loaned him $45,000 after Bank of America and Irving Trust had turned Griffith down. But there were no profits to be had.

*The Struggle* was a story about recovering from alcoholism, and its subject would seem timely if prohibition were not about to end. The film mainly pointed out how out of touch Griffith’s Victorian method of storytelling had become in the industry.\(^{33}\) It was released on February 6, 1932, cost $300,000 but only made $100,000. Griffith himself explained the failure like this:

*The Struggle* was superlatively bad … but the picture as it should be was never made. It was only put out to get the best we could out of it. Luck dropped in—I will not blame luck entirely, but the fact remains that one of the principals held up the picture for a week and another member, a leading member, had to go to Europe to fulfill a contract, and also during the course of the picture, the bank that was supplying money just happened to fail.

(quoted in Balio 87)

While Griffith’s excuses of bad luck seem to point to larger financial concerns that are extremely understated at the end of his statement. The combination of independent financing while carrying almost $5 million in debt, working under a studio executive, who had little faith in the filmmaker, and the film’s now-outdated mode of storytelling, which was compromised further by poor sound recording in the newly established early sound era—in other words, under-financed,
unwanted and rushed in production—almost ensured that this failure would be the final straw for Griffith. And it was. Griffith was resigned to sell his only asset remaining—his UA stocks—at $104,580. Shortly after the sale, D. W. Griffith Inc. went into receivership, and Griffith never made another film.

It is through the prism of this late failure that Griffith is often remembered as an early giant that failed once the technology became too complex for him. The realities of Griffith’s later struggles are clearly, however, the product of his trying to shoulder the entire cost of production, distribution and exhibition with his singular brand, rather, than others, like Cecil B. De Mille and King Vidor who managed to parlay the financial risk onto the corporate studios. Independence and creative control of this financial extreme led to Griffith’s subjugation to the business moguls that were unburdened by having to fully finance the actual film. Once Griffith was made dependent upon someone else’s, strangely Griffith’s work became uninspired and lacked any sort of experimentation. There are many stories of Griffith wandering the Paramount Studios in Astoria mumbling to himself, and of his late alcoholism. But these stories ignore how important it was for Griffith to be fully invested, both aesthetically and financially, in his work.

To ignore Griffith’s need to be “fully invested”—to be fully responsible for his success or failure—is where the Romantic interpretations of auteur’s and their failure should truly identify itself. Instead, future creative icons and their critics would become more interested in the victimization of Griffith by the institution he helped create. They would enhance their own brand by identifying with the struggles of Griffith’s later period. A great example is this quote from Orson Welles, who recollects his first (and only) meeting of D.W. Griffith in 1939. Welles, on a “rise” meeting Griffith well after his “fall,” says:
I met D.W. Griffith only once and it was not a happy meeting. A cocktail party on a rainy afternoon in the last days of the last year of the 1930s. Hollywood's golden age, but for the greatest of all directors it had been a sad and empty decade. The motion picture, which he had virtually invented, had become the product—the exclusive product—of America's fourth largest industry, and on the assembly lines of the mammoth movie factories there was no place for Griffith. He was an exile in his own town [my italics]. I loved and worshipped him, but he didn't need a disciple. He needed a job. I have never really hated Hollywood except for its treatment of D.W. Griffith. No town, no industry, no art form owes so much to a single man. Every filmmaker who has followed him has done just that: followed him. He made the first closeup and moved the first camera. But he was more than a founding father and a pioneer, his works will endure with his inventions . . . (This is Orson Welles 21)

Here we can see Welles clearly identifying with Griffith as an emblematic outcast and failure whose innovations have been forgotten, and this is a redundant pattern of recognition that perpetuates itself throughout auteurism as a sympathetic device. Welles’s rhetoric assumes a parallel with the older “master.” He is invested in the historic misgivings as to what Griffith invented. But from a fellow brand name that arguably, before engaging in the world of cinema, invented narrative in radio, it is prescient of how the debt owed to Griffith’s artistry had shifted to a sort of victimization by the system. What makes Welles’s respect for Griffith truly resonate, however, is that Welles’s recollection takes place in the last decade of Welles’s life when most of America had forgotten Griffith completely and considered Welles the exceptional failure par excellence. By the time of this and other conversations with filmmaker Peter Bogdanovich in the 1970s, Welles himself had also become, as he puts it, an exile in his own town.
From innovator to exile, Griffith enabled not only the transition of the camera as an overt technological marvel into a transparent machinery that propels the narrative of cinema, but also permitted the creative author to become hidden by the cinematic text. If this is so, Griffith’s aesthetic intentions were summarily recognized, not through the critical or popular reception of each film, but, rather, through the bankability of his brand dependent upon the financial success of each subsequent film. This is a familiar trope of the auteur as doomed in a purely economic space. As Griffith’s financial debt obstructed his ability to independently create films, his art supposedly suffered from the demands of the newly established central production units that insisted Griffith conform to an aesthetic uniformity of production. Because Griffith had already pushed the cinematic author behind the narrative curtain, and that his brand slowly devalued from 1915 forward, his failure is supposedly that he could no longer meet neither the aesthetic nor the economic expectations of the industry. But his failure is not, as we have shown, rooted in an economic failure of his films to turn a profit. Instead, his later films commonly “fail” under exclusively aesthetic criteria from many contemporaries and critics as being “outdated” or “antiquated.” The question as to if and/or when commercial failure becomes divided from or confused with aesthetic failure cannot be answered within the singular psycho-biography of Griffith’s history alone. His story must be compared to other failures of cinematic independence and creative control from different angles of industrial authority.

By itself, Griffith’s career provokes sympathy from even the harshest of critics. But Griffith’s contributions become exceptionally nuanced when one considers them within the
speed at which the industry was developing around him. These were huge dynamic shifts in both authorship and authority at this point of cinema’s history. Griffith’s era of cinematic production straddles three historical “phases” that occur in such a relatively short period of time that they tend to almost overlap each other, making it very hard to separate them between specific dates. The first period, roughly between 1907 and 1915—between his anonymous Biograph period and his self-branded blockbuster, *The Birth of a Nation*—occurs within and alongside numerous power struggles between many independent agencies of production and distribution, and of those independents loosely united against Edison’s aggressive attempt at total industry control via the MPPC a.k.a. “The Trust.” At first glance, this period would seem to afford more spaces for freedom and greater individual control because less artists were forced to conform to an economic stability and a streamlined consistency in product. The second period up to 1925 (with 1919 as a watershed year financially) witnesses the conglomeration of independents that form after the dissolution of the Trust in 1915. The surviving independents of the first period became, ironically, an even stronger monolith of vertically-integrated control by acquiring the properties of exhibition in addition to those of production and distribution. This period sees the full adoption of a central production system—a system that sets the standard for financially successful pictures produced *en masse* by a handful of powerful, studio-appointed individuals, who are arguably more powerful auteurs than any director or writer on set. Finally, from 1925 to the beginning of the “Golden Years” of the thirties, the advent of sound and “the Talkies” add both a competitive and aesthetic dimension to feature production. The central production system reaches its zenith as the major studios establish themselves as an oligopoly, and almost all cinematic ventures of any kind must pass through these systems to be seen (and heard).
As the industry cemented itself, different demands were successively placed upon filmmakers. The industry was not necessarily a new system of restraint, but the auteur had to adapt not only to new technologies of sound and script continuity, but also to a certain shift in the proprietary concepts surrounding each film. Griffith is only one example of how such a prodigious aesthetic force can fail under a shift in studio demands such as these. Most directors of the silent age had to carefully negotiate with new policies of industrial overseeing. Thus, Griffith is not unique in this transformative period of directors who were phased out for being unable to create films under these new systems of efficiency and control. While certain historical and critical readings of these “failed” silent filmmakers attribute their failure to technological advances—most notably to sound but also to cinematographic and editing practices that were more conducive to the talkies—others point to the studio granting total authority to its central producers, demoting the director back to a simple employee. Arguably there is truth in both these claims, but if one pays more attention to the industry’s financial and ethical concerns with certain auteurist freedoms, there are many more complex synergies at work between the studios and auteurs.

In the first transformative period, while Griffith was churning out product for the company in late 1908, Biograph was the last holdout for Edison’s Motion Picture Patent Company. The Trust sought to control all cinematic product by aggregating its patent holders. Edison’s attempt was strengthened by the participation of George Eastman who held patents on film stock. Edison successfully sued Biograph for illegal use of the Latham Loop—a patented technique that allowed slack in the film stock so that it would not tear the sprocket holes—thus forcing Biograph to join the Trust. The MPPC was formally incorporated in January of 1909 consisting of Edison, Biograph, Essanay, Kalem, Lubin, Mina, Selig, and Vitagraph. These
companies under the terms of the Trust were the only “legitimate” production companies authorized to use cinema technology in the U.S. To ensure further control, Edison formed the General Film Company to control and oversee the distribution of the MPPC’s product.

Under the MPPC, the move towards a vertically-integrated pyramid of control was already starting to emerge. A great deal of practical delegation of duties to produce more and more product for hungry exhibitors and viewers was already loosely in effect with the MPPC companies, and this would point to the trend of creating a central producer in charge of a team of directors in charge of camera operators and so on. In fact, this is how historian Janet Staiger stages the evolution of the central production unit system:

36 The system evolved from the camera operator during the “cinema of attraction” period to the director unit of an early Griffith, Ince or Sennet, and finally to a central producer who oversaw all films being directed for a company at once. 37 However, this early structuring of production control was only applied to shorter products, and did not demand the attention to continuity control that would become so much more complex with longer feature products.

Edison’s Trust immediately antagonized any competition to the MPPC by litigiously attacking any or all independent producers who tried to circumvent its licensing. In an almost immediate response to this move for total control, independent companies began to move against Edison. While there was many involved, two names would notably establish themselves in defiance to the MPPC. William Fox, a New York Theater owner, would cleverly draw attention to Edison’s violation of the Sherman Antitrust Act by filing for unfair trade practices that prevented Fox’s own Greater New York Film Exchange. While Fox did not ever fully follow through with the claim, he managed to deflect the violation of the Trust patent and while the Federal Trade Commission reviewed Fox’s claim, Fox continued to distribute his own product to
his theaters without paying the Trust. Carl Laemmle moved to play the same game as Edison, and formed the Independent Motion Picture Co, followed by Motion Picture Distribution and Sales Company. He would later change the distribution company’s name to Universal Film Company in June of 1912. Laemmle’s distribution company allowed a necessary outlet for other independents to distribute their product. Laemmle’s company would eventually encompass almost all the one and two-reel production companies—with exception of those under Mutual Distributions—not already belonging to the Trust, and these would come together to form Universal Pictures.

In 1912, the MPPC’s control was severely weakened by the Federal Trade Commission overturning the patent on the Latham Loop. Universal and Mutual took full advantage of the weakened MPPC by expanding its coterie of smaller production companies. In addition, the MPPC companies were desperately holding onto the one-reel format where the independents were willing to take greater risks on longer products. European feature films were proving that audiences could stay focused on longer entertainments. By 1913, the U.S. was primed to try its hand at similar feature films, and with Thomas Ince—the brilliant “Father of Westerns” producing for the New York Motion Picture Co—and Griffith both producing for Mutual, the independents had the upper hand on the MPPC to create the new wave of feature production. As Eileen Bowser describes it:

The outlines of the industry began to take shape in 1913-1914, with the formation of the new feature-production companies that would change the methods of distribution and exhibition. When the feature fever swept through the entertainment world in this period, there were more new companies founded than we can name, but most were short-lived. Some were formed to distribute only one feature film. But this was also the beginning of
a limited number of major production companies that would end up with greater control of distribution and exhibition than the Trust companies had ever achieved. (Bowser 89)

Thus, films began to get longer—such as Ince’s *Battle of Gettysburg* (1913, six reels. Griffith’s *Home Sweet Home* (1913) six reels, and *The Avenging Conscience* (1914) six reels—and the independents began to get stronger.

The need to produce features at a faster and faster rate with consistent quality created a rift between efficiency of production and aesthetic control. For example, at Aitken’s Majestic-Reliance, initially, it was supposed to be Griffith in charge of all production, but Griffith had become less and less interested in overseeing others after leaving Biograph. Griffith wanted to control only his productions, and he was not interested in regimenting a shared style that could possibly speed up his production process. This is the reason that Thomas H. Ince tends to get the credit for being the prototypical model for the central-production method. Unlike Griffith who sought a type of aesthetic seclusion that forced him to keep borrowing money to produce things his way, Ince, by November 1913, was already vice-president and manager of Western Production for New York Motion Picture Co, and in 1914, Ince built his first personal studio for the same company. Griffith’s Mamaroneck studio five years later still depended on Griffith as the sole creative force and financial provider, but Ince, at his studio, withdrew from directing to become a production manager and efficiency engineer. The development of a continuity script and production schedule at “Inceville” in Culver City became a standard uniform system for future Classical studio productions.

By the time the Federal Trade Commission ordered the dissolution of the MPPC in October 1915, and Griffith has proven himself to be the future template of the auteur with *Birth of a Nation*, Ince had introduced a different model of authorship by being the creative force
behind multiple productions at once—by overseeing the director chairs of several simultaneous productions. Both these figures are exemplary of what could be considered the beginnings of auteurism: One created a marketable brand that peaked in a singular epic’s success. The other disseminated a certain style and technique into surrogate directors, maintaining a vertical system of stylistic control in a more efficient model of cinematic production. The coincidence is that Griffith was initially more like Ince at Biograph when producing so many shorter films, and, to be fair, he did delegate the authority of direction in *Intolerance* to assistant directors who would become future troubled auteurs like Griffith—most notably, Erich von Stroheim. But it ended up being Ince who was credited for standardizing the process of creating multiple feature film at once—as the site for studio production.

Producing longer films demanded a more efficient deployment of duties and labor. While Griffith’s epic and its scandalous financial success may still be the early blockbuster most remembered, the contemporary costs of his *Birth of a Nation* and its infamy still did not assuage most banks and investors that a feature film was any more than a fad. From 1915 to 1917, feature films were mainly produced by two companies. There was the World Film Corp. which was managed by Lewis Selznick (David O. Selznick’s father), until he was ousted by William Brady who mismanaged and collapsed the company. Selznick eventually bought up World Film’s assets and integrated them into his Selznick-Select Pictures. The other was Aitken’s Triangle Films that ended up scaring off banks for another two years after its failure in 1917. As mentioned above, Triangle Pictures laid claim to the careers of both Ince and Griffith, as well as Mack Sennet. But as stated above, Griffith never actually completed a film for Triangle. It was Sennet’s Keystone comedies and Ince’s system that carried the company for its short stint. Ince would build another studio for Triangle in Culver City—which would be bought over by
Goldwyn Pictures in 1918 and then, ultimately inherited by MGM when Goldwyn Pictures merged with Loews’ Metro—and Ince implemented the same efficiency model of central production. However, even with Ince’s ingenuity, the company was either too early or too ambitious, and its failure scared off the banks and the stock exchange. The company was defunct when Adolph Zukor purchased the distribution end of Triangle and merged it with what would soon become Paramount.  

Between 1917 and 1919, the banks and stock market were still hesitant to support motion pictures because they had not proven themselves a stable asset that could be collateralized. But within these two years was an intense race to buy up and/or control the real estate of picture palaces across the country. Zukor, and his partner Jesse Lasky, led this race by some distance. Zukor and Lasky were owners of the merged Famous Players-Lasky—formerly a vaudeville talent company—who aggressively purchased Paramount Pictures in 1916 from W. W. Hodkinson, who had founded the company in 1914. They restructured both Paramount and Famous Players-Lasky Co. into a full-fledged distribution company with its own massive talent resources on July 29, 1916. Fellow investor, Sam Goldfish (soon to change his name to Goldwyn) was the new company’s chairman and Zukor was the company’s president. Zukor was never one, however, to share power. The powerful Lasky lined up with Zukor and together they bought out Goldwyn’s shares for $900,000. Immediately, Zukor created Arctcra for production and began a practice of contracting stars for large salaries. Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks and W.S. Hart were signed to Arctcraft in 1917. Zukor initiated a system of block-booking and blind-bidding—a process of forcing exhibitors to buy “blocks” of Paramount pictures based on Paramount-Arctcraft star power without being able to see the film’s first. Zukor had used the star system to pressure exhibitors to pre-buy their films in bulk based solely on star-
power. But Zukor was not satisfied with only pressuring. He wanted to control definitively where his films would end up. Thus, he started to buy up the theaters to control exhibition.

Existing theater owners saw immediately what Zukor was trying to do. To stave off Zukor’s power play, between 1916 and 1917, many theater owners joined together and formed their own corporation, First National. In an opposite play to Zukor, the theater owners began to buy up production and distribution companies and sign their own stars. They acquired Chaplin in 1917, and snatched Pickford from Zukor in 1918. Soon they had equal numbers of talent to compete with Zukor, such as Griffith, Mayer, B.P. Schulberg and Joe Schenck. In 1919, Zukor moved completely into exhibition to battle First National. Financed by Kuhn, Loeb & Co for $10 million, between 1919 and 1921, Zukor had purchased 303 theaters, and by 1926 he would buy out Chicago theater moguls, Balaban and Katz to form his Publix Theater Corp.

Not to be outdone by either Zukor or First National, New York Theater mogul, Marcus Loew went public on the NYSE and gained funding of $9.5 million to compete with Zukor’s purchase power. Already owning a large theater chain, he too went in the opposite direction to Zukor and purchased Metro Pictures in 1920. But it wasn’t until 1924 when Joe Godsol offered him Goldwyn Pictures (Goldwyn himself had been voted out in 1922) that Loew would become a worthy competitor to Zukor. In May of that year, Loew purchased Goldwyn Pictures that included the Culver City studio created by Ince for Triangle Pictures, and brought over New England theater distributer, Louis B. Mayer, from First National to head the Western business end of production under Nick Schenck’s New York office.

Thus 1919 is a watershed year for Hollywood cinema in many ways: It marks a clear turning point in financial trust and support from the stock market and the banks. It marks the final stretch for the perfect model imagined by Ince of vertical integration that controls all modes
of filmmaking as a commodity. Internationally, after World War I, the American market became the strongest market by default as European markets were still recovering. It not only began the race between Zukor’s Paramount, Loew’s and Schenck’s MGM, First National, and the dark horses, William Fox, and the Warner Bros. for the largest piece of the cinematic pie, but—as we have already noted—it marks the beginning of stars like Chaplin, Fairbanks and Pickford and, of course, Griffith attempting to establish an aesthetic independence and existence over these larger property holders. Smaller production and distribution companies like UA and Columbia, which held no theaters, were forced to play ball with those studios that now controlled exhibition.

The independents who had survived the MPPC’s attempt to control the industry were coming full circle to become an oligopoly with one exception. Carl Laemmle, perhaps the earliest antagonists of the MPPC, seemed to be rooted in place. Laemmle had been the major independent filmmaker of mainly short films and new reels against Edison’s MPPC. By 1915, he had already been one of the first to move out to Hollywood and build a studio. Despite these bold early moves, he was stubborn, and stuck to what he believed worked. While Zukor, First National and Loews were snatching up property, Laemmle divested himself of his theaters to focus solely on production as if against the trend of vertical integration. It seemed that Laemmle’s Universal was missing train after train at the station of industrial progress and momentum. But regardless of whether Universal was progressive or not, Laemmle can be credited, for better or for worse, for introducing two names to the industry that would establish assumptions of conflict between authorship and authority: Erich von Stroheim and Irving Thalberg.
Stroheim vs. Thalberg: A Founding Myth of Conflict and Creativity

It has been cautioned that the assumption that the creative filmmaker is always at odds with the industrial powers of the studio system should never become a truism in neither auteurist criticism nor cinema studies in general because it oversimplifies an art versus industry dynamic that can never realistically be clinically or critically pulled apart. However, as we have seen with Griffith and Ince so far, this is not to say that conflict does not arise at almost every level of the creative filmmaking process. The difficulty with rendering moments of conflict is the insistence that there must be a winner and a loser. In truth, it is more practical to retain the irresolvable differences in perspective in each or every one of these battle for authorial control. A perfect example of how two points of creative authority both retain a purposeful and intentional goal towards the creation of their films is the struggle for creative control between the filmmaker, Erich Stroheim and producer, Irving Thalberg. For me, their negotiations are foundational. Their infamous bouts over authority have been deeply romanticized by fans and critics—either with Stroheim (once again) as the “victim” who had his films mercilessly cut down, or Thalberg as the infallible genius of the system. More interesting, is that their conflict happened not once but twice, under two separate industrial powers, at two different studios, with similar results. The first time under Laemmle’s Universal, and a few years later under Nick Schenck and Louis B. Mayer’s MGM. This repetition, rather than showing a doomed artist swimming upstream, shows a willingness of the system to reinvest in a certain artist.

Like Griffith, Stroheim came to Hollywood as an actor, but found himself soon working the other side of the camera. He cut his teeth working under Griffith as an assistant for *Intolerance*. In later interviews, Stroheim claimed he was deeply indebted to working under
Griffith, but, in addition, he felt abandoned by Griffith when the master moved on to supposedly greener pastures at First National and Paramount-Artcraft. What Stroheim inherited from Griffith cannot be definitively known because, like so many auteurs, Stroheim frequently embellished his own biography. After Griffith moved on, Stroheim continued his career in Hollywood as an actor. Stroheim capitalized on his Prussian heritage and became recognized playing German villains. He was known as “the man you loved to hate”—an interesting brand to be sure. Most infamous, in *The Hearts of Humanity* (1917), his character tosses a baby out of a second story window because its screaming interferes with the raping of its mother. After the November armistice of World War I in 1918, however, the demand for German villains was drying up so Stroheim wanted to expand into directing. An inveterate charmer, Stroheim pitched his story of a period Viennese romance, *The Pinnacle*, to Carl Laemmle and, remarkably, convinced Laemmle not only to back the feature-length tale, but also to let him direct it.

As noted above, Laemmle had little faith in the future of feature-length films. Universal’s few ventures into feature filmmaking were marketed as “Jewels.” Laemmle was deeply and personally involved with each of their distributions and marketing campaigns to ensure a return of his investment. Laemmle’s would throw as little money as possible towards its production and stars, reserving all funds for marketing. But this strategy had begun to hurt Laemmle because he was unwilling to pay the six-figure salaries established by Zukor’s Paramount contracts. This is probably why Laemmle invested in Stroheim’s project. *The Pinnacle* was a seemingly affordable picture because the star, the writer and the director were all the same person. Production of *The Pinnacle* began on April 3, 1919 and Stroheim completed shooting with a modest negative cost of $112,144.83. However, unlike Griffith, who edited the massive *Birth of a Nation* in only a few weeks, Stroheim labored over the editing process and
delivered a film that pushed past the accepted limits of industry length. This would become the major point of industrial contention in every Stroheim picture henceforth.

Impatient with Stroheim’s editing style, Laemmle effectively hijacked and redirected Stroheim’s directorial brand. Fearing that Stroheim was dragging out the completion of *The Pinnacle*, Laemmle began to heavily build up expectations of the film. He decided to change the title of *The Pinnacle* to *Blind Husbands* (1919), which annoyed Stroheim as author and director because he thought the change trivialized the romance of the film into a marriage farce. Per usual, Laemmle spent more than the negative cost of the production (over $140,000) to market the film. His marketing promised the forthcoming genius of Stroheim. The biographer Richard Koszarski describes the early auteurist marketing plan:

Most remarkable was the poster that showed nothing but Stroheim’s determined gaze and this text: “Carl Laemmle offers Stroheim. The genius who conceived the idea, wrote the story, directed the production and who plays the leading role in the most enthralling picture of modern times. *Blind Husbands*. Such an auteurist campaign was rare even for giants like Griffith; for an unknown filmmaker, it was unprecedented. If the film proved a disappointment, Stroheim would never be heard from again, and Universal would be the laughingstock of the industry. (*Von* 48)

Laemmle was well known in the industry for both this type of risk taking, and exploding expectations in audiences. And Laemmle’s risk paid off. When *Blind Husbands* premiered on October 19, 1919 to strong critical reviews, Stroheim’s was instantly established as a meticulous director of detail, and the fact that he also played a character in the film attached his face with his directorial brand. The press followed suit critically, echoing Laemmle’s over-blown marketing of this new “genius:” As in this review for the *New York Telegraph*, which lauded the film:
If we are not very much mistaken, *Blind Husbands*, will introduce to the industry a new “super director”—Eric Stroheim. Unlike many other directors who aspire to the ranks of the fortunate, he is not a near-Griffith, a near-De Mille, or a near-Tourneur. His work is quite in a class by itself . . . The details are truly remarkable . . . all the work of a man who knew very much what he was doing. (undated clipping quoted in *Von* 48)

It appeared that Stroheim in his very first outing had proven himself as a worthy commodity, but its artistic merits cannot be separated from the underpinning of Laemmle’s financial investment in marketing. Laemmle offered Stroheim a three-film contract, and, feeling completely sheltered by Laemmle’s support, Stroheim immediately assumed a star-director position at Universal City. He shot and edited a quick studio project titled *The Devil’s Pass Key* (1920).\(^1\) and then began working on his next personal project that he intended would outshine the successful *Blind Husbands*.\(^2\) When *Foolish Wives* (1922) began shooting in 1920, the competition for lavishly produced epics was heating up. Metro had green-lit the costly but extremely successful, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921), and Griffith had himself invested a quarter of a million to purchase the story of *Way Down East*. Stroheim refused to be outdone and began constructing a complete replica of Monte Carlo on the Universal lot at a cost that would, ironically, threaten to break the bank at Universal.

And this is where the arguable seminal “genius of the system” *a la* Bazin appears in this narrative. During the shooting of *Foolish Wives*, Laemmle made a very bold change in management for Hollywood’s Universal City so that his New York office could regulate any overspending done on the West Coast. In 1918, Laemmle had hired the young Irving Thalberg fresh out of high school as his personal secretary in his New York office on 1600 Broadway. Thalberg took dictation for Laemmle but, according to Universal colleagues, soon began editing
and rethinking the owner’s own orders, showing an incredibly intuitive understanding of the industry, both financial and artistic. In 1920, Laemmle installed Thalberg as an office boy at Universal City to keep an eye on production manager, Isadore Bernstein. When Bernstein expressed his resentment to Laemmle for being monitored by a “boy,” Laemmle simply replaced Bernstein with Thalberg. Thalberg was given sole command of Universal City’s production schedule and was to be answerable only to Laemmle. Thalberg’s instructions were to rein in production costs. But rather than just monitor the studio’s accounting, Thalberg believed that Universal could grow into a feature film factory that would rival Paramount.

Thalberg clearly differed with Laemmle’s approach to filmmaking. Thalberg wanted to increase feature production, not limit it to a handful of Jewel productions per year. To do this, Thalberg knew he would have to optimize the director’s position instead of just restricting it with a budget. As historian Thomas Schatz describes:

Universal City was often derided as Hollywood’s consummate movie factory and Thalberg was fine with quite comfortable with the analogy. Like other modern industries that relied on mass production and mass merchandising, the cinema developed its own version of the assembly-line system with an appropriate division and subdivision of labor. The director was crucial to that process, and Thalberg saw no reason to limit the director’s freedom and creative control over actual shooting, so long as he recognized the nature and limits of that authority. (22)

These limits were to be tested on directors who had up to that point been given almost absolute creative control. Stroheim, whose budget on Foolish Wives was nearing the million dollar mark was an obvious target. Shocked at Stroheim’s “wastefulness” of shot footage and unlimited retakes, Thalberg attempted to exert his newly appointed authority to finish up production on
Foolish Wives. But because Stroheim had cast himself as the star of the film as well as its director, it was impossible to remove him without having to reshoot most of the film.

Thalberg chose to withdraw from this battle for the time being. While Stroheim worked throughout the entire year of 1921 on Foolish Wives, Thalberg dedicated himself to restructuring Universal. Thalberg was a strong proponent of the “continuity script,” where a film was broken down shot by shot and meticulously scheduled (as Ince had done in the earlier decade). Because of Thalberg’s close attention to pre-production and script development, he rarely interfered with the shooting process, leaving it under the authority of the film’s director. If Thalberg had to exert control, he would do so with reshoots and, if need be, in the editing room. And this is where the first conflict between the producer and the director would take place.

When Stroheim produced his rough cut, the film was three and a half hours long. He suggested it be screened as a two-part feature. Thalberg refused this believing that the film could never recoup its million-dollar cost if it was exhibited as a serial. He ordered the film cut down, and when Stroheim refused, Thalberg locked him out of the editing room and cut it himself. Stroheim publicly lamented the final cut of his film calling it “the skeleton of his dead child.” Stroheim pleaded his case to Laemmle, but to Stroheim’s surprise Laemmle backed Thalberg. Thus, Foolish Wives was promoted less as the next aesthetic leap of Stroheim’s, but, rather, as an extremely expensive film. It flaunted its million-dollar cost attempting to generate publicity. Even though the film still did well with critics and the audience, as Thalberg had predicted, the film’s massive cost made a profitable return nearly impossible.

Stroheim had one film left to complete in his contract with Universal. but this time Thalberg was prepared with a new set of conditions for Stroheim. For Stroheim’s next picture, Merry Go-Round, Thalberg contractually prevented Stroheim from acting in the film to eliminate
the leverage Stroheim had earlier flaunted. Thalberg clearly spelled out that Universal, not Stroheim, had final control over budget costs and that Stroheim was to report daily to Thalberg on the film’s progress. Just after shooting began Stroheim walked off the picture and was replaced by Rupert Julian. Stroheim moved on to Goldwyn Pictures (now run by Joe Godsol, who had bought out Sam Goldwyn in 1922), and began working on a film version of McTeague, which would become his most well-known, and mostly invisible, picture, Greed.

After Stroheim’s exodus, Thalberg soldiered on, eliminating directors who refused to commit to his structure. He had imposed these limitations to rein in the overspending and from a budgetary standpoint, and he had succeeded. But Thalberg was still deeply concerned that Universal’s lack of dedication to prestige epics would result in Paramount, and First National (now indirectly controlled by William Fox who had bought up its majority of its shares) overshadowing Universal’s low-budgeted shorts. Thalberg was keenly aware of the industry’s expansion into exhibition, but he was unable to convince Laemmle to buy into that end of the business. Thalberg’s equal insistence on feature production was bringing Thalberg’s relationship with Laemmle to a breaking point. Thalberg invested money into reshooting extra scenes for The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1923), Thalberg went ahead without Laemmle’s or the New York office’s blessing and invested a great deal of money to add crowd scenes to make the film look like it had a larger production value. Laemmle was furious because the film would now have to be sold as a roadshow to compete with De Mille’s The Ten Commandments (1923) and Fairbank’s Robin Hood (1922). This “forcing” of Laemmle’s hand was intentional, but it still did not get Thalberg a raise or a percentage of Universal. In 1923, Thalberg was aggressively courted by Louis B. Mayer to join MGM as its central producer. He took the job, leaving Laemmle with Hunchback that turned out to be Universal’s biggest hit of that year.
When Marcus Loew and Nick Schenck purchased Goldwyn Pictures on May 16th, 1924 from its chairman. Joe Godsol for $5 million, Louis B. Mayer put Thalberg in control of the Culver City studio originally built by Ince for Triangle. And this is how Stroheim found himself at the mercy of Thalberg’s central producer control once again. Stroheim had completed his original edit of *Greed* under Godsol at Goldwyn. Godsol had already cut down the seven-hour film to four hours in 1923. By the time MGM inherited the film, they simply shelved it with a $470,000 debit. Thalberg attempted to recoup the inherited loss by cutting the film more. And the same story played out again: Stroheim insisted to play the film as a series, Thalberg rejected the idea so Stroheim refused to cut it down, and Thalberg hired Stroheim’s friend and colleague, Rex Ingram, to cut it before Ingram left for Europe. The result is one of the earliest and most infamous examples of a lost original epic. The final film was cut down to standard feature length, and the film was released without fanfare and it did poorly.

For those that try to frame Stroheim’s luck as the misfortune of being placed under the man that had restricted him earlier at Universal, these arguments are somewhat diffused by the clear facts that Thalberg tried to salvage *Greed* from becoming a pure write off, and that Thalberg kept Stroheim on payroll after acquiring him under his Goldwyn contract. In fact, Thalberg personally green-lit Stroheim to direct *The Merry Widow*. Thalberg believed that Stroheim’s talent had marketable potential, and he insisted to Mayer, who despised the director, that he could be controlled. And this is to some degree proven because unlike the *Merry-Go-Round* incident at Universal, Stroheim completed the film. The film was Stroheim’s largest commercial success since his Universal debut, but Stroheim still insisted that the film did not match his vision. He refused to relegate his attention to detail to the budgetary restraints of the
While Stroheim is perhaps the most remembered “victim” of Thalberg’s central production system—and, in truth, certain directors were more the “victim” of Mayer’s bully tactics than Thalberg’s involvement—Stroheim was only one of a of several silent director that were “phased out” by MGM. Marshall Neilan and Rex Ingram could be alternate tales of auteurs whose aesthetic vision was beyond the budgetary limitations of the studio. And cost was not necessarily at the core of why the auteurs were pushed out of the system. Films like King Vidor’s *The Big Parade* (1925) and Mayer’s own lavish *Ben Hur* (1925) were as costly as Stroheim’s, Neilan's and Ingram’s, but the Vidor and Mayer films’ success was attributed to Thalberg’s ability to manage the production costs against the expectations of what audiences wanted to see. As important as Thalberg’s contributions to each MGM product was, he refused to brand himself or take credit for any work. When Marcus Loew died in 1927, leaving Nick Schenck in charge, Thalberg had expanded his unit to include a secondary set of producers to streamline multiple productions even further. Even though Thalberg delegated to his close associates—Henry Rapf, Bernie Hyman, Hunt Stromberg, Al Lewin and Paul Bern—Thalberg was always deeply and personally involved in all of MGM’s projects. Thalberg’s method was well beyond that of an assembly line method because Thalberg took part in all elements of production.

Contrary to many historians of Hollywood’s “Golden Years,” Thalberg was not infallible. He was resistant to jump into sound after Warner Brothers had become major players with their Vitaphone patent and their early sound films—and the permanence of sound technology was bolstered when Vitaphone’s (or its AT&T-backed ERPI company’s) direct
competitor RCA teamed with theater owners Keith and Orpheum to form the last major studio, RKO. He was overly cautious and answered only to his own timetable. Because of this MGM felt that Thalberg’s authority was becoming too insulated and powerful. As Schatz explains:

Thalberg […] had simply become too powerful, threatening the corporate control by studio owners and top executive officers. So, the studios steadily phased out or downgraded, the central producer’s role and developed management systems with a clearer hierarchy of authority and a greater dispersion of creative control. (Schatz 161)

Schenck and Mayer were becoming increasingly wary of the absolute creative authority that Thalberg commanded. And they would begin to install other producers like David O. Selznick to take over Thalberg’s domain piece by piece. This would lead to a newer wave of independent producers that would eventually eliminate the central production unit as the core studio practice by the end of the Depression.

So just as the wave of silent mavericks, from Griffith to Stroheim, had been phased out by the early sound period, the central production unit that was perfected from Ince into Thalberg would also fall almost immediately after. The central production unit and its own brand of auteurism—where the producer managed the final intentional output of each film—failed under the pressures for greater corporate involvement in the cinematic product. Ironically, the corporate elements would depend more and more upon independent producer-directors to handle the creative ends as they became more and more obsessed with managing the financial burden behind their massive real estate investments of vertical integration after the Depression.

A Certain Tendency to Personify Classical Hollywood
By the adoption of sound in 1928, each studio had successfully established its own “personality” so to speak in the content quality of each studio’s product. By the end of 1927, the Thalberg position had become replicated by the other studios, with figures such as B. P. Schulberg at Paramount and Daryll Zanuck at Warner Bros. The studios had each, almost uniformly, established a central production base that would contract directors and stars at an agreed upon salary for an agreed quantity of films. These contracted individuals would conform to each studio’s central production unit and their aesthetic conditions and limitations. This arguably produced a consistency in style and content in each studio’s product. For many Classical historians, this consistency in style was the direct result of the central producer. As historian Thomas Schatz describes it:

The quality of these films was the product not simply of individual human expression, but of a melding of institutional forces. In each case the “style” of a writer, director, star—or even a cinematographer, art director or costume designer—fused with the studio’s production operations, and management structure, its resources and talent pool, its narrative traditions and market strategy. And ultimately any individual’s style was no more than an inflection on an established studio style. (Schatz 6)

According to this quote, the industry had complete control over individual creativity, but let us return to this absolute claim shortly. By having control of what was produced but also being able to exhibit those productions and directly rake in returns, the classical studio system had evolved into a strict oligopoly of five major studios who owned and controlled their own theater chains—Paramount, MGM, Fox, Warner Brothers, and RKO. There were also the major-minors, Universal and Columbia, who were rivals in sheer quantity for production, but did not own theaters and thus relied on the majors to exhibit their product. And, of course, there were the
private distributors like UA, and smaller independent companies like Disney, that would establish a tenuous relationship with the majors to retain some sort of creative control with their films.

Buried deep in the foundations of the Classical Hollywood system is the authorial relation between the commercial and the aesthetic—a relation that connects auteurist failure to industrial power in very interesting and varied ways. After considering the silent era of proto-auteurs, any search for consistency in an auteur’s style must look past its technological and aesthetic accomplishments towards its ability to negotiate with the industry because it is always collaborating with an ever-changing system of cinematic production that will eventually outmode it. However, to blithely accept this claim would be to give in to an auteurist futility, and this would not take us very far from what Bazin claimed was the core problem with auteurist criticism: that the system will outlive and outgrow a psycho-biographical source of creativity. If revisiting these thresholds have shown us anything, it is that even at Hollywood’s earliest stages, the auteur is very much present in its surrounding industrial narrative as well as in the contemporary discursive field of criticism about these periods. The auteur is not as invisible as contemporary historical commentary may like it to be.

The race towards vertical integration and overall control of the cinematic product from inception to exhibition is, indeed, integral to the failures of these proto-auteurs, but these early examples of failed creative independence establish long-term expectations both stylistically and economically retroactively by the studios and critics alike—expectations that the proto-auteur would need a time machine to fulfill. Instead, these proto-auteurs become a template for the critical practice of telling cautionary tales of how to unmake a movie within the early Classical Hollywood system. The limitations placed on proto-auteurs by power-hungry owners like Zukor
and Loew, or bottom-line corporate men like Schenck and Mayer, cannot be the only explanation of the auteur’s failure. After all, it is hard to break rules that have not yet been fully established. For example, Griffith’s aesthetic failure is often assumed to be directly connected to his debt, whereas Stroheim’s failure was to be directly attributed to his arrogance in the face of studio authority. But respectively, Griffith was an exemplary factory man able to produce epic projects with great alacrity, and there was no established production method to make Stroheim’s attention to cinematic detail affordable. Both these artists established their stylistic preferences before any central production unit had fully formed to manage them.

Outside of institutional control, there are other possible explanations. One is the perpetual argument that Griffith and Stroheim aspired to cinema as a high-art form in a vulgar reality. This could explain why “low” factory entertainment like Westerns and their directors—from Ince to John Ford—could adapt to the central production unit’s timetables more readily because their efficient silent methods required less aesthetic effort, and were better suited to the system than the expensive, over-the-top epic filmmaking of both Griffith and Stroheim. Another explanation would be Griffith and Stroheim’s insistence on detail and complexity in both their shots and narrative structure, which would be too advanced for a common audience. But again, as we have already established, these are tenuous classical defenses for those critics that claim cinema to be an absolute art form. Beyond aesthetic differences, there are intense economic factors that contributed to their failures. As clever as Griffith was to leverage his name to receive funding, he never developed the nuance of getting the studio system to shoulder the actual financial risk. Other filmmakers like Cecil B. DeMille or King Vidor were not only exceptional at self-promotion, but also were able to fulfill studio demands and play by the rules. And Stroheim himself continued to jump from contract to contract despite his inability to make a
film under two hours long. No matter how one approaches Griffith and Stroheim’s failures—whether comparatively alongside more “successful” directors or an all-powerful central producer—there would be no definitive explanation for their individual exiling from the system.

Our investigation fails to explain or define these auteurist failures if they depend upon such a reductive model of auteurism of aestheticism versus commercialism. This is where the necessity to expand auteurism into a proper genre study that would include director and producer—and all other—influences under the same brand becomes the more reliable method of inference. The subtext of all these narratives of failed independence and inexorable industrial conflict demonstrates a core insistence on a character or figure that motivates the creative end of the industry regardless of whether it is in harmony or not with the machinery of the Hollywood industry. For this reason, I have kept Griffith’s innovations and the specter of his brand embedded within the financial machinery that supposedly tarnished his name. It is why I offered up Ince as an industrial counterpoint of failure that in some ways is identical to Griffith’s. And it is why I have balanced the assumption of Stroheim’s Prussian arrogance failing against the intuitive subtlety of Thalberg’s authority and its supposed infallibility. From an historiographical point of view, despite the apparent scarcity—or in Schatz’s claim above, almost a complete absence—of an individual source of artistic creation for particular studio films, the critical discussion of this field of production may be expanded from a singular author like Griffith or Stroheim into the larger field of authorship inherent in the central producer, or even larger to include an entire studio like Paramount or MGM to represent an even larger field of authorship. But as big as one makes the narrative, this field, however large, still relies upon the construction a singular, individuated “source.”
This can be proven if one looks how even those Hollywood histories that claim to eschew auteurism, quickly search for psycho-biographical surrogates in the larger economic framework of the industry. Regardless of most contemporary revisions of the classical studio system’s narrative, historical writings still insist upon a certain figure that is responsible for the success or failure, economic or aesthetic, of each studio. For example, in his analysis, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History*, Douglas Gomery’s overview of the entire history of the Hollywood system places the greatest value on the successful vertical integration of the early Hollywood system, and thus his study concentrates on the economic accomplishment of those figures that managed to fully control production and distribution via owning exhibition. Gomery emphasizes, for example, the individual accomplishments of Adolph Zukor for being the first and most effective “genius” to vertically integrate the industry. Gomery’s entire history quite effectively weaves the studio system into a narrative that only follows the money, but it congeals around the figure of Zukor first, and then Loew, Fox and Warner in order of financial success.

In considering, MGM’s early success in the classical system, instead of Loew, Gomery devotes all his energy to Nick Schenck, who dictated corporate expectations to Louis B. Mayer. This crystallizes what Gomery considers the exclusive source of the Hollywood “success narrative”: The figure with the most direct financial control over the specific cash flow of each studio is the true auteur. While Gomery’s work is invaluable as an economical overview—and indispensable when considering how the studios made their painful progression into a vertically-integrated oligopoly and, then later, into the disseminated conglomerates of distribution that they have become today—his work claims to avoid creating “personalities” that formed the studios’ evolution. But it clearly substitutes the creative figures of directors and producers for other
psycho-biographical (and always masculine) figures like Zukor and Schenck, and later Lew Wasserman of MCA/Universal, who Gomery appoints the greatest business genius of them all.

Another direct example, in his fantastic overview of the Classical studio system that I have been liberally quoting thus far, *The Genius of the System*, Thomas Schatz's approach equally eschews the histories of writers and directors, and concentrates on the “middle” of aesthetic production.\(^45\) His approach centers on Thalberg. Equally important to Schatz is Darryl Zanuck, who departed Warners to create Twentieth Century films that would eventually merge with and take over the bankrupt Fox, and David O. Selznick, who after serving a similar Thalbergian position for Paramount and RKO, became the model of the future independent producer *par excellence*. For Schatz, this Bazinian interest in the intermediary moguls of the Classical Hollywood System to whom he clearly attributes the aesthetic success of the 1930s’ oligopoly vigorously claims to avoid auteurism. His opinion of auteurism is strangely harsh as he says:

> Auteurism itself would not be worth bothering with if it hadn’t been so influential, effectively stalling film history and criticism in a prolonged state of adolescent romanticism. But the closer we look at Hollywood’s relations of power and hierarchy of authority during the studio era [. . .] the less sense it makes to assess filmmaking or film style in terms of the individual director—or any individual for that matter. The key issues here are style and authority—creative expression and creative control—and there were indeed a number of Hollywood directors who had an unusual degree of authority and a certain style. . . but it’s worth noting that their privileged status [. . .] was more a function of their role as producers than as directors. Such authority came only with
commercial success and was won by filmmakers who proved not just that they had talent but that they could work profitably within the system. (Schatz 5-6)

There is a strange hostility, here, towards the romantic model of auteurism from an historian that clearly is shifting the creative source from a Stroheim to a Thalberg—from one figure of an auteur to another. Schatz commits the fallacy that the auteur is strictly an aesthetic category, and that the figure of producer—the figure that successfully navigates through all avenues of a film’s funding to create profit—is an economic alternative to the auteur. But he is clear in his argument that style is a direct result of the central producer. In maintaining the central producer as both financial manager and creative controller, his own attempt to separate the two figures admits to a slippage between them, and thus reinstates the figure of the auteur in the position of the central producer.

I am not faulting Schatz or Gomery for trying to give credit to the economical “geniuses” who constructed an oligarchy under the extreme conditions of the Great Depression. Instead, I want to point out that their adherence to a genre model of “genius grouping” in place of auteurism as a “stalled romanticism” is a contradiction. Nor am I pushing for a method of economic interpretation that is no longer dependent on personalities. In truth, I do not believe that any aesthetic or economic study can exist without them. For me, this method of personification is a reliable system of identification. One can identify with a system’s failure because of its similarity to personal failure, and this is where many thresholds of potential creative independence and artistic possibility emerge.

To simply blame the failures of silent auteurs entirely on the central production unit merely points out a preferential shift in historiography towards the central producer’s authority and all too easily displaces the source of creativity into the unit rather than the director.
Similarly, if one is to argue for a foundational consistency of style in Classical Hollywood, it would not be exclusively due to the central production unit. The central producer system is not the more correct historical surrogate or function of authorship, it is authorship. It is a closer definition of authorship than traditional auteurism in that it admits to being a part of the creative process, but is not the exclusive source. The figure of the author always contains all possible inputs of creativity no matter how limited and exclusive its brand claims it to be. This multifaceted figure is preserved intact as Classical Hollywood shifts from the central producer unit to the independent producer-director models of the 1940s and 1950s.

Moreover, as to the argument for a consistency of style, the only consistency, for me, is the critical habit of determining these early historical transformations—both aesthetic and commercial (the distinction between which becomes more and more blurred as the Hollywood narrative continues)—by way of the generic practice of grouping particular figures of creative authority on whether or not they are to be held accountable for when innovations and advancements in style inevitably fall short of industrial and critical expectations and finally fail. For many cinematic historians, as we have seen, the producers and the money men are granted a certain authorial status, but are often exempt from this accountability of failure. They are only heralded for their economic success—a success that, in some cases, ironically becomes reconfigured as a uniform corporate artistry in their own historiography. The preferential mode of differentiation in these histories is still based on a definition of economic success rather than on aesthetic consistency within the restrictions of Hollywood’s industrial practices with the caveat that the central producer for a brief shining moment was the supposed “perfect marriage” of both.
Thus, as if insisting on a natural progression of this “marriage,” future independent teams like Hitchcock and Selznick would preserve both the established authorities, respectively, of creative director and industrial producer that had been represented in Classical Hollywood formerly by the singular central producer. But, inversely, a filmmaker like Orson Welles, who upon entering Hollywood would immediately set out to become an amalgam of both those figures, and attempt to totally overwrite every established possible protocol in industrial filmmaking, would “overstep” the already fuzzy line of authority between “aesthetic director” and “economic producer” to become a notorious risk-taking auteur—an “arrogant” ensemble of producer, director, and writer—of such magnitude that he would overshadow the earlier “arrogances” of Griffith and Stroheim. He would pay the ultimate price for his bravado, and become the most exemplary—and most apologetic—figure of the maverick auteur.
Chapter 3: The Maverick: Orson Welles and Failures of Independence

I have always been more interested in experiment, than in accomplishment.
—Orson Welles

Critical discourse surrounding Orson Welles has become considerably larger and more variegated in the last few decades, but, initially, Welles’s story in the grand narrative of American film history was yet another cautionary tale like all the others before him. He was remembered almost exclusively as the creator of Citizen Kane (1941), which, to date, remains at the top of most critic’s lists of the best films of all time. For many, Welles, after Kane, was the filmmaker who was never able to surpass his primary achievement—delivering near misses with The Lady of Shanghai (1947) and Touch of Evil (1958) until he became an independent filmmaker in self-imposed exile from the studio system in Europe. Or worse, the more popular misconception was that he abandoned filmmaking completely in the last decades of his life to occasionally appear in wine commercials and talk shows. This configuration of Welles, the filmmaker and the man, made him the victim of his own claim that he started from the top and worked his way down. This is, of course, a grave understatement for an artist who contributed much more to a multitude of different media than only a single masterpiece of cinema.

Welles was already a huge presence before Kane. Welles entered studio filmmaking after almost a decade of success in the theatre and radio. Following his hyper-realistic, panic-creating fake news radio broadcast of The War of the Worlds, he was in great demand by several of the big five film studios. From these offers he accepted the smallest of the big five, RKO’s, contract that gave him final cut over his first studio project. Even at that point, Welles was not new to experimenting with the medium of cinema. Welles had already dabbled in making films before Kane: First, as a precocious student at the Todd School for Boys, he had created a short “spoof” of the surrealist avant-garde with Hearts of Age (1934). And later, he had created short
“intro” films for some of his theatrical productions—in fact, recently his opening for *Too Much Johnson* has magically been discovered and restored. Before deciding upon *Kane*, Welles first intended to film a version of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* that would be filmed entirely from Marlowe’s, perspective. The project proved to be either too technically challenging for Welles, or too risky an experiment for the studio, and was ultimately rejected for another, more typical, thriller, *Smiler with a Knife*.

But that project also fell through, leaving us with what typically begins (and ends) Welles’s cinema, the undisputed masterpiece that is *Citizen Kane*.

Because of the technical accomplishment that is *Kane*, Welles was labelled one of the original *auteurs* by many—a designation that Welles, a devout anti-*cineaste*, absolutely loathed. The accolade was largely contingent on the assumption that the director of *Citizen Kane* represented a powerful, individual force—either intentionally or accidentally—that transcended the standard factory product and practices of the studio *par excellence*. For more narrow-minded critics and biographers such as Charles Higham, this immediate success led to an inability to reproduce the success of *Kane* (a success that was not accredited until much later after its release), and, thus, produced a “fear of completion” in Welles. Welles became a very certain type of *auteur*: Unlike Ford or Hitchcock, he represented an *auteur* that perpetually “failed” against the control systems of Hollywood, and thus exiled himself from Hollywood to the supposed denigration of his future work. Therefore, the configuration of Welles as an *auteur* was a double-edged sword, and because for so many it rested on a single masterpiece, he became a primary target for those against the *auteur* theory. In the early 1970s, Pauline Kael with her article, *Raising Kane*, which is, perhaps, her most famous assault on the Romanticized auteurism of Andrew Sarris, attacked Welles’s authorship of *Kane*, attempting to transfer most of the credit to the screenwriter Herman J. Mankiewicz. The backlash to Kael’s attack was immense.
proving the existence a growing critical dedication to Welles. The filmmaker Peter Bogdanovich and critics such as Jonathan Rosenbaum and Jim McBride argued not only for Welles’s authorship of *Kane* to be ratified, but also began to draw more attention to Welles’s subsequent contributions to cinema post-*Kane*, which, in turn, led to a growing interest in not only his subsequent twelve completed films and his ventures into television and other media, but also his incomplete works. The contextual histories surrounding these fragments and multiple versions of his ever-expanding body of work, have finally, to this day, begun to complicate the oversimplified figure of Welles as simply the unfortunate figure that never did anything as important as *Kane*.

Welles remained in the shadow of *Kane* for four decades, which is too large a field to cover in a single chapter, however, I want to look closer at how Welles interacted (or refused to interact) with the historical shifts and changes in the Hollywood studio system and its margins after *Kane*. Welles’s body of work within the grand narrative of the Hollywood studio system begins at the decline of the classical studio period at the end of the 1930s, and spans into the dawn of the New Hollywood of the early 1970s. This chapter will concern itself with two moments of post-*Kane* “failure:” One moment within the declining Classical Hollywood studio system and the other “outside” or in exile of an emerging New Hollywood.

First, I wish to consider a film that Welles’s critics often ignore entirely, *The Stranger* (1946). This film is often dismissed because, in almost a full reversal of the auteurist elevation of Welles as creator of the infallible *Kane*, *The Stranger* represents a complete resignation to the studio system to produce a standard and un inventive studio product. Rather than argue for a revaluing of the film, I will analyze why such resignation to a control system is anathema to the critical investment of Welles as an auteur. What is at stake for the figure of Welles as a purely
radical filmmaker if The Stranger were to be embraced more warmly within Welles's canon? Or, to rephrase the question, if The Stranger is a successful studio collaboration financially, but an aesthetic failure from the critical viewpoint, then how is failure intrinsic to the construction of Welles as a maverick filmmaker and to auteurism in general?

Second, Welles's uneven and fragmented productivity following Kane is allegedly due to his self-imposed exile in Europe after years of frustration with studio interference in 1948. After his first stint of exile in Europe between 1948 and 1958—within which he produced two films: the independently produced, Othello (1951), and the Euro-funded, Mr. Arkadin (a/k/a Confidentiality Report) (1955) both of which exist in multiple versions—Welles returned to Hollywood only to suffer more studio interference with Touch of Evil.50 So Welles returned to Europe for the entire 1960s. When Welles finally returned to Hollywood in the 1970s at the dawn of the New Hollywood, he hoped that a younger generation of filmmakers that revered and imitated the older studio auteurs would enable a comeback—or at least allow a capstone to his career—by funding his meta-cinematic project, The Other Side of the Wind. In many ways, the New Hollywood rejected him morecoldly than the classical system ever had. Welles’s post-Kane difficulties are either explained by his unwillingness to engage with the classical studio system, or, inversely, by the classical studio’s rejection of Welles’s radicalism and penchant for experimentation. But what, then, explains Welles’s “failure” to complete a final film in a New Hollywood that historically branded itself as a cinematic movement that—albeit briefly— unabashedly modeled itself on the maverick auteurs of the classical system (of which we have Welles as a prime example), and craved more varied and experimental approaches to traditional cinematic narratives and editing. Even though by the dawn of the New Hollywood Welles had
already spent decades breaking cinematic ground before all this radicalization of filmmaking was embraced, he was left largely unsupported by his admirers.

It is my hope that by comparing two different historical modes of Welles-as-auteur in relation to two different Hollywoods, one can discover what is at stake for a critical discourse that considers Welles as the definitive counterpoint to the Hollywood studio system of production—or what Jonathan Rosenbaum will call an “ideological challenge” to the “industrial-media complex”—from *Kane* forward.  

In many ways, this is what most Romantic variations of auteurism have struggled to maintain: that the artist always stands apart from the system. However, the director-as-brand in the contemporary blockbuster mode of filmmaking betrays this conception because the branded, or “bankable,” director always collaborates to a large degree with what the studio demands. Thus, these two historical points that we shall explore will witness an earlier Welles attempting to bend himself to the will of the classical studio system with *The Stranger*, and compare that Welles to the older and fiercely independent filmmaker that, after years of exile, thought he could return to a New Hollywood built on revolutionary filmmaking that would finally recognize his indomitable spirit. In both cases, Welles would find his aesthetic position to Hollywood unchanged.

*The Stranger*, or Welles’s Most Successful Failure

*The Stranger* is by far Orson Welles’ most ignored work. The film occupies substantially less space in critical tomes on Welles than any other of his works. The critical consensus is that it is a minor, forgettable studio piece, unworthy of a place in the Welles pantheon. And maybe it is. As I have promised, I do not intend to argue for its elevation in the Welles canon,
but the near-silent critical discussion is strange, to me, considering that, however Welles is constructed as a sign-system stylistically—or historically and/or economically as a *brand* or *star-director*—most literature on Welles ignores this rare moment of “complete” resignation to the Hollywood studio system (which is more frequent with Welles than is acknowledged by his supporters). This resignation and its apologetic approach to filmmaking—Welles-as-humble-narrator—becomes Welles’s rhetorical strategy throughout his entire post-*Kane* career.

By “apologetic” I mean that, for many critics, Welles after *Kane* is a self-acknowledged and unabashed “incompletist” with control issues stemming from a need for full independence within or without the studio system. Put another way, Welles is always apologizing for not being able to work in harmony with the studio systems rather than adamantly setting himself apart from it. Writers that insist on Welles as a maverick against the studio system (both supporters and detractors) defend his fiercely independent pieces, like *Othello*, and are rapturous (again either to negative or positive ends) that these pieces cannot truly find a finished form or product. Multiple versions and fragments of unfinished works of Welles’s movies exist in different versions sitting throughout the globe in private cans lost or forgotten. All these pieces make for very speculative conversations as to what they *should have been*. To be sure, imagining the potential of these fragments is where critical dialogue truly emerges. Welles, rather than creating “contained” pieces that would establish a consistent stylistic system faithful to both auteur purists, and structural film historians, would instead consistently break from his own cinematic grammar from project to project—most often by changing the economic conditions surrounding each subsequent production to allow each project the flexibility to evolve throughout the production process, however indefinitely long that would take. The intentionality of this “style”—the search for pure expression through independence—is impossible to prove definitively, and,
equally impossible, is to claim that this “style” is produced entirely from a uniform resistance to various systems of control imposed by various studio systems—the Welles-as-a-spoiled-brat theory. The only consistent thread throughout all of Welles’s work would seem to be this “incompleteness.” In fact, most recent Welles scholarship flows freely throughout Welles’s vast collection of multiple versions, abandoned or unfinished projects, and the various studio eviscerations of his conceptions rather than focusing on his completed works. The core of Welles studies can be said to be generated by his cinematic “incompleteness.”

If most of Welles’s work is acknowledged to be incomplete, then why do most critics begin and end with the singular cinematic moment of Citizen Kane, which is arguably the only truly complete object of Welles’s canon? Kane was an object from which Welles perpetually distanced himself. This distancing can be seen either, in one extreme, as degenerative and/or self-destructive—as in the biographies of Charles Higham and David Thomson—or, at the other extreme, it can be interpreted as an attempt to move the cinematic medium into a more expressive and personal space of incompletion permitted only by independence from all studio systems—apparent in the critical works of Jim McBride, James Naremore, Jonathan Rosenbaum and others. For now, let us accept the critical assumption of so many of Welles commentators: that, from Citizen Kane forward, Welles will have each film “fail” to rival the accomplishment of Kane somehow, either intentionally or not.

So why not, then, start with the most commercially successful of his failures? The Stranger “fails” differently than both its predecessors and successors by representing a complete absence of a Welles who is obsessed with controlling each film’s production. This absence of aesthetic control might explain the critical indifference surrounding the film—most consider it not a Welles product at all. For these critics, the film as a commercial success was a by-
product of Welles's resignation to studio control, and, thus, the studio’s right to final cut is the reason for its critical abandonment. On these terms, The Stranger’s commercial success in 1946 comes directly from a suppression of Welles’s penchant for experimentation, and thus offers little to have it stand out amongst the numerous B movies that the studio factory was spitting out. As Welles would argue with Peter Bogdanovich, Welles took on The Stranger strategically to prove that he could produce an efficient studio product in a bankable fashion. For most critics, he simply sold out. Per usual, the real story of The Stranger is probably somewhere in the middle.

The Stranger emerged from an intense period of professional disappointment for Welles. Following a power shift in RKO between 1942 and 1943 that famously cut up The Magnificent Ambersons, left It’s All True unfinished and lost in South America, tore up Welles’s contract(s) and threw his Mercury Theatre crew off the lot, Welles found himself in need of a job. To complicate matters, by the end of World War II the conservative shift in the American political field had abandoned Welles of the Roosevelt and Rockefeller support of his liberal radicalism, and he was left adrift in the conservative studio system. In 1943, Welles was offered the part of Rochester in Robert Stevenson’s Jane Eyre (1943) produced by William Goetz, who was then with 20th Century-Fox. This was Welles’s first popular film performance to date despite the mostly negative critical reception of his previous work as film producer and film director. The success of Jane Eyre led to a second successful performance in Irving Pichel’s Tomorrow is Forever (1946), also produced by Goetz, but this time under Goetz’s independent company formed with Leo Spitz, International Pictures. The company still relied on Welles’s nemesis RKO for distribution so when Welles was offered a part in The Stranger, Welles surely approached the role of Franz Kindler with either caution or indifference. Surprisingly, he was
then offered to direct the film. However, he was placed under the direct authority of Sam Spiegel who had partnered with International via his own Eagle Productions, and who owned the original story, *The Trap*, on which *The Stranger* was based. Spiegel had initially wanted the involvement of John Huston, fresh off his success with *The Maltese Falcon*. but Huston was unavailable due to military service. Thus Spiegel “settled” for Welles. This would place Welles directly under the thumb of a highly authoritative and controlling producer.

*The Stranger* would be the first film that Welles relinquished complete control of his creative contributions towards any of his works to date. In fact, Welles’s contract agreed to indemnify Spiegel if he could not finish the film. Also, he was not allowed any say in the casting of the film. Even if he was fired as director, he would still be obliged to continue the role of Kindler. The supposed saving grace would be that after completion of the film, he would be given a four-picture deal with International. This is the only piece of the contract that apparently was not binding since International never offered him the deal after *The Stranger* was completed.

What Spiegel and Goetz wanted from Welles was a straightforward thriller. The basic thrust of the film is the Allied Department of War Crimes’s hunt for the Nazi war criminal, Franz Kindler. The Department allows one of Kindler’s former underlings, Hans Meinike, to escape his cell on death row in hopes that he will lead them to Kindler. Meinike tracks down his old colleague Kindler, who is hiding in a small town, Harper, Connecticut, posing as a history teacher named Charles Rankin and is about to marry the daughter of a Supreme Court Justice, Mary Longstreet. The war crime investigator, Wilson, played by Edward G. Robinson, follows Meinike to Harper, but Meinike eludes him by knocking Wilson out cold. Meinike then tracks down Kindler-as-Rankin outside his job at the Harper School for Boys, but Kindler immediately strangles Meinike to avoid being discovered, and buries the body. Wilson awakes and, having
lost Meinike, begins to narrow down his suspects in the town. Whittling down his list, Wilson meets Rankin after Rankin returns from his honeymoon, and at dinner, Rankin exclaims that Karl Marx is not a German, but a Jew. This triggers Wilson’s suspicions that Rankin is Kindler. Kindler, then convinces his wife that he is wrongly accused, but then stages a plot to kill her. Failing to do so, Mary realizes that her husband is truly Kindler and with Wilson’s help corners him atop the clock tower, where, trying to escape, he is stabbed by one of the automatic clock figures and he falls to his death.

While nowhere as inventive a narrative structure that Welles had already demonstrated with *Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons*, the story still resonates with some of Welles’s consistent themes—specifically, a nostalgia for a simpler era and the threats of technology and monetary power on those nostalgic ideals. Harper, Connecticut and its School for Boys is more than reminiscent of Welles’s middle American roots in Wisconsin, where he attended the Todd School for Boys. Rankin is the technological threat, in this case embodied by Rankin’s belief that a Fourth Reich will rise under the disguise of marriage to a Supreme Court judge’s daughter. But *The Stranger's* narrative remained simplistic for audience accessibility and avoided any form of chronological hopscotch or use of voice-over narration that was so specific to Welles’s style following *Kane* and *Ambersons*. Even under the restrictions of his contract, Welles tried to contribute changes to the script that would make it less linear, and less predictable. For example, Welles wanted to hire his old friend, Agnes Moorehead, as a nosy spinster who would replace the investigator and make Kindler’s discovery more internal to the town’s consciousness. Both Speigel and Goetz rejected this idea, and hired Robinson to ensure a better box office draw. Also, Welles wanted to develop a larger twenty-minute prologue that expanded Meinike’s search for Kindler in South America before discovering his location in Harper. Welles was always
outspoken throughout the war that Nazi conspirators had not been squelched and Welles wanted to capitalize on the popular conviction that South America was becoming a Nazi refuge. But this lengthy prologue was also rejected. Even so, the opening five minutes of Meinike’s search—clearly the reduction of a greater segment—has some of the film’s most creative cinematography in the film, and leads one to imagine what Welles intended as a greater first act.

The restrictions on editing the script were tantamount to restrictions on production. Although most of the story called to be shot in exteriors on location, Spiegel insisted on constructing everything on the backlot. The assumption of most researchers is that Welles’s reputation for exorbitant over-shooting on It’s All True was still fresh in the industry’s mind. This decision to create sets, however, reunited Welles with Perry Ferguson, his art director on Kane. Unfortunately, the result was far more banal than the opulent sets created for the earlier film. The lackluster design was less the fault of Ferguson, and more the fault of the common perception of small town existence. The only spectacular set would be that of the clock tower, which serves as the centerpiece for the town and characters—both Rankin and Wilson have a passion for fixing timepieces—and is the place where Kindler meets his end. The oversized clock was criticized by viewers for its authenticity to its fictional location for being out of place in a Connecticut town (most New England towns would not have medieval statues built into their mechanisms). The clock’s design points to the more exaggerated visual style intended by the director. It becomes the typical spatial distortion of over-sized or encompassing sets that visually minimizes Welles’s central characters. In this case, using an over-sized symbol of time to dwarf the central character. Such “dwarfing” is best seen by repeated shots from within the clock tower itself where the actors would have to scale up a rickety three-story ladder and through a trap door that framed their ascent.
But there are few other shots that contain the vertiginous, deep focus shots typical of Welles’s previous films. Welles hired Russel Metty, who would work with Welles again on *Touch of Evil*, as his cameraman. Metty had already done some minor work with Welles under Greg Toland for *Citizen Kane* and Stanley Cortez for *The Magnificent Ambersons*, but Welles was more than likely not looking to recreate Toland or Cortez’s large scope style, but, rather, was looking for a cameraman built for speed. Metty resembled the contemporary noir shooting style of John Alton—a style that anticipated a budgetary lack of elaborate sets by only lighting up front and letting the background disappear into the darkness. Metty’s camerawork helped to downplay Ferguson’s bland setting and accentuated the film’s character development.

Supposedly Welles shot and directed with relative ease on set. His contribution to post-production, if any, was quick and mostly invisible. The editing was mainly controlled by Ernest Nims, who, in turn, was controlled by Spiegel. The editing was underpinned with a tepid score that did little to enhance the performances of the actors, but mainly enhanced the melodramatic high points with a typical redundancy.

While there are moments in *The Stranger* that look forward to future experiments—the vertiginous clock tower and menacing robotic, medieval figures look towards the extreme close-ups on characters in his next feature *Lady of Shanghai* with cameras looking dangerously over cliffs, and, of course, the final distortions of the famous crazy-house ending. *The Stranger* remains safely contained in studio tradition, abandoning experimentation for straightforward storytelling at every chance. And this is probably why, *The Stranger* was a commercial success—there were no multiple levels of visual complexity to digest, and no open ended existential questions of its characters. Instead the story plays out quickly in a straightforward manner worthy of a “high concept” future blockbuster product.
But it is less important to me what made *The Stranger* a profitable project, if not for Welles, then for Spiegel and Goetz. What is more central to my overarching theme is the critical dismissal of the film because of its commercial success, and this “success” is understood only as a direct result of the dilution of Welles’s stylistic ability and control. If this was an intentional career move, as Welles himself insisted, to prove that he could make a bankable film under the standard Classical studio restrictions of the time, then why is *The Stranger* not reconsidered under those conditions or with those intentions within Welles’s critical discourse? And how can you dilute a style that as we have already noted is consistently changing and reinventing itself as it moves away from *Kane*?

These contradictions are seen throughout Welles critics’ analyses of the film. For Charles Higham, who very reductively claimed that Welles’s “fear of completion” led to mediocre and forgettable post-*Kane* works because Higham only anticipated more *Kanes*, *The Stranger* is a “strategic success.” Higham praises the concise storytelling, which is more the product of Speigel and Nims than Welles’s, and praises the suspenseful nature of the film. But Higham also opines the lack of invention, leaving it in the shadow of *Kane* as he does with all other Welles’s works. A more sympathetic critic, Peter Cowie draws out the few cinematographic and editing elements that he attributes to Welles’s style, however, again in comparison to *Kane*: For Cowie, there are few moments such as the clock tower scenes and even fewer classic Wellesian long shots that were so abundant in *Kane* and *Ambersons*. Cowie points out that the only true Wellesian editing is the moment that Kindler strikes his fiancee’s dog because it is digging up the buried Meinike, and cuts directly to Robinson’s character awakened as if startled by the kick to realize Rankin is Kindler. Cowie is correct to note that there are few elements that would connect the film to *Kane* or *Ambersons*—or, looking forward, *The Lady of*
Shanghai, Arkadin, or Touch of Evil—but if we are to remain on our present critical course of establishing a Wellesian system as a movement away from the system of Kane—a system that does not admit to a singular Welles style—we must adhere to that part of the Welles-as-system is that it is in no way absolute. While Welles preferred types of shots and edited in a very distinct pre-conceived way that would allow him to connect shots filmed sometimes years apart, there is little evidence of a consistency of style. So, we must search deeper than Higham’s claim of Welles strategically not-being-Welles as a means of commercial success, or than Cowie’s explanation of The Stranger being un-Wellesian in style as a means for The Stranger’s critical dismissal.

Jim McBride moves only a little further in his 1972 book (revised in 1996) by connecting The Stranger to Journey into Fear (1943). Journey into Fear historically bounces in and out of the Wellesian canon (at the time of this writing it is fair to say that it is out). Journey Into Fear was handed over to Norman Foster by Welles to complete its direction as he left to film It’s All True in South America. Supposedly Welles directed the scenes he acted in and then left the rest to Foster. Welles always disowned the film and gave full credit to Foster. McBride describes Welles lack of interest in producing Journey as a prelude to The Stranger thus:

This misguided attempt to be a commercial producer no doubt was made less distinctive by studio meddling, but the fact that it looks like such a hodgepodge cannot be blamed entirely on the studio. Because of the hybrid nature of the direction, in which Foster was nominally in charge but Welles tried to make little “improvements” here and there, Journey into Fear lacked a firm hand at the tiller. It proved that Welles could not function effectively when his heart was not really in his work. (Orson Welles 91)
McBride is couching a clear sub-argument in his apology for Welles as a romantic who must always work passionately or not at all, and thus being passionless on *Journey into Fear* he was not responsible for its mediocrity. McBride hints at Welles’s being unfit to *commercially produce* a work, and this deserves more attention. We can assume that *commercially* implies the successful variant of the term (not the responsibilities or the risks) and ideally imagines Welles a bankable director. When connected to *producer* we have the key position of control, usually in cinematic terms, economically. Here, McBride does not question and/or explain Welles’s inability to commercially produce, it is an assumption.\(^5\)

When reaching *The Stranger* in his historiographical critique, McBride is far less forgiving of Welles’s indifference. He says:

> The story offers the elements of a good film [. . . ] but much of *The Stranger* teeters ludicrously into melodramatic hokum [. . .] Welles might have approached *The Stranger* with greater ambition for it follows the general thematic pattern of his films: the guilty secret, the nemesis/investigator, the scenes of unmasking, the chastened innocents, and the protagonist’s tragic fall [. . .] *The Stranger* is not quite as bad a film as I claimed in the first edition of this book—its *intermittent visual authority* becomes more apparent on repeated viewings—but it is still is a disappointing piece of work. (98-100, my emphasis)

Even while McBride agrees in his 1996 revision that the film deserves more attention, he refuses to give it some. Again, there is McBride’s insistence that the Wellesian system is dependent mainly on authority, in this case a visual one that we will assume to be cinematic and diegetic. But this authority, according to McBride, does not contain the ability to commercially produce that visual authority. As seen earlier in his faint connection to *Journey into Fear*—a film that he softens his critique by claiming Welles’s heart wasn’t in it, but strangely does not do so for *The
Stranger—McBride brackets off Journey Into Fear in the Welles canon as being a more or less an author-less work, and that Welles could not be responsible for the weakness of Foster’s direction, but Welles is responsible for being a poor commercial producer. Is it possible that because McBride cannot defer the director position of The Stranger, he, thus, critically forecloses upon it? His review thus sidelines to a critique of Welles’s performance as Kindler. For him, Welles’s performance is overwrought and unbelievable, and we are supposed to connect Welles’s “failure” in direction to his “failure” in performance. But Welles’s ability as an actor must be separated by his tactics as a director. In fact, many critics often confuse his performance with his puppetry so to speak.

Moving further into Wellesian critical discourse, in the first edition of The Magic World of Orson Welles, James Naremore dedicates only two pages on The Stranger. It is included in a transitionary chapter between Welles’s RKO contract years and his brief American return with Touch of Evil. The chapter elaborates what Naremore will call Welles’s “radicalization of style.” This aesthetic shift will be dedicated mainly to The Lady of Shanghai for which The Stranger will act only as a cautionary precursor. At the beginning of the chapter, Naremore focuses on Welles’s public life between 1942 and 1946 that had intensified alongside his troubles with RKO following Citizen Kane. Welles’s liberal and progressive politics were the subject of a regular column in The New York Post entitled Orson Welles’s Almanac, and his pro-Roosevelt position often extended his concern that Naziism was only at rest, not defeated, and required vigilance. Much of this liberal (or radical) positioning can explain the “failure” of the invisible, incomplete It’s All True, however, Naremore’s intention is to show that the shift from liberal democratic wartime sentiment (of which Welles was an outspoken representative) to a more
conservative, paranoid/protective mood that would encourage things like HUAC and its investigations explain a parallel shift in Welles’s style from 1945 on.

But while Naremore plays up Welles's political position against Nazism, the critic downplays the *The Stranger* as exemplary of this position, and, rather, falls back into a classic aesthetic comparative argument. His feeling is that *The Stranger* is too derivative of Hitchcock’s *Shadow of a Doubt* (1942) made four years earlier and featuring Welles’s Mercury Theater actor and colleague, Joseph Cotten. Hitchcock’s film centers around a widow killer on the run who hides in a small California town with his extended family who, in turn, discover who he really is. When discovered, the killer tries to murder his niece to cover his tracks, but is killed trying to do so (ironically on the railroad tracks). The stories have similarities in hidden identities within a small town, but the styles and political focus are arguably quite different. Naremore, like McBride, also compares *The Stranger* to *Journey into Fear* as a type of “patchwork” project. Thus, Naremore’s first edition forecloses on *The Stranger* as either derivative of Hitchcock, or Welles’s own earlier work.

Naremore's revised edition in 1989, however, becomes more apologetic to *The Stranger*. Between editions, Naremore had been able to do some “deeper” research at the Mercury Archive (held at the Lilly Library in Bloomington, Indiana) that houses much of Welles’s correspondence and scripts from his American career—most specifically his pre-cinema work, his RKO contract years, and post-RKO period between 1943-1947. Naremore discovered that:

During that five-year period [1943-1947] just after his career with RKO ended, when his fortunes seemed in precipitous decline, [Welles] can hardly said to have been inactive. He wrote a syndicated newspaper column, he directed *Around the World* on the New York stage; he made dozens of speeches about theatre or politics, he appeared regularly
on the radio; he placed almost weekly orders for magical equipment; he wrote or supervised several movie scripts, [. . .] he co-starred in three pictures, and he adapted, directed and acted in two memorable Hollywood thrillers[. . .] (269)

By recognizing how active Welles still was after being kicked out by RKO in 1943, Naremore begins to elevate The Stranger at least partially to the height of his subsequent film, The Lady of Shanghai—a film that Naremore can arguably be the best critical spokesperson for. Naremore concedes that he may have not been able to give The Stranger proper critical recognition after discovering its projected Wellesian elements that were removed by Spiegel and Nimms. He continues:

*The Stranger* produced by Sam Speigel’s International Pictures and first shown in May 1946, was reduced in length by almost thirty minutes. I have said that it was Welles’s most conventional movie; but if I was able to see it in its long version that judgement might need qualification. Both the shooting script (presumably written by Anthony Veiller, John Huston, and Welles) and the studio’s production log reveal that the film was originally structured as a flashback narrative. It began with a mysterious sequence in which Mary Rankin rises from her bed at midnight, makes her way through a graveyard, and emerges into a New England town square where she enters the door of a church and begins to climb the enormous clock belfry. A crowd gathers in the square, armed with scythes, pitchforks and shotguns, and any weapon at hand. From their viewpoint, we see two figures emerge onto the ledge of the clock tower—a male and a female, locked in a struggle. Both figures topple from the ledge and fall to their deaths. [. . .] people begin to ask questions: ‘Know who they were?’ ‘What happened?’ ‘Who were they?’ Fade out. (270)
Naremore now gives critical weight to *The Stranger* because it begins to be consistent with every post-*Kane* film: It presumes an unseen version that would be more *Wellesian*—as having an invisible element removed by the studio, and is thus incomplete. Naremore’s discovery of *The Stranger*’s missing parts imply that Welles’s intentions of the film were obfuscated by studio interference, and that this interference would grant it reconsideration among Welles’s other works. Post-*Kane*, all Welles’s work, it would seem, must be considered as a collection of films only partially realized. The truth of this statement is what is at stake for critics that conceive of Welles as the ideal independent maverick.

Combining McBride’s claim that Welles was characteristically unable to commercially produce his films with Naremore’s reconsideration of *The Stranger*’s missing and/or imagined extended/intended cut, one can outline a clear relation between Welles’s incomplete works with and against the Classical studio system: Welles’s “style of incompleteness” is not commercially viable or bankable, and thus the studio system must “complete” them to make them so. Thus, there is a stalemate in placing *The Stranger* amongst Welles’s post-*Kane* work without damaging a certain critical investment in Welles’s as a pure independent maverick. If *The Stranger* is to be given similar aesthetic merit in the Welles canon, it must promise a certain element of incompletion, and thus be considered a victim of the Classical studio system. But, by his own claims, Welles intended *The Stranger* to be proof that he could be a commercial director if he so desired, in this case, meaning to be able to produce on schedule and relinquish his cut to the studio and its editors. *The Stranger*’s missing pieces are probably much more than a resignation to the studio’s final cut. They also exhibit the collaborative efforts of a filmmaker trying to understand his relation to the control systems of production and distribution. And arguably, he failed to discover a middle ground between creativity and control. From *The Stranger* forward,
Welles would intentionally avoid restrictive terms such as “bankability” and “commercially viable” when shopping his projects to various sources of funding that moved further and further away from the money of Hollywood. Thus, *The Stranger* is an important piece in the Wellesian canon in that it is the only clear combination after *Kane* of Welles's difficulty in producing within the confines of the studio system, and his yearning to access the pipeline that would allow his films, if not be completed, at least be seen.

**Becoming Falstaff: A Note on Welles’s Exile**

Before jumping to Welles’s experience with the New Hollywood of the Seventies, let us render a brief overview of his hiatus from the American system of film production to recognize the shift in filmmaking conditions after Welles abandoned Hollywood allegedly in search of more creative control in Europe. “Exile” is the popular descriptive term, not only for Welles’s periods of absence from the United States, but in general from the Classical studio system after *Macbeth* (1948), and again after *Touch of Evil* in 1958. The reasons for his original departure vary, but the three most prevalent theories are as follows: First, that he had amassed large tax problems from his theater, radio and film careers. Second, his outspoken liberalism that had been encouraged and protected by Roosevelt’s liberal social programs had become suspect to the rise of anti-Communist politics, and this provoked J. Edgar Hoover to open an FBI file on Welles (this file does really exist and has recently been available to the public). As McCarthy’s anti-communism swelled into the House of Un-American Activities Commission, Welles thought it best to avoid further slander of his character and leave the country. Third, was simply a practical career move where Welles simply felt he was at a dead end with the Hollywood studio system.
All three of these theories have their weight in truth, but most critics favor Welles’s exile as a political move against the studio power system. For example, as Jim McBride argues:

[. . .] although Welles did have tax problems intermittently for many years, he sometimes exaggerated their severity and seemed to use his tax difficulties to deflect attention from his less tractable political status [. . .] It is understandable that Welles would want to blame his tax problems for keeping him out of the United States from 1947 through the mid-1950s and deny or minimize the deeper reasons. He kept up the fiction not only during the blacklist era but also in later years, when the blacklist had been lifted and he was trying to reactivate his career in American films. Discussion of those old difficulties with the FBI and HUAC, still not common knowledge at the time, might have stirred fresh anxiety about Welles’s penchant for controversy, a reputation he was trying to escape. But despite his denials, Welles occasionally made other remarks suggesting that he was keenly concerned with the political repression he had left behind in the United States. (Whatever 106-108)

Welles’s liberal views are well documented by Naremore’s attention to Welles’s radicalization of style mentioned above, and the impulse to leave the U.S. was the decision of many other filmmakers of the era. But Welles’s departure, for me, is more of a personal act of disappointment than a financial or political one. In less than a decade, Welles’s public figure had faded immensely. He had fallen from being the youthful American genius and “voice” of innovative entertainment to being merely the guy married to Rita Hayworth.

And this stigma followed him to Europe. Upon arriving in Italy in 1948, Welles’s first stop after completing Macbeth for the low-budget Republic Studios, his reception was far from warm. Macbeth had been overshadowed in both American and European markets by Olivier’s
Hamlet (1948). Where Olivier’s film was considered a high-budget success that psychologized the bard, Macbeth seemed cheap and rushed in comparison with tacky Scottish accents. His Italian acting gigs were throwaway performances for cash as he famously smuggled cameras from his producers to film his independent feature, Othello. After Welles was snubbed by the Venice film festival which refused to consider Othello, he began to weave a gypsy path throughout Europe starting and stopping features and projects as he went along in a perpetual search for funding.

I am elaborating Welles’s lukewarm reception in European markets not to romanticize Welles’s European pictures—both finished and unfinished—as a purely independent move that liberated his cinematic experimentation. Welles still had to engage with finding funds and support for his projects. Without the studio system behind him, Welles was forced to develop guerilla-style filming tactics that were less a stylistic choice and more of a conditional necessity. He was indeed marginalized by his need for financing. However, there is room to argue that Welles manipulated his marginalization to the studio systems in both Hollywood and abroad to effectively create cinema under his terms. As Catherine Benamou supports:

Most of those who have followed Welles’s film career closely would agree that his difficulty in obtaining financing or studio approval for his films—most notably Heart of Darkness (1939), The Magnificent Ambersons, and It’s All True—as well as many years he spent in a peripatetic search across Europe and the Mediterranean for shooting locations and production support, conform to the romantic vision of the talented and worldly yet industrially marginalized artist that has been the bread and butter of the auteur theory. At the heart of this theory is the fundamental critique of corporate monopoly and excessive industrialization of the filmmaking process, primarily the
fetishization of technology and a hypertrophied division of labor. What is forgotten in many Euro-American narratives is just how important these margins can be for the productivity of an auteur like Welles: one’s engagement with, or unrepentant positioning in the “margins” (defined politically, aesthetically, culturally, or socially) always introduces an element of risk vis-à-vis the industry and can thus tip the balance toward the truncation or cessation of a project [. . .] Yet these same margins can also give the auteur the independence and moral strength with which to confront the industrial Goliath (in effect, as Welles pointed out in *Citizen Kane*, a two-headed monster, which spans the print media and film industries). (Benamou 147)

Benamou, here, is correct to identify the auteur theory’s stake in conceiving Welles’s as a marginalized cinematic force in the European market. The great assumption is that Welles sought to make films outside of technological and industrial demands, but this is not truly the case. Welles sought to supplement the financial backing of studio productions with equal European money such as the Alexander Salkind, who financed *Arkin*, and would go on to produce *The Three Musketeers* and *Superman*—both future blockbusters by their own right. The truth is that Welles sought out conditions that would allow equal control over final cut of the film while supplementing the money that would have been provided by a studio contract with less involved European funds. This can be seen in both his first period of exile, which produced the economically sparse but brilliantly compact version of *Othello* and the tongue-in-cheek wit of *Arkin*, and his second period that produced the highly-stylized *The Trial* (1960) and what some critics argue is his true masterpiece, *Chimes at Midnight* (1965). All these films have much smaller budgets than his studio period, but still clearly have enough funding to grant the quality of contemporary middle-budget films of the period.
This is not to say there is no originality within this period of work. The inventiveness in these pieces are immediately apparent despite the growing impoverished conditions of Welles’s filmmaking, and this inventiveness is assuredly a testament to his talent as an economical filmmaker, contrary to the accusations of RKO that branded him as spendthrift during his tenure. Welles’s managed an incredible ability to piece together shots from weeks (if not years) apart to make them appear flawless in their synchronicity. But the question that always haunts Welles’s European projects is always what they could have been. And, again, this is not fair as the films that exist in themselves and can be judged on their own intrinsic merit.

Between his classical studio period and his return to the New Hollywood, the figure of Welles emerges as neither a failed filmmaker on the run, nor a bankrupt genius. Instead, Welles outside of the studio still managed to produce several features as he battled with obscurity in America up until the Nouvelle Vague began to draw attention to his importance as an auteur. Despite a modest period of productivity in exile, Welles had vanished from critical and popular discourse in America. As McBride points out:

From Hollywood’s and the public’s point of view, Welles might just as well have quit directing movies after he departed for Europe, since his subsequent career as a filmmaker seemed so obscure. He was an “uncommercial, art-house director” whose films took years to arrive in the United States and then were scarcely seen in his native country. In 1949, an informant told the FBI that Welles “[. . .] had been making pictures over in Italy these past two years in order to finance a trip home to the United States.” That kind of insularity and xenophobia, abetted by the rampant anti-intellectualism of America in the 1950s ensured that Welles’s European works were marginalized. (99)
But marginalized or not, the “works in exile” exist mostly as Welles intended them to be even if it takes some effort to find copies for viewing. Excluding *Arkadin*, which was edited beyond Welles’s control just like *Amberons*, *The Stranger* and *Lady of Shanghai*, the completed films of this period—*Othello*, *The Trial*, *Chimes at Midnight* and *The Immortal Story* (1968), as well as the “essay films” of the 1970s, *F for Fake* (1973) and *Filming Othello* (1978)—are the complete films that make up more than half of his completed works.

But a lot of critical interest in Welles’s post-Kane work, especially regarding his periods of exile have been concerned with his unfinished work—the *could have been* element of Welles’s cinema. As we have already noted, the critical discourse surrounding Welles has become increasingly interested in the archeological elements and the fragments of Welles’s oeuvre. His earlier RKO projects and subsequent studio works with the obvious exception of *Kane* all contain missing elements and imagined completeness that are explained away as the result of studio interference. However, the works begun during Welles’s period of exile do not have such an easy excuse. Welles’s incomplete works such as *Quixote* and *The Deep* remained in fragmentary form mainly by Welles’s own choice, and thus to consider any invisible work by Welles requires an initial questioning of the authorial source itself. As Benamou warns:

[. . .] to shift the historiographical emphasis to the lost text [Benamou’s text refers to all possible incomplete or unfinished Welles films that could be generated from its historiography] and its contexts is not to deny Orson Welles’s subjectivity and agency as director and sociopolitical subject. It is, rather, to re-center the discussion onto the trajectories forming around the work itself . . . a revised notion of authorship is called for, one that would supplant “romantic notions of creative genius . . . and provide a historical
corrective to the poststructuralist ‘notion that the author is simply an empty, abstract
function of cultural discourse through whom various ideologies speak.’ (Benamou 151)

For me, the various ideologies that, however, manifest themselves as critical discourse configure
Welles as an assumed commercial failure and this strategy automatically isolates the
conversation to only his aesthetic value. By committing the fallacy that the commercial aspect
can be completely removed from his work, their opinions vacillate as to what degree this figure
was a successful alternative to all historical and economical variations of studio production. It is
less a question of whether Welles is upheld as an auteur or not, but, rather, how his cultural
function changes within variegated systems of control, and how the auteur’s work is ultimately
critically valued as either a cooperative or resistant force. All the while, it is a dangerous
assumption that under classical Hollywood’s assessment he was always-already a “failure”
commercially post-Kane.

These favored critical assumptions beg the following questions as we shift Welles’s
figure from classical Hollywood to New Hollywood: Is the maverick valued only because it
represents an alternative to Hollywood’s economic and technological barriers? How does one
compare an “incomplete” film to a “complete” studio product? Is it proper to consider only the
completed works—in Welles’s case, thirteen features—to see how the author’s texts function in
the larger historiographical field of studio production? If one was to uphold Welles as an
intentional or unintentional “incompletist” and consider the unseen films within the same field of
production, must we assume that all his finished films were contrary to his aesthetic intention? If
Welles resigned himself to studio filmmaking in The Stranger, then why was he unable or
unwilling to resign himself to completing so many others that he was clearly more passionate
about? In all these queries, there is one that underpins them all: Does Welles have to be a
classical Hollywood failure to maintain his critical following? If so, why is this stigma not reversed by the explosion of warranted auteurism in Hollywood in the late 1960s?

*The Other Side of the Wind*, or an Unfinished Film about Not Finishing a Film

Of all of Orson Welles’ unfinished or unrealized projects in the last two decades of his life, to date, there is no potential feature more anticipated by Welles aficionados than *The Other Side of the Wind (TSOTW)*. The film tells a story of an “old school” maverick director, Jake Hannaford, who has apparently died in a car crash on the night after his seventieth birthday party. As usual, Welles starts with the death of his main character and moves his narrative back to the night before. As we flashback to Hannaford’s party, he is swarmed with paparazzi and critics—each of whom represent real life critics of Welles, namely Pauline Kael, whose *Raising Kane*, as referred to above, had appeared during the first year of Welles’s shooting *TOSOTW*. Their questions flurry around Hannaford such as “what is the new film about,” or “what does it mean,” and Hannaford deflects the questions with witty reversals and quips. The paparazzi are obsessed with the director’s much-awaited upcoming feature—a film that will be not only Hannaford’s swan song but a meta-commentary on the “new filmmaking” of his contemporaries. It promises to be an art piece *a la* Antonioni’s *Zabriskie Point* (1970), a film that attempted to capture the American 1960s counter-culture through plaintive-yet-detached “European” cinematography. Hannaford is attempting to prove himself equal to but also against such an “art house” style while reestablishing himself as a bankable commodity in the “auteur” scene—a clear commentary on the up and coming “cinema brats” of the New Hollywood.62 But throughout the party, we learn that the film is still incomplete, and that his lead character, whom
Hannaford may have more than some homosexual attraction toward, has mysteriously either died or vanished. The film interweaves itself between the party footage and scenes from Hannaford’s unfinished film as speculation of whether the film can ever amount to what its expectation is.

It is the frightening biographical similarities of this plot and its parallels to Welles’s struggle to get *TOSTOW* made that make this invisible film resonate with our investigation to what is at stake in critical expectations of Welles as a maverick filmmaker and alternative cinematic icon. At the beginning of the 1970s, Welles had marginalized himself almost completely from the studio system. Between 1958 and 1970, most of Welles’s European projects begged more comparison to the unfinished *It’s All True* than to *Kane*. Throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, Welles perpetually shot his ever-changing cinematic interpretation of *Don Quixote*—a project that was originally financed for television by Frank Sinatra. The project became so drawn out that Welles in interviews began to call the film, *When Are You Going to Finish Don Quixote?* Throughout the late 1960s, he shot most of *The Deep* that remained almost complete, waiting for dubbing by Jeanne Moreau until actor Laurence Harvey’s death shelved the film. Welles nearly completed a very surreal version of *Merchant of Venice*. He shortened the play, omitting the character of Portia, and concentrating on his own riveting performance of Shylock. *Merchant* is kind of a fusion of his *Chimes at Midnight* and *The Trial*, both filmed earlier in the decade—it marries Welles’s ability to manipulate Shakespeare’s texts and structure with the Kafkaesque surrealism of an empty-yet-oppressive city space. All these films have obvious conditions that prevent an ideal completion—missing negatives or reels, deaths, etc.—but while these films are incomplete, they would seem to remain so more by Welles’s fluctuating interests or his choice to be a nomad in Europe.
The Other Side of the Wind is different from his incomplete European films in that Welles clearly wanted Hollywood to not only see this film, but to financially back it in some way. Welles returned to Hollywood in 1970 when the studio system was in a huge state of flux. The Classical system in Welles’s absence had long been forced to divest its theaters by fiat of the Supreme Court’s Paramount case, and thus had lost control of their vertical structure, which controlled the entire production pipeline from script to screen. The big five studios were pale shadows of their earlier selves. RKO, Welles’s “studio nemesis,” had disappeared completely after Howard Hughes bought it over and ran it into the ground. Larger studios like Paramount were consumed by larger corporations, in Paramount’s case, Gulf and Western, and for these conglomerates less than 10% of their overall wealth was generated by entertainment. Diluted as a focused industry dedicated solely to producing and distributing films, and embattled by the growing popularity of television, the 1960s had taken its toll on the system, and in addition to that, the studios had clearly lost touch with its youth audience. Surprise counter-cultural hits such as Bonnie and Clyde and Easy Rider (1969) pointed towards the youth market’s demand for a shift in standard Hollywood product to a more violent and more revolutionary style of filmmaking. The studio system would open itself up to hungry auteurs to shoulder the demands of the new audience, while the studio could concentrate on simply funding and distributing product without the risk of creative miscalls.64

Welles had returned to Hollywood to act in Henry Jaglom’s A Safe Place (1971) that was financed by Columbia’s BBS Productions, which had already cleared a successful path for grittier marginal filmmaking with the aforementioned Easy Rider and Bob Rafelson’s Five Easy Pieces. Supposedly, BBS producer Bert Schneider met Welles through Jaglom, contracted a script from Welles and issued him a typewriter. Welles neither completed the script nor returned
the typewriter, but instead embarked on an experimental project that would develop a script while the project was being shot. Claiming this to be a novel approach to filmmaking—although arguably it had been somewhat accomplished already by Cassavetes and Altman separately—the concept of the maverick director gathering up a team of actors and crew to improvise a new Orson Welles film was enough to generate a dedicated entourage of talent that would stick with Welles off and on for four years.

All primary shooting was completed intermittently between 1971 to 1975 as Orson bounced back and forth between Hollywood (and Carefree, Arizona where most of the Hannaford birthday party scene was shot on location) and Europe. Welles approached the filming with his new-found cinematographer and acolyte, Gary Graver, in the same way he had been filming in Europe for the last two decades. Welles would shoot efficiently around whichever actor was available on set from day to day. Graver would rush around setting up shots in advance to guess at whatever Welles would come up with from day to day. Welles worked on his usual shoestring budget, starting and stopping as funds permitted. Welles had found start-up funding in France via an Iranian company called Astrophore. The company was owned and operated by Mehedi Bousheri, the brother-in-law of the Shah of Iran. For the rest of his life, Welles implied that the shift in Iranian politics—the overthrowing of the Shah by Ayatollah Khomeni—had complicated the completion and release of the film. But Welles would prove to be as much of an impediment to *TOSOTW*’s completion as the proprietary disputes.

Welles felt mounting pressure from Astrophore to produce the film by early 1975. In February 1975, Welles was elected to receive the AFI Lifetime Achievement award, and Welles felt that this would be a perfect opportunity to shop the film out to a wealthy Hollywood audience in to buy back any proprietary claims from the Iranian-French company. Four years
earlier as Welles began shooting TOSOTW, Welles was awarded a “Special Oscar” for career achievement. In 1971, Welles was only fifty-five years old at the time and viewed the award as an insult, forcing a premature end to his career as he was shooting what he intended to be his masterpiece. Welles refused to attend the Academy Award ceremony, staying in his hotel room in Beverly Hills to watch his friend, John Huston, accept the award on his behalf. However, by 1975, he had finished most of shooting for TOSOTW, and was able to showcase a few scenes of the work print to the captive AFI audience.

At the award ceremony, Welles used his familiar rhetoric of humility to accept his award. After screening two scenes from TOSOTW, he gave this extremely savvy speech that concisely presented himself as a pure independent—as a maverick and an intentional cinematic gypsy:

This honor I can only accept in the name of all the mavericks. And, also, as a tribute to the generosity of all the rest of you to the givers to the ones with fixed addresses. A maverick may go his own way but he doesn't think that it's the only way or ever claim that it's the best one except maybe for himself. And don't imagine that this raggle-taggle gypsy is claiming to be free. It's just that some of the necessities to which I am a slave are different from yours. As a director, for instance, I pay myself out of my acting jobs. I use my own work to subsidize my work. In other words, I'm crazy. But not crazy enough to pretend to be free. But it's a fact that many of the films you've seen tonight could never have been made otherwise. Or if otherwise, well, they might have been better. But certainly, they wouldn't have been mine. (Whatever 19)

But Welles’s attempt to shop out his new film was met with absolute silence. It was as if Welles was already considered such a maverick that he either needed no one to help him with his film,
or was otherwise such an independent at this point that any investment in his work would be a waste of money.

Thus, the ownership of the negative remained uncomfortably shared between Welles himself and Astrophore. The negative was held at LTC, a French editing facility, until proprietary rights could be finalized. The volatile political situation in Iran had intensified the dispute. The Film Industry Development Corporation of Iran (FIDCI), headed by Bahman Farminara, was now overseeing Astrophore and its investments, and took a very specific interest in auditing the expenses of Welles. To avoid the heightening political situation in Iran from interfering with the film’s completion, Bousheri asked Welles’s associate, Claude Fielding, to arbitrate several deals to buy out the Iranian interest. Fielding approached Myron Karlin, the president of Warner Brothers International to purchase Astrophore’s percentage but Warner Brothers International would end up owning the film. Fielding approached the director Carlo Ponti, who suggested that Welles wait for the Iranian political situation to worsen and then buy out Astrophore for $500,000. Another interested party was James Kennedy, an admirer of Welles and owner of Ashling Multimedia in Vancouver who offered to pay one million dollars to the Iranians over two years, and offer $100,000 to Welles for his next film after TOSOTW was completed. But Welles ultimately pursued none of these deals, holding out for a dream deal that left him with complete control over the film.

As projected resolution after projected resolution was passed over, Welles’s attention to completing the film began to wane over the following years, as if the lack of interest in the film following the AFI event had signaled a moratorium on the film’s completion. By 1978, Welles had contracted with Paul Masson to do his famous wine commercials for $500,000 per year. Welles had formally fallen out with his New Hollywood confidant and supporter, Bogdanovich.
Welles had shown interest in directing a film based on Paul Theroux’s *Saint Jack*, but as Welles’s now-typical stubborn attitude in settling on a production agreement to select an actor and begin shooting dragged out the project, Bogdanovich chose to direct the project himself starring Ben Gazarra. Welles felt betrayed by Bogdanovich, but Bogdanovich’s career had long since fizzled out with a string of failures, and while *Saint Jack* was received better with the critics than his last three features, it was still a flop. Thus, by 1978, Welles was alone in the Hollywood system that had become by this point completely dedicated to the blockbuster model of film production.

In one final attempt to complete *TOSOTW*, Welles was approached by his *Othello* co-star Suzanne Cloutier and her husband, James George, the former Canadian ambassador to Iran from 1972 to 1977. George was a founder of The Threshold Foundation that was made up of wealthy independent interests like George. George offered to merge his foundation with Astrophore to complete *TOSOTW*. Despite this windfall, Welles still insisted upon a 50/50 split and final cut of the film. George and Cloutier were not averse to Welles retaining control, but an even split was a hard sell considering the gamble on such an “experimental” film. Welles refused to agree to any set of terms proposed by George and Cloutier, and quite simply gave up trying to appease Welles by 1979. And, of course, by 1979, Iran had fallen to the conservative religious party of Ayatollah Khomeni.

At this point the Iranian investment via Astrophore of *TOSOTW* was approximated at one million dollars, and the negative was still stuck in the LTC vault. Because of an unpaid tax bill by Khomeni to the French government, the government seized Astrophore and its assets, which included the precious negative. The Iranian government insisted on terminating the agreement between Welles and Astrophore. Between 1979 and 1982, the French court refused to terminate
the agreement between the two. According to French law, Welles had automatic right to possession of the negative due to *droits d’auteur*. Welles’s proprietary rights to the film were preserved literally by the French government’s attachment to the auteur theory. At the same point, Hollywood had successfully shackled the new auteurs of the New Hollywood to adhere to the blockbuster model or die. Spielberg and Lucas had managed to completely conform to the system, whereas Coppola, Friedkin and Bogdanovich had been pushed out or sublimated to minor productions. The mavericks that Welles had aligned himself to were either made powerless or chose to conform completely to the studio system’s new economic demands.

After Welles passed away in 1985—coincidentally at seventy years old just like his character Hannaford—his mistress Oja Kodar, Gary Graver and critic Jim McBride continued to shop the work print around. They approached John Huston to complete it, but Huston was already eighty and suffering from emphysema. Spielberg and Lucas both passed on screening the film. Clint Eastwood showed interest in completing the film under his Malpaso company, but eventually also passed on the film. Graver soon passed away from throat cancer, and Kodar sabotaged a Showtime deal that would complete the film under Bogdanovich’s supervision allegedly because she did not want the critic Jim McBride involved. At the time of writing, a group of Welles supporters raised half a million in a crowdfunding campaign during Welles’s centenary to release the negative from LTC, however, it has become clear that Kodar, who inherited Welles’s half of the film, still is unwilling to release the negative without ample compensation. Funding for *TOSOTW* is its perpetual problem, but it began with Welles’s insistence on having complete control over its completion much like his *Quixote*. Even posthumously, the completion of a potential Welles masterpiece seems unlikely. The hesitancy
to ultimately finance a Welles film just does not seem to be a sound investment even in this millennium.

Failures of Independence and the Ideological Failure of the System

So far, we have rendered the figure of Welles and his specific brand of auteur into two historical modes separated by two decades of exile from the Hollywood system—a system that changed its economic structure and ideologies radically during those decades, but, regardless of those changes, produced similar “failures” for Welles:

The first mode considers his purest moment of resignation and subservience to the classical studio system, in which case, Welles produces his most successful and bankable commercial piece of work that is also the only studio work of his to turn a profit. However, that project does not fulfill the critical anticipation of Kane’s experimentation and technical contributions to filmmaking. While The Stranger is arguably Welles’s closest project to a collaborative working relationship with the studio system since Kane, it resists the temptation to challenge the aesthetic demands of the producers—challenges that result in Welles’s other studio pieces being visibly truncated, re-edited, or otherwise “sabotaged” by studio interference—even though I have shown these interference also happened to The Stranger. Consequently, the critical abandonment of The Stranger speaks to the investment of Welles scholars in which a Wellesian work must only exist contrary to the demands of the studio system.

Conversely, the second mode fulfills this contrarian condition. Throughout the 1970s, Welles remains the classical maverick that both critical detractors and supporters configure him to be. Welles attempts to create an original piece that simultaneously speaks to the arrogance of
an over-hyped auteurism within New Hollywood, but also exposes the studio systems true interests in said auteurism as a marketable path to the director as a brand name for the blockbuster model. Welles’s attempt, however, to get Hollywood funding to finance its own critique “fails,” and the contrarian position with the “external” financing from Astrophore prevents a finalized version of the film. Welles thus leaves a typically unfinished work that remains invisible for all to date, and fails to create a film supported neither from within Hollywood nor outside of it. Welles’s insistence on absolute aesthetic control and final cut under any contractual terms kept final cut from ever being able to happen.

It is this conflict between the two modes that any attempt for critical resolution of Welles as an authorial figure of the maverick resists. At best, Welles remains, as Jonathan Rosenbaum has argued, an “ideological challenge” to any or all systems of studio control, either classical or New. But what exact ideology here is being challenged? We have already begun to demarcate two different ideological states between the two historical modes of the Hollywood system: The classical system that maintained a closed, vertically-integrated system from production to distribution and thus produced films in a uniform fashion under studio terms, and the New Hollywood system that would relegate itself to financing independent auteurs to initially produce films for a counter-culture that the studio system had failed to understand and/or anticipate, but would evolve into culturing brand specific auteurs backed by a blitz marketing technique and nationwide openings to ensure maximum box office returns on opening weekend. Within Rosenbaum’s argument, the ideology of the “industrial-media complex” that Welles would challenge, it would seem, refers to the latter system—a system that would seem to have a much more variegated field of ideological construction. And this is confusing because Rosenbaum’s
argument reconsiders how the accomplishment of *Kane* is an anomaly of the Classical model, not the New Hollywood model.

Following the economic arguments of Douglas Gomery, Rosenbaum insists that *Kane* represents a rare paradoxical moment where an independent production was made with unlimited studio resources. Under this reconsideration, Welles’s experimental power was underpinned by studio resources. Welles, presumably intentionally, contracted with the weakest of the big five studio systems to retain final cut, but still had access to a major studio’s assets. Following the amount of backlash the studio received over *Kane*, the studios recognized its mistake and cut off Welles’s independence from *Kane* forward. That Welles is purely an independent filmmaker (and I do not disagree with this) as well as an intellectual, which has generally always been prey to the anti-intellectualism of American systems, is how Rosenbaum factors Welles as a challenge to the system. Conditionally, this is fair considering Welles’s work became more and more dependent on economical shooting practices and clever editing techniques to mask certain deficiencies in its *mise en scene* as it moved further away from—and thus less dependent upon—studio resources. But Rosenbaum balances the psycho-biographical explanation of Welles’s character with certain blanket statements of how the “ideology” of the studio system (and, again, what ideology are we talking about really?) forecloses on the pure independence (and intellectualism) of Welles. For Rosenbaum, the idea of financing one’s own work is anathema to the “industrial media complex” because the film is not art, but, rather, a commodity. Thus, Welles’s “incompleteness as an aesthetic factor” complicates the system’s need for a marketable or bankable product.66

But while the many versions of Welles’s work as well as his unfinished fragments and invisible projects may complicate the direct distribution market of Hollywood, it fits right in with
the New Hollywood’s alternative market of multiple versions and commentaries provided by DVDs, Blu-Rays and streaming distribution to the home market. The idea of multiple versions—director’s cuts vs. theatrical releases—is intrinsic to the dissemination of the cinema experience from theaters into the home. Instead of being a challenge to the contemporary system, the figure of Welles as an “incompletist” is easily embraced within the newer system. We have already considered how Welles’s fragmentary cinema has drawn more and more critical attention over the past few decades, and if one considers this attention within the newer, more fragmented system of streaming and ancillary markets, we see that Welles as an ideological challenge is more apropos of the Classical system than that of the disseminated system of variegated production that Hollywood has become.

What we have here instead of an ideological challenge is better considered as a figure of authorship that marks the limits and failures of pure independence. Welles is exemplary as both a maverick and as a humble artist that wanted to assure that his works came out the way he wanted. But the difficulty of what Welles figuratively represents cannot be reduced to a simple contrary position to a monolithic conception of the control systems of studio filmmaking. The contemporary studio system that emerged from the New Hollywood is made up of multiple ideological strands that divested itself of uniform control and, instead, embraced, absorbed, and transformed auteurism at its core. Just like the evolution of Welles’s work, both finished and unfinished, exhibited multiple variations of economic conditions and aesthetic shifts, the same shifts, variations, and possibilities must be afforded to the New Hollywood that Welles had hoped would support The Other Side of the Wind. With TOSOTW, it seems that Welles had been in exile for too long, and his flexibility to bend to any system as practiced in 1946 with The Stranger had atrophied beyond repair. Or perhaps, the film’s fate was, as so often with Welles,
just poor timing as the studio system was still struggling, as we will see in the following chapter, to restructure itself. But Welles was always out of sync with the system and always to some extent remains forever in the shadow of the irreproducible event that is *Kane*. Until that shadow is lifted, Welles will always be eclipsed by a cautionary tale of a maverick that bucked an outdated Classical model of production, rather than seen as one of the true forerunners of independent cinema.
Chapter 4: Figures of Revolution, or the Future Failures of New Hollywood

*The new power of directors was legitimized by its own ideology, “auteurism” [...] which had an instant appeal for the passionate young cineastes who now knew that John Ford was better than William Wyler, and why.*

—Peter Biskind

The figure of the maverick, especially in the extreme case of Orson Welles, intentionally fails to fit comfortably into the narratives of either Classical or New Hollywood studio politics. The maverick mobilizes multiple and incomplete revisions as an alternative to Hollywood deadlines and final cuts, touting financial independence as a strategic necessity of exclusion and creative isolation. But regardless of the innate defiance of authority and control, the cinematic figure of Welles still began as a negotiation *within* the studio system, not outside of it, and something in all his films admits to a certain dependency upon the Hollywood method of filmmaking. In fact, rather than just an ideological challenge to the Hollywood system, the figure of Welles can be used as an interesting prism through which to acknowledge the fracturing of the Classical Hollywood industry and its transformation into New Hollywood. It also points to the transformation of the maverick figure itself.

When Welles first entered the studio system at the very end of Hollywood’s “Golden Era,” the age of Thalberg and the central producer had already been pretty much phased out. The central producer units gave way to the financial pressures of the Great Depression and its flagging ticket sales by the second half of the 1930s. No studio was exempt from this recession. By 1936, Paramount’s real estate purchases had accumulated so much debt that the company was placed in receivership for two years. In that same year, Adolph Zukor relinquished his presidency for a chairman position, and control of Paramount was transferred to Barney Balaban (formerly of Balaban and Katz whom Zukor had bought out in Chicago to form Paramount-Publix). At MGM, Nick Schenck remained in complete control, but Thalberg’s death that year
left him at odds with Louis B. Mayer’s infamous ego. Schenck ultimately removed Mayer and maintained control of the West coast studio through the silent but formidable middle-manager Eddie Mannix, but the creatively involved central producer system had died with Thalberg. Meanwhile, Nick’s brother, Joe, left UA with Daryl Zanuck, who had quit the unappreciative Warners, to form Twentieth Century Productions. The two quickly bought the bankrupt Fox corporation—Fox was the most direct victim of the stock market crash—and formed Twentieth Century-Fox. Schenck and Zanuck’s former employers, UA and Warners, floundered without a formidable production leader, and Twentieth Century-Fox soon faltered as well when Joe Schenck went to jail for paying off the projection unions and Zanuck left for military service in 1941. As for the minor studios. Universal’s Carl Laemmle had handed over control of the company to his son, Carl Laemmle Jr., who subsequently passed it on to The Stranger’s producers, William Goetz and Leo Spitz, who then sold it off to the recording giant Decca. Only Columbia maintained itself under the same management, and quietly soldiered on with modest B pictures under the Cohn brothers until their deaths in the fifties. And finally, in 1952 Pickford and Chaplin handed over the reins of UA to the entertainment lawyers, Krim and Benjamin, but let us leave that story as a prelude for the alleged fall of New Hollywood’s investment in auteurism in 1980 for now.

In the financial “middle” of all these corporate changeovers was the studio that had courted Welles so vigorously in 1939—the smallest of the big Five, Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO), headed by businessman Floyd Odlum. Odlum’s main interest in RKO was to eventually sell it, but in the meantime, to compete with the larger studios, he instituted a practice of contracting independent talent to produce films for RKO, and, thus, indirectly started the new Hollywood policy of the independent producer. As Douglas Gomery explains it, “Odlum had
embraced the independent producer, making RKO the haven for the ambitious independent producer-director. It began in 1936 when Odlum signed Disney and continued in 1941 when he signed Sam Goldwyn—both away from UA. Under Odlum’s distribution and exhibition skills, both prospered” (Gomery 151).

It is during this shift—from the studio regulated central production unit into the film-to-film contractual independent producer-director—that Orson Welles arrived at RKO, and cast his 

Kane shadow over everything else he would do. It was under the title of independent producer where his post-Kane failures became impossibly complicated. In a somewhat awry manner, looking back on his RKO years, Welles himself believed that the independent producer model was not only responsible for his own personal difficulties, but for the actual fall of (Classical) Hollywood itself. He lamented:

Hollywood died on me as soon as I got there [in 1939]. I wish to God I'd gone there sooner. It was the rise of the independents that was my ruin as a director [...] The minute the independents got in, I never directed another American picture except by accident. If I'd gone to Hollywood in the last five years [between 1965 and 1970?], virgin and unknown, I could have written my own ticket. But I'm not a virgin; I drag my myth around with me, and I've had much more trouble with the independents than I ever had with the big studios. I was a maverick, but the studios understood what that meant [...] But an independent is a fellow whose work is centered around his own particular gifts. In that set up, there's no place for me. [interviewed circa 1970]  
(This is Orson Welles 204)

Welles here is folding at least two thresholds of “independence” on top of each other in a deliberately confusing way. The first clearly connects to his arrival at RKO, and refers most likely to Odlum and Schaefer giving him “too much studio control” over Kane. The second
threshold is less clear. It would seem to refer either to his search for European funding or, more likely, to his return to Hollywood in search of support for *The Other Side of the Wind*. It is interesting how he overlaps these two moments together as if to collapse several decades of multiple Hollywood transformations into a single gesture of his desire for unregulated creative control at the core of both historical modes of Hollywood’s failure. But at the same time, he seems to want to have been a more willing participant in the Hollywood machine.

Alternating between Hollywood participation (mostly failed) and exile, Welles’s own narrative paradoxically dovetails with two eras of Hollywood’s transformation as an industry. Both times that Welles’s decided to leave Hollywood for Europe coincided with Hollywood confronting serious modifications to its practices. When Welles left for Italy in 1948, this year marked the year of the Supreme Court’s decision in the *Paramount et al.* antitrust case that would force the studios to give up their holdings in exhibition over the next ten years, and disrupt their vertically-integrated control of product. His second exit in 1958, after Welles had briefly experimented with television at Desilu, and completed *Touch of Evil* for Universal, the latter studio was bought over by the powerful talent agency, Music Corporation of America (MCA).69 This is a significant takeover because an agency that represented the employees became management. At the start of the 1950s, talent agent Lew Wasserman, the president of MCA, had famously brokered a profit-sharing deal at Universal for James Stewart on Anthony Mann’s picture, *Winchester ’73* (1950). Stewart gave up his salary for fifty percent of the profits. Wasserman’s commodification of a star’s brand and his balancing of the potential risks of a film’s profitability with a clever means of tax sheltering salaries set a precedent in how production costs became restructured to agree with the projections of distribution and marketing—–with a stake in the profit, the brand was directly motivated towards each film’s success.
Wasserman’s and MCA’s purchase of Universal would reinvigorate a flagging studio system that had lost its control of exhibition. Wasserman would continue to set trends that embraced both the forthcoming conglomeration of studios into larger corporate entities, and the emergence of television, which had been declared a method of broadcast by the FCC and thus denied to the studios as a potential antitrust issue. Wasserman’s embracing of television was to many in Hollywood a selling out of the industry to a lesser medium based on advertising. Welles himself shared this opinion as he wrote of Hollywood in 1959:

Is Hollywood's famous sun really setting? There is certainly a hint of twilight in the smog and, lately, over the old movie capital there has fallen a gray-flannel shadow. Television is moving inexorably westward. Emptying the movie theatres across the land, it fills the movie studios. Another industry is building quite another town; and already, rising out of the gaudy ruins of screenland, we behold a new, drab, curiously solemn brand of the old foolishness. There must always be a strong element of the absurd in the operation of a dream factory, but now there's less to laugh at and even less to like. The feverish gaiety has gone, a certain brassy vitality drained away. TV, after all, is a branch of the advertising business, and Hollywood behaves increasingly like an annex of Madison Avenue. (Welles “Twilight in the Smog” Esquire 1958)

So, between the rise of the independent producer and Hollywood’s interaction with television and its advertising potential, two key periods of studio failure and transformation correspond to Welles’s two periods of exile. The first period witnesses the restructuring of the Classical system. RKO’s model of independent production becomes the preferred method of practice, and the studios would relegate themselves to being merely a system of financing for those productions. While RKO would set many of the future trends of studio practice, such as
marketing its film library to the television era, it would not survive to see its own seminary contributions. Odlum sold RKO to Howard Hughes in 1948, and Hughes drove the studio out of business by 1957. Hughes finally sold RKO’s library to General Tire, and the lot was sold off to Desilu—Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz’s television production company. So ironically the studio that granted Welles his initial freedom and caused him so much grief afterwards, disappeared completely within his first absence. RKO was completely dismantled and absorbed by the dawn of television and the new medium’s potential for production and exhibition.70

The first period is rich with its restructuring of independence in the face of studio transformation—it is, after all, the period from which the politique des auteurs assembled their various lists of auteurs. But, the later period is equally as challenging to our rethinking of cinematic authorship. Within the first period, just like the proto-auteurs, of early American cinema, the figures, who may or may not be considered auteurs, are constructed retrospectively. In this period, the figure of the cinematic author certainly does become more pronounced. But the authorial intention is mainly a statement of propriety rather than a claim to consistency in style. It is potentially a branding method to ensure the next contract rather than an artistic statement. Any consistency in style is forced upon the brand retroactively by future critics and cinephiles.71 So even though one can clearly see names being attached to films more regularly—a Howard Hawks Film, a George Stevens Production—it is the second period—the period of cinema’s incorporation of television and its advertising potential—where one witnesses more concrete attempts to construct a thematic dynasty around authorship. The author’s name becomes a promissory note of theme and style like the expectation, say, of suspense grafted to the singular name of “Hitchcock.”
It is also in this second period where the anticipations of the cinephile more clearly determines the practice of the auteurist filmmaker—where the necessity of appropriating and controlling one’s brand become a standard practice to maintain a self-affected auteur status that generates an anticipating audience. It is through the control of this brand—this promise of a consistency of style—that the cinematic author manipulates—and is manipulated by—both individuals and industry alike, often to opposing ends. Per usual, the narrative of the rise of the auteur in New Hollywood is a myth that is self-constructed. The myth goes something like this: Fully divested of their theaters, studios became subsidiaries of conglomerates, and were subjugated into being purely financial entities. Thus, Hollywood became dependent upon the hyper-romanticized auteur to provide the creative element of their commodity. This is, of course, where auteurism becomes most troubled, and most interesting.

It is true that the studios became smaller sub-companies to a conglomerate’s larger economic concerns. And it is true that a certain group of auteurs attempted to take advantage of the opportunities that emerged from this change over. But how? The figure of the maverick—a figure which is already extremely complicated—became usurped by a younger wave of auteurs in pockets of economic flux and variations of audience’s taste. While these new mavericks were to usher in new practices of creative independence, they often ignored the complexities of such a figure of pure independence like Welles. Thus, the intentional failures embedded in the maverick figure would inevitably repeat themselves in their new environment. With Welles, we have already witnessed that the prerequisites for the supposed creative freedom of New Hollywood resulted in yet another moment of exile for Welles. In New Hollywood’s perspective, Welles was revered as a Classical Hollywood iconoclast and auteur, but not as a bankable cinema brat. Intrinsic to the maverick, Welles was unable and unwilling to revisit his
past style to gain favor with the era’s new investment in auteurism. Welles scoffed at the cinema brats’ nostalgia for studio filmmaking of the past—a critique of nostalgia that had always been a common thematic trope from *Kane* and, more directly, *Magnificent Ambersons* forward—the past must give way to the new. In short, Welles’s modernism did not fit with the newer auteurs’ postmodern pastiche of Classical models.

What becomes apparent is that Welles is not the optimal threshold through which to understand how New Hollywood emerged. Welles’s attempts to negotiate either the Classical Hollywood system or the New Hollywood system intentionally fail because his figure always chooses to remain independent of both system’s conditions and regulations. The figures of authorship that arise with the New Hollywood will attempt to retain this necessity of independence—this figure of the maverick. But their “originality” will be rooted in revisiting—and thus dependent upon—cinema’s past figures of authorship, and this goes against the maverick’s modernist tendencies to create something new and timeless. Instead, their work will be an admiration and a reworking of past methods of filmmaking to discover something new. This is an important figural shift between the maverick and its future models—its supplements—and it relies upon an interesting rhetorical reversal. Welles constructed himself as a maverick, but when he would talk about or question his figure’s position in Hollywood history, it would always be imbued with an apologetic humility. This was a strategy that often failed to garner him studio support. The younger auteurs would dispense with this humility and construct a more brazen or cavalier rhetorical configuration. But they would construct these more confident personas around a nostalgia for past methods and styles of revered mavericks. Most of these auteurs would oscillate wildly between the figure of the maverick and a new figure that freely borrowed from and deconstructed past mavericks.
So, the challenge in approaching historical thresholds that may lead to these new figures of authorship has the complicated task of exploring important transformations in the Hollywood industry while at the same time witnessing the self-referential rise of the actual event of auteurism that develops alongside these thresholds. There are far too many possible historical moments that witness this absorption of past styles into the New Hollywood model of the more-aggressive-than-irreverent self-branded auteur. I have tried to limit these thresholds to only a few key examples where stylistic modulation integrates with changes in both technology and cultural taste. I have per usual embedded a few figures along the way that are deserving of their own chapter if this were an infinitely larger book.

The Auteur Will Be Televised

As if the antitrust Consent Decree in 1948 was not destructive enough to Hollywood’s control of exhibition, the threat of television relocating the movie theater into the home called for an even greater restructuring of the once vertically-integrated oligopoly. Many theaters attempted to wire their theaters like they had done for sound in 1928. But the FCC had already blocked off this technological countermove by clearly allocating television as a broadcast medium. Television fell under the industrial domain of radio and music corporations, and because of the antitrust suit, studios were forbidden to buy broadcasting companies or their properties. By the fifties, the studios were desperately trying to compete with television on a technological level. They experimented in widescreen filming and exhibition, and other technological variants such as 3-D. However, the true future of Hollywood lay not in competing with television, but in the collaboration and integration of the two without violating antitrust
laws. Hollywood needed to not only integrate with the new medium of television, but also had to integrate the independent production teams and restructure their holdings at the same time.

In the forties, RKO had provided the blueprint for both independent production units, renting out its lots to those units, and commodifying its library for licensed screenings. But these innovations were the product more so of economic necessity than a means to restructure and secure the industry. Respectively, RKO’s Odlum hired independent producers to deflect production costs onto the producer-director, and, later, Howard Hughes sold off the library because he was incompetent at running a studio. The business auteur that is the more appropriate messianic figure who repurposed these independent units, and brought Hollywood into a comfortable marriage with television—which transformed it into New Hollywood—would be MCA’s formidable talent agent and president, Lew Wasserman.

Wasserman entered the Hollywood industry as the most effective agent in the business. While the Winchester ’73 deal remains the centerpiece of this part of his narrative, he is actually a forerunner of a particular type of auteurism. As Gomery contends:

Wasserman gave birth to a true auteur system . . . it was Wasserman’s successful assault on the seven-year contract system that endeared him to most clients. His confrontations with the studio leaders of the 1950s gave stars and directors the creative freedom they long desired, MCA stars were able to choose their films, to order script changes, and to keep a percentage of box-office revenues. (206)

In 1950 Wasserman formed the independent television production company, Revue, to showcase his talent list. However, it was considered a conflict of interest for the agent to own both the talent and the stage. The Screen Actors Guild (SAG) would normally grant waivers on a case-to-case basis, but Wasserman was able to negotiate for a blanket waiver for Revue. This is because
Wasserman’s television production company was not only providing more jobs for actors alongside the studios, but he also allowed them to share in a greater part of the profits. By 1954 Revue’s gross revenues exceeded those of MCA and would continue to do so.

In 1959, with Wasserman’s success with Revue, the next logical step was to move into actual physical production. He purchased the Universal studio lot from Decca for $12 million dollars. Wasserman now controlled the most powerful talent agency, the largest independent television production company, Revue, and now he had the actual real estate upon which to create the films themselves. By 1960, however, this had drawn the attention of competitors that complained that Wasserman was monopolizing the industry. Wasserman was quickly forced by the government to divest either MCA or Revue to avoid an antitrust suit. Because Revue’s gross had been $72 million in comparison to $7 million, the decision was simple. Thus, he divested from controlling the talent and sold off MCA. This allowed him to purchase Universal Pictures, the distribution end of Universal. By 1964, Revue was renamed Universal City Studios, and Revue Productions became Universal Television. Wasserman was now a major player in both television production and Classical movie-making, and he was quick to create studio quality product specific to the new medium.

Because of his experience as an agent, Wasserman was faster to understand the branding and advertising policies of the new medium. He literally envisioned television as a vehicle to reach a larger and more variegated audience instead of seeing it as a competitor to theater exhibition. He was also able to simultaneously construct and advertise his talent list. One of his greatest accomplishment in this amalgamation of stylistic configuration and promotion is how he amplified and enhanced the already established independent producer-director, Alfred Hitchcock.
At the beginning of the 1950s, Wasserman had become the central dealmaker for Hitchcock, but, by then, Hitchcock was no stranger to the importance of his brand. He had already established himself as producer-director in the thirties working in his native Britain for Gaumont. Hitchcock was aggressively lured to Hollywood by David O Selznick. Selznick was the nearest inheritor to Thalberg’s success. He had been a central producer for MGM, RKO and Paramount, and had become one of the earliest examples of an independent producer. His Selznick Independent Productions (SIP), which distributed through UA, had already proven itself formidable by 1937, and was about to explode with the upcoming *Gone with the Wind* (1939).

As successful as he was, Selznick had estranged himself from the local directing talent because of his rigid control of scriptwriting and story selection. Selznick desperately wanted to contract with Hitchcock because Hitchcock could not only produce as well as direct, but was known as an efficient team player with studio politics and collaboration. Hitchcock was reticent to be under contract with anyone after a huge success with *The Lady Vanishes* (1939), but after two years of intense negotiations, he finally signed on with SIP to produce and direct *Rebecca* (1940).

Hitchcock immediately established working limits with Selznick. He prevented Selznick from interfering with production because of his ability to cut with the camera. This technique of filmmaking demonstrated how Hitchcock used his talents to control the outcome of production. As Schatz retells it:

… on a deeper level, it revealed Selznick’s growing realization that Hitchcock was a filmmaker whose work he could not prepare, control, reshape to suit his own tastes. After finally signing a top producing director, Selznick was facing the the necessary consequences—the same consequences he undoubtedly would have faced with Capra or Ford or La Cava. (Schatz 284)
Selznick was also, however, too preoccupied with *Wind* to exert any true pressure on Hitchcock during *Rebecca*. *Wind*, of course, was released through MGM to enormous success and established Selznick as the top producer in Hollywood for 1939. But following suit, Hitchcock’s *Rebecca*, equally proved itself by winning the Best Picture Academy Award in 1940. As Schatz continues:

... Selznick and Hitchcock were proving that the producer and director could break free, if not from the system at large, at least from direct studio control. That freedom enabled them to create some of the studio era’s greatest pictures, while it also heralded the system’s ultimate disintegration. (294)

But Selznick had exhausted himself after *Wind*, and loaned out Hitchcock on contract for four years after *Rebecca* to UA, RKO, Universal and Twentieth Century-Fox.

In this four-year period, SIP had been liquidated and transformed into David O. Selznick Pictures. After a four-year hiatus, Selznick returned to producing in 1944. He reunited with Hitchcock for his next three pictures: *Spellbound* (1945), *Notorious* (1946), and *The Paradine Case* (1947). While the first two films were successful, the last film caused a necessary commercial and aesthetic split between the two. Selznick had become increasingly preoccupied with large scale success by way of outspending competitors and over-controlling his epic productions. In this second working period, Schatz make a qualitative difference between the two:

From *Gone with the Wind* through *Since You Went Away* and *Duel [in the Sun]*, Selznick’s pictures were progressively less interesting and less memorable—except as monumental and cinematic curiosities—and they were indicative of independent filmmaking at its unbridled, self-indulgent worst. *Spellbound* and *Notorious*, on the other
hand, were among the best Hollywood films of the 1940s, and their production struck an ideal balance of power and melding of talents [. . .] Selznick’s inability to strike or even seek a similar balance on his own pictures underscored the particular dangers as filmmaking became more genuinely “independent” and excessive in the mid-1940s, while the Hitchcock collaborations evidenced an altogether more positive potential. (383)

These claims of aesthetic difference between Hitchcock and Selznick, while not wholly untrue, repeat the Hitchcock-as-artist-is-better-than-Selznick-as-money myth. Schatz rightly distinguishes that Selznick’s investment in costly spectacle not only destroyed Selznick’s profit margin but also lacked the intimacy of smaller productions. Selznick was so preoccupied with his blockbusters that, like with Rebecca, he could not be more involved with the choices surrounding Spellbound and Notorious, and this allowed Hitchcock a fortunate freedom from either Selznick collaborating or interfering. The “balance” that Schatz attributes to Hitchcock above came from his ability to maintain a certain amount of insulation from authorities above him. Supposedly, like Lubitsch before him, he would shoot only what was needed and, unlike Stroheim, would provide a limited amount of footage to rearrange. But Hitchcock’s aesthetic economy was not a stable as Schatz’s division would make it. After leaving Selznick, Hitchcock set up his own independent company, Transatlantic, with his friend Sidney Bernstein. The two films he produced without any studio supervision, Rope (1948) and Under Capricorn (1949) failed to gain any more critical or popular attention than The Paradine Case had, the failure of which was supposedly Selznick’s. By the end of the forties, with or without the support or hindrance of Selznick, Hitchcock would need to reinvest a new energy into his brand if he was to survive the fifties.
This is where Wasserman as Hitchcock’s agent took over. Wasserman packaged a huge deal for Hitchcock for nine films, and these films would become the pinnacle of his career. He would begin this deal with the popular hit, *Rear Window*, but the true acceleration of Hitchcock’s industrial value came in 1955, when Wasserman convinced Hitchcock to produce *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* for CBS and sponsor Bristol-Meyers. The show would run for a decade. Hitchcock himself only directed twenty episodes, but he introduced each one, and his personal image became a household name. Now symbolized by his portly silhouette and theme music—Gounod’s “Funeral for a Marionette”—Hitchcock’s dry personality and macabre sense of humor became embedded in the audience’s expectation of his films.

Wasserman and Hitchcock’s timing could not have been better. The year 1955 becomes another watershed year for most cinema historians in that it marks the moment where the Hollywood system realized that television was a new potential market instead of a competitor. *Alongside Hitchcock Presents* was Walt Disney’s successful premiere of *Disneyland* that horizontally cross-marketed his theme park. This success spurred Warners, Fox and MGM to plan series of their own—none of these were as successful as Disney, but it pointed to the production of the tele-film. And the fact that a major player like Hitchcock had acceded to “lower” himself to the medium to bolster his filmmaking pointed to a growing necessity for being televised to sell films.

For industrial historians like Douglas Gomery, the entirety of Hitchcock’s success in the fifties was underpinned by Wasserman. Financially speaking, this is somewhat correct. Wasserman secured Hitchcock $129,000 per episode and Hitchcock owned each one. In 1962, when Wasserman moved from being an agent into a studio head, he paid Hitchcock 150,000 shares of MCA stock for the rights to *Psycho* (1960) and his television shows. Next to MCA
founder Jules Stein, and Wasserman himself, Hitchcock became the third largest stockholder of MCA. Beyond financial success, however, it is near impossible to separate Wasserman’s packaging of Hitchcock from Hitchcock’s aesthetic sentiment and technical ability. Both are very much embedded in Hitchcock’s configuration. The figure of Hitchcock really takes a turn when his contemporary critical estimation is weighed against his financial success and popularity. Contemporary critics of Hitchcock’s films like Bosley Crowther of the New York Times were adamant in insisting that Hitchcock was merely a populist—a mediocre filmmaker dependent upon gimmicks. The irony with Hitchcock is that his financial success ultimately gets attributed to Wasserman and his aesthetic estimation gets devalued as a sell-out—his auteur status gets applied well into the 1960s where his filmmaking arguably fails to be truly Hitchcockian.

To be pulled into a study of Hitchcock’s latter period would require an entire second volume, but what is worthy of note in passing here is how Hitchcock’s auteur status, which rises in the sixties as his films become less and less appreciated and, once again, arguably “dated,” becomes configured less as a maverick and more as a populist. The supporters of each period of Hitchcock’s films always embrace their vulgar elements as proof of their lasting success. This has always been the contradictory foundation of traditional auteurism: The auteur is supposedly determined by his consistency of style—a style that is unique and original to filmmaking—but critics like Godard and Truffaut were unabashedly proud of those filmmakers who could tap into the masses, who could intuit the demands of the popular audience while retaining this style. The Hollywood system—especially later and later with Godard—was to blame for forcing the demand of economic and popular success upon the artist, but if the artist could already intuit what the studio wanted, where is the conflict? From this instability of conception one can see the
figure of the maverick being simultaneously retained and transformed into something else. The maverick becomes televised—a cinematic voice and an advertising promise broadcast into the expectations of everyone’s living room.

The People’s Cinema: The Genre Picture and the Counterculture

While his television show was prospering, the critical and financial disappointment of Hitchcock’s now-classic, *Vertigo* (1958) made Hitchcock feel that his brand of suspense was becoming predictable and out of touch. Even with the more successful, *North by Northwest* (1959) Hitchcock still felt he was beginning to date and was relying on his old bag of tricks. He was not really hitting the audience where he wanted to have the most memorable effect. The answer for Hitchcock came with, of course, *Psycho* (1960) a mega-hit that manipulated exhibition hype like his “schlock” contemporary William Castle had with *The Macabre* (1958), *House on Haunted Hill* (1959), and *The Tingler* (1959) —with *Macabre*, Castle had given each audience member a $1000 life insurance claim in case they died of fright during the film. To out-Castle Castle, Hitchcock famously refused entrance to viewers once the film had started supposedly to prevent gossip revealing the shock of Janet Leigh’s murder in the middle of the film, but, instead, he was creating hype and buzz that drew people to theaters in droves.

Although no two filmmakers were as different in aesthetics and execution, both Welles and Hitchcock can lay claim to a reinvestment in the vulgar channels of the genre flick. 73 Traditional auteurist criticism would value Howard Hawks in genre transformation over both Welles and Hitchcock, but while Hawks worked in “all” of the genres, he did not invent or reinvent them. He stabilized them and arguably threaded a consistent Hawksian signature
(although Hawks himself would deny this) as he hopscotched through genres. Welles and Hitchcock literally reinvented certain genre films. Like Welles had done with film noir in *The Lady of Shanghai*, and especially in *Touch of Evil*—basically ending the genre by giving *noir* a heightened technical prowess that was less a product of economic frugality than the expansion and aesthetic reinvestment of the popular B-movie format—Hitchcock placed his usual technical rigor into the “lowly” horror genre. Hitchcock succeeded in fusing his artistic precision and meticulous attention to the *function of the camera* with “low” genre material—a straight-up “shocker” film. Upon its initial release, Bosley Crowthers typically called the film an “obviously low budget job,” and dismissed the film as one that relied merely on cheap surprise. While now it is regarded as one of Hitchcock’s most, if not psychologically deep, technically proficient films, what is surprising from critics of the era is that they missed an intentionally obvious elevation of a popular form into an A picture. Just like they judged the man for “stepping down” into television, they misinterpreted *Psycho* as an established studio director (albeit provisionally artistic as a suspense director) stooping down to make a popular genre film rather than as a progressive and clever (also more expensive) move in the other direction.74

One of the keys to understanding the transformation of the Classical into New Hollywood is this immersion into the vulgar side of cinema’s history—the genre films that catered to a specific audience, and audience that supposedly received film at the lowest common denominator. While there are many historical signposts that point to the eventual transformation of the classic studio system into the New Hollywood of the 1970s and beyond, the shift in cultural content, so to speak, can be best “seen” in the shifts of storytelling and subject matter within the Western genre—the genre most identified as the studio staple of American myth-building. The “classic” Westerns established by studio directors, such as John Ford and Howard
Hawks, ranged from operatic investigations into the fabric of American survival and cultural formation to oversimplified serial tales of cartoonish heroism against a barbaric frontier. Throughout the fifties, Budd Boetticher’s Ranown series, most notably Seven Men from Now (1956) and The Tall T (1957), had vigorously “interiorized” the vast landscapes of the West into deeper, more complex characterizations of social anxieties in an undeveloped society. They were thinly veiled psychoanalytical treatises of ethical behaviors within frontier and border politics that were sympathetic to the growing attention to diversity rather than a monolithic American ideology. These pieces condensed the more operatic extremes into small, localized issues contingent on the characters’ abilities to conform to ethical situations. These films rejected any sort of binary justice system (white hats beating black hats) and reinvented the concept of the West as an absence of systems of control and/or justice that divided good and bad (nothing but grey hats). Against these subtle Westerns that began to look inward into its own false investments in the American myth, bloated cinematic attempts to renew patriotic fervor in the genre, such as John Wayne’s The Alamo (1960), were roundly rejected as outdated propaganda pictures that simply reminded American viewers of the marginalization of other cultures, and colonial self-justification rather than rallying Americans to embrace the need to return the cultural significance in the larger world.

Even traditional masters of the Western felt the need to change the genre’s tone. John Ford’s The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence (1962) deeply deconstructed the mythical figuration of masculinized frontier justice with the difficult patience of convincing frontier civilizations to embrace statehood—a resignation of their self-protected rights via gunplay towards a faith in federalization as a greater popular force. Liberty Valence (played brilliantly by Lee Marvin) is the “villain” of the piece who terrorizes James Stewart’s attempts to peacefully civilize his
adopted Western town. Strangely the villain is given a name that speaks quite plainly to the power(s) of unfettered liberty and Marvin’s character is exemplary of such uncontrolled freedom realized as absolute terror. Ford’s stalwart, John Wayne, is the traditional cowboy justice that secretly underpins Stewart’s crusade to civilize the town. When the final confrontation between Stewart and Valence becomes imminent, it is Wayne who secretly kills Valence from a distance. But Wayne allows Stewart to take the credit for ridding the town of Valence. After voting for statehood and many years later following the death of Wayne and the success of Stewart (he is a senator now), Stewart reveals to journalists that Wayne is the actual force that shot Valence and allowed Stewart to coax his adopted territory into statehood. The press decides not to print the truth with its famous line, “When faced with the choice to print the truth or to print the legend, print the legend.” Ford himself reveals that the national myth-building implicit in the Western genre is beginning to show its social cracks as the American Sixties political scene becomes more and more complex.

The point here is not to force a reading of the struggling studio system through the shift in the Western genre, but to point out the cultural ideological shifts that the studio system, for most of the 1960s, was reticent to adopt. If Hollywood was, as Hugo Munsterberg had called it, a “dream factory,” its dreams were in desperate need of being updated. These shifts were reactions to, most notably—but not excluded to—both Kennedy and the Martin Luther King Jr. Assassinations, America’s Anti-Communism rising to a frenetic post-McCarthy impasse in Cuba, and the subsequent growing military involvement in Vietnam. American audiences had fractured into so many disjointed subject-positions and subcultures that the studio’s hegemony was failing to speak directly to the growing counter-culture.
J. Hoberman in his book *The Dream Life* carefully connects the paths of LBJ’s post-Kennedy attempt to wrangle Americans into supporting the effort in Vietnam, the following slippage into the conservative Nixon era, and the malaise that emerges at the beginning of the seventies, with the violent changes in cinematic exposition and the internalization of cultural disappointment and anxiety that infiltrated the cinema of the late sixties and early seventies. Films like Arthur Penn’s *The Chase* (1966) — a box office flop starring Marlon Brando that would precede Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) — points to the social frictions developing around miscegenation and class difference in small town America. While Penn disowned the film because of studio interference in its ending, the film still demonstrates Americans’ growing quickness towards violence instead of diplomacy. Nationally, the cinema was becoming increasingly bold in depicting violence and sexuality in general as the Hayes system began to collapse. Films like *the Dirty Dozen* (1967) replaced noble war dramas with a cast of anti-heroes, rapists and criminals, forcibly recruited for a suicide mission of the Nazis. Hoberman’s read is that the violence of the film and its almost gleeful ending of trapping the entire Nazi party, most of them civilians, and lighting them all on fire before almost every member is killed—an ending so violent that it shocked most critics as indulgent and psychopathic—resonated with the counter-culture that were sympathizing with the reluctant criminals-turned-suicide-squad by comparing them to the contemporary young men being drafted into Vietnam.

The majors continued to produce escapist melodramas and musicals as if ignoring the changes around them. Big studio projects would hit sporadic success with “old school” films like the musical *The Sound of Music* (1965), but each attempt to repeat success, with musicals like *Doctor Doolittle* (1967), *Star!* (1968) and *Hello Dolly* (1969) failed to gain traction with moviegoers. Big budget musicals, like the traditional Western, were of little interest to a culture
that had become almost completely disaffected. The sluggish reception and financial losses from studio pictures were giving way to smaller studios that were producing all types of “schlock” and “exploitation” cinema. These films were often fodder to fill up low-rent theaters, and would stab blindly at diverse audiences. Most effective at this was American International Pictures (AIP) headed by Samuel Z. Arkoff and James H. Nicholson. AIP produced what would have been traditionally called B pictures with extraordinary prodigiousness and a more focused connection with the younger counter-culture—biker films replacing the beach movies of Funicello and Avalon (which AIP earlier produced), experimental psychedelic films evolved out of the juvenile delinquent pictures of Dean and Brando.

The infamous Roger Corman, AIPs hyper-productive director and producer, would be able to fire out multiple films on the cheap. In the 1950s for AIP, he produced sci-fi schlock for next to nothing, and by the sixties he had found a niche in the horror genre. He helmed a successful string of low budget films based on Poe stories starring Vincent Price. Corman treated film as a pure factory product, encouraging upstart directors to produce two films at the price of one. Corman was the response of over-budgeted Hollywood spectacle, and from this economic counter-position, he gave first breaks to many young directors, who would become members of the new auteur movement of the seventies. For instance, Welles’s on-again-off-again confidant, Peter Bogdanovich, shot his first feature film, Targets (1970), under Corman. He would fuse a retired Boris Karloff—a Corman horror regular—refusing to complete his last picture with a secondary story loosely based on a Charles Whitman-like “normal joe” going on a shooting spree and being chased down and killed at the drive-in premiere of Karloff’s last movie. Bogdanovich cleverly connected the “real life” horrors of meaningless assassinations seemingly everywhere with the “schlock” horror of the monster movies of Karloff and Corman. Another
instance is Monte Hellman, who directed *Ride the Whirlwind* and *The Shooting* (both starring a young undiscovered Jack Nicholson), the latter being an atmospheric twin story that fused the Western genre with a surrealism that pushed the Western in the art-house direction. Under the high speed, low-budget umbrella of “Cormanism,” it would seem by the sheer volume of these low-budget genre pictures flooding the market that low-budget cinema was not only gaining more visibility than the big budget film projects provided by the big studios, but they were more consistently hitting the mark when drawing the attention of the counter-culture of the Sixties.

The success of AIP and Corman in their “trash cinema” becomes a threatening alternative, like television, to the flagging Hollywood studio system. The affluence of low-budget “trash” becoming not only more available to wider viewership but also no longer compartmentalized by genre or taste allowed for various genres to cross over and become fused with others or redefined. The countercultural viewership seemed to be losing interest in fantasy and myth-building on a socio-cultural level. The perfect cinematic example of this—of Hollywood’s dream construction of the 1950s’ nuclear lifestyle being undermined by realities of a growing marginal demand of “social reality”—is the Burt Lancaster film, *The Swimmer* (1968), as a metaphor for the fading star system and the Classical Hollywood insistence upon “happy ending” narratives. Based on a John Cheever story published in the New Yorker two years earlier, Lancaster plays a middle-aged, athletic, upper-middle class man, Neddy Merril, who crashes a small backyard cocktail party of his neighbors and suddenly decides to “swim home” from backyard pool to backyard pool. As he crosses through his neighbor’s yards, he becomes exposed as a false representative of nuclear family life, trying desperately to stay young, he encounters fiercer and fiercer neighbors who began to exile him from their yards. Climbing up to his house, the house has been shut and abandoned for years. His family is long gone and it is
unclear for how long, if ever, Neddy’s past—a past so seemingly current and real at the
beginning of the film—has been a self-constructed myth that cloaks a history of infidelity and
familial irresponsibility. *The Swimmer* intimates the closing of the handsome chiseled actor as a
figure of the past. The film ends with Lancaster locked outside of his dilapidated empty home in
the rain. The film takes Lancaster’s Neddy to the devastating conclusion that shatters his own
delusional myth. This insurgence of deconstructing the Hollywood studio system’s myth-
building function is the prevalent theme of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and while it will
survive, to quote Obi-Wan Kenobi, to “become more powerful then you can ever imagine,” the
New Hollywood made promises of a more authentic style of filmmaking—films that would
speak reality from the margins as well as from the center. However, this “countercultural
promise” opened a socio-historical gap created by Hollywood’s detachment from its audience.
This gap will be the space that creates, redefines and destroys the cinematic author in a single
brilliant flash as the studio system struggles to restructure itself.

This promise at the threshold of New Hollywood articulates two important shifts in
industrial practices: First, Hollywood reinvested its resources (including their producers and
directors) into what had been considered “low” or “secondary” filmmaking—horror, science
fiction, teen films, etc.—and this can also explain the ascendency of the minors, Disney,
Columbia and Universal, who had never owned any theaters but now were embracing the living
rooms provided by television. The studio system would begin to accept and turn towards these
marginalized genre fields, injecting them with bigger budgets and better technology to herald the
coming of the new blockbusters. Second is that the studio system became willing to “reach out”
to a new set of producers and artists that were themselves allegedly part of the growing counter-
culture. These were the children, not only of these genre pictures, but of the influence crossing
the Atlantic of Neo-Realism and the Nouvelle Vague, and, for a brief period, the studios, rather than waiting film to film to figure out what works as it had been with the independent production units, handed over their resources almost completely to the filmmakers themselves—the auteurs of the New Hollywood.

A Different Kind of Maverick: New Authors of Contempt and Adoration

With no control over exhibition to guarantee an immediate rental and term of visibility in the popular market, and with television bringing the theaters into the living room, the studio system had lost its grip not only on its oligopoly, but had moved out of sync with what the new “culture” wanted. It was forced to integrate with the demands of television production, but as the sixties soldiered on there was also a clear change in demand from marginalized—and later militarized—groups defiantly demanding civil rights. Most cinema historians and critics designate *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) as the watershed film that marked a violent shift in cinematic temperament that would begin to shatter production codes and assumptions of what was and what was not permitted in Hollywood filmmaking. *Bonnie and Clyde* freely borrowed from the revolutionary and irreverent film grammars of the French New Wave and angrily replaced the more conservative narrative figures of noble Hollywood heroes with flawed, broken anti-heroes. This aesthetic blast was far from sudden. Rather, it was a product of a steady progression away from American idealism and isolationism, and towards the exposition of the country’s darker imperialism. There are many historical strands that feed into this countercultural “takeover.” While we have already pointed to a few possible strands above, the following concentrates on a
few key figures and events that were directly responsible for the transformation of the figure of the classical maverick into the New Hollywood auteur.

First, was the direct influence of European cinema on films like *Bonnie and Clyde*. The film was a direct attempt by its original screenwriters, Robert Benton and David Newman, for an American film to adopt the iconoclastic practices of the Nouvelle Vague, specifically the practices of Truffaut and Godard. By the mid-1960s, the two *Cahiers* critics-turned-filmmakers had become the front-runners of their own cry for a new type of filmmaking. Each filmmaker had an endearing respect for the history of Hollywood film mavericks, but also an irreverence for the Hollywood system and its grammar. Truffaut and Godard would split apart—somewhat violently at the end of the decade—as Godard’s irreverence became paramount to his respect for past masters, and the opposite became true for Truffaut. As early as 1965, Godard had named his obvious critique of Hollywood’s dependence on star systems and popcorn sales, *Contempt* (1963), and the contempt became more and more apparent in each of his films that followed. Truffaut, however, incorporated historical cinematic grammars, specifically Hitchcock’s, into his film work and thus reentered the larger system of cooperative film politics and grammar. Godard saw Truffaut’s reinvestment in Hollywood filmmaking as hypocritical to Truffaut’s own *politique*. Godard would continue experimenting with breaking traditional cinematic grammar almost entirely from established structures of filmmaking. At the fringes of being completely avant-garde, Godard would enter a wholly political field of aesthetic exploration by 1970. He would team with Jean-Paul Gorin to form the radical Maoist film group, The Dziga Vertov Project. Truffaut, on the other hand, would soften his style into more introspective narratives based on character development and the reflexive nature of cinema. Godard and Truffaut became the polarizing influences for the hungry young American filmmakers emerging from a
collapsing Hollywood studio system. While there were clearly other influences from the newly arriving “art cinema” of Europe—the Italian neo-realism of Rossellini, Visconti and De Sica, the introspective studies of Fellini’s surreal nostalgia, and Antonioni’s landscapes of modern ennui—the tension between the aesthetic approaches of Godard and Truffaut’s new cinema became the two faces of the Janus-faced prototype of the New Hollywood auteur.\textsuperscript{79}

There was also a financial allure to this new way of filmmaking for both new artists and new production companies. It was a cheaper alternative to expensive Hollywood budgets and union stipulations. The French New Wave had incorporated the economical filmmaking of Italian Neo-Realism and added a technical panache that accented realism with a sort of technical freedom from certain rules of continuity. The ruins of post-World War II that enabled the economy of neorealism in Italy, for American filmmakers of the 1950s and 1960s became the post-conglomerate “ruins” of the Hollywood system. The cheaper inroads of AIP, Corman and tele-films would mirror the emergence of lighter, cheaper and more mobile film equipment that forced ingenuity out of the Nouvelle Vague filmmakers and made their new techniques both repeatable and affordable. Young filmmakers skipped most of the apprenticeships and catapulted, often successfully, into the director’s seat. Some would even venture higher—trying to create a new private studio system where they became studio heads, but in their minds, studio heads who were forever sympathetic to the struggles internal to the artist. They envisioned a hands-off approach to filmmaking inherent to the avant-garde and documentary movements but with financial access to the larger fields of cinematic production.

Thus, with \textit{Bonnie and Clyde}, Benton and Newman had based the script on Godard’s \textit{Breathless} (1960) and even more heavily on Truffaut’s \textit{Jules and Jim} (1962). When Warren Beatty optioned the script from Benton and Newman, he pitched it to the Warner Brothers as a
gangster picture (another nod to the return of “dated” genre pictures). Jack Warner agreed to make the picture, but saw little hope in reviving the Warner gangster films of Cagney and Robinson. Beatty brought in his friend Robert Towne to polish the script, and had allegedly convinced Truffaut himself to direct the picture. However, Truffaut did not direct, and the choice of director went to Arthur Penn, who had just come off his flop, *The Chase*. But Penn had come out of television directing in the fifties and not only could he shoot fast and cheap, he was more in touch with the changing political views of the younger generation. Before the film’s completion in the summer of 1967, Jack Warner sold off his company to Seven Arts Productions—a television production company. *Bonnie and Clyde* ironically became one of the last pictures of the classical Warner regime as well as its biggest hit that fall. The film’s hyper-violent ending of the two pathetic and sympathetic antiheroes had tapped into the spectacle of violence and revolution that was bubbling to the surface all over the world. Hollywood narratives were being forced to screen the crumbling of their own myths, and the result was a starker, more visceral representation of sociocultural repression and anger.

The film’s success, especially within the counterculture, in 1967, indeed proved the demand for a raw and new cinema in Hollywood filmmaking, and the demand was answered rapidly. However, it is necessary to take one more step backwards. *Bonnie and Clyde* was by no means the first American film to search out a new type of realism that identified with counterculture. Nor was it solely an affectation of foreign influence and its film theory. American cinema not only had its own significant avant-garde movement—such as Brakhage, Deren, Connor, and, of course, Warhol to name a few—it also had its own jazz roots as well that affected a uniquely American improvisational style of filmmaking of the fifties and the sixties. If there was an auteur that pioneered a stripped down cinema that presaged *Bonnie and Clyde*’s
ability to peer into the social realities of the American common and ordinary life it would have to be John Cassavetes.

Cassavetes can be labelled a maverick like Welles in that he operated at his most artistic levels when completely independent of the Hollywood system, where he also, like Welles, paid his bills working as an actor. But, he is a more of a fringe figure of pre-New Hollywood that deserves a detour as a potential type of auteur that not only underpinned the liberated playfulness of characterization of the forthcoming New Hollywood, but also—more subtly—may have informed its foreign art-house influences as well. Cassavetes rarely gets enough attention for, as his biographer, Marshall Fine, says, “accidentally” inventing the American independent film (or would say Cassavetes intentionally failed to create the American independent film). While this is a substantial claim that has its limits of accuracy in the history of counter-Hollywood studio production, Cassavetes’s work does represent an interesting side-story to the Hollywood system from the late fifties to New Hollywood in the seventies.

His first film, *Shadows* (1959) tells the story of a black woman who passes for white. The film follows the racial tensions within various elements of the jazz and beatnik crowds of New York City. The film ends famously with the statement, “This film has been an improvisation.” This statement has led to the popular misconception that Cassavetes’s films were unscripted and unplanned. This is almost entirely untrue in that Cassavetes planned meticulously what he wanted to achieve with his characters and scenarios, and he was often militant on the set, demanding that actors deliver only their scripted lines. Regardless of these facts, *Shadows* became renowned specifically as an improvised independent film done on the cheap and underground. The earliest cut of the film was almost completely free of any kind of
editing or narrative structure, relying more on rambling dialogue and multiple long takes as if it was searching out what it was trying to capture. Cassavetes was unhappy with the first cut of the film and reshot and reedited large sections of the films into the cut we have now.81 However, the first version gained the attention of film critic of the Village Voice, and avant-garde filmmaker, Jonas Mekas, who praised the film’s improvisational elements as a gesture towards pure cinema that rejected the characterization and narrative structure of traditional Hollywood filmmaking. When the second (and final) version of the film was released, Mekas turned on the new version, claiming it had sold out to the tighter and more conventional studio editing style, but the film was still exceptionally original and represented a much more, raw and natural feeling of filmmaking that predated the formally liberated cinema of the Nouvelle Vague, and the documentary styles of Shirley Clarke, the Maysle Brothers and others.

But Cassavetes never advocated the absolute rejection of narrative filmmaking of the American avant-garde, nor the technical distancing and deconstruction of Godard. He always retained an extreme focus on the human elements of his films. His approach to characterization rejected the traditional screenplay approach that clearly preconceived, and thus foreclosed upon, the meaning behind characters and what they represent. Instead, Cassavetes eschewed a “depth of character,” and preferred to stay on the surface of characters giving them a life-like opacity. Following Shadows, Cassavetes was given two Hollywood studio projects. The first was an attempt to capitalize on the jazz elements inherent in Shadows by Paramount called Too Late Blues (1961). The studio clearly controlled the casting, placing a limp Bobby Darin in the jazz role, and Stella Stevens as his girl with a heart of gold. The story was too contrived and forced—very typical of the “square” studio system of the early sixties trying to capture and capitalize upon certain subcultures that they clearly did not understand. The second experience was even
worse. *A Child is Waiting* (1963) starring Burt Lancaster and Judy Garland, and produced by studio giant, Stanley Kramer, demonstrated how polarized Cassavetes’s approach to filmmaking was to the traditional studio system. The film’s story circles around the institutionalizing and treatment of special children. Cassavetes spent a great deal of time trying to capture the children, but Garland, Lancaster and Kramer primarily wanted a star vehicle, and were unhappy with Cassavetes's thematic preoccupations. Cassavetes was forced off the picture, and being discontent with his studio experience returned to independent filmmaking, and began work on the privately funded, *Faces* (1968).

Filmed in 1965 and eventually released independently in 1968, *Faces* is a master class in character study and the impenetrable surfaces of individuals. Loosely structured around a middle-aged couple contemplating divorce. The film throws the viewer immediately into a social space that has no establishing narrative. Two male characters attempt to pick up a woman named Jeannie in a bar, and go back to her place. The two men are drunk and vying for her attention by reenacting comedy routines and acting like teenagers. The film allows for no central dialogue, but instead captures the immediacy of frustrated and bungled attempts to woo the girl. When Jeannie starts to show more attention to the husband, his friend immediately asks what her rates are for the night disrupting the playful atmosphere. Having killed the mood, the two men leave, and Jeannie kisses the husband on the cheek to prove her sincerity in being attracted to him. The film cuts back to the house where, after playful dinner discussions, the husband tries to have sex with his wife only to be ultimately turned down. In what seems the next morning (the film condenses time in such a way that the entire film seems to take place over a single night, but elements of the film seems to have compressed time so that the film may span over several days), the husband says he wants a divorce and leaves. The film separates into two narratives where the
husband returns to Jeannie to pursue an affair, while the wife goes out on the town with her housewife friends and brings home a hip and charming youngster, and after all her friends leave she succumbs to the youngster’s advances and sleeps with him. The two narratives begin to parallel as the husband awakes in the morning and starts to deride and reject Jeannie, oscillating between rudeness and awkward playful joking around, and he ultimately leaves Jeannie to return home. The youngster awakes to find the wife in the bathroom, passed out on the floor having attempted suicide with an overdose of pills. The youngster panics, but chooses to revive her and they share a very tender moment of friendship until the husband comes home and the youngster bolts out the window. The husband is unfairly enraged with his wife and they argue at the top of the stairs where she tells him directly that she flat out does not love him. The husband stunned lights up a cigarette and slumps down on the stairs. His wife asks for a cigarette, and he lights one and gives it to her. The film cuts to a shot of the two of them smoking on the stairs until they both get up and seem to return to their daily routines, making it unclear as to what the result of the “evening” will be. The film is uninterested in closure as it has presented as blankly as possible the events surrounding unmotivated actions. The result is an extremely naked portrayal of not only the moments of life that unsettle relationships between individuals but also contain all the banalities and quirks that occur between those events.

Unfettered by the demands of working under a studio system’s timeline or budget, Cassavetes created an intense film that seemed to move at a very deliberate pace to capture life as it occurs. It is less an attempt at pure realism, but instead a shift towards filmmaking intent on capturing the tensions of ordinary life. While Cassavetes did not improvise his films, his films seemed willing to take time for characters and themes to emerge in real time. Cassavetes retains a jazz style in how he phrases each of characters. His camera’s patience, at times, would force
audiences to their limits of attention, but his characters were never forced or boring. Including Cassavetes as part of the figural shift towards the New Hollywood auteur would place him as a kind of balancing point between the two New Wave influences—between the tension of Godard’s futurism and Truffaut’s nostalgia. Cassavetes did not strive to change cinema, nor to quote from its past. He remained fixated on the the private spaces of the present. His primary task was to investigate cinema’s spatiotemporal relationship to its characters. He wanted to show how that relationship has the potential to change us.82

By the late 1960s, Hollywood’s choice of material compared to the naked delivery of *Faces*, the willingness of plain-faced nobodies to dropout of society’s predestined conditioning as in *The Graduate* (1967), or the brutal assassination of characters who refuse to conform to social law like *Bonnie and Clyde* seemed dated and perfunctory. Its themes were stale and its subject matter bore little connection to the counterculture’s effect on viewership. *Faces* was a fresh alternative to patterned stories on marital difficulties, and the film alluded to larger social concerns within the politics of the home. Cassavetes’s character studies and fluid-yet-unflinching camerawork seemed to be a portent to the similar shift to the working-class existence of the American individual, the disappearance of a uniform political and aesthetic understanding of American culture, and the drop out mentality of the sixties counter-culture. Cassavetes expanded countercultural viewership to include itself in his characters. Meanwhile *Bonnie and Clyde* had done the same but had usurped the Hollywood system to do so. Hollywood surrendered to their misunderstanding of audience demands and chose to settle into their conglomerated existence as a part of a larger economic machine. Hollywood executives placed their faith in production teams that were younger and more in touch with their countercultural peers. Warner Brothers, now owned by Seven Arts and run by production head Kenny Hyman,
would take chances with a young Francis Ford Coppola to shoot *Finian’s Rainbow*. Paramount would take a leap of faith with Robert Evans as their youngest production head who would green-light Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968). But the production team that would take the fastest advantage of Hollywood’s resignation to the counterculture, and burn the fastest if not the brightest, would be Columbia’s BBS Productions. BBS would engage with a Cassavetes-like introspection into ordinary life, but it would use the Hollywood system to open its resources to younger filmmakers and contemporary ideas.

BBS Productions allegedly began as a conversation between its founding members, Bert Schneider and Bob Rafelson, who shared lunch every day in Central Park. Schneider worked as treasurer for Screen Gems, the tele-film division of his father Abe’s, company, Columbia Pictures, who had taken over the studio after the Harry and Jack Cohn’s deaths. Schneider felt that he had reached a dead end at Screen Gems, and longed to do something a little less corporate. Rafelson was the creatively hungry but often jobless part of the duo. Rafelson had worked for Revue in 1962, but was fired by Wasserman supposedly for hiring an actor with pimples. Rafelson suggested Schneider quit his father’s job and form an independent company with him. Their production company would ideally have Rafelson as the creative force, and Bert as the money man. The two friends transplanted themselves to LA and pitched their variation of the Beatle’s *A Hard Day’s Night* for television to Bert’s good friend Steve Blauner, who would eventually become the “S” of BBS productions. The result was the late-sixties television smash *The Monkees*. The show introduced the pair to the music scene of the late sixties, which transformed the square, corporate Bert into a bearded, long-haired counter-cultural spirit. Rafelson and Schneider ended up representing physically and conceptually an alternative to the
Hollywood studio “suits.” With the support of the success of the show, they formed Raybert Productions. Raybert immediately gathered together frustrated fringe actors such as Jack Nicholson whose ordinary looks were being ignored by the old star system. *The Monkees* success, however, was beginning to burn out by 1967. The band began to seem a corporate attempt to profit off the music scene. They were considered a fake representation of 1960s youth culture, who could barely play their instruments never mind represent the growing counterculture’s sociopolitical concerns, *The Monkees* needed to be either retired or rethought. Rafelson choose to do both with a feature length film that would be a psychedelic deconstruction of the band. Rafelson enlisted his friend Nicholson to write a script for the band that would literally destroy their myopic pop silliness and address more pressing social issues like Vietnam.

As Peter Biskind describes Rafelson’s approach to *Head*: “Rafelson fancied himself a European auteur; with characteristic arrogance, *Head* was to be his 8 1/2, the summation of his career and his meditation on art. Unlike Fellini, however, there was nothing to sum up, it being his first picture” (Biskind 60). *Head* was an interesting experiment for Rafelson, but the film was far from successful. *Head* had made an initial countercultural statement, but it was no more groundbreaking than the psychedelic films and biker movies that were being pumped out at AIP. Although its next film would be a mixture of those two genres that would catapult BBS to countercultural greatness.

Around the time of *Head*, Peter Fonda had pitched a different kind of biker movie to Samuel Arkof to fulfill his contract with AIP. Fonda had already had a relatively successful run with AIP, especially with *The Wild Angels* (1966) that had been made for $360,000 and grossed $10 million for the company. After completing the psychedelic flick, *The Trip* (1967), Fonda pitched a film called *The Loners* which had two bikers smuggling one last score of drugs across
country only to be killed by rural Americans that see their sense of freedom as a threat. Fonda wanted his friend Dennis Hopper to direct. AIP did not like the idea of making drug dealers the protagonist, and they most definitely did not trust Hopper, who was too volatile and too personally immersed in the expanding drug scene. Fonda brought the idea to Raybert, and Schneider convinced Columbia to back it. The risks were great, but the result was *Easy Rider* (1969). Although Hopper did indeed prove to be volatile and unstable, Raybert, which had now changed its name to BBS, somehow had intuited that this film would be more than a biker film, which, by popularity of genre alone, partner Steve Blauner rightly knew would automatically return the film’s negative costs. Like *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Easy Rider*’s characters, Captain America and Billy the Kid were outlaws—now drug smugglers instead of bank robbers—that represented the repression of a dying American myth of homogeneity and conformity. As if speaking directly to the type of myth-busting, nothing could be more symbolic to the counterculture’s conception of the American condition than the red, white and blue gas tank filled with money exploding from a redneck’s gunshot on the American highway, which kills Captain America at the end of the film. The film opened in New York on July 14, 1969. It cost $501,000 and in New York alone took in $19.1 million. The incredible profit margin had instantly awakened Hollywood’s interest, and Columbia made a six-film contract with BBS that granted BBS final cut provided each film came in under $1 million. As Biskind says,

> Perhaps the most concrete result of *Easy Rider*’s success was the legitimation of the Raybert idea, and the transformation of the company into a significant cultural force. It not only made a big movie, it defined a sensibility, opened Hollywood to the counterculture. As [Paul] Schrader, who lost his job at the *Free Press* by panning *Easy
Rider, summed it up, “BBS fired a cannon shot across the bow, Coppola and Lucas would sink the ship.” (75)

Schrader would be correct in that BBS and Easy Rider would be responsible for a certain counter-cultural auteurism that would precede and open the space for the more concrete figures of New Hollywood authorship. Like Biskind’s claim for Rafelson’s immediate self-appointment as a European auteur, the unpredictable and violent Hopper would also lay claim to auteur status on his first film. As Biskind continues,

Hopper and his friends were seized with a millennialism that seemed to be sweeping everything before it. As he put it, “I want to make movies about us. We’re a new kind of human being. In a spiritual way, we may be the most creative generation in the last nineteen centuries [. . .] We want to make little, personal, honest movies [. . .] The studio is a thing of a past, and they are very smart if they just concentrate on becoming distributing companies for independent producers.” (Biskind 75)

But Hopper’s claim to authorship would be challenged by all the other timely forces at work in such a surprising success. As screenwriter and actor Buck Henry would argue,

Easy Rider was author-less, the automatic handwriting of the counterculture . . . Nobody knew who wrote it, nobody knew who directed it, nobody knew who edited it, Rip was supposed to be in it it, Jack was in it instead, it looks like a couple hundred outtakes from several other films all strung together with the soundtrack of the best of the ‘60s. But it opened up a path. Now the children of Dylan were in control. (quoted in Biskind 75)

BBS had responded directly to the counterculture, and unlike Corman and AIP, they were allowing more creative control by not necessarily restricting them only to genre audiences. BBS has created a commercial bridge between “low” culture and trash cinema to art-house and
European cinema. Rafelson quickly cemented the BBS promise of personal small art-house films with *Five Easy Pieces* (1970). The film rode off Nicholson’s new breakout stardom with *Easy Rider*, and pulled in major critical support from critics Kael and Sarris, who were successfully steering audiences away from the middle-brow disdain of Bosley Crowthers.

Now on a roll, the following year BBS produced three pictures. The first two seemed to venture too far into navel-gazing and loose camera work. Henry Jaglom’s *A Safe Place* (1971) on delivery seemed to have all of the Cassavetes freeform film techniques and *Easy Rider*’s rough editing style, but the narrative fell flat and gratuitously used the performances of Jack Nicholson and Orson Welles in directionless ways. Nicholson’s own, *Drive, He Said* (1971) lacked the energy of the earlier films. It would have seemed that the hippie-approach to filmmaking had been derailed in the new decade much like the Manson family and Altamont had done to the actual free love scene of the 1960s. But, in a very contrary and aesthetically reserved move, came Bogdanovich’s second feature, *The Last Picture Show* (1971). Shot against contemporary convention, the film was shot in black and white—supposedly at Orson Welles’s suggestion—and very plainly told a story of the loss of teenage innocence in a small Texas town. The metaphor of the closing of the town movie theater pointed to not only the bleak maturity and responsibility of teenage Americans, but also the loss of the unifying force of the Classical Hollywood approach to exhibition—the shared social space of the theater being dissipated by drive-ins and television. Its nostalgic effect was worthy of Welles’s *Magnificent Ambersons*. Bogdanovich’s little film managed to engage the counterculture and youth markets with its subject matter, but brought attention to the older generations feeling of abandonment and loss. Both older characters, played by Ben Johnson and Cloris Leachman, garnered academy awards.
for their performance out of the film’s eight nominations including for best picture, director, screenplay and cinematography.

*The Last Picture Show* secured the BBS model as one to be imitated. But the company at its core was suffering from a hypocritical fissure, as Biskind warned, “Still, there was a contradiction at the heart of BBS; it walked the line between a countercultural powerhouse and a conventional production company (Biskind 77). In other words, BBS was still seen by most of the younger filmmakers as the old nepotism disguised in hippie clothing. And as the success rolled in and the egos grew, BBS had lost vision of what it intended to become. As Jaglom noted:

> It was going to be a Hollywood Nouvelle Vague. The choice was no longer between doing it their way or not doing it at all. The possibility opened up that you could really do serious and interesting work, and survive commercially. We wanted to have film reflect our lives, the anxiety that was going on as a result of the war, the cultural changes that we were all products of [. . .] The original idea of BBS was that we were all hyphenates. We were all writers, directors, and actors [. . .] But make no mistake, there was one person who was in charge, that was Bert Schneider. (Henry Jaglom quoted in Biskind 77)

Because Schneider was the son of the president of BBS’s parent company, Columbia, once the initial potential had been exhausted, their protégés began to jump ship. Rafelson was the only one to stay on, and contributed the much underrated, *The King of Marvin Gardens* (1972). The film suffered from untraditional casting of the two brother main characters by placing Jack Nicholson in the sedate role of the responsible brother and Bruce Dern in the extroverted role. By the end of 1972, the aloof style of hippie filmmaking and its attention to ordinary problems of
an ordinary life had given way to the desire for more extreme characters and larger scale productions. This is not to say that the fast-and-loose personal style of production advantageously founded by BBS ceased to exist after 1972, but they had plugged into an earlier event that had already burnt out and had become something else. As Rafelson would claim in an interview in the new millennium: “We were just fucking lucky. We were in the right place at the right time.”

If it seems that I have strayed too far from our investigation of failed cinematic authorship throughout these thresholds, the intention has been to try and isolate the major gravitational forces at work on both Hollywood and authorship in the historical narrative space that begins somewhere after the Classical Hollywood boom of World War II and ends somewhere before New Hollywood mobilized its new auteurs to develop the blockbuster and then absorbed or discarded the new auteurs in that process. These forces reconfigured and added to the Classical maverick. They included a new type of aesthetic revision of Classical Hollywood filmmaking. Under this figure, the New Hollywood is not really that new. The shifts created by anti-trust actions, television, the rising counterculture and its marginal and variegated demands, a reinvestment in the vulgar elements of filmmaking, the disintegration of the Production Code that either provoked or allowed the increasing levels of violence (often attributed to, but not exclusive to, the Vietnam War) and sexual content (that becomes impossibly complicated in the transition from the sexual revolution and the summer of love to the sexualized brutality of the Manson murders) all lay claim to influencing the need for a reconfiguring of both authorship and authority.
With the freeform jazz styling of Cassavetes's character studies and the countercultural revelations of ordinary life and its marginalized antiheroes of BBS Productions, the groundwork was laid for the fusion of lowly genre directors and aspiring, classical and art-house influenced, film students. This was the amalgamation of the maverick and the acolyte. New mavericks would risk their unique stylistic choices by imitating and incorporating older maverick signatures. Of course, this fusion would appear in multiple ways in many different films. Coppola would reinvigorate the gangster picture with both respect for its common appeal but elevate the genre artistically with substantial creative freedom and studio funding. Martin Scorsese would disown his Corman produced project, *Boxcar Bertha*, because Cassavetes reminded him of how honestly “human,” and sincere his first film, *Who’s That Knocking at my Door*, (1967), was, and encouraged him to return to making films from the place he knew best. The result would become *Mean Streets* (1973). Older factory directors like Robert Altman and Arthur Penn found a new liberty in the New Hollywood, and began to apply countercultural spin to familiar traditional genres like the Western—respectively with *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) and *Little Big Man* (1970). Before the likes of Lucas and Spielberg would take the popular and vulgar elements of filmmaking to its most bankable conclusions, there arrived in Hollywood an underground filmmaker from New York with the hopeful intentions of being the American Godard, but instead would become labelled a shallow Hitchcock wannabe. Brian De Palma would be the most dedicated of the so called “movie brats” in the search for the perfect balance between the future of the maverick, which he recognized in Godard, and the future of the cinematic acolyte, which he would find again and again in the work of Hitchcock. His failure would become that of the copycat, and his work would be critically denied for decades because his specific brand of the maverick intentionally inhabited the stylistic grammar of another.
Chapter 5: The Copycat: Brian De Palma and Failures of Imitation

*I am interested in the medium of film itself, and I am constantly standing outside and making people aware that they are always watching a film. At the same time, I am evolving it.*

—Brian De Palma

At the time of this writing, Brian De Palma is currently in production on his thirtieth feature film. Compared to Welles’s thirteen completed features, De Palma would seem to be much more successful than Welles in getting his films made, and his entire oeuvre much more “complete” and much less invisible. But De Palma has had plenty of his own moments of exile from the studio system where he has had uneven commercial success and definitive commercial failures. Even so, De Palma’s work has been more consistently dedicated to cooperating with the studio system than Welles. While he has bounced throughout his career from big budget studio productions to quieter more independent or foreign funded features, De Palma remains capable of getting most of his films made. To date, only *The Demolished Man*, based on the 1955 science fiction classic eludes him, but even that film remains unmade in the way *Napoleon* or *A.I* remained unmade for Kubrick: The film just never presented itself as ready to be produced for personal reasons, not by studio interference.

De Palma is another sort of figure with a different set of failures. He seems far from the struggles, say, surrounding Welles’s *The Other Side of the Wind*, which remained ignored by the studio and the academy completely. He was one of the new rising auteurs of the 1970s that kept their careers at an arm’s length from Welles’s project. He came to Hollywood as a revolutionary and experimental self-appointed Godardist. With several admired experimental and revolutionary features made in New York City already under his belt, De Palma was welcomed into the fold by his new-found friends—Coppola, Scorsese, and the other movie brats. His first studio project, *Get to Know Your Rabbit* (1972) ironically featured Welles as an actor-for-studio-
pay to fund his sporadic shooting of TOSOTW. Less than a comparison to Welles, my concern with De Palma is not about the availability or existence of his films, but more of the failure to receive critical merit from the critical field of the then-emerging, now-established project of Film Studies. With the exception of Carrie (1976), and now more and more his paranoid masterpiece, Blow Out (1981), De Palma’s work seems of little interest to film critics except as a negative foil to more “deserving” auteurs such as Scorsese or Altman. Indeed, conversation of De Palma angers, if not *enrages*, many “traditional” critics who hope for his exile from the cinematic canon. Whereas Welles’s finished and unfinished films have produced a great deal (and still growing) amount of research and critical investigation into the fragments that continue to expand his ever-growing potential critical viewership, De Palma’s work has very rarely been seen or considered within the critical register—especially within the discourse surrounding cinema as “high art”—and, if it has, it is almost always negative. It is often seen as derivative imitation and genre hack work.

By the late 1970s, De Palma became the brunt of Andrew Sarris’s auteurist attacks of De Palma as an imitator of established auteurs (specifically Hitchcock), and was, thus, unworthy to join Sarris’s pantheon of stylistic greats. This critical rejection, while balanced by supporters such as Pauline Kael and Robin Wood, would become compounded by the growing anti-pornography movement headed by writers like Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin—couched in a very extreme politicization of the feminist movement—that attacked his treatment of women. These heated criticisms began to boil by Dressed to Kill (1980) and then overflowed with rage upon the release of Body Double (1984). But even if these attacks were to erase what innovative works he had completed up until Body Double, his variations from that point forward—each of which became more and more complex experiments with not only old masters
(yes, most overtly Hitchcock, but also Welles, Buñuel, Wilder and Antonioni), but also with critical repetitions of his own style—should have at least garnered him some critical reinvestment, especially as less antagonistic identity politics balanced the more extreme readings from the late 1980s forward. Regardless of his struggles with certain feminist politics, following the commercial and critical disasters of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990) and *Mission to Mars* (2000), De Palma would prefer to marginalize himself in the millennium to work without the prejudices of past critiques that have always shackled him.

From a traditional auteurist standpoint, even though De Palma has always retained a consistent style, his work has always been dangerous to endorse because it remained the work of a misogynistic, Hitchcock rip-off artist throughout the emerging blockbuster era up until now by his detractors. *It failed to deploy the accepted politique des auteurs.* However, these “prejudices” as I have called them are starting to finally show cracks in their foundations with newer critics acknowledging a certain agenda in the critical field that dismisses De Palma because of his larger commentary on cinema itself. This slanted critical agenda—an agenda that relegates De Palma as being a “hack” and thus refuses to consider his work as a student of Hitchcock or Godard—or (God-as-Ultimate-Author forbid!) as their successor or equal—enforces a certain blindness to—or invisibility within—De Palma’s work. For me, this agenda urgently needs to be reconsidered because De Palma’s failure to win over critical reception is a progressive step to Welles’s creative independence, albeit in a very different stylistic manner of auteurist configuration. Both these auteurs’ works are almost always directly about the nature and possibilities of cinema itself, especially in their express concern over the tenuous state of cinema’s (and its authors’) existence. But where Welles embraces his failures by maintaining an intentionally incomplete body of work with a rhetoric of humility and apology, De Palms treats
the inherent failure of cinema head on by reformulating and reiterating it again and again to reveal near infinite possibilities in that same cinematic grammar.

The Trouble with Hitchcock

It is primarily De Palma’s dedication to—and fascination with—the “Hitchcock system” from *Sisters* (1972) forward that gets him into the most trouble, especially within the devout auteurist and anti-pornography feminist movement. DePalma’s post-1960s work, which would exhaustively re-invoke Hitchcockian techniques and themes, as we will see (again and again) is often misread by most critics as mere copycatting. Ironically, the same critical voices that would rise to academic power in Film Studies throughout the 1970s and beyond would allow a free pass to foreign directors like Chabrol who was doing the same thing. The same with Truffaut who would also freely borrow from Hitchcock in *The Soft Skin* and *The Bride Wore Black* without apology (perhaps this is because of his seminal interview book with the master of suspense himself that give him an academic pardon?). Although it is not just De Palma’s reworking of Hitchcock’s themes and motifs that enrages certain critics. De Palma’s work will be considerably complicated and vilified by critiques of his violent depiction of the female body and his flirtations with pornography, violence and other marginalized “trash” as it enters the Reagan era. But, whereas Hitchcock’s legacy will undergo similar revision and critique from feminism and others, Hitchcock’s place in the canon will remain secure up to the writing of this chapter. De Palma’s will not. Despite recent attempts from critics such as Chris Dumas and David Greven as well as my own, De Palma is still invisible to critical attention, and is rarely considered nothing more than a derivative genre player in the critical field.
Thus, it is De Palma’s relationship with Hitchcock that one must always begin with—even though he, in fact, begins with Godard. De Palma’s body of work is so inextricably and intentionally woven first and foremost into Hitchcock’s that, like the conjoined twins of *Sisters*, it is dangerous to separate them too quickly. So how are we to approach De Palma’s “borrowing” from the Master of Suspense. To borrow from Hitchcock, undoubtedly the center of all psychoanalytical-based Film Studies, is to inherit the Freudian/Lacanian presuppositions of its critics. For many psychoanalytical critics, Hitchcock, like Lacan’s linguistic turn, adopted Freud’s speculative system of identification and sexual difference and created a cinematic language with it. In psychoanalytic terms, Hitchcock-as-Freud, here is an inextricable system of subject-formation created by the repressive hypothesis, or the primal scene, via the cinematic apparatus. While I don’t wish to be pulled too deeply into the Lacanian/Freudian (and Zizekian) critical method, I do wish to point out that the motivation behind applying this method is to gender the cinematic process. Critics in the early to mid-1970s, most notably Laura Mulvey, would claim that the phallic power of cinema was gendered very specifically to follow the Freudian/Lacanian model, and its power of subject-formation within the audience was inescapable.  

But De Palma’s films perpetually complicate this gendered assumption. Keeping in mind that a gendered representation is both a performance and an image, and that for a thinker like Judith Butler it is always a *failed* performance but not necessarily a failed image. De Palma’s films repeatedly return to the homosocial sphere as incapable of comprehending an unknowable feminine component. With clinical and critical precision, he invokes a *less masculine* type of cinema. Perhaps this is where the constant critique of De Palma as an adolescent filmmaker with adolescent concerns stems from. He cannot with full conviction embrace a macho position
(however affected) like a Peckinpah or De Palma’s contemporary, John Milius. Nor can he affect a sensitivity towards a feminine sympathy like Altman’s *Three Women* (also affected).  

One wonders if it is possible to consider De Palma by just lifting him out of the psychoanalytical register as the New Criticism hoped to do with literary texts in the 1950s. In a sense, philosopher and critic, Eval Peretz, tries to do just that with De Palma. In his book, *Becoming Visionary: Brian De Palma’s Cinematic Education of the Senses*, he attempts to extract the filmmaker’s films from their cultural or psycho-biographical nexus by means of a pure philosophical rigor. It takes as its critical subject De Palma’s *Carrie, The Fury* (1978) and *Blow Out* (with a very quick nod to *Femme Fatale* (2002)) to philosophize about how each film constructs a specific phenomenology of the image. For Peretz, De Palma’s films use specific framing and internal camera movement to limit and explode the image at the same time. His idea is that De Palma’s unique brand of the horrific makes aware the audience of a blindness within the image that awakens a larger sense of perception. Peretz very adroitly connects Deleuze’s “thinking” of the frame, and Nancy’s pluralization of the absolute and the senses. But Peretz is not entirely detached from the psychoanalytic register as he still, albeit more philosophically, connects Lacan’s mirror phase of subject identification to the three De Palma films

By bracketing off the external forces surrounding De Palma’s work—most importantly the critical anger towards De Palma’s exacerbation of Hitchcockian misogyny—Peretz does offer up two concepts that are worthy of use in exploring how De Palma and his cinematic approach can be rethought. First, he insists that all De Palma’s work is “the absolute dedication of his cinema to the question of the image” (18). By saying that De Palma’s cinema is always positing a question to cinema, Peretz allows one to reconsider De Palma’s attachment to, and
how he can be differentiated from, Hitchcock. He implies that while Hitchcock is always obsessive with form and how the audience is positioned within the camera position (and how this collapsed position is often psychologized by his POV shots), Hitchcock’s work remains blind to itself—blind to its own mechanical functions. As Peretz explains,

If De Palma’s cinema indeed relates in a privileged way to the Hitchcockian ouvre, it does so, precisely, I suggest, by becoming its image, its double—not in the sense of a derivative copy of a preexisting model, but in the sense of introducing into it, through this strange doubling, a haunting mediation that activates what we might call a blindness internal to Hitchcock which has more than any other body of work in film history introduced a dimension of an obstruction of a beyond at the heart of its disturbing images, an obstruction known as Hitchcockian suspense. (19)

This is a much more careful consideration of De Palma’s connection to Hitchcock instead of just as an imitator of form. It considers Hitchcock and De Palma as a relation.

Peretz suggests that De Palma’s doubling of Hitchcock is never imitation in the purely Platonic sense, but it is, instead, a twin project that positions itself also outside of the Hitchcock oeuvre where it can perceive Hitchcock as an object. To use a layman’s example, rather than Steven Spielberg “hiding” his borrowing of the entire technical structure of Hitchcock’s *The Birds* for his blockbuster *Jaws* (1975) (in other words, disguising his work as “original”), De Palma is a blatant double of Hitchcock.91 In this analogy, De Palma is more like Bach with his Goldberg variations—he remains faithful to a prior melodic structure, but varies the piece harmonically.
Following this logic, Hitchcock is devoid of any self-referencing, De Palma is, however, able to reference both Hitchcock and himself. Peretz thus constructs this doubling in a Lacanian (or Levinasian) way. He continues:

De Palma can thus make us see Hitchcock from the “place” where Hitchcock cannot see himself. Hitchcock can become Hitchcock . . . only by being mediated through De Palma, his body double or Siamese twin. Such a procedure actually destroys the Platonic conception of model and copy, a destruction that De Palma’s denigrators anxiously sense and want to prevent. (20)

Peretz’s claim to de-Platonize De Palma is a healthy aesthetic move not only because it reminds De Palma detractors that the classical conception of all art is derivative of a greater Ideal, but also that there are elements of De Palma that go beyond Hitchcock. Yes, beyond Hitchcock there are other free borrowings from Buñuel, Wilder, Antonioni, and, as we will see in his later work, most importantly—and often dismissed or ignored—De Palma himself, but there is a more clinical interest in returning to these technical signatures of other masters: to find multiple variations of effects within the same grammar.

These variations we could also call a rhetorical shift, or, as we approach a more gendered reading of De Palma, a performative transvestism, but, for now, the doubling of Hitchcock performed by De Palma as rendered by Peretz leads to the second concept argued by Peretz: That of the violence inherent in De Palma’s images. In addition to being called a brutal misogynist, De Palma is often accused of being too violent in general, which, as we have seen earlier, can be thrust upon most of his New Hollywood peers, as well as Hitchcock’s Psycho, which pushed the boundaries of the new MPAA ratings system in 1960.
Peretz, as always, remaining in a very sterile philosophical field, clinically differentiates two types of violence at work in De Palma:

The accusation [of gratuitous violence] fails to distinguish between two main dimensions of violence in De Palma’s films: the one we can call violent representations, or violent content in his films; the other is the violence of the images, not of the content of the images as representations, but on their impact by being images rather than direct objects of perception, that is by being inscriptions of an obstructing beyond, an internal blindness that they seem to communicate to viewers, or violently inflict on them, undermining their powers of perception and their positions as spectators occupying an ideal point in relation to which the film is supposed to be constructed. (20)

For Peretz, De Palma’s films are always “about” the relation between these two types of violence. There is often violent content in his films—the final gym scene in *Carrie*, the driller killer in *Body Double*, the Dahlia victim in *The Black Dahlia*, &c—but their effect is because De Palma is always reminding the viewer that this violence is never *real but cinematic*. Accusations that he places his characters (often women) in gratuitously violent victim positions automatically refuse to ask why is he so honest to fantasize about such violence in his cinema? Why does he repeat and return to these scenes of violence so often and so consistently if its gendered codification is always going to result in the same reading? Once again it would seem that the “obsession” would lie somewhere within DePalma’s investigations into the varied effects of a certain film grammar. For Peretz, violence in De Palma’s approach to cinema building is necessary, as he continues:

What De Palma’s films attempt to do in their creation of some of the most extraordinary images in the history of film is to open the viewers to the dimension of the image, and to
its violence as image, the violence of its blinding the audience, a blinding, though, that can open up a new, visionary force. (21)

I could produce an exhaustive list of examples to support Peretz’s “visionary force”, but by surgically removing the political and gendered considerations of De Palma’s subject matter as Peretz does, this would be an exercise in futility because De Palma’s invisibility to the critical field is, for me, directly caused by his gendered imagery, his violence within said imagery, and its political frustration. However, before moving beyond his philosophical argument, I do agree with Peretz that De Palma is pushing mimesis past its limit into very violent areas of excess.

What we can take from Peretz is that De Palma’s specific reflexivity and indicative approach to the machinery underpinning the cinematic experience is not only a meta-cinematic experiment that we find throughout cinematic history from the works of Preston Sturges to the works of Charlie Kaufman and Spike Jones, but is also a *splitting* of the cinematic experience into simultaneous multiple perceptions of the same film grammar. And this cinematic project of continuously splitting and doubling the cinematic experience, for Peretz, raises DePalma to the highest ranks of the cinematic canon. As he says of De Palma,

> Very few directors in the history of film, it seems to me, have more rigorously and profoundly, more analytically, complexly, and diversely, investigated the state of the cinematic image, the status of this strange thing inscribing a blankness at the heart of the senses, than Brian De Palma. De Palma is in my opinion, the greatest contemporary investigator, at least in American cinema, of the nature and logic of the cinematic image and should be viewed as the equal, and heir, to such great thinkers of the cinematic image as Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, Sergei Eisenstein, Carl Theodor Dreyer, Orson Welles, Alfred Hitchcock, Vincente Minnelli, Robert Bresson, Stanley Kubrick, Pier Paolo
Pasolini and Jean-Luc Godard. That he has often been derided and viewed with contempt, especially among American critics, is itself a fact, raising highly interesting questions, but is for another matter and is beyond the scope of this book. (Peretz 18)

Here we must distance ourselves from Peretz as he never truly engages with De Palma’s erotic or political dimensions of image-production. By ignoring the politico-libidinal force of De Palma, is to ignore De Palma. For Peretz, the philosophical definitions and concepts take center stage rather than allow for careful analytical readings of the films themselves. Peretz will begin with a very slow, frame-by-frame reading of the opening of the films, but quickly moves to his primary task of determining a blindness within the cinematic image. Thus, the above quote claims that De Palma needs to be added to the register of cinematic “thinkers” (which I fully agree with), but his reading never fully engages with political or gender themes associated with these images. To select Carrie as an object of study and, then, to not investigate its commentary of gender construction is to be truly blind to its image-content and its effect. Likewise, to select Blow Out and divest it of political conspiracy completely renders the film impotent. And ignoring both politics and gender in The Fury is an exercise in futility as it brilliantly and uniquely mobilizes both quite brilliantly. Peretz’s elevation of De Palma, thus, still leaves De Palma’s unique failures invisible by placing their critical reception and interpretation, his political and gender issues, “beyond the scope of this book.” In other words, for our purposes, Peretz succeeds in exposing a blindness in De Palma, but does not engage with a blindness to De Palma.

The Lady Never Vanishes
Any hope of ignoring either the psychoanalytic register or accusations of misogyny and their gendered assumptions are impossible if one is to engage with the effect of his cinema. I am not claiming that De Palma does not objectify women (he does) and that it is not often the negative figuration of a victim (it often is), but many of these critical claims are reactionary attacks that are blind to a greater project in De Palma’s cinematic world in that these claims do not include the clinical consideration of such a repetitive use of overt objectification. De Palma is often bringing us much farther than either Hitchcock’s subtle manipulation of sexual objectification via point-of-view tracking shots and sudden aggressive editing (arguably systems of cinematic control of the viewer), or, as we will see, Godard’s commodifying, distancing, and thus de-humanizing cinematic models into the complications of representing gender stereotypes.

For now, let us reduce these attacks as stemming from a limited reactionary position that often misreads De Palma’s deconstructing and politicizing of an assumed masculine cinema’s representation of the female body as an oversimplified misprision of a hatred of women. For the sake of clarity, here is an example of such a reductive reading of De Palma-as-misogynist:

We disagree [. . .] with the suggestion that De Palma is a progressive filmmaker whose work reflects critically on issues of morality. While his films are critical aspects of American society, these critiques are limited to a traditional populist suspicion of big institutions (government in Blow Out, corporations in Phantom). In [De Palma’s] interviews, he does voice some sense of the reality of feminism, but his films speak more loudly (and perhaps more unconsciously) than his words, and they stand as a symptomatic expression of a misogyny so endemic to American culture that it passes as normal. (Camera Politica 190-1)
Ryan and Kellner’s critical summation in their book, *Camera Politica*, is a classic example of the late 1980s critical apparatus substituting its political agenda in place of the radical and revolutionary politics of the countercultural 1960s and its cynical variations in the 1970s agenda that underpins all De Palma’s films. However, rather than simply claim De Palma’s style is outdated and must be critically updated, they dismiss it entirely as sexist. Even worse, the director is held accountable for misogyny inherent in all “American” cinema. Written in 1988, this work remains historically blind to De Palma’s repeated quotation: his continued fusion of Godard and Hitchcock. Ryan and Kellner do not permit thematic variation in De Palma’s films beyond being a misogynist. They acknowledge neither his specific use of Hitchcockian motifs, nor his cynical political bent. If they were to consider either, they would see that he treats men as objects too—that there is an even greater misanthropy in his work. Most of his films deliver a political commentary (not just government or corporations as the critics reduce DePalma’s political interests into) that is not incapable of, but intentionally fails to offer up alternative political representations. De Palma’s cynicism, it would seem, applies to all his gender constructions.

It is equally unfortunate for a clearer sense of De Palma’s approach to identity politics that this quote is written right before the release of *Casualties of War* (1989)—a film that unflinchingly exhibits the “true story” of the rape and murder of a Vietnamese hostage by a group of soldiers who were court-martialed for their brutality, and brought to justice without allowing us to be excused from the trauma of such an act—and before the much later release of *Redacted* (2007)—an intentional repetition of *Casualties’* story displaced into the Iraq War.

While Ryan and Kellner would have probably reduced both these films only to the horrific treatment of their female victims, these films still exhibit all De Palma’s stylistic traits,
but clearly politicizes the abuse of its female victim. It blames its violence on specific conditions of masculinity produced by, in these two examples, war. The viewer is forcibly placed in the subject position of a court-martial—as both judges and accused. The audience is forced to revisit, and be traumatized by, the act of cruelty. The viewer, then, is forced to pass judgement, not only on the soldier’s, but, in the case of Casualties, final judgement is reserved for the lieutenant that testified against his platoon. Lieutenant Eriksson begrudgingly witnesses the act, but fails to stop the platoon from raping and killing her. Identically, in Redacted, the viewer’s court position is disseminated into “browsing” the trauma on various media. The viewer is connected to the entire movie via blogs, video diaries, and chat rooms. What is important here is that De Palma, in both films, forces his audience into an uncomfortable critical position that must witness and judge, but cannot change the film’s outcome—a position where the subject-viewer cannot help but fail in its political correctness. The audience is at once directly engaged and separated from the film’s narrative in an intentionally Brechtian manner.

The question then arises: why are critics not receptive to a film that so clearly shares their own critical relationship to cinema as directly as Casualties of War and Redacted do? In both these films, De Palma does not allow you to not acknowledge nor to forget the victim. We are never allowed to forget the feminine in De Palma’s films. And what of the more commercially friendly films between Body Double and Casualties? Critics like Ryan and Keller clearly dismiss, either indifferently or strategically, the innocuous De Palma comedy, Wise Guys (1986) or his huge commercial success with The Untouchables (1987), neither of which demonstrate the misogyny that is supposed to permeate all De Palma’s work. Ryan and Kellner also (as all De Palma’s detractors do) completely dismiss his early “Godardian” phase, isolating De Palma’s cinema only to his “derivative” Hitchcockian experiments in voyeurism—to the ten-year period
from *Sisters* (1973) to *Body Double* (1984). This is the period where the pejorative critical stamp is marked upon De Palma. De Palma as the “symptomatic expression of a misogyny” strangely finds himself at the intersection of the dawn of New Right politics and the Reagan era, and the opening and radicalization of feminist and subaltern studies in academia that sought to break out of the restrictive subject-positioning Grand Narratives of psycho-analysis and structuralism in search of political agency. De Palma’s cynical retrospective attitude of the 1960s and 1970s politics as represented directly by political thrillers such as *The Parallax View* (1975) and *All the President’s Men* (1978), and indirectly via the horror films of Romero, *Night of the Living Dead* (1965) and *Dawn of the Dead* (1972), which posited living culture as more dangerous and horrifying than its mindless zombies, refused to fit in with neither neo-conservatism of the post-Reagan era, nor with the search for feminine agency in academic critical studies.94

So, if left to his detractors, criticism focused on De Palma would be content if most of his work were erased as misogynistic.95 There is no forgiveness for his mastery of the thriller genre, only contempt for his victimization of women as docile bodies. Hopefully, so far, we have offered a bit of a defense to the direct claims of misogyny lodged at De Palma, but there is still a great deal of remaining indirect indictments of misogyny inherent in his use of quotation, especially what he inherits by “copying” Hitchcock, that need to be reconsidered. But the question of De Palma’s misogyny often get tied up and confused within the same negative accusations of unoriginality so let us, first, try and separate these two a bit before we continue.

One of the few defendants of De Palma on the front of imitation comes strangely from Robin Wood whose political views are often extremely sensitive to marginalized subjects such as the feminine and homosexuality. But Wood sagely critiques the attacks on De Palma being
unoriginal, as being merely a Hitchcock rip-off artist and a petty genre director masquerading as an auteur. Wood argues:

> It is interesting that, in an age of generally inert remakes and imitations, there is still such insistence on the Romantic concept of originality. In terms of the Hollywood cinema and its critical reception, the term has become thoroughly debased. A film is perceived as original either if the reviewer is ignorant of its sources or if it imitates a (generally European) model of critically ratified “genius”: when De Palma works his variations of *Psycho* this is imitation or plagiarism, whereas when Bob Fosse or Woody Allen imitates Fellini or Bergman this is somehow, mysteriously evidence of his originality . . .

[O]riginality (and one needs to substitute another word like authenticity) can be judged only by the use to which the formulas have been put, evaluation becoming a matter of discriminating between the inert and the creative. De Palma’s variations on Hitchcock—confused, unsatisfactory, maddening perhaps—are never inert. (Wood 125)

Wood is correct in asserting that debasing De Palma for being unoriginal is aesthetically impossible, and that all of cinema has its influences.96 When De Palma “borrows, he is completely transparent in what he “takes” from Hitchcock. His films speak with open quotation marks, but he does not naturally follow these quotes to Hitchcockian conclusions. In fact, De Palma will consistently prove himself willing to do what Hitchcock would never dare—such as kill an entire high school class in a blazing gymnasium in *Carrie*, or literally exploding the villain, Childress, in *The Fury*. Returning to Wood’s defense: “De Palma’s borrowings of Hitchcock plot structures [. . .] is not the cynical appropriation of commercially successful formulas but a symbiotic relationship whose basis is a shared complex of psychological/thematic drives” (126). For Wood, these thematic drives are voyeurism, romantic obsession, (female)
sexuality, (male) anxiety, and gender ambiguity. All these, however, to Wood, are reductive to a standard Freudian fear of castration in both Hitchcock and De Palma equally.97

But this castration is not equally distributed and, regardless, gives a poor understanding, say, to the exploding of Childress in The Fury. In the film, the lead character of Gillian is adopted by Childress in the end as a replacement for Robin, her “twin” in telekinetic power. Childress’s goal is to harness the telekinetic force in Gillian to be used as a weapon—this was his original plan for Robin until he fell to his death being “rescued” by his real father. Following the castration example, Childress attempts to harness the phallic power of Gillian’s repressed strength. But Gillian releases her power upon Childress and he literally explodes. The film’s intentionally hyperbolic and bloody conclusion deploys a Godardian editing style where the scene is displayed several times from different angles, repeating and “exploding” the explosion, and then settling on a bird’s eye shot as it watches Childress’s severed head fall to the floor. And then black. Simply reading this final scene as a man and a woman struggling over the phallic “force” which is “given” to Childress ignores the excess/success of such an impactful ending. This example goes far beyond mere dominance and submission between the masculine and the feminine—the latter always being lost or a symbol of loss. It also debases Ryan and Keller’s argument of symptomatic misogyny, as well as all others that relegate De Palma as derivative and a Hitchcock imitator. For a reader like Zizek, this moment would be more the uncontrollable maternal force breaking free from its Oedipal repression rather than a mere transference of power and control.98 This is pure excess. And, we must remember, this type of excess is never shown in the Hitchcockian grammar (perhaps with exception to The Birds). Unlike, the tongue-in-cheek metaphor of the train entering a tunnel to substitute the suggested consummation of the main characters at the end of North by Northwest. De Palma literally shows not only the
consumption of power, but the excess of it in all its bloody detail. All the institutional power that Childress represents—he heads an unnamed secret branch of the government—is flooded with the power he is trying to harness from Gillian. Here, De Palma’s camera does not flinch (it never does) in showing you the result of such erectile gorging. Hitchcock would not go there. De Palma does.

Therefore, those that accuse De Palma of merely being gratuitous in his violence (whether it be to the female body or not) by default admit to De Palma’s supplement to Hitchcock. They must acknowledge his different approach to and investment in Hitchcock’s techniques that achieve different results. Recent critics of De Palma, most notably David Greven and Chris Dumas, reach beyond the foreclosure of “inherited” misogyny in the relation of De Palma to Hitchcock. Both Greven and Dumas go much further with De Palma’s method of quotation by engaging directly with De Palma’s gender difficulties and his political underpinning that are inherent from his early work forward.

For Greven, De Palma’s being accused of being a misogynist is always conflated with him being accused as a mere imitator of Hitchcock. Both statements are unfair, but the former stems from the latter. He states,

In my view, De Palma’s Hitchcockian thrillers add a great deal to Hitchcock: they extend his aesthetic experiments while expanding and revising his psychosexual politics. Between them, Hitchcock and De Palma submit the masculine subject of Hollywood cinema to a challenging analysis, decentering the male subject while also exposing the perniciousness and hollowness of the structural foundations that support this subjectivity. [. . .] De Palma has inherited many of the Master’s ideological problems. Charges of misogyny have dogged Hitchcock, particularly in terms of his films from Psycho forward
Indeed, De Palma has effectively taken one for the Hitchcock team, emerging as the screen misogynist, the implausible plot-meister, the cold, inhuman filmmaker. The identification with [De Palma’s] screen heroines, indeed his remarkably insistent, urgent, and consistent interest in woman characters, which distinguishes him from his New Hollywood peers, save for, possibly, Robert Altman; his radical indifference to conventional narrative, especially the compulsory demand for closure; and the profound levels of depth in De Palma’s films, even at their most extravagantly satirical, are qualities that have escaped his detractors but also many of his admirers. (Greven 110-1)

Greven is correct in pointing out a repetitive blind spot in De Palma’s supporters as well as his detractors. Let us use an example from De Palma’s most famous advocate, Pauline Kael. Kael lauded De Palma’s 1970s work, and stuck with him well into his decline in popularity in the 1980s. Kael’s support for De Palma had its own agenda, however. Kael, the critic who had attacked Welles’s authorship of Citizen Kane, was not searching for a replacement set of auteurs, but wanted to debunk the Romanticized auteur theories of Andrew Sarris.99 For Kael, De Palma demonstrated a certain gimmickry intrinsic to Hitchcock that should have demoted him as an example of Sarris’s auteurism. De Palma was an irreverent filmmaker that demonstrated over and over that Hitchcock’s “genius” could be repeated if not improved upon. With awareness of this blind spot, I agree that De Palma’s reconfiguring of the Hitchcockian grammar is an act of originality and extension rather than mere duplication, De Palma represented solely as the bad boy giving the old master the finger trivializes his experimentation with the Hitchcockian system. It ignores where De Palma expands his cinema into non-Hitchcockian variations.

Again, it is excess of the Hitchcock system that breaks away from simple imitation. In Greven’s argument, De Palma always exceeds the Hitchcock system. He says,
[N]o director other than De Palma has more self-consciously inhabited the style and sensibility of another director and yet managed to create a style so distinctly his own. It’s not just the stylistic devices that are unique to De Palma’s cinema—the obsessive use of split-screen; the use of slow motion; the preoccupation with technology—that distinguish him from Hitchcock. In every way De Palma’s cinema, even at its most Hitchcockian, comes up with remarkably distinct effects. (113)

Rather than claim that De Palma is different from Hitchcock, which is what detractors “want” from De Palma if they were to grant him any sort of credibility within cinema at all, Greven understands these differences as stemming from a reworking of the Hitchcock system from within. He continues:

De Palma goes a step beyond metatextuality. The only way to understand what De Palma does in his Hitchcock homages is to imagine that De Palma immerses himself within the cinematic body of a Hitchcock film and creates a new cinematic life within the Hitchcock host body. If De Palma’s filmmaking is parasitical, the parasite consumes the host and becomes a formidable entity all its own. Quoting Hitchcockian film grammar, De Palma constructs entirely new syntax: extending Hitchcock’s faith in pure cinema, De Palma takes Hitchcock’s pure cinema to unexpectedly new places. (114)

While it is not fully clear to me how Greven’s parasitical metaphor can extend pure cinema, I agree with him in the more provisional manner that De Palma, in many ways, is never imitating Hitchcock, but extending Hitchcock. The variations, for me, are less an inhabiting or evisceration of the Hitchcock body, but, rather, a continued critical relationship with the Hitchcock system—an extension of vulgar, flawed, and ultimately failed cinema that has the capacity to comment upon itself perpetually and without closure. Perhaps this is the reason that
De Palma’s cinema, like Hitchcock’s, is less concerned with plausible narrative and convincing endings, and more with cinema as a clinically obscured object that is always trying to understand itself.

Here we can see the borrowed grammar articulated differently than just an endless repetition of victimizing the female body. Yes, the act of victimization is embedded in the grammar, but De Palma’s repeated obsession with a particularly gendered violence stands as an example of how the Hitchcock’s motifs contain the victimization of the female form *a priori* to De Palma’s variation of the same motifs. Let us use the most obvious, the *Psycho* shower scene—a woman being attacked in a enclosed “safe place.” De Palma references the infamous shower scene countless times in numerous variations: Kate Miller being attacked by a phantasmic rapist in the shower in the opening of *Dressed to Kill* while her husband ignores her while shaving in the mirror. This moment is returned to violently in the same film with the razor killing of Kate in the elevator, another enclosed space. And again, the witness to the murder, the prostitute heroine has her throat slashed in the bathroom in the movie’s ending dream sequence. There is, of course, Carrie White in the classic shower room at the beginning of *Carrie* although De Palma brilliantly complicates the shower room as it is a shared space for all the girls. There is the comical parody of the Hitchcock sequence in *Phantom of the Paradise* where Gerrit Grahm’s character, Beef, is singing the phantom’s songs meant for his muse, Phoenix, and he is attacked with a plunger to the face and told never to sing those songs again. All these, yes, are Hitchcockian in that they share a vulnerable female (Beef is an effeminate queen), naked mostly, but De Palma *knows that the audience already knows this scene and relies on the audience’s assumptions to vary its effect.*
Hitchcock almost always uses his techniques as a sustained moment of shock, which is his own definition of suspense. For De Palma, shock is never the goal. Rather, he is always posing a question of quotation and placement. It is how he displaces the effect of this feminine vulnerability in the narrative structures of each of his films, and most often this feminine vulnerability structures a reciprocal masculine ineffectiveness. Most apparent, is the opening of Blow Out where the schlock film, Coed Frenzy, opens the film as a study of “bad” Hitchcock (as well as “bad” De Palma). A poorly filmed POV Steadicam shot places us in the character of a knife-wielding voyeur/killer, and after we have snatched some impossible glimpses of immature imaginings of rampant nudity and sex acts, the killer creeps into the shower room to find a sole naked female victim showering. The curtain is pulled back, she sees him and screams. The scream is the actual voice of the actress, but its infidelity to the effect is so unbelievable that the soft giggling of watching a sleaze film turns to pure comic laughter. Blow Out via Coed Frenzy opens with an intentionally “bad” usurpation of Hitchcockian POV and voyeurism. The “bad” use of these techniques can be easily folded back onto a knowledge that the Hitchcockian system has not only spawned countless low-budget variants in the slasher genre, but also reminds the viewer how easily it falls into a strictly pornographic function if diluted into sheer effect. Coed Frenzy thus functions as the narrative thrust for Blow Out’s main character, Jack Terry, the foley artist of Coed Frenzy, to search for a more authentic, a more “serious” scream.

Here again, the search for a better female voice, for many negative critics, represents a double-edged slighting of the female body. The actual actress is denied her voice (Coed Frenzy’s director states that she was hired for her tits), thus she is representative of the female body as an object of desire and denied any access to dialogue or speech. But this silencing is compounded when the fatal scream of Sally Bedina—the girl Jack Terry wires to catch a serial
killer, but fails to save from said killer—is “inserted into” the mouth of the shower girl. The film’s commitment to Jack Terry’s hopeless pursuit of exposing a Chapaquiddick-style murder/cover up results in little more than finding the appropriate scream. Many readings of this film mark this as De Palma’s indifference to the main female character throughout the film—that she is merely a device to “get that scream” at the end for the murdered girl, towards whom we, the schlock-audience are equally indifferent.

But this of course like reducing the murdering of Marion Crane as a petty shock motif to expose a story about Norman Bates. This is true and it isn’t. De Palma’s film invests in Jack Terry’s inability to find truth or meaning in anything that has transpired. At the end, he is only patching fake things onto another fake thing to make it seem real. If to anything, this film owes more to Vertigo (the film that is often in perpetual homage in De Palma’s cinema) and its idea of repeating the same story to achieve same results with the “cure” of shifted perception.

Critical misreadings that immediately see imitation rather than variation in Hitchcock in De Palma’s films, thus, are at blind to both Hitchcock and De Palma on thematic and textual levels, and are guilty of not seeing any variation of that grammar except misogyny. It is as if the hostile critics believe that the figure of De Palma can only be read only as the traumatized Scotty of Vertigo, in this case, instead of his love/imposter, Madeline, he is witnessing Marion Crane be murdered again and again. If one entertains this nuanced collapse of Scotty’s obsession of Madeline into Norman Bates’ voyeuristic erasure of Marion Crane, one would certainly get closer to the synergy between Hitchcock and De Palma. The accusation of misogyny would become much more complex, and even harder to blanket across De Palma’s entire body of work. This fusion of Hitchcock’s themes and characters would add a vulnerability and impotence to the male viewer, his passivity, and his pathetic need to reconstruct this scene to understand it.
knowing that he never can? This is where our conversation meets and agrees with Greven’s investigations into De Palma’s representation of the masculine and homosocial behavior in the face of an inscrutable femininity. He says, “If charges of misogyny have been unfairly leveled against De Palma—and I would argue that it is precisely because of his investment in femininity that De Palma has been paradoxically branded a misogynist—any serious investigation of his work must address these issues, the gendered specificity of his cinema (115)”

Thus, to interrogate the relation between De Palma’s alleged misogyny and his critique of homosocial behavior, Greven turns to De Palma’s earlier work, which, even though still very much thematically engaged with Hitchcock, has a more earnest investment in the revolutionary politics of the 1960s as well as the cinematic shifts we witnessed in the previous chapter. Greven contends that from very early on in De Palma’s oeuvre there is an equal attention to the subjectivity and frailty of the masculine and its failure to “properly” perform its gender. He thus argues:

[De Palma] brings into sharper focus an anti-patriarchal, pro-woman strain in his work. Despite conventional wisdom, misogyny does not inhere in De Palma’s films, though they, inevitably, contain some misogynistic elements at times. I argue that De Palma exudes an ambivalence about—and a rivalrous identification with—his female characters rather than a misogynistic hatred. Indeed, with the exception of Robert Altman, De Palma exhibits a far greater and more sustained interest in representing women than his New Hollywood peers [. . .] (123)

If I have successfully argued for a reconsideration of the two critical monoliths of foreclosure—De Palma being both an adolescent misogynist and a derivative hack in the shadow of Hitchcock—then I would like to redirect attention to the more ignored elements of his cinema
that would reinterpret his failure from being a product of oversimplified imitation and poor gender politics to a greater commentary on Hollywood cinema inherited from the more anarchistic aestheticism of Jean-Luc Godard. De Palma’s early experimentation with Godard — what critic Chris Dumas calls the “invisible political” — informs his cinema much more as an internal act of cinematic critique than an act of sensationalism. To make an effective transition from Hitchcock to Godard, before we leave Hitchcock (and we have seen that this is impossible with De Palma equal to ignoring his issues with certain feminisms), it is best to critique Hitchcock’s centrality to Film Studies, and compare this centrality to De Palma’s exclusion. This brief detour through Hitchcock’s relationship to Film Studies will hopefully make a visible transition through a critical blindness as to what sort of cinema could contain both Hitchcock’s grammatical adherence to a cinematic formalism, and Godard’s intentional destruction of that formalism to reach other possibilities of cinema.

Critical Blindness

The blindness within the grand narrative of Film Studies to De Palma’s work, as we keep discovering over and over, is almost entirely caused by De Palma’s relationship to Hitchcock, with the potential of misogyny being directly embedded in De Palma’s repeated quotations. But one must interrogate critical discourse on cinema itself in order to challenge the convictions that Hitchcock is historically exempt from “deep misogyny” because his agenda is purely cinematic and apolitical, and De Palma is not because he is the imitator and should “know better.” To a certain extent, we have already challenged these convictions, but to push further,
one must challenge Film Studies’ construction of Hitchcock’s system as being an intentional act conscious of what it is doing whether it is held accountable for its identity politics or not.  

Film Studies makes a bold assumption that Hitchcock deployed a meta-cinematic dimension in his work—a self-reflexive element that is “about” cinema itself. For the critic, Chris Dumas, this is the assumption of Film Studies: Because if *Rear Window* is not “aware” of itself as a study in voyeurism, then all claims to its intentional specular functionality are moot. One could argue that if voyeurism is unintentional in Hitchcock, there is no psychoanalytic grounding of specular subject formation. If Hitchcock’s cinema is only an example of, rather than a statement on, voyeurism, then De Palma’s awareness and reiteration of that voyeurism would be a very different type of cinema. And this type of cinema, unlike Hitchcock’s, would be an allegorical one where the diegetic content would reference its own process of enunciation.

Here is an example of this differentiation in cinematic type: In *Rear Window*, the wheelchair-bound voyeur, Jeff, does not reference his act of spying on his neighbors. Jeff and the audience are restricted and manipulated by framing and technical camera movement, and thus passively spy on the neighbors because the camera dictates what one is looking at. There is no cinematic space here that allows reflection on the act of voyeurism, only direct viewing. Meanwhile, De Palma’s films and their characters—even beyond the early films’ “obvious” Brechtian habit of breaking the fourth wall—are obsessed with self-referencing their own technological ability to capture, record and replay their experience. De Palma increases the technical complexity of watching—most notably in his use of split-screen, and slow motion that Hitchcock never used. De Palma overtly places the quotation of Hitchcock in the forefront of his films so that it is De Palma that is referencing a system, not Hitchcock.
There are two key points here: First, Film Studies is not only unwilling, but is unable to invest in De Palma because to do so would demand a reinvestigation into the assumption that Hitchcock’s system was self-reflexive and thus did not need to be reiterated into other grammatical and syntactic possibilities. Therefore, De Palma must remain critically invisible to maintain a certain investment of Hitchcock as the master of scopophilic construction. Second, that De Palma’s mobilization and reinterpretation of Hitchcockian form is at once personal and political. Clearly much has been made of De Palma’s obsessional personal fascinations with the female body as an object of fascination via technology and of cinema as an idea (wrongly misread as a reiteration of practiced effects and otherwise indifferent to cinema as an art form). His detractors are quick to embody an adolescent chauvinism around him, and De Palma does little in interviews and discussions historically to dissuade them—in fact, he often antagonizes them making their negative descriptions worse. But up until the last few years, very little has been said about his political investments that speak to a very sage and tragic resignation to the hopelessness of revolution and change. As Dumas puts forth:

This is why every single De Palma film that we would mark as “personal” ends with the protagonist in defeat, or else no better off than he was at the film’s opening: in the end, there is nothing but the knowledge that one could have done better, but did not – and that regardless of one’s success or failure in producing justice, the spectator will also fail [my italics]. Therefore, that which is truly political is, in effect, invisible, since political imagery is always a distraction from what one is not supposed, and does not really want, to see. And so, one is led to ask: how, after the colossal spectatorial failures of Vietnam and JFK and Kent State and Watergate et al. can De Palma possibly care about entertaining “us”? (Dumas 196)
Dumas is exceptionally thorough in elaborating De Palma’s complex relationship to the socio-political forces surrounding his cinema. While Greven intensely compares De Palma’s “inherited” problems with certain strands of feminist politics through a Hitchcockian lens, Dumas broadens the socio-historical scope by considering De Palma rising from the post-revolutionary ashes of the New Hollywood and its disillusions to be (ironically?) attacked and then ignored by the rising critical investments in identity politics throughout Film Studies.

Politicizing De Palma’s films would not exonerate him from his difficulties with the female body, but it does historicize the shifts in perspective throughout the evolution of identity politics. Much like William Friedkin’s poorly timed *Cruising* (1980), which was ravaged by gay activists as misunderstanding and misrepresenting gay culture, De Palma faced similar accusations from feminists of encouraging violence towards women with a pornographic fervor. As aforementioned, these accusations coalesce most intensely with *Dressed to Kill*. The film was picketed by Woman Against Violence Against Women and other anti-pornography activists. As we have seen, this anti-De Palma feminism gets confused with a more indifferent attitude within the rise of psychoanalytical and cultural feminism in Film Studies that became more and more moderate with its interpretations and politics surrounding “pornographic material.” And it would not be fair to conflate these different feminisms. But as this less reactionary feminism became prevalent, the anger towards De Palma was never reconciled. Scholarly revisions of formerly reviled genre films that were considered anti-feminist like Linda Williams’s *Hardcore* that historicized the pornographic image by clearly separating her Foucauldian historical study of pornography from the anti-pornography/censorship feminism of Dworkin and MacKinnon, or Carol Clover’s *Men, Women and Chainsaws* that carefully reconsidered the rape revenge films as a source of feminine agency made no attempts to provisionally forgive De Palma’s work.
The negative attention towards De Palma after *Dressed to Kill* generated much anger towards each subsequent film. While they were not “politically correct,” they were certainly polemical and affective. It is only by considering De Palma’s personal interpretation of a *politique des auteurs*, and exploring his Godardian strand that polarizes his use of cinematic quotation, that one can see how De Palma’s cinema goes beyond reactionary and oversimplified readings of victimizing women and ripping off Hitchcock and others

Dumas insists that the political Godardian strains in De Palma’s early cinema of the late 1960s/early 1970s—the “golden” period for counter-cultural films—continually echo throughout his cinematic evolution De Palma-as-Godardist, as Dumas phrases it, persists throughout all of his commercial projects, both the more studio driven films like *Scarface* (1983), *Mission Impossible* (1996) and *Mission to Mars* (2000), and the seemingly more personal and independently driven films (and almost completely critically ignored and/or reviled) like *Home Movies* (1979) and *Redacted* (2007). Like Greven, Dumas is particularly attentive to De Palma’s early connections to Godard. He argues that it is through a Godardian lens that De Palma identifies with Hitchcock and his inherited misogyny—that De Palma mobilizes the Hitchcock system *politically*—as mobilizing a system of cinema to critique the ability of cinema to affect social change. In addition, Dumas parallels De Palma’s adoption of Godard’s aggressively anti-establishment techniques in De Palma’s late 1960s films—particularly *Greetings* (1968) and *Hi, Mom!* (1970)—that have a much more overt political message and a “rougher” style akin to the fast-and-loose approach of the New Wave rather than the slick style of Hitchcock. Dumas posits that De Palma’s rise as a filmmaker parallels the growing academic critical interest in cinema as a valid object of study. This critical interest parallels the emergence of the movie brats of New Hollywood that rose out of the failed studio system of the 1960s. De Palma’s early films are a
testament to the influence of the New Wave alongside the guerrilla documentaries of the Maysles Brothers, Shirley Clarke and D.A. Pennebaker, and, of course, the oft-forgotten father of American independent cinema, John Cassavetes.

Dumas traces an embedding of Godard into De Palma’s commercial pictures by locating a certain adherence to failure in his first Hollywood venture. For Dumas, this failure can rewrite a great deal of the derivative and misogynist assumptions we have tracked thus far as this failure acknowledges De Palma’s resignation to the futility of 1960s political movements to which he bore witness. De Palma abandoned many of the idealist New Left movements (of which Feminism could be said to be one), and his films constantly resonate with a coming to terms with that resignation. Dumas’s claim is that from Sisters (1972) forward there is a recognition of personal and political failure implicitly at work in all his films. While De Palma will change stylistic paths with his early “post-revolutionary” films that clearly align themselves with Godard, and move his investigations into Hitchcock to the forefront, there remains an uncomfortable aesthetic of political resignation at the center of his works.

For Dumas, the critical and feminist refusal to “see” De Palma may be intentional in that it would realize the futility of its own political motivations and fervor. As Dumas concludes:

[F]eminism was part of the 1960s, a strand of the great web that included civil rights activism and the anti-war movement, and this singularity facilitated the ease with which it could be used as a metaphor. But the movement lost, as all “radical movements in this country” do, as De Palma did, as Godard did, as Welles did. Thus, when Dressed to Kill [. . .] is released, the feminist response to the death of Angie Dickinson will represent, for De Palma, a prime example of “missing the point.” (195)
This “missing the point,” as with any criticism that hopes to engage with De Palma’s entire oeuvre, is an act of critical misreading within which all future studies of failed auteurs—and the relationship of this failure to the politically invisible elements of their work—can be reformulated into different critical opinions and results. Determining the “reasons” for De Palma’s repetition of Hitchcock and other quotations that come preloaded with an earlier set of personal and political intentions and misprisions is a folding of interpretations and intentions within which these same critical interpretations and intentional failures are integrated and overlap each other in a very confusing and complex nexus that is nearly impossible to untangle. But if one is to incorporate Godard as another mode of cinematic quotation, one does not attempt to untangle it. Instead, one embraces its opacity and irresolvable complexity. A Godardist leaves cinema open to experience as it is, without searching for an original meaning or value. To quote Godard—or to quote as Godard does to be more topologically accurate—is an act that intends to liberate the quote from its context. This political aesthetic—this emancipation of the cinematic quotation to create a new cinematic object—is the invisible political dimension behind De Palma’s “troubles with Hitchcock.” By ignoring De Palma’s Godardian element, De Palma’s intentional act of quotation itself is being critically misread by many. The greater critical risk, it would seem, beyond admitting that Hitchcock was not fully conscious of his subject formation, is that De Palma could be excising Hitchcock’s motifs with Godardian intent. How would De Palma’s detractors defend their critical dismissal of De Palma if the greater influence behind De Palma’s filmmaking was not Hitchcock, but Jean Luc Godard.103

“Peep Art,” or Godard Does Hitchcock
From his first collaborative student film, *The Wedding Party* (1966, shot in 1964), until his first Hollywood studio project, *Get to Know Your Rabbit* in 1972, De Palma clearly demonstrates the immense impact of the New Wave on American filmmaking at the transition between the two decades. The New Wave’s direct “quoting” of older cinema giants is at once reverential of older signatures within cinematic history, but is also playfully dismissive of their structural management—a management that always found a middle ground between individual stylistic invention and the expectations of the studio system’s commercial conventions. Of all the mavericks of the New Wave, Godard was always the most dedicated to destroying and rebuilding established cinematic grammar, pushing the boundaries of cinematic grammar further and further throughout the 1960s before fully politicizing and polemicizing his own cinema into a Maoist and anti-American obscurity in the 1970s. While his contemporary and friend, Truffaut’s, cinema became more and more “human” in the 1970s by delving more and more thematically into characterization and personal connectivity—and thus “survived the decade” with more accessible narrative-based cinema—Godard’s films became more and more clinical. Godard relished in objectifying and distancing his characters by uprooting them from narrative structures—positioning them in long philosophical tracking shots that refused to follow a dedicated object—and using an editing style that resisted the subliminal flow of the traditional continuity system. American filmmakers in the mid to late 1960s saw the reorganizing of classical narrative filmmaking as a form of aesthetic liberation from standard Hollywood grammar and its politics. Unbound by traditional rules and inspired by the guerrilla tactics developed by the New Wave from Italian Neorealism and documentary filmmaking, auteurs like De Palma could experiment on the cheap and capture the popular sentiment of the post-Kennedy
Assassination era that would move quickly from flower power and free love to the Manson murders and Watergate.

De Palma’s first feature, *The Wedding Party*, was a shared project with his mentor, Winslow Leach. With a host of actors collected from De Palma’s alma mater, Sarah Lawrence, Leach would direct the actors while De Palma controlled the structure of shots and filming. De Palma opens the film using high speed footage of the party being picked up from a dock and driven to the house. As the groom and his friends reach the bride’s mother’s house, the groom is introduced to a host of elderly guests and the camera switches to slow motion as the titles roll. The film is then segmented into scenes grouped by standard etiquette of planning and leading up to wedding ceremony. In the first section, the groom’s friends, played by Robert De Niro in his first screen appearance and future-De Palma regular William Finley, try to convince the groom not to get married. De Palma here freely intercuts within the scene like Godard in *Breathless* (1960) and the narrative plays out as a textbook example of *plan-sequence*. The cuts are used more for comic effect than efficiency as in Godard’s film, but the immediate use of jump cuts and varied speed of film distinguishes De Palma’s inclination towards breaking traditional continuity in the spirit of the New Wave. De Palma’s mentor Leach criticized De Palma heavily for his avant-garde techniques and tried to push the film towards a more traditional marital comedy. The film clearly shows this dichotomy of style and its narrative suffers from committing to the different approaches to filmmaking. In addition, the film’s direction is credited to a third “partner,” Cynthia Munroe, who was the financial backer of the film. Thus, *The Wedding Party* is a diluted example of De Palma’s genesis as a filmmaker and his future capacity for technical experimentation, revolutionary modes of cinema, and meta-commentary.
De Palma then created a comic, surreal low-budget experimental film, *Murder a la Mod* (1966). While this film will serve as a very early example of De Palma’s interest in Hitchcock’s murdering of Marion Crane, De Palma approaches the murder scene as an avant-garde filmmaker, revisiting a murder from three different perspectives *a la Rashomon* and infusing dream-like symbolism *a la* Maya Deren. For example, when the victim dreams of the pending killer’s identity, all she sees are a pair of hands holding the exact time bomb that begins *Touch of Evil*. The use of Hitchcock is farcical here, much like Welles’s *Hearts of Age* where the young filmmaker spoofed the “high art” of surrealist filmmakers. As Douglas Keesey, in his chronological study of De Palma notes: “If Godard had made a Hitchcock film, or if Hitchcock had made a Godard film, it might look something like *Murder a la Mod*” (22). However, while *Murder a la Mod* is a good example of De Palma’s interest in the avant-garde and New Wave at an early stage in his career, it lacks the political energy and anger relevant to his films from this point forward. De Palma had not yet fully engaged with the political shifts happening in the late-1960s—specifically, for De Palma, the Kennedy Assassinations, Vietnam, and draft-dodging.

This politicizing of the experimental beginnings, is solidified in his first “true” feature, *Greetings* (1968). The film begins with a static shot of a television showing the president Lyndon Johnson rallying Americans to stand behind the Vietnam War. The film then cuts to follow behind a man walking down the streets of Harlem with the Monkee-esque title song playing through the opening credits. The character, Paul, then stops and suddenly decides to enter a bar. The camera remains outside as we hear Paul shout out, “Which one of you niggers is man enough to take me on?!” The sound of an immediate bar brawl follows. The film immediately cuts to Paul, who now has a black eye, explaining his “harlem strategy” to his two friends: Lloyd (played by another future De Palma regular, Gerrit Graham) and Joe Rubin (again
Robert De Niro). Paul’s impulsive plan was to incite the black patrons to hospitalize him to avoid getting drafted into the army. The following scenes portray the two friends coaching Paul, first to become a homosexual (Lloyd’s suggestion), and then a fascist/racist overzealous killer (Jon’s suggestion) to effectively avoid the draft. Using jump-cuts again a la Godard, De Palma has the actors improvise a lengthy (two days?) immersion into becoming a character repulsive to the army. The scenes, condensed in time by the jump-cutting, have the playfulness of Godard’s early work, and the characters’ persistence of avoiding the draft have the ironic parallel of army basic training—having the amount of dedication to avoiding the draft by becoming a repulsive antithesis of what they are naturally, they replicate the process of becoming the perceived killers that the army conditions its soldier’s into. The trio’s strategy to avoid induction into conformity by creating an overzealous killing machine that the army will hopefully reject as being too extreme parallels De Palma’s tactic of extreme use of technical imitation and repetition of not only cinema’s past-masters but of his own cinematic tropes. While itself an extremely hyperbolic connection on my part, the impulse for his characters to use extreme measures to get out of conformity in many way resonates with De Palma’s desire to “escape” the control systems of filmmaking while being inextricably constructed by it.

Beyond mere stylistic appropriation of the jump cuts to disturb the narrative’s passage of time, De Palma is deploying a political aesthetic. Representing the counter-culture’s resistance to being drafted, the film’s opening segment immediately grasps a frenetic aesthetic desperation in trying to break free from the impending draft. At once, the film’s first section captures the racial tension of the 1960s, the inescapable futility of the war and the sexual explosion of the free love movements. The character’s dialogue is interwoven with role playing as racists and fascists, interest in the conspiracy theories surrounding the Kennedy assassination, and tales of sexual
exploits. However, while one character talks, the other two are seen not listening to the dialogue, but either playing like children trying to stay awake or literally nodding off. Thus, the soliloquies are being received by none of the characters and only by the viewer. By incorporating Godard’s rearranging of cinematic narrative, De Palma captures simultaneously the obsessive political themes of the decade as well as the narcissism and the indifference felt to the futility of revolution.

The three characters are then divided into thematic sub-stories for the rest of the film and rarely interact with each other past the initial draft-dodging scene. Paul becomes a comic foil for the free love/hippie movement by, after a failed date attempt, whom he hands off to Lloyd as he is “not ready” sexually, tries computer dating. Throughout the film, he is put in contact with numerous female “free spirits” practicing various comic embodiments of sexual liberation. Lloyd becomes the obsessive conspiracy theorist on the Kennedy assassination. And, Jon begins his experimentation into voyeurism creating “peep art” —an obvious deviant of Warhol and Lichtenstein’s Pop Art Movement. These three characters, within reason, create the three templates from which De Palma will develop his cinema regardless of what genre—or genre mash-up—he plays with in his subsequent work.

Paul’s character will become the genesis of De Palma’s “shock and awe” approach to the feminine. Paul’s computer dates places him in “dangerous” contact with aggressively sexually-liberated women—various female characters all representing some form of sexual threshold that Paul is nearly subsumed (or ultimately almost smothered) by. While the female form here is viewed by Paul-via-De Palma through an arguably “macho” framework—instead of establishing a connection with the female participants, Paul is trying to simply “get laid” —and this pursuit will eventually dovetail into Jon’s experiments in voyeur cinema of “peep art” —an
aestheticizing of pornographic voyeurism that De Palma will be constantly attacked for despite its variations and evolutions throughout his work. Paul’s masculine position is perpetually anxiety-ridden, and is always “screened” from the viewer. His masculinity maintains a Brechtian mediation (a *verfremdungseffekt*) with which to distance itself from the misunderstanding of the feminine. Again, this will be the same character position where his detractors say he objectifies women, but in truth it is less an objectification than an obsession with technology’s ability to amplify and augment the voyeuristic compulsion in his characters. They attempt to both passively watch and actively be a part of the scene being watched.

Lloyd will become the conspiracy theorist that will echo into Jennifer Salt’s character, Grace Collier, in *Sisters*, Jack Terry in *Blow Out*, and Nicolas Cage’s corrupt cop, Rick Santoro, in *Snake Eyes* (1998). Lloyd when “taking over” Paul’s first date begins to use the sleeping naked female to sketch out the bullet passages from the Zapruder film. Comically, he directly faces the camera and exclaims at the end of the scene that there couldn’t possibly be only one shooter in the Kennedy Assassination. Much has been made connecting Lloyd’s use of the female as a diagram to prove his conspiracy theories, and that the covered-up truth is how De Palma perceives the feminine. This is open to interpretation, of course, but it is fair to say that all the characters in *Greetings* demonstrate an attempt to meet women—to date and lay them, reconfigure them, capture their privacy on film—while also perpetually running away from them in confused terror.

This is most apparent in Jon’s character where his interest in “peep art” literally shows himself as the artist trying to enter his own work. How can one invisibly watch others unnoticed, which is the nature of peeping, and yet simultaneously be involved in being watched? It is this paradox that most clearly represents the Godardian meta-cinematic strain in De Palma. His
engagement with voyeurism as a cinema, before he begins to rework the technical grammar of Hitchcock in his future films, fundamentally is displayed when Jon convinces a woman to undress before him and his camera. The woman is first framed in the viewfinder and receives verbal instructions from Jon to remain unaware of the camera. There is a second frame placed within the camera frame to imply a “looking through a window” effect. When the woman is almost completely disrobed, Jon enters the frame, his camera still rolling, and jumps on top of her. She exclaims: “What are you doing in my window?” This scene, for me, is the most direct statement of how De Palma approaches cinema: De Palma’s audience is always at once hidden from view in watching private places, but the audiences is always embedded or pulled into the frame.

This collapsing of viewer/performer is simplified when De Palma first uses the split screen technique in filming the Performance Theater’s production of *Dionysus in ’69* (1970). The film shoots the play simultaneously from the actor’s perspective as well as the audience’s. The concept is simple enough, and effective for capturing an interactive theater performance. But it is not the technique of the split-screen, which will become uniquely De Palma’s technique, rather, it is the multiplicity of perspective within each frame that creates an embedded layer. This is the reason De Palma’s “sequel” to *Greetings, Hi Mom!* (1970) abandons Paul and Lloyd’s characters and concentrates solely on Jon, the peep artist. By the end of *Greetings*, Jon has been drafted and is in the battlefield of Vietnam being interviewed by a television crew. The crew films Jon “arresting” a Vietnamese woman, but realizing he is on television, he immediately begins to direct the women as he did in his original peep art piece. In *Hi Mom!* Jon has returned from Vietnam and is pitching his peep art to the pornographer who sold him some porno short films in *Greetings*. Jon’s artistic concept is to film his neighbors through their windows in a type
of pornographic *Rear Window*. The pornographer backs him, and he diligently stays up around the clock to film his peep art. Fixating on a girl named Judith, Jon plots to seduce her while his camera films the seduction. Even though he has timed the seduction perfectly, the camera slips on its tripod and captures the photographer/performance artist below painting himself black except his penis. When the film is screened and this “production mistake” appears, the pornographer sees this and fires Jon for not producing pornography, but for creating “political perversity.”

The film then follows Jon as he joins the same performance artist’s play, *Be Black, Baby*. The film moves from voyeurism as pornography to a political subjugation of the white gaze that has the white audience drawn up in black face and mistreated by the black players in white face. The whites end up praising the show, but Jon is not content with only a few audience members and plots to blow up a tenement building to gain more political traction. He succeeds by planting dynamite in a basement washing machine. After the building is destroyed, a television crew interviews him in the rubble, and after a brief rant about people not understanding the Vietnam experience (echoing the difficulties of Afro-American culture in *Be Black, Baby*), he speaks directly into the camera to say “hi” to his mom.

*Hi Mom!* is invaluable towards understanding De Palma’s cinema in its entirety. It houses the blueprint of De Palma’s interest in voyeurism and its implicit pornographic and political elements. As De Palma describe himself: “*In Hi Mom!, for instance, there is a sequence in where you are obviously watching a ridiculous documentary and you are told that and you are aware of it, but it still sucks you in. There is a kind of Brechtian alienation idea here: you are aware of what you are watching at the same time you are emotionally involved in it*” (Knapp 9). While he does not deploy the split-screen technique from *Dionysus* until *Get to Know Your
Rabbit, which becomes the technical signature of this multiple experience, the various windows that frame and construct multiple acts of peeping create the same effect. His early films, specifically Greetings and Hi Mom!, were some of the earliest, if not the only, commentaries on the draft and America’s involvement in Vietnam, and this garnered him decent critical praise and, being invited to Hollywood, the admiration of his peers, Scorsese, Spielberg, and Lucas. In fact, he had gained a certain artistic “street credibility” as a revolutionary (literally in the political sense as well as aesthetically) filmmaker before any of his contemporaries.

Arriving in Hollywood, De Palma had been given creative control by Warner Brothers to helm Get to Know Your Rabbit—a vehicle for anti-establishment star, Tommy Smothers. Like most productions of the early 1970s, the studios were still struggling to recreate the surprise effects of counter-cultural films like Easy Rider (1969). So, the studio invested in De Palma’s mild success with his New York Godardian comedies. The film co-starred Orson Welles, who was back in Hollywood doing small gigs for cash to fund The Other Side of the Wind. Ironically De Palma’s experience of the film’s production mirrored a Wellesian one with studio interference from the start and De Palma ultimately being fired from the project. Allegedly, Welles could barely remember his lines, and ignored De Palma on the set, treating De Palma as just another young maverick like his friend, Peter Bogdanovich. However, when Welles witnessed the classic studio interference, he quietly began to counsel the young director. De Palma recounts: “Welles started the film as a chore. But he liked me and ultimately got involved with the character he was playing. I felt he gave a very good performance, and he was helpful with the conception of it. He also had many good ideas as far as the writing and directing were concerned” (Knapp 31). This brief coming together of Welles, the washed up “failure,” who would become a participant in De Palma’s first and most formative “failure” in a story that
would recount the ultimate failure and inability to free one’s self from the conformity of corporate culture is beyond prophetic in its coincidence.

The film’s plot tells the tale of Tommy Smothers’ character quitting his corporate job to become a tap-dancing magician. While the corporation pursues Smothers and begs him to return to his comfortable life, he refuses and studies under Welles who encourages him to “get to know his rabbit” in order to be a successful magician. The film is an overt indictment of a corporate lifestyle of conformity that was supposed to end by Smothers being able to successfully break free from its restraints. The studio was ultimately unwilling to allow De Palma such an ending. De Palma was fire from the film and the film ends with Smothers rejoining the corporation only to jump out of the window in a vague suicidal ending that marked the impossibility of leaving the corporate fold. This was De Palma’s original ending for the film:

My ending, that Warners would have nothing to do with, was that [Smothers] tells [the corporation that has adopted his tap dancing/magician lifestyle] he wants to go back out on the road . . . Cut to Johnny Carson Show, and Smothers talking about how he’s dropped out and his wonderful life. And there’s an Abbie Hoffman type beside him who’s just published Eat the Establishment. And he gets into a big argument with Smothers and accuses him of being a rip-off artist and that the TDM, the Tap Dancing Magician Corporation, is financed by the banks and oil companies and he’s just a new way of exploiting the counter-culture. And Smothers is hurt because he really believed in what he’s done. [The TDM corporation] comes on to sell TDM products, and Smothers finally realizes that he’s being ripped off, being used to sell merchandising products. So, he tells Johnny he wants to do a trick, the Great-Sawing-The-Rabbit-In-Half-Trick. Now, on coast to coast TV, it looks like he has just sawed his rabbit in half and failed. The
rabbit is a bloody, horrible mess, and Smothers rushes off stage. Well, the whole TDM collapses because he’s done the worst thing in America that you can do, he’s maimed a warm furry animal on TV. He’s ruined Astin, again. But he is finally left to his own devices; he’s free because no one wants him now. Ross comes up and says “How could you do that? What happened?” And Smothers pulls out the rabbit and you realize it’s been a trick. He has finally done a successful trick. (Bartholomew in Knapp 30)

The aesthetic similarities of this ending to De Palma’s film career is eerie. De Palma’s insistence on a bloody illusion, a use of the horrific, to stimulate the necessary change in viewership that would afford his main character a new sense of freedom from the commercial field is exactly what he mobilizes with his following independent feature Sisters—the film that begins his direct and unapologetic experimentation with Hitchcockian grammar. The killing-the-rabbit ending gets him fired from Hollywood. De Palma fails to do the trick expected of him in the Hollywood system. From Rabbit forward, he would continually bloody and kill the thing that needed to be protected in his films. There will always be violence towards those safe places, those comfort zones, and these places will always fail to be preserved.

After being removed from the picture, De Palma felt absolutely betrayed by Smothers and the studio that had encouraged him to direct as freely as he had done with Greetings and Hi, Mom! but rather than returning to his rebellious Godardian comedies, this experience had refocused his cinema. Dumas claims that Welles “got to know his failure.” By learning studio disappointment in a Wellesian way, De Palma sublimated his political resignation and his frustration towards both the feminine and the homosocial structures that subjugate the former into more formal experiments with Hitchcockian technique—most importantly, he engaged with Hitchcock’s accessibility to his audience. Since then De Palma has couched his Godardian strain
and his own political commentary and cynicism within a Hitchcockian framework, forcing that framework to work against itself as more than just a simple crowd—pleasing method of suspense and psychoanalytical repetition. Those who wish to reduce De Palma to being just a derivative hack and adolescent misogynist must engage with the larger field of political resignation and critique of homosocial violence and regression that permeate his cinema.

A New Hope for Old Victims: De Palma’s Millennium Films

From the 1960s to today, De Palma’s entire oeuvre has evolved into a much more varied body of work than just a series of Hitchcockian thrillers with political commentary. He has produced commercial comedies, action-films, dramas, and other factory products as well as personal low-budget features and works that could arguably belong to both independent and commercial fields. But the consistency of De Palma’s work is not in his style, but in the resignation that remains throughout his work into the 21st century. De Palma began the millennium with a deep, personal disappointment. De Palma had hoped that his foyer into science fiction in 2000’s Mission to Mars would have garnered him a little more respect either critically, commercially or popularly. It did none of these. It was met with the usual indifference on the popular level and critics dismissed it as a hokey, unbelievable plot (because all good science fiction must be believable, right?) along the lines of its unfortunate Hollywood neighbor in the multiplex, the dull popcorn flop, Red Planet (2000). After following critical and commercial successes like The Untouchables (1987) and Mission Impossible with adventurous personal works like Casualties of War and Snake Eyes respectively that were met with the typical aggression that had plagued De Palma since Dressed to Kill and Body Double, De Palma,
following the commercial disappointment of his greatly underrated *Mission to Mars*, abandoned Hollywood money for privately funded, Euro-productions.

While none of his millennium films have made money, they have all exhibited a certain relaxed freedom of technical form that has not been seen since his 1960s films, and these films reflect a certain proof in upending the negative criticism we have been trying to moderate at the core of his filmmaking so far. Because of limited screenings and the disseminated fields of exhibition via Netflix and other streaming venues, these films are gathering much greater internet interest than his 1980s and 1990s films that got lost in the blockbuster filled multiplexes, and ignored by the smaller art house cinemas which had become the refuge of both trash and cult cinema as well as the high art of foreign film from the Reagan era forward.

These films meticulously revisit themes that have threaded their way through all his work, but these latest films are much more playful in their conceptions of both masculine and feminine stereotypes. *Femme Fatale* (2002) begins as a heist film that takes place during the Cannes film festival. At its very beginning the lead character, Elle, is seen in the reflection of a television that is showing *Double Indemnity* (1944). Wilder’s film defines the noir trope of the *femme fatale par excellence* in Barbara Stanwyck’s character, and De Palma is freely quoting Wilder here. Elle is hired to steal an expensive piece of body jewelry at the festival by seducing the female model wearing it at a film premiere in the bathroom during a power outage. She succeeds, but double-crosses her two male partners and flees with the jewels. She is pursued and caught by her partners and thrown from an indoor balcony to crash through a glass ceiling in front of parents that are searching for their missing daughter. Elle awakens to find herself in the bedroom of that same daughter—she is a dead ringer for the daughter and the parents have confused Elle for their daughter. She takes advantage of the mistake and hides in the house.
While she is taking a bath, the real daughter comes home and, distraught over the death of her daughter, commits suicide. Elle witnesses the suicide, and seizing the opportunity, switches identities with the dead girl and flies off to America, meeting her future husband on the plane. Seven years pass by, and Elle, whose husband is now the American Ambassador to France, returns in secrecy to France. However, her image is immediately captured by a paparazzi photographer, and her partners, one having just been released from jail for the jewel theft, again pursue her. Elle begins to use all her seductive tools to wrangle the paparazzi photographer to help her escape the partners, but she ultimately fails and the partners discover her on a bridge and throw her off into the water. The camera follows her into the water in slow motion as she sinks to her death, but suddenly she awakes in the bath tub right before the daughter commits suicide. This time she intervenes and stops the suicide. The daughter thus lives and hitches a ride with a truck driver to begin her new life in America, and she gives the driver her dead daughter’s crystal pendant which he hangs on his rear-view mirror. Seven years later, Elle is still on the run and her partners catch up with her where in the previous time line they throw her model-accomplice in front of a truck to track her down. But this time, the crystal bauble shines light in the driver’s face. He swerves and instead the partners are killed.

This plot is intentionally complex in that it literally plays out one “typical” De Palma scenario where the female pays the price of deceit, like Kate in *Dressed to Kill*, for her choice to play out her life as a *femme fatale*, and is murdered. But then in a very Buñuelian turn, she is offered a second life in which her rescuing of her doppelganger offers a second possible scenario where the male partners are instead killed as retribution for their violence towards the female characters. This second timeline offers a critical revision of how a decision, in which a character chooses how to perform itself, can produce different narrative outcomes despite retaining a
certain dedication to technical and historical repetition. Even though on its surface this is a typical “just a dream” scenario, De Palma is quite deft in setting up expectations of viewers of his own films, only to rearrange it into a much more spiritual and positive direction. The film produces the same cynicism, but does not relegate this cynicism to the feminine. Instead, he empowers Elle with the power of choice to determine her own fate.

De Palma would continue his investigation into *noir* themes with *The Black Dahlia* (2006), based on James Elroy’s fictionalization of the actual unsolved murder of Elizabeth Short in 1945. Elroy’s story of homosocial competition between two amateur boxers turned police detectives, and their obsession over a dead female victim would seem perfect material for De Palma. Indeed, the film has fantastic De Palma moments in the vein of *The Untouchables*, but De Palma is restricted by Elroy’s clumsy third act that conveniently lumps all the subplots together into a Chandleresque ending that remains unsatisfactory on many levels. In this case, De Palma does not murder his female victim, but instead gets mired once again in impotent homosocial behavior. The film is very uncomfortable handling the complex storylines, and is hindered by difficult casting, but the film’s return to *noir* via a historical period piece works out some very complex gender themes that can be seen in his two following films: The masculine in *Redacted* (2007), and the feminine in *Passion* (2012). In keeping with our consideration of the new feminine possibilities in De Palma’s cinema, let us jump forward to *Passion*, and finish off with *Redacted* as a final statement on De Palma’s political cynicism and the future of cinema.

De Palma’s lifelong interest in the political desperation of homosocial behavior is challenged and complicated by De Palma himself when he shifts the stereotypical competitive homosocial behavior—ironically using the advertising business that is notorious for commodifying the female form—into a competition between two aggressive women. De
Palma’s female characters, as I have argued, are almost always drawn with more intensity and compassion than his male ones. In De Palma’s remake of Alain Corneau’s *Crimes D’Amour* (2010)—reduced to a classic Hitchcockian one word title, *Passion*—De Palma returns to his technical prowess in the thriller genre, but he nuances it with a new complexity between the two female characters: Christine and Isabelle. Christine is a power player in the advertising company hoping to be relocated to the New York office. She is also Isabelle’s superior. The film opens with the two working at a single laptop computer in Christine’s home on an ad campaign for women’s jeans. The two are interrupted when Christine’s lover arrives and Isabelle excuses herself to continue work on the ad. Overnight, she has a brainstorm and has her assistant, Dani, walk around the city with a phone came in her back pocket so that she can catch men looking at her ass in the client’s jeans. The ad is a hit with Christine’s superiors and Christine immediately takes the credit. The film thus spirals into competitive backstabbing that escalates into murder. Isabelle manages to murder Christine and use her lover, whom Isabelle was also sleeping with, as a patsy. She assumes Christine’s role in the company, but discovers that Dani had followed her and is able to expose her alibi. Dani, who has been in love with Isabelle, forces her to be her lover under threat of her alibi being exposed. The film plays out with Isabelle strangling Dani, who manages to send the evidence to the police in her last dying gestures, but before Isabelle can be arrested she is strangled herself by Christine’s twin sister. This is a typically strained storyline that allows De Palma to return to his own tricks of how far he can push the reality boundaries of the viewer. As soon as the twin sister begin to strangle Isabelle, Isabelle awakens in her bed with the still strangled Dani lying on the floor and the phone ringing. Cut to black.

Again, De Palma has returned to the fractured storytelling that we witness in *Femme Fatale*. In *Carrie* and *Dressed to Kill*, De Palma intentionally ended with his characters waking
up from a nightmare to stamp the trauma of the film’s narrative onto the surviving character. Here in *Passion* this has a similar effect, but the waking is inverted to find the film unresolved. Violence has begot violence. And the film leaves Isabelle with yet another corpse to get rid of. This is far more complex than just transferring the female victim into a female killer. Aggression and violence has been relocated into a purely feminine sphere. Like *Carrie*, the male characters are pushed to the margins to focus on the power play between the female characters. Some may say that this feminine social sphere is still the fantastic construction of a masculine, De Palma’s. mind. But the characters of Isabelle and Christine are far more nuanced and carefully drawn with their specific anxieties and obsession to be representative of the larger feminine sphere. Yes, violence is gendered, but is not specifically located in one gender or the other. De Palma’s cynicism is never mutually exclusive to either gender.

And this leads us back to *Redacted*. We have already commented on how *Redacted* is an intentional duplication of *Casualties of War*. *Redacted* polarized critics and its release was reserved solely to the DVD market. Critics such as Owen Gleiberman gave it a D+ and chided it for its clumsy integration of film and video formats with amateurish acting and delivery. De Palma, himself, felt that the film’s commercial and critical failure was that it was impossible to critique the troops and still gain an American audience. But his assumption is suspect as the film is less a critique of the troops but, rather, the product of trying to maintain an ethical balance in the situation of combat. The film’s “fast and loose” presentation that seems “thrown together” perfectly matches the chaos and limitations of the field of vision and inability of understanding of the effects of the Iraq War. The film speaks using a hodge-podge grammar of YouTube and the selfie-perspectives of FaceTime and Skype. De Palma is not going for realism here. He never does. He is not trying to romanticize the experience of war like Oliver Stone’s *Platoon*
(1986), or poeticize it, like Malick’s *The Thin Red Line* (1998). *The experience of war is not really the subject of this film.* *Redacted* is an intentional political failure to stop the war by exposing not only the repetition of the war’s violence, but also revealing the inevitable and perpetual outcome of futility and absurdity when expecting ethics be upheld within its social structures. The purposelessness of war is the subject of *Redacted*. The film knows at its core that it will not and cannot stop the war. It proudly displays its failure.

De Palma is famous for reversing Godard’s claim that cinema is “truth at 24 frames per second.” For De Palma, cinema is always lying at 24 frames per second. *Redacted* is, perhaps, the best example of this claim at a technical level. It challenges the “reality” of truth-telling formats such as personal video and television news. The film’s main narrative is told primarily from the video recordings of the infantry men in their barracks. The film quickly complicates the format by switching to a French documentary style on the same platoon that blatantly mimics Kubrick’s *Barry Lyndon* (1975) with its use of slow zooms and classical score. Bouncing between the “home video” and the more aesthetically, and thus less “real,” cinema of the French documentary, the film’s story becomes even more complicated as it changes perspective from the soldiers to the Al Jazeera-type newscasters reporting the horror of the Iraqi victims of U.S. soldier’s violence. The film then brilliantly includes base surveillance cameras and Islamic Fundamentalist internet video to show various sides of retaliation and escalation between the occupiers and the occupied. The film reaches its frenzy via night cameras as they invade an alleged insurgent’s home and rape and kill the family. This is a direct repetition of the act De Palma’s visited in a much more cinematic fashion in *Casualties of War*. It is almost as if De Palma has allocated *Casualties* to the cinematic space of the French documentary in *Redacted*. If so, De Palma is problematizing his own political disgust and interest in the horrific social
conditions produced by war. Unlike *Casualties*, *Redacted* refuses to conclude with a court martial, but follows the witness of the horrendous act home to the reunion of his family. Clearly, the crime for the most part has been redacted, but for the De Palmian witness, the image of the victim is never erased. There is no blindness to the traumas and horrors that De Palma often revisits. And for De Palma and his cinema, the viewer should never be blind to these horrors either. As *Redacted* proves, regardless of how cinema has become reduced, redacted or disseminated into smaller, shorter formats and different digital compression rates, cinema’s innate inability to tell the truth is an arguable invisibility in the larger field of image production. *Redacted* is far from amateurish—it is instead youthful in its use of future media, but sage in its message that has been repeated by De Palma since the 1960s: The revolution will *not* be televised. Its failure will.

These readings have only scratched the surface of reconsidering the critical invisibility, or the intentional failure to be critically seen within a limited critical agenda, that has surrounded De Palma by only considering the “bookends” of his cinema: his early work and his millennial work. There are plenty of threads that can lead to similar revisions of his critical failure: The up and down attempts at blockbuster success from *Scarface* and *The Untouchables* to his lowest commercial nadir, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990), or to his greatest commercial success, *Mission Impossible*. Or another way, that he tended to follow his successes with highly personal films that could not live up to the spectacle of the former films. Or, we could chart his Hollywood “failures” from *Get to Know Your Rabbit* to *Bonfire* and *Mission to Mars* to show how De Palma’s cynical political bent and his clinical distance from his subject matter cannot connect with the Spielberg/Lucas constructions of the blockbuster audience and its conditions of
success. Or the complete critical rejection of his deeply personal projects like *Home Movies* (1980), *Blow Out* and *Casualties of War* as failed attempts to return to his aesthetic, political, and revolutionary roots in *Greetings* and *Hi, Mom!* All these and more are worthy of other chapters, if not books, but for now let us leave these strands as future possibilities of proving my overall feelings on De Palma’s work: That De Palma’s failures deserve greater respect as acts of quotation that, rather than just repeat it, expand the cinematic playing field and its surrounding critical discourse.

I believe that De Palma’s critical invisibility has already been somewhat lifted by the cinematic aesthetic that favors quotation and meta-cinema from the 1990s forward. Filmmakers like Quentin Tarantino and Roberto Rodriguez have made a cottage industry of mining culturally invisible films like blaxploitation and the *giallo* films of Bava and the rest, not to mention all the “trash” elements of grindhouse cinema. These contemporary filmmakers “borrow” a De Palmian axiom: that all marginal cinema has the cultural capacity to rise to the “A” list. As we will see in the following chapter, the blockbuster model of New Hollywood will greatly encourage borrowing and quotations of not just passages, but entire films. This practice will not be reserved to only elevating genres and “trash” tropes, but, like Hitchcock and Godard for De Palma, there will be numerous direct homages and “borrowings” of older auteurs that will be lauded instead of ignored as derivative. Todd Haynes will not be derided or ignored for his direct imitation of Douglas Sirk, nor will Paul Thomas Anderson be critiqued for attempting the perfect Scorsese-Altman fusion from *Boogie Nights* (1997) to *There Will Be Blood* (2007).

De Palma’s unique failure resides in his method of quotation that makes him a critical pariah. If anything, De Palma has always been unabashedly and dedicatedly transparent with his interests in the cinematic ideas of others that fascinate him. He may never be able to shake off
his conception of—and obsession with—a specific female construction, but no one has been more rigorous in the pursuit of how the feminine-as-object—and arguably Film Studies’ dependence on the gendered state of cinema—operates within the cinema. When framed as such an extremely important critical project, I consider Hitchcock’s contribution as second only to De Palma. However, there is nothing really to be gained in just comparing De Palma to Hitchcock. In many ways, De Palma transcends a simple diegesis or reflexivity in formal approaches to filmmaking. To a certain degree, he owes this transcendence to his admiration of Godard. However, if, as Godard has prophesied for the future of cinema, the new millennium as a proliferated and fragmented visual culture that denies cinematic authorship as anything but a series of quotations, then De Palma and his cinema’s ability to simultaneously articulate its own obsessive critical field and still surprise the viewer on a gut level with the same old tricks again and again may indeed be the only cinematic model appropriate for such a new configuration of digital authorship.
Chapter 6: The Rise of the Blockbuster and the Impossibility of Success

By allowing the auteurs to take more responsibility for their movies, studio executives were able to shift the blame for box office failure away from themselves... when auteur films began to lose money, the studio executives were in a position to blame not only individual directors but also the very system the studios had formerly exploited. By supporting an American auteur cinema in the 1970s, studio executives maintained a position in which they could avoid culpability no matter when or how the auteur period fizzled out.  

—Jon Lewis

In the 1960s, De Palma and his contemporaries had set out to become a new wave of Hollywood mavericks, but like the ideologies of 1960s, the cinematic figure had been tempered with a knowledge of its own fate—a nostalgia that inherited an awareness of its eventual failure. Wannabe mavericks had finally admitted that they were indebted acolytes and unabashed copycats of former masters, as well as of the studio executives that had fostered them. This revision of auteurism and its newfound introspection of itself seemed to, at first, be warmly embraced by the Hollywood system. The passage between the countercultural sixties and the neoconservative Reagan era was an indisputable “golden period” of New American Cinema. The inroads forged by eager new directors—most fresh out of film school—in tune with both Classical Hollywood cinema and art-house European cinema, who, alongside older television directors that shared similar countercultural sympathies and fostered an equal bent towards iconoclasm, had opened a wealth of productivity that revived older maverick negotiations with the Hollywood studio system while maintaining a renewed respect for traditional Hollywood film grammar. They applied groundbreaking new techniques in location shooting, documentary-style camerawork, and non-continuous methods of editing and sound recording worthy of the avant-grade and art-house cinema that influenced them. But by the end of the decade, revolutionary-yet-integrationist filmmakers of Hollywood film grammar like De Palma and his
contemporaries would become chastised for the same violent variations of experimentation and faithful reinvention of past mavericks that had established a completely new approach to Hollywood filmmaking. By the early eighties, the anticipations of audiences would cite failures where they formerly had applauded the brazen leaps of the New American cinema. The most popular theory of the cause of this shift in reception is allegedly due to the rise of the blockbuster as the paramount model of Hollywood filmmaking and its direct abandonment of auteurist cinema.

This theory, however, ignores a rather long and complex period of transition. Early in the new blockbuster era—some point in the early 1970s—the auteur film and the blockbuster were indistinguishable from each other. The personal dedication to intentional artistry and the encyclopedic ability to reference past masters and genres was what supposedly underpinned the adulation of audiences, and was the main reason they flocked to these “superior” films. By the end of the decade, the blockbuster had become something else. It referenced an appeal to the lowest common denominator. It was cinema at its most easily digested. The Hollywood blockbuster and the auteurist art film could not be more far apart. This splitting apart of what at first seemed a harmonious paradox is what interests the next few thresholds explored in this chapter. As we have already witnessed with a filmmaker like De Palma, even though he was idolized by the “movie brats,” whom he joined in Hollywood in the early 1970s, De Palma later became branded as an unapologetic copycat and misogynist instead of a master of reintegration with older film grammars. One of the main reasons for this, arguably, is that he never attained the blockbuster successes at either side of the spectrum—neither the auteurist blockbuster of Coppola’s two Godfather films or Friedkin’s, The Exorcist, nor the ascension of Spielberg’s
brand from *Jaws* to *E.T.*, Lucas’s *Star Wars* trilogy or the collaborative Indiana Jones films of both.

If the blockbuster is directly responsible for the absolute transformation from auteur as artist into a pure marketing brand, then its history deserves more than a bit of critical attention. In fact, the blockbuster will not only create an irresolvable tension between the artistic maverick and the later auteur of integration and revision, but will call for a completely different rhetorical approach to the Hollywood industry—an approach that will publicly resist the Hollywood demands, but privately negotiate studio weak points to receive financing to produce a stylistic cinema contrary to Hollywood expectations of contemporary demand. This rhetorical strategy will triangulate another figure of the auteur that will incorporate maverick resistance strategically within its brand to complete auteurist films that reintegrate Classical Hollywood’s commitment to creative film production while also manipulating and rerouting the blockbuster model’s financial expectations.

The Simultaneous Rise of the American Auteur and New Hollywood

Along the lines of the countercultural, youth-market driven project of BBS Productions, which operated independently with Columbia’s money, Francis Ford Coppola in November of 1969 with four lackluster and unimpressive features under his belt managed to convince Warner Brothers into staking him $600,000 to start a San Francisco based production company. Coppola named the new company American Zoetrope. Warner Brother’s investment in Coppola and friends—the studio was now owned by the Kinney corporation conglomerate—was more than likely a panicked decision to compete with the phenomenal youth-market surprise of BBS’s *Easy*
Rider. Since San Francisco was the hub of the youth culture at the time, Coppola and crew, which included young George Lucas and Walter Murch, were to use the financing to produce youth-based features. However, Coppola immediately purchased $500,000 of state of the art editing and sound boards and a 35mm screening room. In his invaluable study of Coppola, Whom Gods Wish to Destroy, Jon Lewis describes the early American Zoetrope as a young auteur’s dream. He says, “[it] took shape as a film student’s concept of what a studio should be like: all the best equipment, smart people sharing ideas and expertise, and lots of screenings of classic old and important contemporary movies” (13).108 Coppola utilized the press to promise a radically, new alternative to contemporary Hollywood methods. After a year, Coppola had three projects on deck. Lucas’s THX-1138 and the scripts for The Conversation and Apocalypse Now Warner Brothers were so unimpressed by these projects that they demanded their money back. Coppola was forced to turn around and use all this new equipment to produce television commercials and documentaries to return the money he had already spent. However, because Warner Brothers refused all American Zoetrope’s line up, Coppola retained proprietary rights of all three projects, as well as a fourth project in the works from Lucas—a nostalgic look back at teenage youth culture in the early sixties.

But Coppola’s luck would famously turn around. After American Zoetrope had folded, Paramount offered Coppola a Hollywood gangster picture that had already been turned down by Constantin Costa-Gavras, Peter Yates, and the young BBS star Bogdanovich, fresh from his hit, The Last Picture Show. Coppola was reluctant to leave San Francisco to make a mainstream genre film that he believed was offered to him just because he was Italian-American. Allegedly his friend, Lucas, encouraged him to take the project because the film would be so popular that Coppola would never have to stoop that low again. The Godfather (1972) would, of course,
become the turning point for both auteurism and commercialism in filmmaking. It would be the successful film that would not only enable Coppola’s leverage power in Hollywood for the next decade, but would initiate commercial expectations that would eventually transcend the auteur-as-artist, transforming it into a pure act of branding.

The artistic success was entirely attributed to the figure of Coppola, but the credit for the commercial success of *The Godfather* gets mired down in the contest of egos between Paramount producer, Robert Evans, and the savvy against-the-industry casting choices and dedication of artistic detail of Coppola. Evans had been one of the youngest production heads installed by Gulf and Western’s leader Charles Bludhorn, once again, attempting reach the distant youth-culture. Evans pioneered massive hits with Roman Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), and another starring his then-wife Ali McGraw with *Goodbye Columbus* (1969). Evans received a script from Erich Segal that he thought was an ideal star-vehicle for McGraw and he began rewriting it into the script for *Love Story* (1970). Evans encouraged Segal to write a novel based on the same script, and he cross-promoted the novel with the film’s release. At a cost of just over $2 million, the film grossed nearly $100 million in four months, bolstered by the sale of its novel and soundtrack. Following this success, Evans had optioned Mario Puzo’s forthcoming novel for $80,000. When Coppola came on board, the director worked closely with Puzo developing the same quality script Coppola had won an Oscar for in *Patton* (1970). Evans and Paramount made sure Puzo’s book was published during production to advance awareness of the film and its title. Meanwhile, Coppola completed filming the picture, and at only one million dollars over its projected $6 million budget. Paramount released the film in February 1972 with massive promotion and saturation booking in 350 first-run theaters. Evans and Paramount had
set a standard practice for creating an event film. And Coppola was credited for fusing the artistic dedication of the auteur with the premiere commercial model of the blockbuster.

However, this fusion was not quickly reproducible, and the studios were clearly scrambling to find the mathematical methods to repeat such a success so they allowed auteurs to continue their experiments in the popular fields with their financial blessing. This is not to say that Hollywood had completely handed over their slate to auteurs. The studios also invested heavily in successful disaster movies that had made huge profits with *Airport* (1970) and *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), and these films still played with the viability of the old star systems while fusing them with the new breed of gritty, more “realistic” actors. But auteurs seemed to be finding their niche within the corporate playground. The film student acolytes were boldly matching the disaster movies’ success with nostalgic genre pictures. Peter Bogdanovich’s third feature took the contemporary star-power of Barbara Streisand to create the Hawksian homage in the slapstick, *What’s Up, Doc?* (1972). Streisand had initially wanted a drama like *The Last Picture Show* and disliked both Bogdanovich and the picture, but her dislike of the film was washed away by its commercial success. Coppola produced George Lucas’s second feature, which he had retained the rights to during his American Zoetrope period. *American Graffiti* (1973) was released under the newly formed Lucasfilm Ltd., and was a huge sleeper success. Playing off the nostalgia of the generation for a simpler pre-revolutionary, pre-Vietnam period, the film reconstructed a simple night of teenage guys cruising around listening to the car radio and trying to pick up girls before they were either pulled into military service or adult life. The film cost only $775,000 with ten percent of the budget going to the rights of the soundtrack tunes, and Wasserman’s MCA-Universal spent a half-million to promote it. The film grossed over $55 million, surprising the hesitant distributors at Universal. *American Graffiti* was,
however, only the third highest-grossing picture of 1973. Ahead of it was Universal’s own pet blockbuster, *The Sting* (1973) that was a clearly engineered hit that re-teamed Paul Newman and Robert Redford from the mega-hit, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1968), and a film that reinvented the horror genre fusing it with gritty realism of its social contemporaries, but a film that also exploited the boundaries of violence and gore in the post-Code Hollywood of the seventies.

The intense violence of Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow being riddled with bullets at the end of the film, and repeated in *The Godfather* with eldest son, Sonny, being similarly “over-assassinated” at a toll booth, had been internalized into the unlikely vessel of a twelve-year old girl in *The Exorcist*. The film’s director, William Friedkin, had just won the Best Director award for *The French Connection* (1971), a gritty portrayal of a heroin bust by two eccentric beat cops with a borderline legal approach to obtaining a collar. *The Exorcist* introduced a renewed investment in sensationalism on both the artistic and commercial end. A possessed little girl spouting obscenities never heard on screen before, and masturbating with a crucifix created a hype with almost pornographic appeal and catered to the exploitation cinema of Russ Meyers, Radley Metzger, Doris Wishman, and of course, AIP’s Roger Corman. But following the marketing strategies initiated by Evans at Paramount with *The Godfather*, Warner Brothers added another proven tactic to saturation booking and television blitzes by “four walling” the film. This technique had formerly been a strategy of documentarians and low-budget features where the distributor would rent out entire theaters to exclusively premiere their piece. This enabled the distributor to access all of the box office proceeds for a flat fee.109 “Four walling” was short-lived as a promotional technique because the National Association of Theater Owners (NATO) immediately appealed to the Justice Department reminding them that the marketing
technique was in violation of the Paramount Consent Decree, but in this short time, certain studios now had proof that building anticipation on the advertising end with television and cross-promotion with ancillary products, and delivering sensationalism as an explosive “event” supported a model of commercial success. But the studios were still at a loss to understand exactly where in the construction of such sensationalism there was still an insistent demand for artistic quality and auteurist involvement.

One attempt to harness the elusive alchemy of the auteur and the blockbuster was The Directors Company—the brainchild of Paramount chief, Frank Yablans and financed by the studio for $31.5 million, The Directors Company contracted Coppola, Bogdanovich and Freidkin, all three of whom by 1973 had proven to deliver that magical combination of nostalgia and sensationalism. The directors were obliged to each complete three films over the following six years and be an executive producer on at least one of the other company member’s films. Paramount would, in turn, grant each director full creative autonomy, guarantee its funding and share fifty percent of the profits with the director on each film, with the provision that each film cost less than $3 million. On the surface, The Directors Company looked like a simple business move: Contract three hot directors, give them full creative control to keep producing their popular films, and ensure eighteen films to fill Paramount’s slate over the next six years. But Yablans’s concept was not structured on a blind faith in the director’s ability to govern themselves. His strategy was to absorb the auteurist elements of each film into a reliable commercial model. Jon Lewis correctly elaborates Yablans’s strategy:

As Yablans saw it, the Directors Company only seemed to perpetuate a growing acceptance or the *auteur* theory in Hollywood. What he and Paramount actually had in mind was a re-contextualization of *auteurism* within the studio superstructure. Thus, for
Yablans, the Directors Company conceded a modicum of autonomy and power over the three bankable directors, but it did so in exchange for what amounted to the director’s capitulation, their seeming unwillingness to make mainstream movies. “They’ve gone through their growth period.” Yablans mused, “Indulging their esoteric tastes. Coppola isn’t interested in filming a pomegranate in the desert. They’re all very commercial now.” (Lewis 16)

In Lewis’s estimation, Yablans was betting that the success of Bogdanovich’s *Last Picture Show* and *What’s Up Doc*, Friedkin’s *The French Connection* and *The Exorcist*, and Coppola’s *Godfather* had forced an acknowledgement upon each director that their successes were a product of conforming to the system. From the director’s standpoint, however, it was their commitment to a new cinema that was causing these commercial successes. More clearly, the new auteurist phenomenon in these blockbusters was a type of *Citizen Kane*-like fusion of personal artistic films that were given full access to Hollywood’s machinery and financing power. The anomaly of *Citizen Kane* as a personal artistic film with access to larger studio machinery had now become a prolonged experiment based on the blockbuster success of Coppola’s *The Godfather*.

Yablans’s prediction that Coppola would simply conform and produce for the New Hollywood was premature at best. Out of the gate, Paramount refused Yablans request to transfer control of *The Godfather, Part II* (1974) to the Directors Company because it had begun production before the Directors Company had been formed. Even if Paramount had allowed the transfer, the second *Godfather* was the exact antithesis of what Yablans had envisioned for a sequel to the first film. It was almost four hours long with over an hour in Italian. Even worse was that it was a critical smash. While not as commercially successful as the first—it grossed
less than half of the first film—it was still at then-blockbuster-levels of commercial success and it won the Best Picture and Best Director Oscars. Because of the prestige, Coppola gained a certain and immediate leverage and authority over Yablans concerning his future contribution to The Directors Company. Because Coppola seemed to be more in tune with what audiences wanted to see, and because he was extremely adept at promoting his own auteurist brand with each new feature, Yablans was forced to uphold Coppola’s creative decisions for his next feature.

Coppola followed the success of *The Godfather, Part II* with a much smaller, more personal work that would win the Cannes Palme d’Or that same year, and become one of Coppola’s personal favorites alongside many future cineastes. But *The Conversation* (1974) was exactly the film that Yablans had assumed Coppola and his peers had outgrown. The film was a somber and deep introspection into the destruction of the private spaces of American life. It would dovetail nicely with the paranoid treatises of Alan J. Pakula’s *Klute* (1971) and *The Parallax View* (1974), and resonate with the apathy and growing distrust of all modes of authority in the American public after Watergate. For Yablans and Paramount, it was too moody, and, ironically, too private a film to be marketed for any profit. The film convinced Yablans that his company and his concept had had been founded on tan unattainable concept of commercial auteurism.

However, seductive the auteur theory appeared at first, the studios soon came to realize how dangerous its implementation could be . . . Yablans had reason to fear the prospect of more big directors making little personal films with the studio’s money. And though it hadn’t happened yet, an even more perilous scenario loomed: the possibility that a big director might make a big personal film. (Lewis 18)
Coppola was pressing for the opposite of Yablans’s model: An auteurist-controlled commercialism. Yablans saw no hope in rerouting Coppola’s crusade so he pulled the plug. In 1975, Yablans and Paramount withdrew from the Directors Company, having only produced three films in its short tenure. *The Conversation*, Bodanovich’s third popular hit, *Paper Moon* (1973), and his subsequent flop, *Daisy Miller* (1975). At the start of 1975, Coppola and his “children” seemed unflappable, if not unstoppable, in their auteurist dedication to infusing the New Hollywood blockbuster with meta-cinematic commentary and an embedded artistry. Coppola would set out to top himself with his new project, *Apocalypse Now* (1979). As he scouted location in the Philippines that year, he would vanish off and on for three years to complete the film. In his absence, the young television director, Steven Spielberg, and Coppola’s own friend and protégé, George Lucas, would alter the balance of auteurism and commercialism forever.

The Shark and the Permanent Failure of Auteurism

By the middle of the decade, the necessity of the auteurist dimension of New Hollywood filmmaking remained problematic for Hollywood. Enter *Jaws* (1975). *Jaws* became the emblematic event film, and set new—and increasingly impossible—economic expectations for the auteur. Or more specifically, Hollywood began to raise its own figure of an auteur specifically designed as a brand, whose primary function would be wholly complacent to the system, operating as a transparent promise from the system itself. But while *Jaws* may indicate the beginning of this figural construction, it also resists it as the film still contained signatures of both the maverick and acolyte. The film’s auteurist elements are often obfuscated by a critical
mistrust of the film’s commercial success. This is the recurring fallacy of the artist and success: That a successful film cannot be an artistic one. The film’s popularity and economic success is indisputable, but the reason for its success is normally placed squarely in Universal’s engineering of the picture as a much televised, forthcoming event. Historian David Cook describes the film as a socio-economic nexus, himself drawing from other descriptions put forth by other historians like Thomas Schatz and J. Hoberman.

Jaws emphatically marked the arrival of the New Hollywood\textsuperscript{110} by recalibrating the profit potential of the blockbuster and redefining its status as a marketable commodity. In terms of marketing, it was the first “high concept” film\textsuperscript{111}—in the sense of a film whose conceptual premise and story is easily reducible to a salient image, which then became the basis of for an aggressive advertising campaign keyed to merchandizing tie-ins and ancillary markets, creating synergy between film, products, and related media [. . .] As a cultural phenomenon, Jaws represented a revival and “implosion” of the disaster cycle that had had its real world correspondence in Vietnam and Watergate. But was also the paradigm for . . . the high-cost, high-tech, high-speed thriller that became the major Hollywood genre of the eighties and nineties. (Cook 40)

The commercial model that becomes cemented and repeated from Jaws forward tends to overshadow most aesthetic investigations into the blockbuster. This is where corporate historians gain leverage over a romanticized version of auteurism in that directors and writers are wrongly given credit for a commercial success, and that real credit is deserved by the industry. For an historian like Douglas Gomery, Spielberg wrongly receives most of the credit for Jaws’ popularity. Gomery argues that real creative force behind the film’s success was Lew Wasserman. At Universal, Wasserman had steadily been building “events” in the form of
television mini-series like *Rich Man, Poor Man* since 1971. “He cross-pollinated moving talent from TV to film, and vice versa. For example, without the TV movie *Duel* [Spielberg’s first film, which was made for television], there probably would never have been the first true movie blockbuster, *Jaws*” (Gomery 211). Gomery’s claim deserves attention in that it was Wasserman’s insistence on hiring Spielberg to direct the film, but it does sweep a bit too widely to give Wasserman all the credit for *Jaws* in that it ignores the artistry that transforms a B monster picture into a commercial sensation. Wasserman’s marketing campaign may have brought first-time viewers to the theaters *en masse*, but it does not explain the repeat viewings that would become the phenomenon of the Spielberg and Lucas films.112

To be fair, Spielberg reluctantly came to *Jaws* much like Coppola had initially resisted making *The Godfather*. Spielberg was one of the few “movie brats” that, like De Palma, had not attended film school. Spielberg came to Hollywood self-taught and cut his teeth in television production. He directed television shows and often recommended to younger filmmakers that they should start in television. For any critic, that searches for the aesthetic foundation for *Jaws*, they can easily find it—as Wasserman did—in his television film, *Duel* (1971). *Duel* directly borrows from Hitchcockian technique and grammar and, in certain ways, is worthy of comparison to De Palma. The plot faces off with a quotidian salesman, named Mann, out on the road in California where he angrily passes an old, beat-up eighteen-wheeler. The “driverless” truck—we never see the driver’s face or body, only a brief Bressonian shot of his cowboy boots as he refuels—then begins a murderous chase which escalates throughout the California highways and backroads. Spielberg directly uses suspense techniques form *North by Northwest*—specifically the biplane at the crossroads sequence—and *The Birds*—always running from an unexplained hatred that comes from everywhere and challenges the everyman’s sanity, and even
more directly from *Psycho*—the point of view shots from the driver’s seat and Marion Crane’s self-incrimination in the bathroom mirror are direct quotations. This film utilized an incredible economy of direction both practically—having been shot in only 16 days, and assembled for television commercial breaks—and aesthetically, the editing style is extremely fast-paced, and its narrative minimizes characterization to explore a more frenzied plot of guilt and paranoia. This economy is provided entirely by Spielberg’s encyclopedic ability to quote from earlier films.

Spielberg’s next film following *Duel* allows us to imagine an alternative Spielberg dimension—a different trajectory of Spielberg as a humble auteur of the human condition instead of a master of sensationalism that *Jaws* would construct him as. His auteurist road movie *a la* the American New Wave, *The Sugarland Express* (1974) received even less attention than *Duel*, but its commercial failure is modest and only intensified in retrospect to his future films. As Spielberg critic, Nigel Morris, claims, “*The Sugarland Express*, if remembered, is considered a failure . . . Spielberg later declared it his one totally unsatisfactory movie, and astutely analyzed its structural problems” (30). The film was based on a true story where a mother is denied custody of her child after serving time for shoplifting in Texas. She breaks her husband, who is also serving time, out of prison to confront her child’s foster parents. They hitch a ride in which they are accidentally pulled over by a single policeman, and thus hijack the police car and the officer to try and reach the town of Sugarland where their child is. As the police pursuit grows and grows, the clumsy criminals gather crowds of local support, who encourage their desperate attempt to reunite with their son. The film ends in a typically New American manner with the police gunning down the husband and arresting the mother. As Morris continues,

> Without the prejudice that greeted later Spielberg releases, *The Sugarland Express* as ‘Godard-lite’, might justly be claimed to embody potentially subversive Brechtian
elements. In its original context, such a possibility arose under the influence of television. This powerful competitor not only transformed industry economics but also meant that remaining filmgoers, whom the industry had to identify, cultivate and satisfy by offering something different—such as road-movies with victimized anti-heroes—no longer represented majority ideological attitudes. (40-41)

Morris’s assumption that the anti-heroes of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Easy Rider* had run its course is an assumption of the “high-concept,” low-brow appeal of the slick *Jaws* model. Wasserman had tried to dissuade Spielberg’s producers, Zanuck and Brown, from deciding on the Texas road-movie as a follow-up to the economic, action-fueled *Duel*. But the claim that audiences were no longer in tune with anti-heroes was not the case, especially in the critical field. Counter-cultural films would still retain popularity and critical support, most notably in Altman’s *Nashville* (1975), and Hal Ashby’s *Coming Home* (1978) and *Being There* (1979). But there was intensifying pressure for the auteur to succeed on both artistic and commercial ends simultaneously. Spielberg’s two early films demonstrated an initial intention to approach cinema artistically like his peers. But his readiness to bend to the financial powers to clear the path for future films was clear. His auteurism was not based on a “do it while you can” approach.

Spielberg was invested in a permanence. He would achieve this more effectively with *Raiders of The Lost Ark* (1981) or *E.T.* (1982) than with the more violent *Jaws*, but the latter film did begin a trend towards corporate complacency as early as 1975, and this where Morris discovers, even in the most commercial and successful of Spielberg’s filmmaking—and his *politique* of Hollywood filmmaking—discovers an auteurist foundation much like his peers Coppola and De Palma. He says,
The little coverage *Duel* and *The Sugarland Express* attracted was mostly enthusiastic. Limited distribution, ‘discovery’ by European intellectuals, similarities between *The Sugarland Express*, Terrence Malick’s *Badlands* (1973) and Robert Altman’s *Thieves Like Us* (1974), albeit to the commercial detriment of all three, and the bleak negative yet clearly artistic vision, made Spielberg not merely an auteur, but a serious cult figure . . . If *Jaws* turned critics, especially on the left, against Spielberg, this occurred mainly retrospectively. While blockbuster status made *Jaws* synonymous with Hollywood, early political analyses treated it not as a stick to beat the little-known director, but as symptomatic of the industry or social contradictions [...] dominant ideological tendencies implied by extreme popularity were taken for granted in exploration of more particular meanings, or demonstrated in explications that held neither the text nor mass audiences in contempt. (Morris 48)

This passage is extremely forgiving of the popularity of *Jaws* in that its massive success could not be predicted. However, the bottom line was that the film was specifically engineered to be widely seen by Universal. Regardless, where Morris draws an important distinction is that Spielberg’s first two films, especially *The Sugarland Express*—whose title ironically could be a blanket title for most of Spielberg’s post-*Jaws* material—could have easily been included in the earlier category of early New Hollywood cinema. What had shifted in context of the blockbuster was its loss of contempt for social norms. The film still laid blame in the political structures and government—the mayor tries to cover up the shark attacks—but it returned to the quotidian everyman, to the smaller anxieties of proper parenting and to the responsibility to neighborhood in the character of Brody, the island police chief. Spielberg’s film is itself a threshold into a more willing escapist. If *Jaws* is truly the turning point from American cinema’s direct
questioning of socio-political norms (an assumption of the auteurist agenda) towards the insularity of apolitical entertainment, then the question is exactly what, from 1975 forward, were American audiences suddenly escaping from?

While there can be no definitive answer to such a rhetorical question, it can be noted that the phenomenon of *Jaws* shows that the Hollywood investment in auteurism was indeed skewed from the onset. The auteur was not the enemy of Hollywood. It was the embedded intentional failure of a pure dedication to auteurism as a mode of creative control that concerned New Hollywood. Spielberg was not an alternative to auteurism, but was an alternative type of auteur, one almost completely stripped of its maverick component. Without this dimension, the acolyte is only able to quote to simulate the *effect* of the quote. It does not strive to complicate its meaning, call attention to it, or *critique* it. Regardless, an auteurist schism had occurred and two distinct paths were formed.

The Empire of New Hollywood and The Apocalypse of Auteurism

The first path of hyper-commercialized auteurist filmmaking that emerged from *Jaws* at first found even Spielberg to some degree left behind. Spielberg followed *Jaws* immediately with *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), an extremely personal film to Spielberg that fused the spectacle of the science fiction genre with the artistry of an auteurist prestige picture—very much like *The Godfather* had done for the gangster genre. But Spielberg, as well as Universal and Wasserman, were outplayed by Lucas’s *Star War*, which immediately surpassed *Jaws* as the record holder for biggest grossing picture and muted the reception of *Close Encounters*. While Spielberg had centered his film once again on familial relationships—a
father so obsessed he pushes away his wife and children, a mother who has lost her child to visiting aliens—Lucas’s film was an amalgamation of pure archetypes whose simplicity in character enabled an economy of narrative that harkened back to the popcorn serials of Classical Hollywood.

For some, the short period between *Jaws* and *Star Wars* effectively returned Hollywood to a new type of Tom Gunning’s proto-cinema or “cinema of attractions.” While especially with *Star Wars* there were huge technical advancements, most notably John Dykstra’s traveling matte technology that made the model work much more affordable and time efficient, if anything these new “high-concept” films were a streamlining of easily digestible narratives, and an aversion of any sort of “deep reading” of each film. This is far from Gunning’s concept where the camera was an overt object that enabled an audience to marvel at its abilities and was not invested in any sort of sustained attention to narrative. Instead, this method, like the disaster movie blockbusters which preceded them is more correctly described as a *cinema of sensationalism*. Spielberg as an auteur following *Jaws*, at first, resisted such sensationalism, trying, like Coppola, to find a balance between his personal approach to cinema, albeit a much more quotidian and nuclear approach, and the commercial demands that his “shark movie” had imposed upon him. After *Close Encounters*, Spielberg followed with the rare commercial failure *1941*—a very personal film, and a strange, awkward comedy. The reasons for its failure are vague yet numerous. It could be chalked up to building audience expectations with two spectacles, and then putting out a nostalgic “small” movie. Or, perhaps, the film was cast with many of *Animal House*’s gross-out comedians whose audience expected a more irreverent farce, rather than a slower-moving comedy that harkened back to *The Russians are Coming, The Russians are Coming* (1965). Regardless of why, the importance is that this failure seemed to
realign Spielberg towards being permanently bankable in the industry, and led him not only to follow the path of his contemporary Lucas, especially following the monster success of *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), but Spielberg would literally team up with him to create his own adventure franchise with *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. And not to be outdone, he would then claim back his gross-sales record with a kitchen-sink-success—the retooled family-based, sci-fi, Christ story, popcorn-drama, *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982).

New Hollywood after *Jaws* still preserved space for the auteurist prestige picture, but the opportunities were growing scarcer and scarcer as the eighties approached. Everything seemed to be hinged upon the expectations of Coppola’s long-overdue, pre-*Jaws* promise of *Apocalypse Now*. The film had been green-lit in 1976 by United Artists who were eager to fund any project by the still extremely bankable auteur. The script presented to UA was still the original John Milius script that he had written for Lucas and American Zoetrope in 1968—the same script that Warner Brothers had refused. The script would have to be seriously rewritten to correspond to the political world of 1976, and its original budget of $12 million was now in the light of *Jaws* unrealistic, but in 1976, UA was eager to back anything Coppola wanted to do. The film’s shoot was famously labored and stalled by poor weather, Martin Sheen’s near-fatal heart attack and a civil war in the Phillipines. After fifteen long months, Coppola screened an early draft of the film to United Artists. United Artists saw the cut as a mess and an almost certain failure. They pulled back their investment to $7.5 million and agreed to loan Coppola the money to finish the film. This strategy seemed a poor decision for the executives at UA, as Jon Lewis points out:

In what turned out to be a backhanded affirmation of *auteurism*, UA turned the film over to its *auteur* [. . .] By loaning Coppola the money to complete the film, they unintentionally set him up either to fail and subsequently default on the $25 million loan,
or to succeed and in doing so humiliate UA in the eyes of the industry. If the film went on to lose money, UA’s only option if it wanted to get its $25 million back would be to foreclose on Coppola’s corporate and personal assets . . . Moreover, even if the studio decided to seize all of the director’s assets, the executives were well aware that the collateral Coppola put up to secure the loan was worth significantly less than $25 million. As a result—and this is the most ironic cut of all—the lion’s share of the principal was essentially collateralized by Coppola’s newest “asset,” *Apocalypse Now*, the very film UA executives believed would bomb at the box office. (Lewis 42-43)

UA’s decision to hedge its bets on *Apocalypse Now* was a game that Coppola as an auteur could easily play to win. The anticipation of the films predestined failure was implicit in UA’s lack of financial support. The media interpreted this as a sign that *Apocalypse Now* was finally that pale horseman that symbolized auteurism at its unregulated worst. But UA had placed itself in a Catch 22 in that if they stinted on the advertising budget and did not push for a wide release, they would ensure the film’s failure and have a defaulted loan of $25 million. If they financed a true blockbuster release and the film failed, it would result in a similar default, but, even worse, if the film succeed UA would look the fools for not backing the film and allowing Coppola to walk with all the profits, the rights and the prestige—which is what had similarly happened between Lucas and Twentieth Century Fox with the now-priceless *Star Wars* franchise and its endless ancillary markets.

Surprisingly with all the delays and rumors of its grandiosity, *Apocalypse Now* had not cost by 1979 standards as much as other blockbusters that year like *Moonraker*, *Flash Gordon*, and *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*. But while *Apocalypse Now* had slowly struggled to get to the screen from 1976 to 1979, the auteurist prestige picture had been steadily losing traction with
the box office. Peter Bogdanovich continued after The Directors Company with a string of flops—the live musical experiment, *At Long Last Love* (1975), the return to nostalgia filmmaking with *Nickelodeon* (1976), and the underrated, self-produced *Saint Jack* (1979) that he famously took over from Orson Welles, which finally severed their relationship. William Friedkin’s *Sorceror*, a contemporary, blockbuster-style remake of Clouzot’s classic nail-biter *Wages of Fear* (1955), while arguably one of his best films, and worthy of being called a “high-concept” film equal to *Jaws*, was virtually ignored at the box office next to *Star Wars*. Even critical darlings that avoided the pull of blockbuster demands began to peter out. Martin Scorsese fumbled after *Taxi Driver* (1976) with the overwrought musical tribute, *New York, New York* (1977). Robert Altman, who had early on insulated himself by creating his Lionsgate Entertainment to produce independent personal masterpieces like *Nashville* (1975) and *3 Women* (1977), had stumbled with three flops in a row by the end of the decade: *A Wedding* (1978), *A Perfect Couple* (1979), and *Quintet* (1979).

In the shadow of all these auteurist missteps, Coppola’s film had the impossible task of maintaining the artistic investment that all these failures had come to represent while proving that such investment was overall bankable in the inflated commercialism of the “high concept” picture. Coppola himself would have to model his artistry as a conglomerate of commercially viable pictures to mirror the ever-growing media conglomerates that the studios were evolving into. The stakes of auteurism now hinged on its corporate survival more than ever. This is the reason that, despite the artistic “Hail Mary” success of *Apocalypse Now*’s troubled-yet-ultimately-positive alternative to the “dumbing down” of the blockbuster market, it would lead Jon Lewis to argue that by 1979 “auteurism was at a sort of a crossroads [. . .] These [auteurs] were not rebels or artistes, but savvy players subtly updating the safe studio genre package.
big budgets were merely a product of the age; the auteurs were in many ways the lucky beneficiaries of such soft and high times.” (Lewis 45) Even though Coppola had been able to play a shaky investment into another auteurist success, it was at best a Pyrrhic victory. As Lewis concludes:

. . . the director as commodity—the director as an insurance of box office success—seemed from the start to hinge on a fundamental capital risk: Times change, and one day, one of the studios would be caught with its money tied up in the last auteur movie. Certainly such a fear fueled UA’s panic over Apocalypse Now. Given the film’s production history and UA’s various deals with Coppola along the way, the studio had every reason to believe that Apocalypse Now would mark the end of the auteur era.

(Lewis 45)

But this era was not a free-for-all studio playground filled with young-minded directors with absolute autonomy. It was instead a redirected top-down strategy that was carving out a multimedia-based, multi-faceted market place that was mirrored by the multiplexes of exhibition and the up and coming videocassette markets and pay-per-view television options on the horizon.117 The mounting critical complaints of the infantilizing of cinema from the products of Lucas and Spielberg against the growing hesitancy—if not the direct scapegoating—of auteurist cinema—without its definition ever being concretely defined beyond a marketing brand—would lead to the necessity of a a pure failure—one that would indefinitely justify the necessity of conformity to conglomerate sources of funding. What UA incorrectly and amateurishly forced upon its expectations of Apocalypse Now, became a self-fulfilled prophecy in a project called The Johnson County War.
One of the greatest parables of intentional failure in New Hollywood is how a single auteur destroyed an entire studio with a single film. To date, Michael Cimino’s *Heaven’s Gate* is most remembered as having the sole privilege of ending the investment in auteur cinema, and supposedly demonstrates the sheer destructive power of unregulated artistic freedom that led to the demise of United Artists. Of course, such a grand claim is suspect and contains more than a bit of exaggeration so the parable deserves a worthy detour that looks back into UA’s history—a distribution company that had started as an artist’s company and had maintained a certain auteurist integrity throughout a very bumpy history of independent production and conglomereration. UA’s unique dedication to the auteurist prestige picture historically gives a great deal of color to the studio’s “death” at the hands of an auteur, but to tell this story properly let us jump back a few decades.

Throughout the 1940s, UA under Pickford and Chaplin had struggled greatly to maintain its mission statement of independence from the bigger studios. UA had always been an anomaly in Hollywood in that it was always primarily a distribution company for independent productions. Joe Schenck had exploited UA’s middleman position—between production and exhibition—in the industry by brokering production deals with star producers such as Sam Goldwyn and David Selznick. But as successful as each of these independent producers might have been, UA only survived picture to picture, and struggled to keep itself out of debt. By the time the decade had ended, UA was deeply in arrears and its stock virtually worthless.

At the beginning of the 1950s, UA was losing $100,000 weekly. The remaining founders were finally willing to either restructure or relinquish the company. Pickford and Chaplin, who
were barely on speaking terms at this point, were approached by Eagle-Lion’s entertainment lawyers, Arthur Krim and Robert Benjamin, with an interesting offer. Because UA’s was technically bankrupt, there could be no purchase of UA because it had no value. Rather, Krim and Benjamin would restructure UA in such a way that they promised to bring UA back into the black within five years, and if they were able to do so, they would be awarded fifty percent of the company.

After the Paramount decision of 1948, distribution had fallen out for all the Big Five because chain theaters could now refuse to rent their films. This caused a lull in each major studio’s internal production lines. From the formerly vertically-integrated model’s perspective, if a picture couldn’t be sold, there was no point in making it. But UA was not hindered by the Paramount decision because UA had no theaters to divest. It also owned no studio real estate and was not burdened by those expenses. By the early 1950s, a studio was solely a production organization with its own budgets and overhead, but it was also signatory to the many union contracts that governed production. UA had no physical studio, no overhead, and was not a signatory of the unions. From this point of view, while the larger studios had to restructure themselves entirely, Krim and Benjamin saw the benefit of UA being only a finance company in this new economic condition, and thus made UA strictly for packaging productions. For Krim and Benjamin, the choice and costs of production became the responsibility of the independent producer. Like Odlum had done with RKO to cut costs, Krim and Benjamin did aggressively to build a profit margin. They backed independent productions like Huston’s *The African Queen* (1951), and Stanley Kramer’s *High Noon* (1952), both of which were huge hits. What Krim and Benjamin had promised Pickford and Chaplin in five years, they did in one. And by the end of five years, in 1956, they had bought Pickford and Chaplin out completely. By the end of the
decade, UA was the company of choice for all independent producers and directors because as Otto Preminger would declare to *Fortune* in 1958: “Only UA has a system of true independent production.”

In the early sixties, while Wasserman was quietly taking over Universal and tailoring it to the demands of television, UA hit its stride with profitable series such as James Bond and *The Pink Panther*. UA seemed unaffected by the industry-wide recession that ushered in the non-media conglomerate takeovers of the studios. First Paramount was acquired by Gulf and Western in 1966, and then Warner Brothers by Seven Arts in 1967 (and then the Kinney Corporation in 1969). The acquisitions and mergers allowed these flagging studios to have access to their parent companies’ wealth to subsidize their poor investments in outdated, overblown musicals and epics. Unlike the conglomerate bailout of Paramount and Warner Brothers, the sale of UA to San Francisco’s Transamerica (TA) was strategic. Krim and Benjamin had maintained a successful output of product, but the stock market still considered cinema a poor investment in the face of the failing larger studios. TA would increase the stock prices and afford more money to flow freely through UA. In 1967, Krim and Benjamin willingly retired from the day to day operations of managing UA, and allowed TA to promote a new president from within the ranks of UA.

But within the next few years, plummeting box office numbers and the difficult resistance of countercultural demand, Transamerica’s appointed president, David Picker, was making bad financial investments in UA product, and Krim requested to return to the presidency. The result was a string of successful Oscar-winners like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975), *Rocky* (1976) and *Annie Hall* (1977). But TA was no longer content to leave the company completely under Krim’s control, and TA kept installing executives to police and watch over the production.
decisions. At first this did not disturb Krim because he was still in charge of the creative end—selecting product to endorse or refuse. But as corporate interference grew and grew, in January of 1978, Krim and Benjamin resigned along with UA’s top executives, Eric Pleskow and Bill Bernstein, and CMA’s top agent (talent buyer for UA) Mike Medavoy to form Orion, which immediately affiliated itself with Warner Brothers as it distributor.

The defection of Krim and Benjamin created a loss of confidence in the talent still under contract at UA that had prospered under Krim. Dozens of writers, directors and producers signed at letter directed at TA stating their displeasure in losing Krim and Benjamin. But TA was adamant in controlling its investment. TA ignored the talent’s concerns and installed Andy Albeck, UA’s former international distribution executive, as president of UA. Albeck had not only the extremely difficult task of preventing the exodus of UA’s remaining talent—most notably Woody Allen, who had worked with absolute freedom under Krim because of his modest budgets and ability to deliver before deadline—but additionally he was in the difficult position to deliver the next wave of auteur-driven blockbusters that had become the impossible norm of the system. Thus, it was Albeck’s UA, not Krim and Benjamin’s, that opted for the next film project of the director of the much-talked-about and greatly anticipated, The Deer Hunter (1978).

By 1978, Michael Cimino had only made one other feature, Thunderbolt and Lightfoot (1974), for UA with Clint Eastwood’s production company, Malpaso. Before that, he had been a director of television commercials, but his screenwriting credits were impressive with Magnum Force, (1973) and Silent Running (1972). Cimino initially wanted his next work to be his own written version of The Fountainhead by Ayn Rand.118 UA was definitely interested in Cimino, but was not interested in Rand’s The Fountainhead. Cimino had also been working on something called The Johnson County War about Wyoming cattle-barons slaughtering their
immigrant competition. UA did not want to invest in a Western, but Cimino assured UA that the film’s focus would be more on the scale of a war picture or social-drama, and since *The Deer Hunter* was being promoted heavily as one of the greatest social commentaries on war films ever made, UA took the leap and contracted Cimino on September 25, 1978 to make *The Johnson County War*.

While Warner Brother’s *Superman* (1978) cleaned up in December of 1978, UA was still waiting for its largest projects to be completed: The Bond film, *Moonraker* (1979) and Coppolla’s *Apocalypse Now*, (1979), both of which were already costing the company over $30 million.119 UA’s lackluster line-up of 1978 features made them adamant that Cimino’s film be ready for a December release in 1979. To meet this release, *The Johnson County War*, now retitled, *Heaven’s Gate*, was to begin shooting in Glacier National Park, Montana in April and be ready for a final cut in October. Because of UA insistence on such a short timeline, Cimino’s lawyers demanded he be released from any future needs to go over-budget to meet this deadline. Additionally, they demanded the title to officially be “Michael Cimino’s Heaven’s Gate” —a branding practice established by Kubrick and Lean who had collectively won 38 oscars by 1978. UA was reluctant to agree, but as the film began shooting, *The Deer Hunter* won five Academy awards (for sound, editing, supporting actor (Walken), best direction and best picture).120 The popularity of *The Deer Hunter* bolstered UA’s investment in Cimino and they agreed to the terms and title.121

Cimino agreed to a budget of just over $11 million to complete the film, but by July, he had already spent that. It became clear that there was no way the film would be released in December, and Cimino was protected by contract from any penalty. When UA pushed to take over the film, Cimino kept threatening to jump to another studio. UA grew tired of Cimino’s
threat, and simultaneously called his bluff and tested the film’s marketability at the same time. They attempted to partner with Warner Brothers and Fox. Both immediately assessed the accumulating expenses and declined the offer. They also pitched the film to Cimino’s former distributor for The Deer Hunter, EMI, which also eventually refused determining that the film was going to cost over $30 million by the end of post-production. UA had proven to Cimino that he was stuck with UA, and vice versa.

As Heaven’s Gate passed the $20 million mark, UA debated on whether to continue with the film or take the loss. Steven Bach approached three possible strategies based on earlier historical examples: First, there was the Cleopatra option: Let it run its course and see what happens; Then, the Apocalypse Now option: Try and control and contain it; and finally, the Queen Kelly option: Shelve it and take the loss. The potential loss was too great for the last option, The Apocalypse Now model was tempting because although Cimino had beaten Apocalypse Now to the screen with his own war film, the wait for Apocalypse had paid off in the artistic venue by sharing the Palme d’Or with Volker Schlondorf’s The Tin Drum at Cannes. The middle option would unlikely be effective for Heaven’s Gate as Bach himself reasoned:

Somehow, after Cannes, the inappropriateness of the Apocalypse model had become clearer. Francis [Ford Coppola] had responded to pressure not merely as an artist but because his own property as well as his career was at stake. He had had failures before and knew he might again. These anxieties had brought Apocalypse Now to completion and Francis to his sense. Not only did Cimino have no property invested, but his profit participation in Heaven’s Gate seemed inviolate because of the “no penalties” Christmas release clause, which had never been binding on him, but perhaps was on UA, even though it was now meaningless. Cimino had not yet been humbled by critics or
audiences; he had no Finian’s Rainbow or Rain People on his resume, and if his certitude that he was making a picture to rank with The Birth of a Nation was an act, it was fooling a lot of people [. . .] Cimino’s confidence was monumental enough that it had succeeded so far in numbing an entire corporation. (Bach 255)

Bach lays important groundwork, here, for the integration of failure that articulates itself throughout any auteur’s career. But it also intimates that the core of Heaven’s Gate’s overspending was Cimino’s lack of regulation from a company desperate to maintain a crumbling amalgamation of personal auteurist filmmaking and expensive investment in blockbuster filmmaking—a model that was always searching for the fastest, easiest, and ultimately largest market, or, put another way, the lowest common denominator. The auteur, in short, was clearly becoming less and less bankable, as the blockbuster became paramount above all consideration of aesthetic merit.

UA opted to let Cimino run its course and hope for the best. Cimino finished production in October of 1979, and, as was already obvious, would not be ready for December. UA pushed the film into next year’s December slot. By May of 1980 Cimino finally delivered a first cut of the film. It was over five hours long, the final battle scene itself was an hour and a half. Cimino was pressured by UA’s David Field and Bach to finish the film at a contractual length of between two and three hours at a budget of $25 million. Cimino begged to be fired, but was reminded that UA would sue him and that would end his career. Cimino agreed to rush production and negotiated with UA that if he could finish on time, then he could film his Harvard prologue and Newport yacht epilogue that he conceived as essential to understanding the scope of the main character in the film. UA agreed, but Jerry Greenberg was called in to cut down the
film. Cimino's energy to fight UA’s demands was waning. He was burning out with the battle of completing the film his way.

On November 18, 1980 *Heaven’s Gate* made its critical premiere. The reviews were savage. Too long, too boring. The critical subtext: Too artistic. Cimino formally requested to Andy Albeck to cancel the official opening of the film on November 21 and to allow him to recut and shorten the film. Albeck allowed Cimino to do so, but the damage had already been done. The impossible anticipation of a much-gossiped-about abuse of creative control and spending had cemented itself in critical reception. Vincent Canby of the New York Times labelled it an “unqualified disaster.” Pauline Kael disliked it as she had *The Deer Hunter*, but turned her personal attack less this time at Cimino and more on UA’s abandonment of the film. She said that “if the company had thought that he critics were wrong, they would have put millions in advertising and they might have recouped on the picture [...] But [UA] did not believe in *Heaven’s Gate* and that is why they listened to the press” (quoted in Balio 341).

The $40 million loss and pages and pages of bad press triggered a private negotiation with MGM owner, Kirk Kerkorian, to sell UA. Kerkorian had already made a preemptive deal to TA to buy UA when he was forced to divest his stock in Columbia and had already dismantled MGM’s distribution arm and sold off its library. Cimino released his ninety-minute cut that spring to dismal reception. The damage had been done. The money lost, UA’s brand tarnished. TA agreed to sell UA to MGM Film Company in May of 1981. Unlike *Heaven’s Gate*, TA made out quite well financially. It had paid $185 million for UA in 1967, Kerkorian paid $320 million for UA in 1981. Transamerica made a significant profit while *Heaven’s Gate* was directly blamed for the fire sale of UA.
For decades to follow, it was easier for critics and historians to blame Cimino for the abandonment of the new auteurist cinema instead of the lax antitrust laws under Reagan or the general deregulation of the financial boundaries of blockbuster spending. It became quicker to claim that auteurism was simply a victim of its own arrogance and/or navel-gazing and resign filmmaking to being able to either make blockbusters or not.\footnote{122} It is forever Heaven’s Gate, or more specifically the full auteurist title that the director demanded, Michael Cimino’s Heaven’s Gate that remains not only the singular epitaph of UA, but also becomes the auteurist failure \textit{par excellance} of all the commercial failures that eclipses so many other failures of his contemporary New Hollywood auteurs.

But in truth it was much more than arrogance that dismantled the faith in auteurist cinema. In Steven Bach’s personal memoir of the turbulent history of Heaven’s Gate, Bach strangely defends and respects Cimino’s authorial intentions. As he begins:

I believe [that] Michael Cimino intended [. . .] to create “a masterpiece,” a work of lasting art. His certainty that he was doing so conditioned that history and much of the behavior of those around him. He did not set out to destroy or damage a company but believed he would enrich it, economically and aesthetically. Cimino implied [. . .] that judgement should be tempered by a consideration of intentions, and surely the pursuit of perfection is an honorable, if expensive, goal. But just as surely perfection implies discipline, and there can be no art without it. [. . .] the auteurs and artists whose assiduous pursuit of final cut or this or that other contractual advantage is a meaningless, even destructive luxury unless accompanied by the salutary force of discipline which no union, management, or conglomerate can impose. Like art, it comes from within. (415-416)
This is a perfect example of how the studio system configured itself as insulated from the auteur. Bach’s claim that the auteur ignored the financial restrictions of a budget as we have seen over and over does not immediately determine an aesthetic, nor a commercial, nor a critical failure. Bach’s insists that Cimino lacked the classical discipline that was expected to be internal to the auteur. But in fact, it was as much a failure of UA’s regulation than Cimino’s lack of personal governance that drives Bach’s narrative. He continues to link Cimino’s lack of discipline to the inherent failures of the film itself. The lack of innate human discipline, according to Bach, produces still-born, unsympathetic characters, and meticulously crafted but ultimately empty visuals. He continues:

I think it likely that audience and critical perception of Heaven’s Gate as a failure (in America anyway) came not only from awareness of the scandalously undisciplined method of its manufacture but also from a deeper more disturbing failure of discipline in the picture itself. Not only the filmmaker but the film too was “out of control” [. . .] The “look” of the things subsumed the sense of the thing and implied a callous or uncaring quality about its characters for whom the audience was asked to care more than the film seemed to [. . .] The larger failure of Heaven’s Gate is not that the “golden string” finally stretched to an irrecoverable $44 million [. . .] but that it failed to engage audiences on the most basic and elemental human levels of sympathy and compassion, and this failure is finally cardinal. (416)

Here Bach tries to make sense of Cimino’s failure by moving beyond its deficit. But, for Bach, it is a difficult leap. Bach, to some degree fairly, equates the critical awareness of Cimino’s blatant overspending and arrogance with that of Heaven’s Gate’s characters. Yet he eschews the anticipation of failure created by the gossip and hype surrounding the project. While it is true
that Cimino had chosen very unforgivable characters—a rich Harvard graduate “slumming” in the West, a death-list hitman, and a madam that trades sexual favors for cattle—the real disappointment in the film was founded by the persistent leaking to the press of the film’s cost—a cost that would not permit less than perfect cinematography and narrative construction, never mind flawed characters.

Just like critics and audiences could not sympathize with a Harvard man playing at being a cowboy who ends up indifferent on a yacht in Newport at the end of the film, there was little chance that the film could live up to a visual or narrative promise at the then exorbitant cost of $44 million. Bach is not entirely blind to this anticipation based on a price tag as he turns his questioning of Cimino’s lack of discipline to the nature of the blockbuster industry itself. He continues:

Perhaps there is something about the movie business itself, the industry as it is constituted today, that mitigates against the kind of humanism that might have transformed Heaven’s Gate from an essay in exploitation to what John Gardner called at various times “moral” or generous” fiction. Perhaps the condition in which careers are forged and films constructed partake so little of those qualities that we should not expect to find films imbued with them. But occasionally we do, and that is what justifies continuing to make them. (417)

Bach’s meditation on Heaven’s Gate is deeply pent up with a certain executive guilt over Cimino as an auteurist pariah in an industry whose costs are escalating beyond practical means. While Bach is making a very humanist argument within an unapologetically industrial condition, he still maintains that Cimino’s failure belongs solely to the psycho-biographical director and that this failure is reflected in the film itself. In Bach’s story, Cimino’s lack of internal discipline
caused the failure of Heaven’s Gate. But Bach’s questioning of the possibility of classical humanism in contemporary blockbuster filmmaking provides a counterargument to his own argument of Cimino’s lack of discipline.

Embedded in Bach’s own retelling is the effect of the transition in management of UA of which he was directly a part of. The failure of Heaven’s Gate is implicit in the anticipation of UA for a profitable auteurist cinema at the close of the seventies—an anticipation that should have been moderated by the success of Lucas and Spielberg. The warning signs of investing in mavericks within such an industrial model of inflated spending on movies to ensure maximum revenues were already obvious. Auteurist cinema was re-dividing itself into either a commercial brand or a personal artistic project. On one end, there was a clear commercial progression of the Lucas and Spielberg brand in films like The Empire Strikes Back (1980) and Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981). On the other end, there was an internalization and perfecting of small, manageable budgets for personal features like Raging Bull (1980) and subsequent Woody Allen films, who rejoined Krim at Orion after his contract was over at UA. The risks according to Bach was due to a failure of the independent producer as a financial solution for distributors. As he puts it: “Independent production on a laissez-faire basis—that is, without authentic producers—was breaking down as a reliable method of production” (Bach 308). The implication here is that the method organized by Krim and Benjamin had vanished. But UA historian, Tino Balio rightly corrects Bach in that Krim and Benjamin would not have allowed the film to fail that easily. He compares Heaven’s Gate under TA to George Stevens’s expensive flop, The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965) under Krim and Benjamin. He says:

It is idle to speculate what Krim might have done either to discipline [Cimino] or salvage the picture. We can note, however, that although Krim and Benjamin did not “discipline”
George Stevens during the production of *The Greatest Story*, the company devised a marketing plan to recoup a significant portion of the costs. And because UA had such an impressive lineup of pictures at the time, any loss on *The Greatest Story* could not destabilize the company. TA’s guidelines were ineffective in handling *Heaven’s Gate* it turned out, and when the conglomerate finally realized this, it sold the company. The decision resulted in the disbanding of a once proud motion picture company. It also resulted in less competition in the motion picture business. Less competition means fewer options for independent producers and also for the people who ultimately have to foot the bills—the moviegoers. (346)

If anything, the blame game surrounding *Heaven’s Gate* shows that neither the auteur nor the system are exclusively accountable for any single failure. Rather, it is the foreclosure of the spaces of negotiation and alternate possibilities that always disrupts the flow of aesthetic vision and both authorial and commercial intention—as well as all the effective compromises attached to them during their evolution—into the delivery systems and access portals provided by the always multiplying media streams of Hollywood. For the system, a hands-off approach to management is as dangerous as too much studio involvement. For the auteur, complete artistic cooperation with the system is as destructive as absolute freedom from the system. Neither extreme on either side can ever concretely explain the nature of failure. Instead, the nature of each failure is stirred around and around the repetitions of the anticipation of its reception, and, then, how that failure is reintegrated into new anticipations and so on. As a figure of reception, Cimino is far from being emblematic of either the maverick or copycat, of resistance or integration, but like most cinematic authors is a specific mixture of both. One can find facets of each figure on the surface of *Heaven’s Gate*. As a maverick, Cimino’s brand takes the blame for
destroying the picture’s financing corporation with an unwavering dedication to its aesthetic vision. But as a cinematic integrator, he married various western and social genres (just like Griffith did), and represented a challenging—and often stunning—piece of cinematographic splendor that looked past the banality of the human condition to find a natural, ordinary world being ravaged because of pure pettiness and greed—a critique of manifest destiny as a permit for the brutality of creating a caste system in a supposedly free America. Somehow this critique missed its mark with so many similar auteurist critiques that preceded it. Much of the stigma of *Heaven’s Gate* could be written off to bad timing. Regardless, at least from the maverick position, it will always be remembered as a film that failed on its auteur’s own terms.

Auteurland: American Zoetrope and *One from the Heart*

Cimino and *Heaven’s Gate* had taken the brunt of the anticipated failure of auteurism when so many had expected it to land earlier upon *Apocalypse Now*. One would expect that Coppola would have taken precautions with this near miss. But instead, with the narrow and slippery triumph of *Apocalypse*, Coppola surprisingly doubled down on his auteur status, and risked his entire personal fortune by purchasing Hollywood General studios for $6.7 million on March 25, 1980. His vision for the ten-and-a-half-acre studio, which had been mostly dormant since *I Love Lucy* had filmed there, was to have the run-down studio renovated with an additional $5 million dollars and, then, develop a new form of electronic cinema that would utilize high-density video and satellite technology to deliver the new American Zoetrope Studio’s product directly into future living rooms that would be equipped with high-density receivers. Coppola’s prediction that not only would most of the film experience take place in
the home, but also that digital technology would ultimately replace film is indeed eerie to those readers that now stream his features instantly in HD at home. However, at the time, Coppola’s investment in “electronic cinema” was difficult to grasp from the industry’s point of view. The industry saw the new videocassette recording technology and/or satellite transmissions only as an outsider’s potential for copyright infringement.

In addition to Coppola’s promise to produce an alternative technology, he also promised to complete a full slate of Zoetrope pictures by 1982. This was a big claim since Coppola had already spent all his money purchasing the studio. Because of the growing distrust of auteurist cinema as a marketable commodity culminating in the upcoming Heaven’s Gate, it was extremely short-sighted to think that the financial institutions and distribution companies were going to commit either of Coppola’s promises. Auteurist cinema had clearly moved to the brand names of Spielberg and Lucas, so Coppola’s attempt to preserve autonomy by owning and controlling his own studio was a near impossible goal—not only because of the preventative and exorbitant cost of making a film in the eighties, but because Coppola’s auteurism—a maverick controlling a studio—had become a contradiction. The hypocrisy with Coppola was that his quest for creative autonomy was at odds with his willingness to become the industry. While it can be argued that Coppola’s experience with the distrustful executives at UA mixed with the growing abandonment of Coppola’s auteurist model for the blockbuster successes of Spielberg and his old protégé Lucas, the clear purpose behind Coppola’s desire to own a studio was defensive—to establish some sort of a safety zone for his autonomy.

However, Coppola’s investment could not have made at a worse time in the industry. Here again, we can draw from Jon Lewis’s study of Coppola, who gives a fantastic historical account of Coppola’s “bad timing” in purchasing Hollywood General in 1980. Lewis points out
four pivotal contemporary events that foreshadow Zoetrope Studio’s imminent failure, which reflected the on-going trends of conglomeration and blockbuster production that either complicated or outright impeded Zoetrope’s success. First, there is the relaxation of the government’s antitrust position concerning studio ownership exemplified by mogul, Kirk Kerkorian’s purchase of Columbia stock on April 29, 1979. Kerkorian had already purchased MGM from Time Inc and Seagram’s Edgar Bronfman in 1969 via a forced sale from buying 40 percent of MGM’s stock. After the sale, he liquidated most of MGM’s assets to return his capital, including selling off MGM’s domestic distribution rights to UA and its international rights to Cinema International, which was jointly owned by MCA-Universal and Paramount. By doing this, Kerkorian had invisibly vertically integrated MGM with three of the majors. The following decade, Kerkorian sold off a percentage of his MGM stock to purchase 19 percent of Columbia Pictures Industry (CPI), adding to the six percent he already owned. With this move, Kerkorian became the major stockholder of both MGM and CPI. The move to own 24 percent of CIP’s stock drew attention from the Justice Department and initiated antitrust action. But unlike the 1948 decree, the defense proved that Kerkorian’s stockholding was not necessarily interfering in the production policies of the studios—ownership did not directly mean control. Having argued his way past the suit, on September 29, 1980, Kerkorian moved to purchase another 11 percent of CPI’s stock and entered another bitter lawsuit with Columbia’s production team who hoped to block Kerkorian’s takeover. Although poised to win, Kerkorian’s MGM Grand Hotel suffered a major fire disaster and Kerkorian agreed to be bought out by CIP, to drop the suit, and to not buy any more CPI stocks for ten years. Kerkorian continued to pursue takeovers of Twentieth Century Fox and Disney proving that the new conservative government
had grown indifferent to antitrust laws in Hollywood.\textsuperscript{123} It was players like Kerkorian that purchased studios, not auteurs like Coppola.

Lewis’s second and third historical markers were two attempts to get ahead of new technologies in the industry—a strike and a lawsuit against the emergence of the pay-television markets like HBO, and the videocassette markets of Sony and Matsushita. In fall of 1980, the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) went on strike to secure better contracted wages and proprietary rights for the quickly growing ancillary markets of pay television and videocassettes. The studios were forced to hammer out relationships with these markets just like the arrival of television in the forties and fifties. As Lewis describes it, “SAG’s strike over future box office revenues had an ironic and unanticipated effect. the strike, organized to call attention to a potential inequity in profit distribution, forced the studios to move more quickly than they had planned to establish control over pay television and prerecorded videocassettes” (31). In part motivated by the actor’s strike, Universal and Disney filed suit against Sony attempting to establish copyright control over Sony’s Betacam technology. Back in the early sixties, Sony had offered to develop their technology with Universal, who had turned them down cold. Sony used this offer as leverage to the suit claiming that the studios had had their chance to be involved in the market, but had missed the boat. In their defense, Universal and Disney claimed that the technology Sony had offered them in the 1960s was much more bulky and industrial than the smaller, home-based models on the contemporary market. Judges sided at first with Universal and Disney claiming that Sony was indeed engineering a means of duplication of the studio’s intellectual property, but Sony would appeal these decisions indefinitely throughout the decade complicating the laws surrounding the videocassette market. Coppola’s “new electronic cinema” was most likely viewed as another unwanted competitor to the studios in the light of these legal
actions. Coppola’s promise for a new form of electronic cinema seemed in favor of the future promised by these markets. The studios were unwilling to embrace the technological advancement until they had determined their percentage of it. Once again, Coppola was ahead of his time, but not in a good way.

Finally—and for me, most importantly—Lewis argues that the demise of AIP—the great exploitation-based testing ground for so many of the new auteurs—was proof that the very concept of the studio as a solitary, insulated space of controlling production was itself vanishing from the Hollywood construct. As Lewis contends: “The consolidation of power by the six major film studios in the early 1980s is further evinced in the story of the demise of American International Pictures” (33). I would add to this that the nostalgia for such an alternative studio that grounded itself entirely on zero-budget, anti-blockbuster exploitation and sensationalism not only predicted the failure of Zoetrope Studios, which could be conceived of as an auteurist version of the exploitation production company, but actually AIP’s reluctant abandonment of its exploitation mission statement turned away from “low-culture” methods of filmmaking handing them over to the big-budget films of Lucas and Spielberg.  

By the end of the 1970s, AIP’s films were considered anachronistic to the big-budget, high-concept film, and there was little exhibition space left available to them. On July 17, 1979, chairman, Samuel Z. Arkoff was forced to merge with Filmways—another small private production company—to expand its capital base to remain competitive. Arkoff wanted to continue shooting exploitation films after the merger, but the new partners at Filmways wanted to pursue “prestige” pictures. Filmways executive Robert Bloch discovered that Arkoff had overstated AIP’s assets during the merger, and Bloch used this as leverage to get Arkoff to resign from his own company. Arkoff had left behind three pictures for Filmways: The Amityville
Horror, Love at First Bite, and Brian De Palma’s controversial Dressed to Kill. Filmways stalled on releasing these productions and continued to trim the budget, but as it assessed its growing debt, Filmways not only backed away from exploitation but remained uncertain on funding prestige pictures. They fired their two senior executives, Raphael Etkes and Jeff Young, who had lined up Arthur Penn’s comeback Four Friends, Milos Foreman’s Ragtime, De Palma’s arguable masterwork, Blow Out, Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner and Sergio Leone’s Once Upon a Time in America—to name a few. Unable to commit to any type of picture, by the end of 1980, Filmways was over $10 million in debt. Arkoff, who had retained his stock in the merger, had the last laugh as the company was bought over by Arthur Krim’s company, Orion, who then divested the company’s assets, retired the Filmways name, and sold off Arkoff’s last productions, Amityville Horror, Love at First Bite and Dressed to Kill—all of which did quite well at the box office for other companies.

Why I consider this such an important event for Coppola above Lewis’s other events is that AIP’s exploitation films had been misread as outdated when, in truth, they had been absorbed by both the blockbuster and the auteurist film. Coppola had clearly lost touch with what he had inherited from his early years at AIP—to do more with less. Up until purchasing Zoetrope Studios, Coppola had managed to create powerful personal pictures because he had understood the exploitative and spectacular dimension of his earlier films, and had been able to do so risking not only other people’s money, but as in the case of Apocalypse Now, also his own. The two Godfather films had used the genre picture as a familiar foundation to make larger critical and aesthetic statements. The smaller, more private film, The Conversation, had turned the paranoia of the popular political film inward upon its own narrative to question the propriety of voyeurism inherent in cinema as well as to question the necessity of its invasion into private
lives. Even *Apocalypse Now* utilized the propaganda of war cinema to evoke a serious deconstruction of its maddening justifications. At the core of these “auteurist” pictures, there was not only a reinvestment in cinema as spectacle but of a consciousness that was curious of that spectacle just like the Godardian paradox that we find in De Palma that adored and rejected existing cinematic tropes.

Coppola had lost sight of this meta-cinematic consciousness and thus misrepresented his own auteurism as a pure maverick, refusing to negotiate with the system in any way. In a Wellesian fashion, he rejected every type of audience anticipation choosing to continue making a film for an audience of one, himself, but his own tastes had become indiscriminate and unclear. Coppola had resisted the immediacy of childlike tropes unlike his protégé, Lucas, as too shallow for auteurism. For Coppola, the auteurist had to always change the system with every film, but into what? Coppola also refused to journey into the seedier avenues—the perversions—of spectacle afforded by exploitation cinema like Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* or almost all De Palma. Instead, his stubborn adherence to what the studios were blacklisting under the now-derogatory “auteurist cinema” alongside his privatization of insulated autonomy with the purchase of Zoetrope Studio was not only the rejection of the blockbuster spectacle, but also that of exploitation cinema.

Coppola for all extensive purposes had cut himself loose from all the material conditions that underpinned contemporary filmmaking. With complete independence from the system, Coppola was determined to create a spectacular cinema of the quotidian, of the mundane. He was to imbue such normal, everyday, ordinary life with a nostalgic investment and a return to the Classical studio system of old, the result of which would be the next progressive step of a victorious auteurism that not only acted as a postscript to the New Hollywood, but would
become the future of filmmaking in the form of an electronic revolution that heralded the eventual end of celluloid.

Of course, his first Zoetrope picture, *One from the Heart* (1982), did none of those things. Having purchased the studio by borrowing on his future films, Coppola was hard pressed to receive either a loan or a distribution deal for his next promise of a masterpiece. In addition, the grandiosity of Coppola’s first promise of an aesthetic masterwork, his second promise was to herald in a new technological approach to cinema, which is what most likely soured the studio’s interest more so than his arrogance. Coppola’s electronic method on the film generated from the script via video technology a storyboard that could be “pre-edited” so that a tight and shooting schedule could effectively lower production costs. The studios, after their issues with SAG and their suits against Sony, who was helping Coppola develop this technology, were unimpressed with Coppola’s technology. As Lewis puts it:

Coppola’s emphasis on technologies that might force the other studios to retool or regroup focused a kind of industrywide attention on *One from the Heart* that the film could ill afford. Additionally, the film and the technological revolution it seemed to herald came at a particularly bad time for the studios. They had just begun to deal with the “revolutionary” videocassette and cable television technologies (and markets) and thus felt particularly threatened by talk about yet another new, new Hollywood. . . . And Coppola’s hype that *One from the Heart* was a kind of trial run for *his* new technology just made matters worse. No studio wanted to fund Zoetrope’s research and development without a stake in the technologies’ future use and revenues. (55-56)

Despite the lack of corporate interest, Coppola finally found a backer in Paramount’s Barry Diller who had funded the *Godfather* pictures. Diller offered no completion deal and no cash up
front, but instead he would issue six hundred prints, and would spend $4 million to advertise the film. This left Coppola hunting for completion costs. Coppola began shooting without funding on February 2, 1981 in hopes that generating at least part of a picture would bring backers to the table. The strategy worked to a certain degree. Chase Manhattan who had turned him down at first, loaned him $8 million, then another $4 million, and another $2 million. Smaller personal loans from Diller and Michael Eisner helped. And a Canadian investor, real estate tycoon, Jack Singer, threw in a final $3 million based on Coppola’s past successes. But Coppola, instead of rushed the film to completion with Singer’s money, reshoot the opening credits.

To complete the film, Coppola returned to Diller for more money. Diller had been increasingly disappointed with the dailies and with Coppola’s cavalier attitude towards his financiers. Diller refused to further subsidize the film, and pulled Paramount out of the distribution deal. A cascade of bad press close to Cimino and Heaven’s Gate followed, and Coppola was left scrambling to find a distributor for his $27 million picture. With the stigma of being dropped by Paramount, Warners pitched a deal to distribute the movie if Coppola would shoot and hand over the rights to his next-slated production, The Outsiders, which seemed a considerably easier film to market and recoup costs. Universal offered to distribute, but only if it controlled all ancillary rights to the film. Finally, Coppola settled with the modest offer from Columbia that opened the film at the start of 1982 in a few private theaters across the country. The reviews were savage, and by April the film was playing in only one theater and Columbia finally pulled the film. Coppola, now in massive personal debt, put Zoetrope up for auction that same year.

One of the fundamental issues of Coppola’s brief stint as a studio mogul was that he had forfeited his ability as an auteur to negotiate with the system by trying to become the system.
The theory of *One from the Heart*'s failure was that Coppola never had to perpetually pitch it from inception. Because Coppola ignored the standard Hollywood process of pre-production, the film never had a clear definition as to what it was, only what it was supposed to promise as an advancement of the Coppola maverick. Thus, *One from the Heart* resisted description, and, in turn, resisted being marketed. Put another way, it was always a confused act of blind auteurism. The film claimed to be a revolutionary piece of technological advancement, but no one, including Coppola, was ever clear about what the film intended to say. The film was emptied out by its own hype. Pauline Kael’s criticism that the film felt “like it was being directed from inside a trailer” was perhaps the most prescient. Coppola’s film had become so focused on the idea of authorship as antagonistic to the structural foundations—both financial and material—of filmmaking that he forgot to imbue those structures with any sort of substance. Coppola as an auteur had finally fulfilled the critical anticipation that auteurism had finally championed style over substance.

The fusion of stylization with exploitation and sensational genre pictures that married auteurism with the blockbuster, the distillation of this fusion into its most childlike and digestible form and the abandonment of its meta-critical elements, the re-division of this accessible “high concept model as separate from the overwrought, over-stylized navel-gazing of the expensive personal prestige picture and, finally, the impossibility of alternative means of creative independence: These thresholds are, perhaps, the most directly auteurist that this treatise has so far yet to engage—at least from the vantage point of most popular and critical histories of a particular post-Nouvelle Vague, New American Hollywood auteurism. For these histories, these thresholds—between *Easy Rider* and *E.T.* more or less—are where most discussions of
Hollywood auteurism begin and end: The New American auteur “begins” from a foundation of admiration for the European auteur of *Cahiers du Cinema*’s adoration, followed by the varied arguments over the auteur between Sarris’s hagiography and Kael’s cynicism, and then finally the Hollywood auteur is actualized in vacuums created during the restructuring of the Classical system during a period of conglomeration and expanded ancillary markets. The same auteur construction “ends” with the escalating cost of generating blockbuster after blockbuster, and when each auteur is finally exhausted self-promoting itself after each subsequent film is expected to outdo, outsell and outlast the preceding one, an inherent failure is recognized within the impossibility of each auteur maintaining the prestige picture under such popcorn-driven ethics. In most cases, the industry moves on unscathed.\(^{127}\) The auteur is either marginalized, or is obscured in it complacency to remain a blockbuster’s brand name. And thus, the myth of art impossibly existing in the socioeconomics of the blockbuster industry is not only preserved but intensified.

What is missing from this historical stretch of cinematic authorship is that alongside the escalating monetary investment in the blockbuster model, there was also the emergence of film studies as an academic discourse—which we have partially witnessed in our chapter on De Palma—that had evolved past technical training and historical appreciation. The film schools that generated so many of the New American auteurs were small underfunded departments that primarily acted as spaces for people to study film as a trade outside of the industry, and to hold appreciative discussions between peers. By the eighties, film studies had moved past the rhapsodies of critical journalism and editorials, and had grown into an intense polemical field that debated the value of film as a cultural force.\(^{128}\) Film was no longer “misunderstood” as a series of artistic victories of mostly white male individuals against the corporate system. The
notion of authorship as a means of creative control and authority had given way to studies of how cinema as a cultural object enforced specific ideologies and created moviegoers as subjects. Thus, questions as to why specifically the figures of Cimino and Coppola were made scapegoats and pariahs of the industry were tabled, or flat out dismissed as an obvious by-product of the arrogance implicit in such a romantic configuration of the auteur. To a certain degree, the new academic discourse held the auteur in contempt as much, if not more so, as the conglomerate blockbuster system did. In effect, the auteur ceased to be bankable investment critically as well as economically.

Cinematic authorship within the fully repaired and functional engine of conglomerate Hollywood of the 1980s forward—what some have called the “New New Hollywood”—had become an extremely complex—and to some extent, empty—figure that navigated itself within a market reduced to intellectual property rights—an auteur as a trademark—and a marketing promise—an auteur as a brand. The cinematic author had to fulfill a promise in concert with industrial monetary expectations and multiplex-driven audience anticipations—not only of singular pieces of art, but, now, of an ever-expanding nexus of ancillary markets and advertising. Regardless of how much of the author’s rhetorical configuration was delivered by the corporate methods of scattershot packaging of the latest mega-hit or blockbuster, or refocused as an alternative to those blockbusters that constructed the figure as an aesthetic choice at the multiplex or on the shelf of the video rental store, the auteur had necessarily become both the modernist maverick—promising something different or new in cinema—and the postmodern pastiche—finding new paths in cinema while also promising comfort and familiarity in older cinematic grammars of genre and style. The cinematic author—still loosely defined as a complex nexus of multiple artistic intentions and supplemental inputs—would find it harder to
vacillate between the two figures, and would have to exist as a mediator between these figures. Additionally, it would have to manage its bifurcated position strategically to not be absorbed completely into the pipelines of the “nameless” conglomerate output. It would have to cooperate and contradict at the same time. To maintain a recognizable resistance—to survive at all—the auteur and its failures would have to become intentionally quixotic.
Chapter 7: The Quixotic: Terry Gilliam and the Failures of Blockbuster Fantasy

_The success of the films [of Spielberg and Lucas] is only comprehensible when one assumes a widespread desire for regression to infantilism, a populace who wants to be constructed as mock children._

—Robin Wood

Both the figures of the maverick and the copycat have survived well into the blockbuster era, but only by way of a rigorous reformulation of their commercial obligations. What either figure once represented had to come to terms directly with the fact that the aesthetic stakes of creative autonomy had become prescriptive and had changed drastically since the New Hollywood of global conglomeration had fully established itself. In many cases, filmmakers struggled for a balance between being recognized as an aesthetic force in cinema via the modernist maverick, and, on the other end, being a partially subservient surrogate of an older creativity that could also deftly channel historically proven cinematic grammars into effective new “high-concept” films. For many filmmakers and critics after the “golden period” of 1970s auteurism, making films in the New Hollywood had become an aesthetic salvage operation that combed the ruins of Classical Hollywood for the last remnants of cinematic surprise. Such a post-apocalyptic metaphor for the filmmakers of the 1980s forward is unnecessarily dour, but, in a sense, it is appropriate in that it speaks to the need of many filmmakers still wishing to create more provocative films using now outdated classical structures of Hollywood filmmaking to strategically redirect a rhetorical position in an era of filmmaking that was focused on distilling films to their most marketable. While there are arguably many choices of other cinematic figures that could demarcate a divergence from—or an alternative to—Hollywood filmmaking as the twentieth-century lumbered to a close, my interest in Terry Gilliam as a quixotic answer to the schism between the maverick and the copycat has a very pertinent investment: Gilliam’s filmmaking is at once extremely dated as an epic filmmaker of fantasy reminiscent of _Thief of_...
Baghdad (1940) or Journey to the Center of the Earth (1959), and future-oriented as it always posits the imaginative force of cinema as a means of alternate reality and possibility.

If one was to assess his work solely from his millennial interviews, then, there is probably no filmmaker more responsible for unmaking his own films—albeit with a childlike glee mixed with a seasoned arrogance—than Terry Gilliam. By this point in our overview of cinematic authorship, this intentional unmaking should, especially by the time Gilliam began his career, be understood as the norm within any conception of the auteurist process of filmmaking and, thus, considered common practice in general within all avenues of production provided by Hollywood’s methods of international distribution. Gilliam’s particularly combative approach in getting his films made, at first glance, seems to manifest the same, old romantic myth of the auteur—an artist privileging and preserving artistic integrity over the infantilizing of “high concept” filmmaking. But, if anything, Gilliam’s unapologetic use of fantasy in his films on the surface seems to comply with the growing childish demands of commercial filmmaking that emerged at the beginning of the eighties by its immersion into the genre of fantasy. Paradoxically, Gilliam’s fantastic films have always been an uncomfortable fit for blockbuster Hollywood. But why? At first glance, this rejection seems strange because his films resonate with an accessible late-Classical sixties-styles of epic filmmaking, and they operate with fantasy narratives often directed at adults through the language of a lost childhood—a common technique from American Graffiti to E.T. In addition, his films are most often imagined from a very white, middle class cultural source directly akin to Spielberg’s worldview. But Gilliam’s films are far from the Spielberg or Lucas model of fantasy. Rather, they use fantasy as a a fragmented and unsettling force of imagination to disturb the viewer’s private space. Thus, his auteur status is as complicated as his commercial viability. From a very mixed critical
perspective, Gilliam is at once one of the most singular visionaries of post-blockbuster cinema as well as one of the most combative and deservedly marginalized within the contemporary studio system.

Stylistically, his work is unmistakably “auteurist.” His imagery often uses a wide fish-eye lens crammed with a “chaotic balance”—an anamorphic screen cluttered with the “ruins” of pertinent objects that relate to and surround a character’s condition to imply an equally visually-complicated-yet-fractured consciousness. Gilliam constructs a very specific type of fantastic perversity that embeds itself into—instead of psychotically breaking with—reality. Fantasy, to be sure, is Gilliam’s preferred trope, but he does not use this trope to suspend and complicate an underpinning construction of assumed reality that traditionally folds back into reality with a centered and deeper recognition of such reality.130 Instead, it is his ability to destabilize cinema’s ability to construct “safe” fictions within its claims of transparency as a technological apparatus. Defined by its ability to reformulate temporality into said narratives, cinema already has a tenuous position in “reality.” Gilliam’s films always occupy a liminal space between fantasy and reality, favoring neither, to explore an ungrounded level of perception. His protagonists often begin each film representing the potential of fantasy as an alternative to reality and its systems of control, but these alternatives are always quixotic shadows. Social normality as “reality” in Gilliam’s work varies from film to film, but it is almost always perverted at its origins before fantastic elements are be introduced as its supposed remedy. Daily life is always rife with spatial banality and/or unfeeling “rational” systems, and his characters never fit in and/or cooperate with those systems. Their dedication to imagination of their surrounding worlds complicate and challenge those worlds.
Whether it is the oppressive information age bureaucracy of *Brazil* (1985) or *Zero Theorem* (2014), the shattered disbelief of youth in *Time Bandits* (1982) and *Tideland* (2006), or its echo in old age in *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1989) and *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* (2012), the escapist drug fantasies of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1994), or (mis)diagnosed psychosis, delusion and paranoia in *The Fisher King* (1991) and *Twelve Monkeys* (1996), Gilliam always upholds the anti-societal perceptions of his heroes, and creates a cinema of fantasy that is groundless in the foundational cracks of social realities that pretend to be immutable structures of authority and control. From this brief overview of Gilliam’s certain use of the fantastic, it would be easy to draw a parallel between his narratives and their surrounding system of production. At odds within the system are the two supposedly oppositional “realities” of so-called hegemonic blockbuster production, and Gilliam’s “flights of fantasy” as a maverick artist. But we have long since established this oppositional figuration as a repeating myth of cinematic authorship. First and foremost, such an oppositional model would be a misunderstanding of fantasy as a fundamental proponent of the “childish” blockbuster model. Immediately suspect is the assumption that the fantasy genre is a marketable trope in commercial filmmaking. For example, although Spielberg’s *E.T.* and Lucas’s *Star Wars*—and even looking forward to Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009)—contain a great deal of fantastical elements in their sci-fi blockbusters, but the fantasy is always grounded by a clearly defined foundation of realistic sensibility. The supernatural or “fantastic” alien in *E.T.* is aggressively pursued by a curious team of government scientists seeking understanding of the alien, and, in turn, is protected by a single-parent family finding unity and functionality in the surrogate alien sibling. Both antagonists and protagonists construct a realistic mainframe around the fantastic element. Likewise, the fantastic use of “the force” in the *Star Wars* films acts more as a system of faith in
either side’s cause then an unhinged source of indefinable power. The stronger side of “the force” justifies the realistic worth of the either the empire or the rebellion. In direct defiance of a grounded fantasy, Gilliam’s films absolutely refuse to subjugate the fantastic or the imagination to an easily swallowed pill of reality.131

Although Gilliam’s films may “take place” in the most common, most vulgar, societal spaces, the films refuse to post an exit sign to where the film’s narrative reality can be found, and thus refuses the “high concept” of the blockbuster. As Gilliam says of his own approach to cinema as a critique of blockbuster Hollywood:

I think my biggest thing is to change people’s perceptions of things. I want people to look at the world differently all the time. Look at it with fresh eyes. So, don’t accept anything as the way it’s normally sold to you . . . I want to confuse people I think—to make people keep thinking rather than to just sit there quietly and take what’s given to you again and again and again. And that’s what’s happening now. We’re living in a time where movies are more like movies you’ve seen already. It keeps repeating itself. And it’s very reassuring on one level, but I think it has a dulling effect. It gets people not to think anymore…. (Interview for 1998 Midnight Sun Festival)

From a critical standpoint, Gilliam’s approach to his films are clearly stated while never wholly embraced by critical discourse, but in the historical narrative surrounding the market that has funded and produced his films, Terry Gilliam is renowned not as a popular cult director with a definitively singular style and thematic approach, but as a filmmaker famous for not being able to fund or make his films. The battles to complete his films obfuscate the aesthetic valuation,
positive or negative, of his work. What is of specific interest, however, is that this misdirection is instigated and manipulated by Gilliam himself.

This chapter diagnoses Gilliam’s early career up to Brazil as the beginning of Gilliam’s strategic discomfort with the Hollywood system that would continue for the next thirty years of his career. It then tries to chart a balance of thematic consistency and aesthetic progression with and against the socioeconomic conditions that are seemingly alway-already pitted to unravel his work. Gilliam’s cult status in cinema is impressive and well-established, but so is his screed against the institution itself. As inventive and original as his visionary style is, he is equally creative in creating studio films with independent money while excoriating those who fund him. Gilliam has always approached cinema as if it were still stuck in the Hollywood system of the 1960s before the thresholds of New Hollywood that we have already explored occurred—a Hollywood whose productions were accustomed to bloated, runaway budgets, focusing on large epic tales, with Technicolor objects crammed into Vista-Vision cinematography. It was a studio system blithely ignorant of the effect of the Nouvelle Vague and the gritty “accident” of Easy Rider’s success. Gilliam, in many ways, operates with that “failed” Hollywood style of the past as if the conditions of their productions have not changed.

While Gilliam began his artistic career in animation and film in the era of New American auteurism and studio transformation, he may or may not have been influenced by the avant-gardism of the late 1960s and 1970s during his early formative years. For now, let us postulate that rather than developing with the growing blockbuster requirements of the conglomerate studio system, Gilliam instead chose to move backwards—or to remain in place—with the older “failed” system, choosing to be a reputable stylist of the 1960s. In this way he is an acolyte, a copycat. But regardless of whether this thesis is accurate, Gilliam’s stubborn “classical”
approach to filmmaking—from getting a project funded to demanding the final cut of each of his films—has always-already been uncomfortable and out of place in the “post-auteur” age of the blockbuster and all its ancillary markets. This does not presume that his style is a “failed style,” but is, rather, intentionally anachronistic and a strategic point of contention in maintaining the stylistic consistency of his films. In this way, he is one of the loudest of mavericks. Even with this adherence to an earlier aesthetic, Gilliam is still one of the more original and identifiable auteurs working today. So, the real curiosity specific to intentional failure in Gilliam is not his intentional dedication to an outdated style, but is how he navigates the ruins of the Classical system to produce such a fusion of reverence and irreverence, of defiance and compliance, that gets each of his films made. Beyond the strategic humility and resignation of Welles’s maverick, and De Palma’s scatological and/or pornographic revisions of the tentative grand masters of cinema, Gilliam’s method is truly quixotic in that it is always battling some sort of executive blind spot behind a curtain of conglomerate financing, only to discover that the battle was always and already a Gilliam movie in itself—a fantastic clashing of aesthetic and economic forces that may or may not have occurred.

Imagination without Parental Guidance

Gilliam’s obsession throughout his entire career engages with places and conditions of imagination and fantasy within socially restrictive environments. These environments shift from childhood trauma to technological sterility to dystopian possibilities. However, the pervasive nature of the imagination in Gilliam’s constructs is a mode of social resistance—but often uncontrollable and dangerous to the user of that imagination. Without committing to a purely
psycho-biographical argument, this trope clearly has some origin in the biography and economic history of the stubborn director himself. In fact, the slippery slope of studying Gilliam as a quixotic figure is that he has so thoroughly complicated his own history through numerous commentaries, documentaries and memoirs that his opinions of the reasons behind each film’s failure often precede any critical or commercial recognitions of it. Multiple supplements have created a lasting rhetoric of combat against his producers since the “battle of Brazil.” Gilliam and his surrounding group of dedicated cohorts, documenters, biographers, and other sympathetic witnesses have consistently created volumes of articles, books, documentaries, commentaries and other media extras that reiterate Gilliam’s refusal to conform to the Hollywood system. But ironically, and by Gilliam’s own admission time and time again, it is the only system that he is willing to create and function within.132 We will return to this after an overview of how this rhetoric emerged.

Gilliam began as a cartoonist and animator for several magazines in his native U.S. before expatriating himself to the U.K.133 Forming a bond with the team that would become Monty Python’s Flying Circus, Gilliam often worked independently of the rest of the group creating very original comic animations from cut-outs of magazines—an animation style he had developed from early magazine jobs due to very small budgets. Monty Python’s success on television soon led to the troop’s classic comedy film, Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1974), which Gilliam co-directed with Terry Jones. Gilliam and Jones clashed during production. Jones was, according to Gilliam, strictly narrative-based, and moved in a linear fashion from sketch to sketch. Gilliam was entirely design-based conceptually, and clearly contributed more to the “look” of the film, than to the jokes. Regardless, Holy Grail was a great success, and allowed all six members of the troop to pursue other projects.
While Gilliam, to this day, has remained slightly tethered to the comedy troupe in some way or another, Gilliam slowly started to separate his style from the Pythons. His first solo film was the disjointed *Jabberwocky* (1977). Developed from a script with his old *Help!* magazine friend, Charles Aversion and starring fellow Python member, Michael Palin, *Jabberwocky* does not stray far enough from the medieval context of *The Holy Grail*, and, thus, comes off as a redundant second stab at medieval silliness and scatological humor. It does retain much of the gritty cinematographic style borrowed from Pasolini as did *Holy Grail*, but the film is confused as to whether it wants to be a medieval period piece, or a comedy. The “look” of the film points to the future precision of Gilliam’s design and cinematography skills. Watching *Jabberwocky*, a viewer sees the origins of the over-stuffed wide angle lenses, the attention to authenticity in costume—often assembled with found objects surrounding the character—and make-up, and the exaggerated and paranoid close-ups that jar against wide shots that swallow up the characters in dark empty spaces. Gilliam supposedly rendered two cuts of the film: One that played more to the visual style. A second that played up the humor. To his regret, he chose the latter to release. Regardless, the origins of Gilliam’s recurring themes can be spotted even at this early stage, especially with the concept of the *Jabberwock* itself. Based on the Lewis Carroll nonsense poem, the Jabberwock is a monster that is the by-product of a stimulated, overactive language of imagination that defies rational understanding. If Gilliam’s films are anything specific, they are critical investigations into the definition of what makes imagination overactive.

In 1981, Gilliam would find the perfect balance between his collaborations of Python’s absurdism and his worldview of a ruined fantasy. Or more precisely, a balance between his “cluttered” animation style and perpetual return to the fantastic. Developed from a script written by Gilliam and Michael Palin, *Time Bandits* explored the fantasy world and its disillusionment
from the perspective of a ten-year old boy named Kevin. This direct leap to the child’s perspective would continue to resonate throughout everything Gilliam was later to create—most specifically in *Twelve Monkeys* and *Tideland*. Specific to the Gilliam construction of childhood perception is a fully-grown conscience trapped in an ignored body that can doubt and/or be disappointed by most—if not all—of what adulthood has constructed.

*Time Bandit*’s lead character, Kevin, represents a bookish ten-year-old boy ignored by his middle-class, kitchen-gadget-obsessed parents. After being sent to bed for annoying his parents with historical facts about the Greeks while they are watching a game show called “You Bet Your Life!,” Kevin continues to read his history book by flashlight in the darkness of his bedroom. His bedroom is cluttered with toys that all reflect historical artifacts throughout the ages. He is suddenly frightened by a noise. A knight on horseback bursts through his wardrobe, and leaps over his bed. As Kevin ducks and turns, he realizes his bedroom walls are gone, and he is in the middle of an open plain. He watches the knight gallop off, and Kevin finds himself back in his darkened bedroom.

The following night, Kevin expressly nudges his parents to send him to bed even earlier. He is determined to repeat whatever he experienced the night before, dream or not. He is awakened this time by a troop of little people traveling out of his wardrobe. Kevin confronts them, and the troop, at first, is frightened by Kevin’s flashlight. After realizing they are not caught by whomever or whatever is pursuing them, the troop dismisses him to find an exit from the bedroom. The troop pushes against the bedroom wall—the same “wall” that had disappeared the night before to allow the knight to gallop off—and the wall gives way to a long, protracted corridor. Suddenly, a disembodied face surrounded by bright light appears, demanding the troop to “return what they have stolen.” A stunned and panicked Kevin quickly
joins the troop in helping to push the wall down the seemingly never-ending corridor until it falls away into blackness and they plummet down into eternity and escape.

From here, Kevin and the troop, who explain they have stolen the map of time from the Supreme Being to become international robbers, undergo a series of adventures hopping through history. The film very deftly maintains several genres at once. It keeps a comic element throughout (Gilliam relies on his former Python members, John Cleese and Palin for support here), but also raises the film above silliness by developing the fantastic and surreal elements beyond typical sentimentalism of the children film genre. In fact, *Time Bandits* in many ways is disguised as a child’s film. The film explores the (commercially) dangerous experience of a child becoming disillusioned by history and its heroes. In fact, by the end, the film indifferently divorces him from his parents, if not from the larger scope of socio-religious notions of good and evil.

Kevin’s hopscotch through history is ended by the character, Evil, who lures the troop into the realm of ahistorical fantasy—aptly called “The Time of Legends” —by promising them the “most important object in the whole world,” which turns out to not only be an illusion, but an illusion of a complete washer and dryer set. Evil is primarily obsessed with the world’s technology and gadgetry rather than over its history, and, thus, Evil wants the map to rewrite the Supreme Being’s path of historical creation. Evil’s obsession with technology echoes Kevin’s parents’ obsession with gadgetry, but this is not to imply that the film reduces its adults to simply “being evil.” When the Supreme Being appears, and reduces Evil to a pile of smoldering rubble, the Supreme Being, played brilliantly by Sir Ralph Richardson, is revealed to be an older man in a suit, concerned mainly with keeping the world and its history running in a steady, bureaucratic manner. He returns the troop to their original duties as creators of shrubs and minor creature
with a cut in pay backdated to the beginning of time. He then abandons Kevin to “carry on the fight.” When Kevin asks the ultimate ethical question of “why does there have to be Evil?” the Supreme Being mumbles “something about Freewill” and then disappears, returning Kevin to awake in his bedroom in his home.

The bedroom is filled with smoke, and firefighters burst in and rescue him, bring him outside. Kevin’s parents are outside lamenting the loss of their possessions. The firefighters show them a smoldering “roast” burning inside a toaster oven that resembles a leftover “piece of Evil,” that the troop failed to clean up before Kevin was returned to his bedroom. Kevin warns his parents, “Don’t touch it! It’s Evil!” but the parents reach out and touch it anyway. The parents explode and vanish. The firefighter, played by Sean Connery who Kevin had met in his adventures as surrogate father, King Agamemnon, jumps in his truck, says goodbye and drives off leaving Kevin alone in front of his burning house. In the final, famous crane shot, the camera pulls up into the sky from Kevin, out to reveal the Earth, then the universe, which then becomes the map of time itself which is then rolled up and put away. While this ending may be a standard cinematic conceit of the expanded zooming out effect that the world and its universe become the mapped-out narrative of the author-creator, the technique is haunted by the unsettling abandonment of Kevin as a child left abandoned and disillusioned within “reality.”

*Time Bandits* can be read either as a simple child’s fantasy film, or as a treatise on bad parenting, but it resists both reductive readings. Rather, the film concentrates on the positioning of imagination and consciousness within time—historical or not—and the film very specifically leaves open the future of Kevin, and how he interprets this adventure. From a commercial standpoint, leaving the child/hero to “pick up the pieces” of his now parentless world with a burning home was a risky ending for the U.S. release, but despite its very somber and disturbing
ending, the film did remarkably well with both critics and box office. The film established and promised Gilliam as marketable filmmaker with a fusion of spectacular vision and philosophical depth. At this point, very few paid attention to the film’s commentary on the child architect as a force able to question divine authority. And by ignoring this metaphor, the studio system would fail to make a connection between Gilliam’s conception of the Supreme Being—an almost indifferent, distracted bureaucrat—and the studio system itself. This prefiguration of an all-powerful indifference of the powers that be would be what Gilliam would, from here on, configure in advance and then pit himself against in demanding final cut in his films. Whether Gilliam’s perception of the studio system and its executives is fair or not, it is no wonder that his next film would center on that all-powerful bureaucratic world and the consequences of a child-like fantasy that would attempt to maintain that childish fantasy into adulthood.

“Brazil will be on my gravestone”

Gilliam’s perhaps most “critically-approved” contribution to cinema is, for Gilliam, more like an albatross than a cinematic milestone in his career. Gilliam is quoted above in a 2014 Rolling Stone article that has him reflecting thirty-years on his masterpiece, Brazil. The interview, instead of focusing on his then-current film, Zero Theorem—a film that, in a way, is a remake of Brazil with a contemporary revision of virtuality in the information age—or on the much fan-anticipated reunion of Monty Python, focuses, per usual, on Gilliam’s thirty years of frustration of being a filmmaker that has an impossible time getting his films made. Historically and biographically, Brazil would mark the beginning of true critical and cult acclaim for Gilliam as well as the beginning of a career-long status of being unmarketable, combative and a self-
made pariah of the Hollywood system. According to the article, Gilliam’s frustration would seem to stem from the “popularity” of Brazil. This is not entirely unfounded since the film’s critical impact and its cult status in present day conflicts—as it often does—from its initial financial failings and its studio abandonment upon its release.

The concept and scripting of Brazil predated the scripting and production of Time Bandits. As early as 1979, Gilliam had been working on an idea where a main character intentionally escapes from his bureaucratic existence through fantasy. In the late 1970s, Gilliam wrote a ninety-page treatment from an idea that sparked from working on set in the dreary mining town of Port Talbot in Wales. Looking out over the oppressive, soot-covered beaches, Gilliam allegedly heard an upbeat tune, like the theme song of Brazil, over the radio, and was struck on how jarring the disconnect was between the song and the landscape. He worked briefly on another version with his old Jabberwocky collaborator, Charles Alverson. Gilliam then abandoned Alverson’s collaboration—and their friendship—to revise the script with renowned playwright, Tom Stoppard. Before Stoppard’s involvement, Gilliam had only conceived the fantasy segments against a bleak corporate landscape without a true narrative. Gilliam had not focused on what escaping bureaucracy truly meant, and why fantasy would be a preferred space of escape or agency.  

As critic Jack Mathews retells it:

Gilliam had set out to create a gritty metaphor for the bureaucratic 20th-century world we live in, but his original script was mostly a rambling yarn about a man who indulges in a series of elaborate dreams that, in fact, reflect all the fears and dependencies of his real world. Stoppard, whose success as a playwright owes more to his ability with words than images, thought up the idea of having a dead beetle fall into a computer causing a typographical error that sends an innocent
man to his death and starts a chain of events that forces the film’s protagonist to rebel against an unbeatable system. Stoppard spent six months on the four versions he wrote, while never touching the fantasy sequences. From beginning to end, those were the exclusive province of Gilliam (47).

Stoppard added a huge structural element to the main character to be pulled from daydreaming into chasing his dream into the cold, real world of information retrieval, but it is important to mark that the film’s conception began with fantasy, not reality. Gilliam then put finishing touches on the script with his friend, Charles McKeown.

The script’s main character, Sam Lowry, evolves throughout the narrative from a corporate daydreamer into a reluctant revolutionary. Lowry’s fantasy conceives himself as a half-angel, half-knight in shining armor—Gilliam’s frequent nod to the paintings of Bosch and Bruegel. Lowry flies through the beautiful blue-skies—skies that are only seen in fantasy—until he hears his name called by a beautiful, long-haired woman in the skies, and then suddenly he is awakened by his phone ringing. This fantasy reoccurs throughout the film as he chases down his fantasy girl, and battles to rescue her. Despite these escapist moments, Lowry is a very functional worker in the Department of Records. When a man named Buttle is falsely arrested—and subsequent murdered—Lowry is drawn into “correcting” the paperwork surrounding the clerical error. His job is then derailed as he encounters a “real” version of his dream girl, who is a neighbor of Buttle's. He then pursues her by accepting a family promotion to Information Retrieval, working under his new boss, Helpmann, where he encounters a more visceral and internal reality of goings on behind the bureaucracy. He confers with his friend, Jack Lint, who advises Lowry to stick to his job and not get involved with the girl and/or the Buttle fiasco. But Lowry’s obsession with his dream girl turns him into a reluctant revolutionary against the
system. When he tries to erase the real girl from the Department of Records, he is arrested by the Department and tortured by Lint. In the torture chair he imagines his escape, where he reunites with Kim and runs off into the blue skies of the country. The film returns to Lowry seated in the torture chair where Helpmann and Lint realize Lowry has disappeared into a catatonic dream world.

The script’s direct confrontation with the place of imagination in the contemporary world clearly developed the central theme that would permeate all of Gilliam’s future films. It also became the first Gilliam film to directly clash with the industry that refused to produce and market his work unless he cut it down and made the film more upbeat. The studio had contracted Gilliam, per usual, because they saw him as a commercial commodity following the unexpected windfall of *Time Bandits*, and the upcoming 1983 release of Monty Python’s third and final film, *The Meaning of Life*. He had established a money connection with producer, Arnon Milchan, who, in 1982 was financing Scorsese’s *King of Comedy* and Sergio Leone’s epic, *Once Upon a Time in America*, which were two potentially hot films from major auteurs at the time. As they shopped *Brazil* as a negative pickup to the studios, Milchan immediately recognized the stubborn nature of his director. Gilliam absolutely refused to contractually relinquish any control of his concept. Milchan brought the film to Paramount, the Ladd Co., and Twentieth-Century/Fox, all of whom he had worked with before, but all companies demanded control of the film if they did not like what Gilliam delivered. Fox had offered to back the film if Gilliam first directed a sci-fi film called *Enemy Mine*. Doing this film first purportedly would have immediately elevated Gilliam to an A-list director, but Gilliam refused being wholly dedicated to making only films that he had created from the script forward.
Ultimately, Milchan sold *Brazil* to Fox for the international release, and then to Lew Wasserman’s MCA-Universal for the U.S. release. MCA’s president Sidney Sheinberg would oversee the film and drew up the contract. The standard contract at the time with Universal included a clause that enforced the running time of the film to be turned in at final cut between 95 minutes and 125 minutes. Strangely, this clause was omitted in the first signed contract between Milchan, Gilliam and Universal, which is surprising because the approved script by Universal on July 30th, 1983 was 161 pages long, and that would traditionally suggest a running time of two hours and forty-one minutes. However, after the original cut issued internationally by Fox was two hours and twenty-two minutes, Universal convinced Milchan to amend the contract to include the time limit clause. Gilliam had urged Milchan not to do this believing that Universal would use the clause to bully him into making cuts. Gilliam was correct about Universal’s intent, but Milchan had to consider future deals so he agreed.

Longer films were out of fashion, especiallyarty ones. Hollywood by this time had become extremely strict on keeping films under control and at a certain length. The reuniting of enemy egos of *The Godfather*, Robert Evans and Coppola’s, which produced the financial flop, *The Cotton Club*, and the Milchan production of the four-hour-long original cut of Leone’s *Once Upon a Time in America* were massive losses at the box office, and cemented studio concerns that the audience attention span had atrophied since the 1970s. Thus, films over 125 minutes were considered too financially dangerous to market to American audiences. Sheinberg ordered Gilliam to cut down the film, and, if Sheinberg did not like the new edit, he reserved the right to cut it even further. Gilliam could observe the potential changes, but Gilliam would provide the service for free and Universal would pick up the additional editing costs for up to $100,000. As Matthews described these terms, “Gilliam loved the irony of this. In *Brazil* dissidents are made
to pay for their own punishment, which, for Sam Lowry, is torture. And Sheinberg has asked to be ‘the friend that tortures you.’ He was true to his word on that point.” (Mathews 78)

Had Milchan held out for his money and not amend the original contract, or, as Sheinberg contended, Gilliam had acknowledged to cut the film to 125 minutes, the U.S. release of the film would not have gotten so heated. But it did. Sheinberg started to stand his ground and hold back the release until certain edits were made on Gilliam’s preferred cut. As Gilliam contended, the length was a red herring because the main edit that Universal wanted was get rid of the bleak ending of leaving Lowry catatonic in the torture chair. The studio wanted to end the movie with Lowry making his escape a reality and ending happily. Universal began to take the firm position that the film would never be released in its present form.135

The film remained frozen until Gilliam was invited by Arthur Knight’s Cinema 466 Theatrical Film Symposium at University of Southern California on October 18, 1984 to screen Brazil at the end of the year, and speak to the Symposium for 300 students. Word spread throughout campus, and Universal quickly caught wind of the screening and tried to block it. The union projectionist refused to show the film. They moved the event to a smaller screening room at CalArts, and a small group of students illegally viewed the film. On Saturday, December 14, they then secretly screened the film to Los Angeles film critics. This resulted in the LA Film Critic Circle awarding Brazil the Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Screenplay awards. Two days after the award announcement, Universal and Sheinberg reluctantly gave in and announced that Brazil would be released in New York and Los Angeles before the end of the year.

Following the victory of getting the film released, Universal’s position gained back a few points as New York Critics snubbed the film, and Sydney Pollock’s Out of Africa (1984)
overpowered *Brazil* in the Academy Awards. *Brazil* only received nominations for screenplay and art direction. Universal believed this supported their belief that the film was overblown and unmarketable. The film barely returned Universal’s investment. However, the existence of Universal’s now-famous “Love Conquers All” version that appeared on syndicated television some years later proves Gilliam’s concerns that Universal’s and Sheinberg’s edits would have structurally altered the film rather than making it shorter. The version removes almost all of the fantasy sequences, and ends with the escape instead of Lowry being lobotomized. The discovery of this version reveals a possible future for *Brazil* that would have made the critically-hailed film into an entirely different aesthetic creature. The Universal version became a bastardized version that vindicated advocates of *Greed* and *The Magnificent Ambersons* because the intentional version was not only preserved intact, but had triumphed in a critical market. In the battle of Brazil, the version edited to the conditions of Hollywood economics and marketing “lost” to the version dedicated to the complex interaction between life and imagination. This would, however, become a pyrrhic victory of old school auteurism *a la* Coppola and other mavericks as Gilliam continued his experiments with his specific type of fantastic filmmaking.

What Will Become of the Baron?

*Brazil* marks the center of a suggested trilogy of Gilliam’s films between *Time Bandits* and Gilliam’s next film, *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*—a film that would also in certain ways unnecessarily reenact his struggle with Sheinberg and *Brazil*, and would cement Gilliam’s reputation in the film industry as a contentious and unmarketable maverick (at least in Gilliam’s mind). While the “battle” over *Brazil*’s final cut and release could be considered a major victory
for Gilliam as an *auteur*, a similar result of that victory would be the impossibility of Gilliam-as-
*auteur* being able to create a subsequent film without the studio system setting it up to fail in the
model of Cimino or Coppola. As we have already shown, the studio system’s attitude, from the
1980s forward, towards a director-as-star was conditional on the auteur’s marketability as well as
its “promise” to be an obedient blockbuster filmmaker—at least at the contractual stage. A
director was only as valuable as his brand, but the brand would be assessed after every
production. The name “Gilliam” at this point clearly promised a visual experience, but it also
carried an intellectualism post-*Brazil* that would confuse and challenge average moviegoers in a
way that the popular Lucas or Spielberg brand would not. Hollywood was not wary about
Gilliam’s dedication to fantasy, but, rather, to his critical approach to worlds based on common
sense and reason. So, his decision to make *Munochausen*, a story about a German storyteller or
“liar” set during the Age of Reason in the eighteenth-century, was a risky investment from
Hollywood’s perspective because, to them, an American audience would not understand such an
antiquated story that critiques Rationalism via fantastic narrative. This wariness is echoed
perfectly when allegedly, actor Dustin Hoffmann, who, when told by Gilliam that his next
project would be an action-adventure set in the eighteenth century, told Gilliam to “give up
immediately because it would never sell in New Jersey.”

Within the aesthetic confines of a trilogy that explores imagination throughout the
various chronological stages of a man’s development, *Munochausen*’s subject is the logical
final phase of the trilogy: *Time Bandits* concerned itself with the fantasies and subsequent
disillusionment of a young boy. The elaborate historical stylization and indifference to Evil of
*Time Bandits* sets the landscape for a strange oppressive bureaucracy that is directly dedicated to
suppressing imagination as a system of hope or agency in *Brazil*. *Brazil* continues with Kevin’s
disillusionment of both fantasy and reality transforming the “daydreams” of Sam Lowry into an escapist pathology in a technocratic society—Sam Lowry “escapes” from society’s torturers, but does not affect society in any way. The first two films deftly converge in *Munchausen*: The film overthrows the rationalist, technocratic oppression of fantasy, and imagination playfully presents rationalism paradoxically as the true fantasy. *Munchausen* returns the power of imagination and fantasy to a world manipulated by military threats of an ever-looming invasion—threats that may or may not be illusions themselves. In *Brazil*, for example, terrorism is experienced by the characters as random attacks so frequent that they become part of ordinary life. In *Munchausen* it is the same, but the terrorist attacks are given a national identity as an example of generic “orientalism”—as the Turks—and are placed outside the walls of a “rational” Western city. The central government maintains a *Brazil*-like clerical system, governed by a technocrat named Horatio Jackson, whose primary role is to suppress hopes and fantasy of ending the perpetual war between themselves and the Turks. For example, Jackson immediately executes a war hero for getting the people’s hopes too high concerning “irrational” brave actions. Ironically, he doles out these judgements from the balcony of a war-torn theatre, whose players are poorly re-enacting the *Adventures of Baron Munchausen* on stage. Jackson’s indifference to the play is interrupted by an old man entering the theatre and claiming that the play is “all lies.”

Gilliam, as with the previous two films, cleverly collapses the referential demarcation, or confuses what is to be considered real, and what is to be considered fantasy. Theorists of the fantastic, most notably, Tsvetan Todorov, claim that the fantastic lies within this liminal border where either the fantastic element—in this case, the Baron’s adventures—are discounted as illusions and the laws of the surrounding world—or reality—remain unchanged, or the adventures are found to be “real” and the surrounding laws are called into question. Just as the
film opens with “rational” laws being dictated inside a theater of illusion, and those illusions are revealed to be “lies” by a man who claims to be the actual Baron, Gilliam will never reveal whether Baron’s origin story is factual—he supposedly began the war by winning a bet and walking off with all the Sultan’s treasure—nor does he allow for the completion of the story—the Baron’s reunion with his team, the defeat of the Sultan outside the walls by the Baron and team, the Baron’s death (he is shot in the back by the rationalist technocrat, Jackson)—to ever be certainly the product of the Baron’s actions. The tale ends by vertiginously revealing that what is “true” is that the Turks lie defeated outside the gate and that Jackson’s government has suppressed that fact indefinitely.

Thus, the thematic continuity of displacing reality into fantasy and vice versa remains consistent and strong throughout all three Gilliam films, but the difficulties surrounding the production of *Munchausen* were exponentially worse than that of the two previous films. Gilliam had initially planned to produce *Munchausen* again with Milchan, but his production partner Steve Abbot, had questioned Milchan’s handling of *Brazil*’s funds. The main concern was that, while Gilliam had ostensibly been an equal partner with Milchan on *Brazil*, Gilliam had had no control of the revenue, and therefore really had worked under Milchan. According to Andrew Yule’s account in his book, *Losing the Light*, Abbot eventually coaxed Gilliam to drop Milchan, and they quickly formed their own partnership named “The Munchausen Partnership,” with Anne James. However, from another angle, Gilliam and replacement producer, Thomas Schuhly, claim that Milchan intentionally phased himself out of the production because of there being too many producers. Regardless of the reason, Thomas Schuhly, who had recently produced *The Name of the Rose* (1986) based on Umberto Eco’s best seller purportedly under budget and early, stepped in for Milchan and quickly hammered out a deal for the film with
Columbia’s head of production, David Putnam. Schuhly lured both Putnam and Gilliam with the temptation of producing the film at Italy’s renowned Cinecitta studios at “Italian” prices of 40% less than Hollywood or Pinewood Studios. He also promised to bring star actor Sean Connery to the role of Munchausen.138

From these big promises, the film’s production quickly spiraled out of control. Despite talent within Cinecitta, the Italian approach to filmmaking was much slower than the American system.139 Days ran long, and sets were built slowly. Scenes were cut due to cost. The scene on the moon, for example, was shot entirely without a population to cut costs of extras on set. According to Gilliam and his set, executive producer Schuhly all but abandoned the project after setting up the Cinecitta relation. Schuhly had promised to reunite Sean Connery with Gilliam to play the King of the Moon, but Connery’s commitment was half formed and he opted out. Meanwhile, Columbia increased the pressure to complete the film as the budget soared $20 million over budget. Schuhly attributes the complications of the film’s production to David Putnam being fired and replaced by Dawn Steele at Columbia during production—claiming that the original deal for $35 million and all its terms had left with Putnam. However, Gilliam attributes the miraculous completion of the film mainly to his professional first assistant director, David Tomlin, who had a history of rescuing overblown productions from budget constraints. Because the film’s bond from Film Finance had been overspent, and they could no longer be rescued by their insurer, Lloyds of London. Tomlin relocated production to England and completed the production schedule with what little money remained. He even managed to have the final secondary shooting scene of the Baron and Venus dancing in the sky shot for free by the supportive crew who wanted to finish the film. As Gilliam remembers: “What I love about the film is that it doesn’t reflect the negative things surrounding the film, the nightmare. What
shows through is a wonderful film about fantasy and life . . . and death.” (Munchausen Blu-ray extra).

In Losing the Light, Andrew Yule documents the entire process as a complete breakdown in production management, placing most of the blame, as did Gilliam, his stars and his crew on Schulhy. The film came in at a final cost of $46.34 million, almost double its original budget, for an Easter release in 1989. Despite the poor marketing of the film by Columbia, the film received a decent critical reception. In fact, unlike for Brazil, it received relatively high praise from many New York critics. The lasting damage, however, was commercial. A memo from the marketing director of Columbia in December of 1988 seemed to prescribe and insure Munchausen’s failure. It says:

1. The finished picture’s playability will achieve normative levels at best.
2. The picture has limited appeal base on pre-interest in title and stars, genre, period setting and lack of marketable stars.
3. Based on Terry Gilliam’s track record with Brazil and Time Bandits, the picture will receive mixed reviews.
4. The picture is not likely to generate a strong, positive word-of-mouth from mass audiences. (221-222)

The lack of faith from Universal had transferred over to Columbia, and the poor distribution of Munchausen ensured the film would result in a total loss.

It is not unusual that an arguably coherent and original series of films that interrogate and complicate fantasy with such an intellectual rigor and cynicism, would progressively find itself less and less backed by the Hollywood blockbuster system. And once again, the myth of art versus industry seemingly becomes reified. However, the three films have retained critical
attention as well as a formidable fan base. What is quietly at work throughout these struggles to complete each film is how Gilliam’s failure to make his films commercially successful is placed squarely as the studio’s responsibility, not Gilliam’s. Here, Gilliam is deploying the auteur versus studio myth ahead of the critical discourse that would posit it. In truth, Gilliam-as-maverick outdoes Welles’s in his understanding of counter-critical rhetoric, and Gilliam, against a Wellesian humility, is vehemently unapologetic about not taking full responsibility for the commercial or critical outcome. The studio is made immediately accountable for success or failure of the film.

By anticipating an impossibility of success, Gilliam’s approach to filmmaking following Munchausen adapts to the more marginal avenues of independent funding. He learns how to scale back on epic proportions and costs, but still maintains financial access to a certain grandeur in his work. These provisions take on an expectation of necessary restrictions of his filmmaking that become reflected in his rhetoric after this trilogy. He embraces the foreclosure of his films, at first commercially and then critically. Gilliam deploys the maverick figure to an extremism that was relegated to an avant-garde position to Hollywood, and he begins to wield this rhetoric as a double-edged sword of justification and resistance. Positioning each film as a battle is an intentional act best described by his Python friend and Munchausen cast member, Eric Idle. He describes Gilliam’s presumptive strategy as this:

The thing is that Terry’s approach to filmmaking is always a battle, and that puts it in a position where there always has to be a winner and a loser—either a victory or some sort of strategic withdrawal. The metaphor of a battle isn’t really a useful one. It’s more like business. You have to accumulate allies, and you try to make a plan to take this piece of ground, and you keep your allies with you, and in
theory you go in and take this piece of ground. But he doesn’t ever do that. He
sees himself as the lone Don Quixote, the lone Munchausen, the lone person
against the world. (Eric Idle in commentary on *Munchausen*)

Idle here is sympathetic to the difficulties surrounding *Munchausen*, but he paints Gilliam as a hopeless victim, and not as a quixotic figure that completes each of his films under his own stylistic terms regardless of financial restrictions and executive irresponsibility.

This first “trilogy” clearly establishes Gilliam as a very particular fantasist obsessed with stories of failing advocates of alternate existences within a questionable cinematic reality, expanding narratives of “not being seen or heard” into variegated systems of familial, bureaucratic, and national control. But the viewership that formed around these three films created certain unattainable expectations in the Gilliam’s fantasies that followed. This viewership, both critical and popular, would increasingly hold Gilliam to the impossible task of repeating the phenomenon of sensational ignorance while expecting the same cinematic experience to always occur without a growing internal frustration towards these perpetual failings of fantasy. This viewership lamented a certain loss of directorial ability to effectively repeat the impact of the first three films. But a failure of repetition is not the true “failure” here because Gilliam will repeat the trope of ungrounded fantasy in every subsequent project. What is being ignored by these expectations is that the narrative of unheard and unseen struggle of imagined reality at its core has an always-already embedded intentional failure of being normalized. The failure is not the fading effect of Gilliam’s repetitive thematic trope. It is that the specific nature of a reflexive fantasy that is critical of itself must acknowledge that it will always be invisible and inaudible to “reality” unless it is normalized. Since Gilliam’s rhetorical
position refuses to have his films normalized in any mode of reception, these critical and popular anticipations are once again bound to be disappointed.

I will leave the argument over Gilliam’s post-*Munchausen* films’ success or failure open to the personal interpretation of others. I do not want to get caught up in questioning one’s taste over another. As always, I assume that a more functional failure underpins most critical disappointment. Gilliam’s rhetoric of failure is as embedded in his approach to filmmaking as it is in his protagonists. From pre-production to distribution and marketing, it presumes a failure at its reception more and more with each subsequent film. Gilliam’s insistence on presenting each film as fighting windmills on the commercial plains of filmmaking is what, for me, posits a new variation in the figure of the auteur for the new millennium. To gain a better picture of this figure, we must now shift our attention to the “promotional failure” that is constructed around his future films.

**Big “Little” Films and Unmaking *Quixote***

The films that Gilliam completed in the 1990s loosely mirrored the original 1980s’ trilogy, although they ventured into more direct psychological territory by incorporating the trope of madness—as fantasy reinterpreted as delusion—as a normalizing descriptive device of the system to contain overactive imaginations. Resolute, however, in not repeating the mistakes of *Munchausen*, Gilliam also developed a tighter economy of filmmaking, delivering his films under budget and on time. Avoiding financial risks, Gilliam shelved two grandiose projects, *Gormenghast* and *Watchmen*—two epic projects based on novels with a huge dedicated readership—to take on a project that would not demand the massive costumes and sets of his
former Cinecittà fiasco. Even so his brand remained tarnished by *Munchausen*. Regardless, of his new-found ability to avoid overspending that had hobbled him with *Brazil* and *Munchausen*, the studio system seemed reticent to forgive and forget with Gilliam.

At the start of the new decade, Gilliam stepped back from writing his own material to take on a promising raw script from newcomer, Richard LaGravenese. *The Fisher King* became a successful “little” film that responded to the bloated budget of *Munchausen* by displacing the historical set pieces that would be required by an Arthurian epic into the delusional fantasy of a homeless man in contemporary New York City. Shot entirely on location without expensive sets, the film deconstructed the legend of The Grail into a rise-and-fall-to-rise-again story of Jack, a shock-jock radio talk show host that quits his job following a random killing spree at an uptown restaurant by a listener of his show. Deeply affected by being attached to such a horrific interpretation of his radio cynicism, Jack loses his job and wealth, and lives a life of self-made abjection until he is pulled back into engaging with the world by a former professor of medieval studies, Parry, who, after being traumatized by the death of his wife in the same restaurant shooting, lives as a vagrant avenging random street crimes as a delusional, errant knight. After Parry falls comatose confronting a possible return to reality by Jack encouraging a new love interest that would replace his mourning for his wife, Jack takes it on himself to restore Parry to reality by finding the Holy Grail—a silver trophy cup on a rich man’s shelf on the Upper East Side. By doing so, Jack discovers a renewed investment and confidence in life by being pulled halfway into Parry’s fantasy. Parry recovers but is still delusional. However, his delusion is discovered to be the better alternative to living life in New York City by Jack.

*Fisher King* had an extremely small and quiet release by Tri-Star Pictures—ironically the sister company of Columbia, which buried *Munchausen*, and it was met with solid reviews but
very little fanfare. Gilliam followed the film with an extremely clever remake of Chris Marker’s meditative masterpiece on memory, love and time, *La Jetée*. The original film was constructed entirely out of black-and-white still photographs, and posited a future time-traveller who returned to specific images in his memory, but ironically the most intense memory is that of his own death. Gilliam picked up the rewrite of *La Jetée* from scriptwriters David and Janet Peoples, who had worked on Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*. The script for *Twelve Monkeys* read much more like a blockbuster adaptation of the French art film, but Gilliam found a balance between the sci-fi action film and the pensive meditation on (photographic and cinematic) memory. Because the film had attracted action star, Bruce Willis, still hot from the *Diehard* films, and the up and coming heartthrob, Brad Pitt, Universal, who had blocked *Brazil*, granted Gilliam final cut over the film provided he kept within a budget of $29 million, kept the film at an R rating or below, and that the final cut of the film was shorter than two hours and fifteen minutes.

At first glance it would seem that Gilliam’s new economy of affordable fantasy couched in questions of psychology and delusion was a better match for his filmmaking within Hollywood’s parameters of control. But the short supplementary documentary entitled, *The Hamster Factor*, points to how Gilliam intentionally constructed the film with the express doubt that it would never be allowed to be the film he intended. Gilliam hired documentary filmmakers, Keith Fulton and Louis Pepe, fresh out of film school, to document the making of the film. According to Fulton and Pepe, the film was to be Gilliam’s witness to his process because he assumed the same eventual Hollywood interference as *Munchausen*. Gilliam clearly presents himself in the supplement as “not a Hollywood director” and does not want to be pulled into the “abyss of success,” although he admits that the possibility of a successful Hollywood
A picture may have its allure. He would call *Twelve Monkeys* his seven-and-a-half-feature—a strange allusion to Fellini’s uncertain, introspective masterpiece *8 1/2*—as if to imply that the filmmaking process would become caustic and Gilliam would disown the film if necessary. But Gilliam’s predictions would prove to be wrong. Despite initial bad reviews from test audiences, the critical reviews were mostly positive and the film would go on to gross $160 million by the end of 1996. Gilliam’s distrust wanes by the end of the documentary as he jokes about the film’s success being a result of what he calls “creative spite.” In an example of this spite, he marks the producer’s insistence on extending the final scene from ending at James Cole’s death in the airport to the airport parking lot so that a quick epilogue can be included to help wrap up the complex apocalypse-and-time-travel plot. Gilliam resisted the suggestion by proposing an expensive crane shot that lowers from an extreme wide shot of the lot to the boy’s eyes in extreme close-up. Gilliam expected the producer to abandon the new ending because of the exorbitant expense of the technical shot, but the producer was steadfast in that this ending would be better received by the popular audience. The result is a beautiful and plaintiff shot that closes the film much more elegiacally. In a rare moment, Gilliam concedes to the film’s success as a negotiation instead of a battle.

But still neither the subtle undertones of the critically-embraced *Fisher King*, nor the commercial upswing of the action star-vehicle of *Twelve Monkeys* could reopen the doors that *Munchausen* had shut. Gilliam still peddled himself in Hollywood as a director-for-hire. By the end of the decade, Gilliam took over a project from Alex Cox, who had been fired from the set of the film based on the iconoclastic journalism of Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. At first, it seemed that Gilliam would not be the best choice to represent the vitriolic ramblings and hallucinogenic-induced commentary of lost American ideology. But Gilliam
engaged with the film immediately, creating vertiginously layered scenes with his usual cluttered frames distorting the banality of hotel rooms and casinos in the same manner of the drug-charged literature of the Gonzo journalism. Having won over producer, Laisa Nabulisi and his stars, Johnny Depp and Benecio Del Toro, Gilliam completed the film in under eighteen weeks and under budget once again, and was poised for a third critical success.

In rushing to complete the film, Gilliam and writer, Tony Grisoni, had skipped the usual legal process of creating a new production company, and instead simply took over the company started by Alex Cox and writer, Todd Davies, under Nabulisi. When the film was finished, the Writer’s Guild of America insisted that Cox and Davies were to receive the authorial credit for the screenplay because they allegedly had begun the project. Nabulisi, Gilliam and Grisoni, who had rewritten the entire screenplay to Hunter S. Thompson’s approval, after battling the WGA for weeks, finally resigned themselves to the decision to meet the film’s agreed release date so they could enter the film at Cannes. To add insult to injury, the film was shown at Cannes and was received not just negatively, but with hostility—it was jeered and booed by the audience. In America, the film was marketed as hallucinogenic drug movie that all too seriously ignored the counter-cultural and comical commentary of its post-punk style, and, to ensure its invisibility, the film opened alongside the popcorn-engine, lowest-common-denominator remake of Godzilla (1998). The film quickly left theaters with almost no popular reception at all. Even though the film itself legally insisted that Gilliam had not written the script, the negative press was once again all his.

Following Fear and Loathing, Gilliam abandoned the Hollywood system for eight years. He had attempted to privately fund a very personal work called The Defective Detective, but failed to generate any financial interest. At this point, he turned fully away from Hollywood
money, both commercial and independent, and began to search out European funding for an even more personal project. Almost as if he intended to walk in the maverick footsteps of Welles, Gilliam set out to finally make a film based on his favorite story of fantasy flying in the face of reality, *Don Quixote*. Welles’s *Don Quixote* had famously become a “cursed” film. In truth, Welles had never really approached his film with a concrete script, and he was perpetually reinventing the narrative to fit into the fluctuating economy of styles that his films deployed from the 1950s forward. Gilliam had come to the preproduction table with a script by himself and Grisoni titled, *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*, and he had already found private funding—scaled back from $40 million to $32 million—by garnering Johnny Depp and French film star, Jean Rochefort, to play the central roles. The film was a typical Gilliam approach where a selfish 20th century advertising executive finds himself in the 16th century mistaken as Sancho Panza. As if once again intuiting production problems—probably bolstered by his surprise at the negative response to *Fear and Loathing*—Gilliam asked Fulton and Pepe to document the making of his *Quixote*.

The film quickly reified the myth of the curse. Gilliam’s set was washed out by a hail storm that physically changed the terrain making previous footage worthless. His star, Rochefort, suffered a double-herniated disc and was hospitalized. His insurance company treated both these issues as acts of God and, because the feature was under-funded to begin with, the insurance shut down production as a failure of its completion bond. Like Welles, the film was thrust back into a perpetual search for funding that could effectively reboot the film from scratch. Unlike Welles, Gilliam had documented the failure. Fulton and Pepe’s film became the supplement of a film that failed to exist. It became a reverse Gilliam picture in that it witnessed reality triumph over the delusional narrative of Quixote. The documentarians were wary of
completing the film in that it clearly posited Gilliam’s film as a failure and reiterated the myth that Gilliam’s vision always exceeded his budget. Gilliam insisted that Fulton and Pepe completed their piece arguing that of the two films, theirs was more likely to be finished. The film, titled *Lost in La Mancha* (2002), was entered at the Telluride festival, and to date, stands as the only proof that Gilliam captured a few scenes of his elusive dream project—a project that so resonates with his personal experiences of filmmaking that it begs the question why this project above all others would not be successful.

What is most interesting to me at this point in Gilliam’s career is that, despite the various and arguable success in all these films, what becomes paramount in Gilliam’s aesthetic approach is the repeated narrative of Gilliam’s struggles with *Brazil* and *Munchausen* and its presumptive commentary that points to the inevitability of Gilliam’s difficulty with the system. This prescription of failure starts to become the essential supplement to all his films. Documentaries, interviews and literature on Gilliam all review the hardships underpinning each production, visible or invisible. Failure in commercial filmmaking must not only be assumed but must be articulated as necessary if one is to properly understand or appreciate his films. This failure is not only intentional, but it is circumscribed throughout the work. Supplemental discourse that expanded understanding of films by opening them up to the variegated conditions of their commercial production evolved as the home cinema market grew. Now the restrictive conditions of Hollywood filmmaking were to be clearly and immediately disclosed at the release of each film and then packaged with the DVD, and later Blu-ray, releases. Gilliam may not be the first to have practiced this subtle strategy that merges apology and blame, but he is one of the most consistent auteurs to utilize a mixture of the humility of Welles’s maverick formula to downplay his authority over control, while clearly demarcating the implicit fear that permeates Hollywood
as a blockbuster machine—a machine that always wants to create the same film and not take risks in creative variation. The commercial restrictions for a film’s critical consideration become a priori to its viewing. By clearly articulating the impossibility of success, or “abyss of success” as he puts it, he forecloses on critical and popular opinions that are solely determined by restricting viewership to Hollywood’s “high concept” product. What Gilliam has accomplished in deploying this rhetoric is testing the limits of failure. How far can he push his anti-blockbuster fantasy, and his insistence on working within the ruins of a Classical Hollywood system before this rhetoric loses its effect?

A Failure on Two Fronts and a Strategic Apology

Between finishing Fear and Loathing, in 1998, and the traumatic aesthetic setback of Quixote, Gilliam had been a working with former screenwriting partner, Charles McKeown on a sequel to Time Bandits. But as much as the anticipation of the early film’s fan base grew, funding failed to materialize for the project so Gilliam shelved it as soon as he had gained European funding for Quixote. After that that film failed to materialize and its future funding evaporated, Gilliam claimed to feel “broken” and was sluggish to return wholeheartedly to any project, although he knew that it was best to keep busy. He focused on an adaptation of the book, Good Omens, by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman. The story was in familiar Gilliam’s territory: An angel and devil, who had both grown fond of the Earth since being abandoned on the planet since the garden of Eden, decided to interfere with divine prophecy and defer the coming of the antichrist, thus forestalling the Apocalypse. They intend to raise the antichrist to deny his heritage only to find they have adopted the wrong kid. They then panic to find the real
child before the world ends. Johnny Depp and Robin Williams immediately agreed to play the two main characters, but even with the stars behind it, the projected budget of $85 million seemed too high for a risky auteur project.

While Gilliam briefly detoured into making a Nike commercial for the 2000 World Cup, two more projects came Gilliam’s way from his long-time co-screenwriter, Tony Grisoni. The first was a script called “The Blue Ribbon Operation” that had gained the interest from stars, John Cusack and Dustin Hoffman. The second was a Southern Gothic tale of childhood based on Mitch Cullen’s novel, *Tideland*. The latter project had immediately gained interest from *The Last Emperor* producer, Jeremy Thomas, who prematurely announced Gilliam as its intended future director at the Cannes Film Festival in 2001. But Thomas was still underfunded for the project and put the production off until summer of 2004. Even in this waiting period, Gilliam was still a creative commodity for many. J.K. Rowling was pushing Hollywood to hire Gilliam as the director for her insanely popular, *Harry Potter* series, but Hollywood was reluctant to put such a valuable franchise under the Munchausen-stained maverick. Finally, a script came across Gilliam’s desk via *Twelve Monkeys* producer, Chuck Roven from screenwriter Ehren Kruger, who had successfully written *Scream 3* (2001) and *The Ring* (2001). Gilliam was not really interested in Kruger’s script, *The Brothers Grimm*, even though the fiction based on the fabulists seemed again tailor-made for Gilliam. But because MGM had already expressed interest, Gilliam hopped on board with a decent salary and completion deal. MGM, however, quickly backed out of the picture except for international distribution, and Dimension Films, a sub-company of Bob and Harvey Weinstein’s Miramax, which was now owned by Disney, took over the project.
At the end of 2002, Gilliam was once-again a self-proclaimed director-for-hire, and began pre-production on *The Brothers Grimm*. It was to be shot in Prague starting on June 30, 2003. As part of Gilliam tradition at this point, he brought along someone to keep account of the process. This time Gilliam brought along Bob McCabe, who had written an excellent monograph of his past work from his start as an animator to *Fear and Loathing*. As if it had been planned, the shoot immediately became a contest of creative control between Gilliam and the Weinstein Brothers. Gilliam had initially wanted Johnny Depp and up and coming star, Heath Ledger to play the brothers, and Samantha Morton to play the heroine, Angelika. Depp dropped out putting Matt Damon in place as suggested by Robin Williams, who was playing the comic villain, Cavaldi. Williams was soon pushed out by Harvey Weinstein, who also hated Morton as Angelika, feeling she did not have enough sex appeal for the role. Weinstein forced newcomer, Lena Heady, into the role. Heady was unresponsive to the character and Gilliam became increasingly frustrated with not having say in core elements of the process.

The restraint worsened, however, when the Weinsteins fired Gilliam’s director of photography, Nicola Pecorini. They hated the “look” of the dailies, and felt that the cinematographer was not lighting the stars properly. On August 3, 2003, after one month of shooting, Newton Thomas Siegel replaced Pecorini, and began a process of shooting autonomously and often ignored Gilliam’s direction, clearly with the Weinsteins’ consent. Gilliam shut down the set for a few days and returned to England to see if he could get off the picture for breach of contract. His attorneys talked him out of it warning him that Miramax would sue him with the same contractual threats that UA had used with Cimino for *Heaven’s Gate*. He begrudgingly returned to the set and competed shooting on November 28, coming in $5 million over its $75 million budget.
As Tony Grisoni recalls “To be honest, I sometimes think that some of Terry’s so-called friends, such as me and Nicola, should have really dissuaded him or tried to dissuade him from taking on that film in the first place. When I first read the script, which was the end of 2002, it was a kind of rollicking adventure yarn, but it didn’t seem to offer up anything new for [Gilliam]; in fact, a lot of it seemed very familiar” (McCabe 274). Gilliam continued editing from Christmas until February with his editor, Lesly Walker, and ended up with a rough cut by February. Bob Weinstein hated the rough cut, and took the negative away from Gilliam. The film would miss its contractual release date of April by over a year. While Weinstein shopped the film to surrogate directors like Anthony Minghella to “complete” the film, Gilliam was happy to be free of the picture. Producer Jeremy Thomas had by this point drummed up the proper funding for Tideland so Gilliam was expected to start pre-production in Regina, Saskatchewan that summer of 2004. Meanwhile Bob Weinstein could not find an alternate editor to agree with his disapproval of the film. He thus held Gilliam as contractually obligated to “finish” the film. Gilliam was under a sensitive timeline with both the northern Canadian weather and the fragile independent budget of Tideland so he agreed to return a quarter of his agreed upon salary under the old MGM contract, and released himself from the obligation. So while Bob Weinstein shopped around the film that was now over a year past its release date, Gilliam set off to shoot his first truly independent feature.

Tideland, in a way, is a sequel to Time Bandits, much to the original film’s fan base’s chagrin. The film is a testament to the resilience of a child’s ability to survive through traumatic events via their imagination, but again rather than escaping reality Tideland’s main character, Jeliza-Rose, directly engages with the growing awareness of certain realities concerning sex and death in adult life as it plays out on a vacant farm-scape in the fictional plains of Minnesota.
*Tideland* tells the story of a young girl, Jeliza Rose, entirely from her young mind’s point of view, which generates a highly imaginative, albeit somewhat perverted and disturbed, fantasy world. Her life in the “real world” would be considered by more sensitive viewers a nightmarish world of abusive parenting and lack of systematic development. She lives, and takes care of, her junkie parents, played by Jeff Bridges and Jennifer Tilly, with a disturbing, almost cavalier, sense of comfort and stability—she literally has the responsibility of preparing (by freebasing with a melting spoon!) her father’s nightly heroin dose. Her father, Noah, is a bar musician that has the closer and more dependent—and thus the more unsettling—familial bond with Jeliza-Rose. While the film implies more than a hint of inappropriate sexual behavior between them, it concentrates on the similarities in their childish fantasy-building rather than the possibility of intimacy. Noah’s regressive childlike behavior aligns with Jeliza-Rose’s brand of escapism via imagination. He is constantly referring to an ancient map of Iceland, most likely pulled from a book of fairy tales, and promising to move the family there where their lives will, of course, become magically better for some reason.

Jeliza-Rose’s mother is an overbearing and needy junkie eating chocolates and never leaving her bed. Her mother’s relationship with Jeliza-Rose bounces psychotically from resenting her child’s existence to profusely apologizing for her behavior and telling Jeliza-Rose that she truly loves her. While early scenes of the two are poignant and intense, the mother is almost immediately removed from the story. She overdoses and is found dead in her bed. Noah immediately suggests wrapping the mother in sheets with all her belongings and setting her on fire—drawing again from his Nordic fantasy world. Again, however, being more of the true parent of the pair, Jeliza-Rose dissuades her father from burning the house down, and they
abandon their home (and the body of the mother) to restart their lives in the Minnesota home where Noah was raised.

Arriving in the desolate farmhouse with no neighbors in sight, Jeliza-Rose cooks up her father’s daily dose and goes to bed talking to her doll-head finger puppets all of which represent the idealized personalities of “perfect little girls.” Overnight, the father passes away in his easy chair. Jeliza-Rose half-recognizes he is dead, but continues to talk with him like she does with her dolls. Days pass, and she finally meets her only neighbors. A brother, Dickens, and his older sister, Dell. Dickens is a Faulknerian simpleton, whom Jeliza Rose embraces as an equal and a playmate. Dell is a serious, somber yet warped matriarchal figure, who practices taxidermy to pass the time. Upon discovering Noah’s body, she stuffs and preserves it to “keep him in the family.” The trio becomes a reclusive example of innocents living without external social definitions of “proper living habits.” The brother daily plays in his imaginary submarine, or pretends to be married to Jeliza-Rose. The sister reluctantly governs the family and surrounds herself with stuffed dead bodies of her elders that represent her interpretation of “respecting and preserving family values.” Jeliza-Rose remains incapable of interpreting any of these actions as abnormal as she spends long nights in the naked fields hoping to catch a glimpse of fireflies that she thinks are fairies. Even when Jeliza-Rose is finally discovered by the outside world—a passing train is derailed by Dickens playing with dynamite and she is found by a survivor in the wreckage, who thinks Jeliza-Rose was on board the train—the film chooses to openly end upon the little girl’s future with this disaster. As the camera closes in with a classic Gilliam close-up of the child’s gaze, the reflection of the train wreck’s flames become images of fairies dancing in her eyes and fades out. As usual, Gilliam begins and ends with reality and fantasy being unresolved.
Alongside the on-going debacle with the Weinstein brothers and *The Brothers Grimm*, Gilliam had intentionally returned to North America to make *Tideland* his first truly independent feature with no studio money involved at all. The result unfortunately is that *Tideland* is probably Gilliam’s most forgotten and invisible film—if not his most critically reviled. It became Gilliam’s only true expedition into independent filmmaking. In a sense, it is the commercial intent of Welles’s *The Stranger* in reverse. Instead of proving to the system that he could work within it, Gilliam stepped outside the system, proving that his unique style is difficult to construct without it. For a filmmaker who had become so intentionally outspoken about his frustrations with the studio system, it is amazing, just like Welles, how inextricable he truly was from it.

*Tideland* was to be a respite from his perpetual battle against the studio system. But without his vestige as a filmmaking maverick, the film went through production, for the most part, peacefully. The process was once again captured on film by Vincenzo Natali, but this time the documentary depicted a smooth collaborative process with considerably less chaos on set. *Tideland* was completed and premiered in Toronto, and then screened at the San Sebastian Festival in Spain where it won the Jury Prize. The film’s premiere ironically coincided with the theatrical release of *The Brothers Grimm*, which Bob Weinstein had ultimately failed to alter to his taste and thus Bob’s brother, Harvey, ushered Gilliam back to put the final polish on the film. *The Brothers Grimm* opened to mixed reviews, but was at least, finally finished and viewable.

*Tideland*, following its festival release remained without a distributor until 2006. The film was finally picked up by a small distributor, ThinkFilm, who released the film in a single theater and only made $7,000 in its first week. They expanded to nine theaters where the film grossed a paltry $66,453 domestically. Gilliam strongly criticized ThinkFilm for mishandling
the distribution of the film, and complained that the DVD was issued in the wrong aspect ratio.
Because of mixed reviews in festivals and ThinkFilm’s clumsy promotion, Gilliam insisted that
the film be screened with a personal statement from Gilliam himself that warned audiences that
they might not like the film. The prologue is quoted here in full:

Hello I’m Terry Gilliam and I have a confession to make: Many of you are not going to
like this film. Many of you, luckily, are going to love it. And then, there are many of you
who aren’t going to know what to think when the film finishes. But hopefully, you’ll be
thinking. I should explain: This film is seen through the eyes of a child. If it’s shocking,
it’s because it’s innocent. So, I suggest you try to forget everything you’ve learned as an
adult—the things that limit your view of the world: your fears, your prejudices, your
preconceptions. Try to rediscover what it was like to be a child, with a sense of wonder
and innocence. And don’t forget to laugh. Remember, children are strong. They’re
resilient. They’re designed to survive. When you drop them, they tend to bounce. I was
sixty-four years old when I made this film. I think I finally discovered the child within
me; it turned out to be a little girl. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

The speech was meant as a thinly veiled apology for making a truly dark film, but instead it was
read as foreclosing upon audience’s perceptions by trying to prescribe a singular interpretation of
the film. Even though this was a classic deployment of Gilliam rhetoric, this time the effect was
met with frustration. Because Gilliam had already established himself, from Time Bandits
forward, as a master of capturing a childlike awe that could never be fully disillusioned, his
statement forced a reading upon the film instead of buffering it with the difficulties of its
production as his rhetoric had done in the past.
This overuse of his rhetorical strategy could argue for a very particular resentment from his fan base that also fueled his more antagonistic critics. Positive reviews leaned on the fact that this trope was too be expected by critics of Gilliam. But his detractors were vicious in their hatred of the film. Populist Owen Gleiberman gave the film an “F” saying:

For certain filmmakers, a disastrous folly is something they have to get out of their system; for others, it’s closer to something they have to pass — like a gallstone or stomach gas. Terry Gilliam’s dour, absurdist, gruesomely awful Tideland is of the latter, excretory variety [. . .] The only way to make sense of the film is to read it as a splatter painting of disgust . . . at a movie industry that Gilliam feels shut out by, and at the audience that he has apparently decided to punish as well. (Gleiberman)

Or NewYorkFilmCritic.com, Nathan Gielgud, who was less vitriolic than Gleiberman, but clearly misread the film and its prologue as a hostile attack towards the audience’s ability to interpret the film—a film that he ironically feels is “unwatchable.” He says:

As close to unwatchable as Tideland gets, it might be unique in that its central concern is to draw the descent of a preadolescent into complete madness. The movie gets lost in her head and never recovers (well, it never had much promise to begin with), and Gilliam is too ready to employ clichés like rabbit holes for the fragments to coagulate, but the fact that there’s something original simmering within this silliness (and you’ve really got to see it to comprehend the extent of it) speaks to the potential that can be found in making earnest attempts to navigate otherwise unrewarding terrain.

With the dual disappointment of Tideland and The Brothers Grimm, Gilliam was forced into an interesting introspection into his own rhetoric. The two films, released almost simultaneously, marked failures under very different conditions: The Brothers Grimm had
reinstated Gilliam as a contentious studio director even though there was clear interference from the Weinsteins. *Tideland* was supposed to be both an escape and a rebirth under smaller conditions. Both films arguably maintained Gilliam’s signature, but the first was too commercial and light for his critical supporters, and the second was too somber and serious.

While each film clearly shows signs of its struggles and limitation, the aesthetic merit of both films is not truly my focus. The important impasse here is where Gilliam’s rhetoric reaches a sort of limit. Because the independent production of *Tideland* forbids acts of grandeur and the senseless accumulation of numerous union professionals and producer’s salaries, Gilliam’s apology for making a disturbing film falls flat because it has no straw man to rally against, and thus the quixotic rhetoric irritates critical and popular reception. The frustrating result of reaching this limit is that Gilliam abandoned the possibility of becoming an independent filmmaker. He rejects Welles’s absolute maverick position. Gilliam chooses to remain at the underfunded space of a lower-tiered industry filmmaker of studio fantasy.

In cadence with his rhetorical strategy, Gilliam had already prescribed his dependence on the studio system in interviews right before the period from his failure of *Quixote*—a failure that gets written off as an uninsurable Act of God—and the two extremely distinctive failures of *Brothers Grimm* and *Tideland*—on one end a reconstruction of the myth of “pure” studio interference, and, on the other, the individual responsibilities of avoiding the pitfalls of pure independence and responsibilities of self-promotion and exhibition. In Gilliam’s own words:

It’s a fine line I’m trying to walk because Hollywood money is very useful—because it allows me to make more expensive films, more elaborate films. It allows the films to have movie stars in it, Hollywood stars in it, which usually brings in more people. Because I want to make movies that reach a large number
of people. I don’t want to make movies that are seen by a couple of thousand people. I want to make movies that are seen by millions of people because I think I’m trying to say things in my movies. There are ideas in there. There are thoughts in there that I want people to consider. So, I don’t want it to been seen just by the intelligentsia. Actually, I want it to be seen been kids like I was when I was growing up in Minnesota. That’s who I make movies for. (Interview for 1998 Midnight Sun Festival)

By this very admission, Gilliam admits that while he makes movies for those many kids like himself in the middle of Minnesota—kids like Kevin in Time Bandits and his alter-ego, Jeliza-Rose in Tideland—he is forever wary of making movies about those kids and their inability to fantasize their way out of the darkness of reality. It would seem the quixotic maverick of Gilliam is not, in fact, maddened with the insistence of final cut, but cleverly recognizes the limits of his darker impulses within fantasy itself.

Gilliam has quietly returned to form in the second decade of this century with The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus—an extremely underrated accomplishment that suffered from the untimely death of actor, Heath Ledger, whose loss haunts the film—and a cyber-revision of Brazil and its critique of individuality in the information age with The Zero Theorem. But the critical interest in these two films have been mainly indifferent. Gilliam’s aesthetic merit seems to have lessened in the shadow cast by CGI-centric fantasies of Peter Jackson’s Lord of the Rings trilogy and Zack Snyder’s Watchmen (2009). With Gilliam, however, the growing indifference towards his later films seems not to be the traditional Bazinian progressive outmoding of Gilliam’s
inventiveness with advancing CGI technology, nor is it the waning interest in the perpetual attention to Gilliam’s battle-worn figure to studio politics and control. For me, this disappointment in the quixotic fantastical elements of his filmmaking is because these elements have revealed a kind of hyper-realistic connection between his films and the social and political world today. If Hollywood’s true goals are to not disturb the escapism of its blockbuster machine, then Gilliam’s work has always refuted an audience’s ability to truly escape from its social surroundings.

Gilliam’s films each deploy an intentional critique of how they construct their fantasies by not having a foundation of reality to clearly differentiate between the two. This critique denies fantasy as a means of escape (escape to what or to where?). This reflexive self-awareness—this quixotic need to suspend fantasy so that reality does not consume it—is always already recognized as its awareness of becoming real. It predicts—as it depicts—its contemporary state of being. As Gilliam’s fantasies turn to analyze themselves fantasy and reality are recognized as the same space—as a world where terrorism was literally manipulated and constructed as a threat post 9/11 so that Brazil’s “fiction” became real instead of distanced as an Orwellian fantasy, or a Munchausen moment where there were no weapons of mass destruction outside the gates of Baghdad, or as the corporatization of the construction of the self to build their identities on slick virtual platforms as a pure diversion to ignore the resources of the world being divided up amongst millennial barons like in Parnassus. As Gilliam’s adored early films of silliness and childish fantasy with a dark twist become revealed as the spaces of a more serious type of wisdom or prophesy—as Gilliam’s quixotic figure begins to see itself as real—its viewership becomes more and more uncomfortable sitting through them as
plaintive meditations rather than as escapist flights of fantasy. Gilliam’s fantasies are more than just the creative folly of a bitter curmudgeon or a holy fool, they are our present and our future, our world and our potential, up there on the screen.
Conclusion: Failing to Succeed

There’s nothing quite like the idea of failing spectacularly to excite a filmmaker.
—Mike Figgis

Even with all these failures, these many variations of maverick auteurs are still hard at work—even posthumously—as to what will come next. At the time of writing, the personal projects so important to our figures of intentional failure still valiantly struggle to reach the screen. Orson Welles’s *The Other Side of the Wind* seemed to have finally found its completion funds during his centennial celebration. Welles’s mistress and partner, Oja Kodar (née Palinkas) and her son, Sasha Welles, who had been left the rights to the film’s negative if it was ever to be released from its French vault, and producer Jan Rymska had supposedly worked out their certain differences, and agreed to a financial amount that would satisfy the Palinkas contingent. In addition, Rymska and his colleagues raised $500,000 on an internet fundraiser and were slated to begin editing the film with its co-star, Peter Bogdanovich, supervising the completion effort. However, as centenary festivals continued throughout 2016, it became clear that Kodar, who had a history of backing out of *TOSOTW* deals since Welles’s death, was never really committed to the deal, and began to stall in delivering her consent. Kodar and her son have become yet the next barrier to the film’s completion, as well as self-centered villains to thousands of Welles’s fans and critics that are at this point fully exasperated by the lover and her son’s resistance to hand over the rights to the film. It seems that no amount of money will satisfy their conception of what the negative is worth monetarily. Perhaps, in their defense, they worry that Welles’s vision of the film can never be fulfilled, and this is their way of preventing inevitable disappointment. Regardless, it has become clear that the project is now indefinitely stalled once again.
Similarly, Gilliam has continued to search out funding to complete his *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*. In June of 2015, it was rumored that Amazon’s new film production line was interested in the project. By May of the following year, Gilliam had hired his old Python friend, Michael Palin, to play Quixote, and the film was slated to begin shooting with actors already cast. The marriage between Amazon and Gilliam seemed well-matched. Streaming channels that had taken the place of 1990s rental chains like Blockbuster Video had become so successful that just like television in the 1950s, they began creating their own product to stream on their sites. Companies like Amazon and Netflix have spearheaded the insulated completion of entire episodic series, and, then, making them all available for one single binge-watching session if desired. Thus, for Gilliam, issues of structure and length that had plagued him in the past would no longer be an issue. Still by the end of this same year, the funding and contract seem to have not solidified. It is unclear whether Gilliam still intends to complete the film with Amazon, but as of now, it is suspended indefinitely as well, marking its fifteenth year on the shelf since the 2000 fiasco witnessed in *Lost in La Mancha*.

Even the normally prolific De Palma has seemed to have been slowed on all the three films he had lined up for production for the end of the decade. His return to the thriller-action genre, *Lights Out*, about a blind girl who gets caught up in trying to expose an assassination program, would seems to promise a strong return to form as a mixture of the meek character of Carrie White mixed up in a top-secret conspiracy plot a la *Blow Out*. But the film’s pre-production was pushed back a year, and has yet to have a start date for production. There is even less news on his personal project to adapt Sascha Arango’s novel, *The Truth and Other Lies*. And finally, a reunion project between De Palma and actor, Al Pacino, that would hopefully return the commercial successes of *Scarface* and *Carlito’s Way*, has dropped completely out of
the pipeline. The film was to be a biopic of the popular football coach, Joe Paterno, who was later found guilty of sexual indiscretion with the players. The film may have been deemed too risky a subject, but it had the potential of being another great social performance piece for the actor and director. For now, it looks like the project has been permanently put off just like his dream project, *The Demolished Man*.

Impasses of filmmaking like these are still commonplace in the blockbuster-filled millennium. Coppola continues to work, but has marginalized himself into self-produced metacinemas that seems devoid of passion and focus worthy of the deep meditation of *The Conversation*, or even the cavalier chaos of *Apocalypse Now*. Coppola had outwardly lamented his friend, George Lucas, dedicating himself solely to his decades-long *Star Wars* project, believing he had other, better films in him. But we will probably never see these potential films. Lucas has since sold off the *Star Wars* franchise to Disney after disappointing his fan-base of millions with his lifeless prequels. Bogdanovich and Freidkin have never returned to the auteur’s chair, and Cimino quietly passed away with the stigma of *Heaven’s Gate* intact. Only the complacent filmmaking of Spielberg has survived into the new millennium, but even his films have begun to take the backseat to the anonymous corporate blockbusters of Disney, Marvel and others.

Still, there are new hopes in new names that have taken on the self-branding model of auteurism after the close of the twentieth-century. But even with separate sets of successes and failures produced by Hollywood under the variegated brand names of Todd Haynes, Richard Linklater, Steven Soderbergh, P. T. Anderson and Christopher Nolan—to name only a few—one can already easily discover disappointment and failure being attributed to these younger artists and their collaborative teams. It would seem, after all of this book’s revisiting of failure, no
matter how one shifts one’s perception, failure still leaves its mark in the industry creating almost insurmountable hurdles for its auteurs, both past and present. But the goal of this argument was never to sugar-coat failure as a desirable result. The real intent was to show how intrinsic failure is to all those figures that at one time or another are seemingly arbitrarily elevated and demoted throughout Hollywood and its critical discourse’s history, and to investigate when, where and why failure becomes concretized as a stigma and not as a progressive force. It is to point out that there are other agendas involved in maintaining these qualitative distinctions—agendas that are masked when the industry or its critics just effortlessly toss auteurism into the bin of failure without more lengthy consideration. With every judgement of failure there are hidden motives to relegating auteurs that, while not always legitimate, maintain a certain idealized perception of Hollywood as a bankable industry, and Film Studies as an accredited institution of critical discourse. And regardless of so many transformations and revisions we have explored, these judgements and their motives are still in play today.

Hollywood and its preconception of success—of what will and will not be successful—has not become any more attainable despite all the multiplying avenues of distribution, the variations in restriction of length and preferred formatting, and additional expenses and cost structuring to include so many different hands in so many different pockets. Hollywood now provides ninety-nine percent of the world’s funding for cinematic production. And the remaining one percent is spent around the world mainly trying to imitate a “Hollywood look” to get their products seen. As I have said, streaming has become the next set of packaging of cinema and its moving images. This old new threat of tele-visualization offers more viewable hours per year that one would need at least ten consecutive lifetimes to watch it all. But like the video rental chains that preceded them, these digital rental libraries also limit and restrict
viewership by offering only those films that they can afford the licenses to. Certain films quietly vanish to make way for the new year’s line-up. Now via the internet in addition to cable and satellite TV, the general viewership now lives even more so online and at home, and the multiplexes have shrunk themselves to offer up the few weekend blockbusters in over-hyped 3-D technology warmed over from the 1950s. One now has almost instant access to so many digital archives that one can leisurely skip across the surface of recent blockbusters placed next to quieter more independent features, or one can dig deep into the libraries of cinema built up over time by so many histories and cultures, so many transformations of the system, and so many auteurs and their intentional failures.

Although Hollywood’s ability to adapt into so many markets while also limiting its viewership makes discovering and viewing all its failures a very complex task, it is equally complicated to challenge what labels them as failures within the supposedly critically neutral arena of Film Studies, especially when it truly yields failure upon filmmakers with the same pejorative force as the industry it critiques. The definition of failure, if limited to being just a derogatory term, allows for only one possible configuration of the figure of the auteur: It becomes a figure of creativity that is the scapegoat for all other creative forces within its nexus. This is normally the definition that leads to the images of Hollywood throwing an auteur under the bus to protect the establishment and its authority. In such a conspiratorial light, cinematic authorship would only remain as the receptacle where Hollywood and its surrounding critical discourse stash their unwanted and unloved objects. If failure stays unregulated and defamatory, auteurism becomes a question of how much the commercial industry and its critical discourse disavows the transformative power of an auteur’s failure within the cinematic object.
There are many arguments that would support such a dark future for film authorship. But, for me, the name of the author revels in its failure as a constructive space and, in this larger open understanding of the many perspectives that constitute failure, it becomes the cultural commodity in which each film’s success or failure—the definition of which shifts over time—becomes neutrally embedded. The auteur and its failure are inseparable, and attempts to eliminate cinematic authorship, which some critics still think is possible to do, would beg the question of whether these same critics would find a surrogate for failure as well? After all, where would one place failure if the cinematic author was successfully erased as a pure fantasy or as some other type of surrogate illusion? Audiences would probably demand an entirely new system of accountability to determine what was to be adored or loathed in their dedicated viewership. Failure and its responsibilities would inevitably fall on the system, the critic, and ultimately back upon the audience itself. It would “end up” within its reception where it always was in the first place. How would an anonymous industry and critical field fill the vacuum of creative authority without its failure finally falling on the ones who generated it? I doubt they would be willing to give up their pariahs to take on the responsibility of being accountable for every failure. They would have to finally admit that their expectations that created it in the first place.

So, the cinematic author must remain in place, but it must no longer bear failure alone. It must share its failure as a collaborative effort because cinematic authorship is always a collaborative effort. In so many cases, the commercial and critical fields are often immediately— but almost always eventually—exonerated from their responsibilities towards the failures they helped produce and uphold simply because the cinematic author remains in place as a diversion. They covet success as their own product, revelation or discovery, and allocate failure exclusively

337
to the auteur. Therefore, the greater cultural and critical concern is not really whether we can correctly categorize and qualify certain auteurs as failures—that is already inherent in the cinematic author as a figure of intentional failure—but is that one tends to ignore the impossibility of success in Hollywood and the value judgements of critical discourse as complicit in their failure. On the commercial end, overblown budgets and financial expectations continue to keep filmmaking out of reach for most filmmakers and any aesthetic accomplishments are usually obscured by box office results. While this impossibility is partially challenged by the present ability to shoot and edit digitally on personal devices, the difficulty of aesthetic and commercial acknowledgement remains in the distribution and exhibition of those digital projects, the pipelines of which are still commercially monitored and controlled in one way or another. On the critical end, the impossibility of aesthetic satisfaction should be recognized as a construction made by one’s own critical agenda, but critics will never be held accountable for as long as they are without certain consequence allowed to transfer blame to an auteur. The irony is that critics often deny the category of the auteur as an individual arrogance laying claim to a collaborative effort if the product is argued as a success, however, if it is argued as a failure, the figure reintegrates back into an individual that was responsible for its failure, or as a victim of its blocked possibility of systemic success. Regardless, on both the commercial and critical ends, the auteur remains strategically marginalized as a potential buffer for commercial and critical failure.

By this logic, without the marginal space of failed Hollywood auteurs, we would only be watching films made on the premise of the largest opening box office amounts and cross-referenced with the best critical reviews. Hollywood as a commercial force is unapologetic for making aesthetic decisions based on their market shares, and it does not have to answer to these
decisions because it has proven to transform itself when there are large enough shifts in audience demand. Critical discourse, however, is another story. So many critics make judgements based on some sort of pre-established model of aesthetic excellence that they know never truly existed. And yet, when a filmmaker like De Palma draws from those supposedly “perfect” places, he is made a pariah for trespassing in the temple of a greater cinema long since completed, and, thus, his work is made anathema. Or, when Welles turns filmmaking into a private act of perpetually reinterpreting and reediting his personal projects, he is chided for an inability to conform to the system—a system that refused to invest in him time and time again. Or again, when Gilliam revisits the same tropes that made him adored by critics with Brazil, he is said to have “lost it” because the repetition of dysfunctional fantastic tropes ceased to interest those critics.

Everything disappoints. Everything has been done. Like so many modern philosophers, film critics are obsessed with the ends of things so they can effectively suspend their criticism over an object with a sense of closure. But if they were to admit to the end of auteurism altogether, failure would be left to them to unpack and explain away.

Thus, to stabilize a future figure of cinematic authorship, the solution is not as easy as either sharing the culpability of failure with the system or critical discourse because cinematic authorship already includes the system of production and critical discourse by being a collaborative nexus of creativity in filmmaking. But the figure can be better configured if it is used less as a heuristic method of categorizing films, and instead is considered as a strategic rhetorical differential in the machinery of a globalized Hollywood conglomerate. I have offered up three figural modes of intentionality that are examples of these rhetorical differentials: The independent maverick, the copycat that reinvents established stylistic conceits, and a strategic fusion of both in a quixotic manner.
If the examples throughout these chapters prove anything, they prove that careful consideration of filmmakers that are written off as failures on so many levels—levels determined on limited perspectives of commercial success, questionable and arbitrary demands of originality, disagreements with shifting ideologies and/or identity politics, and so on—can be easily reconsidered as strategies that are simply not aligned with the commercial trajectory of the industry that negotiated their production, nor the aesthetic assumptions of their contemporaries’ critical field. Rather, their failures are what differentiates their works from being completely effaced by larger “normalizing” forces. While it is true that many potential works from so many intentional failures remain incomplete, unfinished, ignored, in multiple versions, in different cuts in length, and just plain invisible in so many other ways, the potentiality of these works can still be imagined and contained in the margins that make up the greater textual discourse surrounding their existing work. No longer should cinematic authorship be determined by quantity or quality, by taste or originality, by its resistance or its conformity to fields of determinative control, by its political correctness or other provisional social complaints launched at a psycho-biographical being, or even by blind luck or chance. Because cinematic authorship is no more than a series of failures that make up the greater sphere of certain collaborations of filmmaking that contain moments of success grounded upon those failures. These failures are all rhetorical efforts that engage with a greater cinematic project—a project that keeps filmmaking open to new and different ways of thinking about moving images, to being surprised by moving images one has already witnessed, and to a faith in a potentially infinite cinema and its coming attractions.
Notes


2. The tales of auteurism are often cautionary tales of self-exile and eventual absorption into the system. The first part of Strange’s story is the classic misreading of the commercial factory discarding its greatest artist, having no use for his artistry after losing his technical skill when, in truth, it is the artist who has castigated and exiled himself. This repeats the typical Hollywood myth of a creative paradox in filmmaking, both sides of which are to some degree incorrect—that the artist is at once solely held individually accountable for its failure, but is also exempt from failure because the system only wants consistency in producing the same product over and over. As the story continues, far from squarely placing the blame solely on the hubris of the individual artist, both the “real” world of Strange—commercial medicine—and the fantastical world of Kamar-Taj are ultimately saved by Strange’s creative problem-solving, which “breaks” with the conformity and rules of both worlds. Again, this echoes another myth where the artist is a world-maker that is always thinking outside of the system. Finally, if the story is viewed as a pure act of aesthetic evolution, there is a wonderful resonance with the power of creative authority and Strange’s ability to claim victory in the timeless dimension that threatens both worlds. The “timelessness” of Classical and Romantic aesthetics—Art as an Ideal—is historicized by an artisanal repetition of time—a single repeated event—that acknowledges a temporality within a supposedly timeless dimension. This conception of the creative work is very close to what Walter Benjamin conceived as “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Instead of “correcting” a flaw in his individual character, Strange turns his trauma of self-projected failure into a greater potential by opening himself up to the possibility of future failure and success. Thus, this fantasy figuratively deploys and critiques many of the myths concerning creative authority oversimplified as an individual Genius misunderstood by the world. Both the world and the Genius are subject to failure to survive.

3. A “high concept” film is an oxymoron to describe a blockbuster that targets the lowest-common denominator to reach the widest audience by being easy to understand and digest.

4. Upon closer analysis, authorship, albeit a much more collaboratively configured authorship, within Marvel films is still very much in operation after each success. However, to this authorship becomes more visible when perspective shifts to failure. For example, when *Batman v. Superman* has the impossible task of recouping a billion dollars, attention suddenly turns to its director, Zack Snyder. The fact that authorship is made visible in failure but obscured in success has been the recurring differential throughout the entire industry’s transformations. Despite all of Hollywood’s attempts to tame, obscure and/or eliminate the figure of the cinematic author, it has always retained the author as a receptacle in which to place its failures. This is no different when a director would retaliate against an aesthetic or commercial failure by removing his/her name, and deploying the placeholder, Alan Smithee.

5. I am critical of positing anything “outside” of Hollywood because, especially in the 21st century, it has become such an overarching system of finance and cultural absorption that very few films get shown in any venue without passing through some media format that is not part of Hollywood in some way. This is not to deny that many films are produced without Hollywood financing, but their distribution and reception are often dependent on Hollywood’s conglomerate “pipelines” to be viewed and appreciated. Because I have argued so far that failure is inherent in
reception, Hollywood and its disseminated global presence is the conduit from which disappointment and failure are experienced.

6 For some there is a distinction between New American Cinema, which is the early period of Nouvelle Vague and counter-cultural influenced films like Bonnie and Clyde and Easy Rider, and the New Hollywood which is the industrial commitment to blockbuster filmmaking starting with The Godfather and culminating with Jaws and Star Wars. However, I, like others, do not recognize clear breaks between these two periods, but instead see them as interdependent of each other as future chapters will support.

7 They too had their moments of personal forays into embarrassing commercial flops. Spielberg’s 1941, because it followed the successes of Jaws and Close Encounters of the Third Kind, seemed to fail miserably by comparison. Even those auteurs such as Scorsese, who I would place somewhere between the New Hollywood mavericks and the sell-outs, had numerous rise and fall moments. Between Taxi Driver and Raging Bull there was New York, New York, another auteurist attempt to pay homage to the classic MGM musical that was left cold by critics and audiences alike. And even after Raging Bull, which had almost no support from United Artists as it pushed to get Michael Cimino to finish its most famous failure, Heaven’s Gate, which would famously put the studio up for sale, Scorsese has struggled for decades between brief personal and artistic successes to become only recently a marketable commercial player.

8 Gunning uses this term frequently. See Thomas Elsaesser’s anthology on Early Cinema and Gunning’s own D.W. Griffith and the Origins of Narrative Cinema: Griffith’s Early Years at Biograph.

9 For an excellent argument for the multiplicity of cinematic authorship, see C. Paul Sellors’ monograph, Film Authorship.

10 I do not wish to get pulled in two different arguments, one literary and the other cinematic, but the figure of a single, undifferentiated source of creativity in literature is also never fully true either.

11 Here it is good to remind the reader of Derrida’s argument that a binary opposition is never truly opposed. In this case, conformity would construct resistance as its opposite, but resistance is an off-shoot of the system that conformity represents.

12 Sconce’s use of emotional disappointment and the unfulfilled desire of the witness harks back to Christian Metz’s psychoanalytic approach who insists that the critic of film must love the cinema, but also have discarded it. While I do not choose here to engage in all the Lacanian nuances of these claims, from Metz to Zizek, I do acknowledge that desire of the cinematic object does factor largely into all narratives created around and by authorship. Critical engagement in creative potential is always embedded with an actual concern of what it could have been.

13 This dove-tails nicely with my insistence that cinematic authorship must be configured practically and embedded in historical and materialist conditions.

14 There are those that argue that cinema always can be reduced to the naturalism of photography, and is thus at its core always a form of documentary regardless of its possible narrative qualities. However, there is also the concept of photogenie that implies that the framing and composition immediately endows its naturalism with something that exceeds its documentary base.
While *politique* is often translated from the French as “policy,” I think when considering the *politique des auteurs* of the *Nouvelle Vague*, especially as a point of origin for a consideration of cinematic authorship, *politique* is a bit more forceful than an act of policy. It is a political move to change the aesthetic perception of cinema—to use cinema as a political tool. Not as a means of propaganda, but to explore its potential for ideological change.

Of course, if one were to look for a definition of this future cinema, one would probably look less to the writings of the *Nouvelle Vague*, and more to their actual films. Because, to some extent, they proved their arguments by becoming avant-garde filmmakers themselves to varying degrees, their writings, by being put into practice, hold a certain historical weight in the narrative of cinema. The writers of *Cahiers du Cinema* of the Fifties became the *auteurs* of the Sixties. My only point here is that *being cinematic* is a problematic demand, and it marks a failure to fully configure the properties of the *auteur* that detractors will use against it.

Of course, my following chapter on Welles will intentionally complicate this “discarding.” Bazin ignores the meta-critical statement of *Confidentiality Report*—a film that “repeats” narrative elements of *Kane*—which clearly has different rhetorical goals. It also exists in extremely different conditions of production than that of *Kane*. Bazin’s comparative example, to me, is weak within a consideration of Welles’s history, but Bazin is not playing the *auteur* game with Welles here.

There is a lot of Bazin’s critique of Welles that I disagree with, but my differences will be dealt with in Chapter 3 that deals specifically with the shadow of *Citizen Kane* and the configuration of Welles as a certain figure of auteur.

Notice here how the *politique* is now suddenly a theory and no longer a call to practice.

There is no clear epistemological break in critical interest here. The assumption is that the journalistic and editorial criticism gave way to a more academic interest in film as an ideological entity. For a primer in this transition, I would suggest David Bordwell’s book on the history of cinematic narration, *Narration in the Fiction Film*.


This is normally attributed to the literary scholars, Wimsatt and Beardsley.


*D.W. Griffith and Origins of American Narrative Film*, p.5.

Their argument is maintained throughout their work. Most notably, Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson’s *The Classical Hollywood System* and Bordwell’s *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Style and Story in Modern Movies*.

Consider Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly’s *Singing in the Rain*, which rewrites and romanticizes Classical Hollywood’s entrance into sound films. This would be only one of hundreds of Hollywood’s questionable biopics of its own history.

Despite *Birth of a Nation*’s massive blockbuster success, Griffith only managed a profit all said and done of $1 million.

See Elsaesser in his introduction to the section on Griffith in *Early Cinema*.

I am borrowing freely from Elsaesser’s brilliant explanation of early continuity in his introduction to Griffith in *Early Cinema* p. 293.

This separation is established by Noel Burch in *Life to These Shadows*.

See *Movies and Money* 33-41.
One argument for Griffith’s unique gift at narrative was how he inserted the Victorian motif of the family at the center of Modern elements of industrialization such as the Civil War. The assumption here is that the family that struggle under the father’s addiction to alcohol in The Struggle is an outdated Victorian model. But this belies the flood of World War II movies and post-war films that use the family as a solid center of modern lifestyles and problems.

A similar system of auteurist identification and differentiation is elaborated between De Palma and Hitchcock in Chapter 5.

And this process of identification can be extended to Welles himself by Copolla self-branding himself as a vilified auteur. c.f. Corrigan’s The New Hollywood.


Staiger claims this system originates with Ince, but there are earlier examples of similar practices under the MPPC.

Ince stayed on under Zukor’s Paramount-Artcraft for a short while before trying to remain independently in control of his own studio. He built yet another studio in Culver called Thomas Ince Studios. I am lingering on Ince’s epilogue here because there is a similar risk to branding here that should be compared with Griffith’s. While he found distribution for his films, he found himself becoming more and more dependent on the model of Zukor’s Famous Lasky Players-Paramount and MGM, who were buying up control of the exhibition end of film production. The brand of an entire studio was too early to package without a secure outpost from which to sell it—and it would be Zukor and Loews that would secure the finance to control such vast real estate beyond a single studio ranch. Whether Ince would have survived more successfully than Griffith as a prototype of the auteur as producer versus the prototype of the auteur of the early blockbuster is impossible to debate as Ince died of heart failure in 1924 shortly after he celebrated his 44th birthday on William Randolph Hearst’s yacht. (One more thing . . . I have always loved the rumor that Ince was on board Hearst’s Oneida to try and merge with Hearst’s Cosmopolitan Pictures, and was accidentally murdered by Hearst, who confused him for Chaplin. This story as told to Peter Bogdanovich by Orson Welles is the basis of Bogdanovich’s film, The Cat’s Meow for those who wish to fantasize about the auteurist differentials between Ince and Chaplin.).

Zukor was a master at expanding and exploiting the star system. While the star system arose earlier with the Biograph girl, Florence Lawrence, it was Zukor and Lasky that initiated large salaries to encourage long term contracts.

First National was formed by Thomas Tally and J.D. Williams between 1916 and 1917.

Legend has it that after Blind Husbands was cut without Stroheim’s permission, he locked himself into the editing room for this picture with a loaded Winchester rifle.

This film has unfortunately been lost. Strangely, Stroheim himself never mentioned the film in interviews at any point in his career.

There has always been a popular parallel between Stroheim and the later, Orson Welles. Both filmmakers had incredibly successful first feature that overshadowed their future careers. And Greed is often compared to Welles’s The Magnificent Ambersons as two arguable masterpieces cut down by the studios and their cut footage lost or destroyed. The imagined “complete” version as originally intended by both auteurs have gained another mythical status as films destroyed by studio interference. However, Griffith himself was notorious for cutting his own films after every screening on the roadshow tour. The concept of a “complete” and definitive
version of the director’s intention is impossible. There are too many variations that occur to each film as it moves through the distribution circuit. Yes, it is a shame that there is no access to the missing footage of Greed and Ambersons so that one could determine its merit, but the insistence that a film was supposed to be better is often an apologetic tactic for the intrinsic merit of each piece of cinema always being fragmentary and incomplete.

As if to prove Stroheim’s restrictions were more a product of his own working method and not necessarily Thalberg’s, Stroheim joined up with independent producer Pat Powers to shoot The Wedding March. Again, Stroheim exceeded his budget of $300,000 by almost $1 million. The film was, as usual too long, and Stroheim was forced to cut the film and move the footage to a second film called, The Honeymoon (which like The Devil’s Pass Key has been lost). After Powers had shut down production and taken over the film, Stroheim pursued Gloria Swanson, who had joined United Artists with enormous cache and star-power. She and Joseph P. Kennedy brought on Stroheim to direct Queen Kelly. Next to Greed, Queen Kelly was perhaps Stroheim’s greatest failure. Stroheim famously took Swanson’s nun character and made her the “queen” of her aunt’s brothel. Once Swanson figured out Stroheim had hijacked the plot, she and Kennedy had him removed. Scenes from this film are famously screened in Billy Wilder’s Sunset Boulevard, where Swanson’s character of Norma is sheltered by her butler and former director Max played by Stroheim.

This title is taken from Bazin’s De La Politique des Auteurs where he claims that in addition to the argument for a study and defense of individual style of individual authors in film, more attention should be paid to “the genius of the system”—specifically the Classical Hollywood System that supplied the creative, as well as economic, resources for those authors.

Excepting Bazin and the Nouvelle Vague in the mid to late 1950s. Welles criticism was sparse—and mostly took pity on Welles—and focused mostly on his studio work since much of his European work was unavailable. In the Seventies, Welles’s critical perspective shifted to consider him as an independent filmmaker rather than one simply crushed by the Hollywood system.

This technique was later implemented in Robert Montgomery’s The Lady in the Lake.

This is mainly true of Welles’s American critics, and less so of the Nouvelle Vague’s admiration for Welles early on. It would be fair to exempt the original authors of Cahiers du Cinema that, while revering Kane as a watershed moment in cinema also paid closer attention to his other work. Truffaut was very fond of Mr. Arkadin, placing it as a better film than Kane, and Bazin, who did not align himself with auteurism, wrote a very compelling early retrospective of his work shortly before his death.

Bogdanovich’s response to Kael—that allegedly was wholly or partially written by Welles himself—was so fierce and direct that Kael asked Woody Allen, “How do I respond to this?” and he answered, “Don’t.”

Arkadin itself challenges the myth that Welles’s difficulty with studio interference was isolated to the classical Hollywood system. The film was edited into various version by the financial producers. Welles gave up on trying to finish the film his way.


The exception(s) to this claim may be Welles’s late essay film, Filming Othello, which is often disregarded as a rambling television interview with his Othello stars and intermittent comments by Welles himself that echo the far superior, F is for Fake. More consistent with my argument
of resignation would be *Journey into Fear* that is often demoted as a work abandoned by Welles and directed by Norman Foster (Welles himself would insist that it is a Foster film and not a Welles film to Peter Bogdanovich). Discussion of this film is better suited when we discuss the period after *Citizen Kane* that leads up to *The Stranger*.  

53 The same is said of Welles’s unfinished film *The Deep*. The film, based on the novel *Dead Calm*, is a thriller that supposedly was left incomplete because while waiting for actress Jeanne Moreau to finish dubbing her part, another star, Laurence Harvey suddenly passed away. Welles himself claims that he did not complete the film because he felt it would date. Stefan Drössler that holds the work print at the Filmmuseum Munchen has reconstructed the piece with gaps in sound, but upon showing it to critics many initially dismissed it as a minor work. However, the film easily has some of Welles’s best comic moments, and as loose and inventive shooting style as any of Welles’s later works. Critic dismissal of *The Deep*, again, speak to what critics have invested in Welles from *Kane* to what Naremore calls his “radicalization of style” in following pictures: They seem to want to see only the experimentations of narrative storytelling and adventurously grand camera work that speaks only to *Kane*.  

54 Or perhaps the film is just bad. But even considering *The Stranger* as a “bad object” in the Wellesian canon would produce a more fluid discursive field than its near omission in critical texts surrounding Welles's work. Regardless, critics speaks very little of it so we shall speak a little bit more of it in hopes that Welles’s resignation to the studio system (and not his first nor last) is worth more than an ellipsis.  

55 In *This is Orson Welles*, Bogdanovich also claims that *The Stranger* deserves credit for being the first film to show actual footage of the Nazi death camps. This would foreshadow the screening of Harry Lime’s penicillin victims in Carol Reed’s *The Third Man* by almost a decade. It was indeed radical at the time to be so blatantly anti-fascist as America itself was turning away from foreign political involvement to a more anti-communist, anti-intellectual society. In his conversations with Welles, Bogdanovich commended him on being so bold to show actual footage so close to American discovery of such atrocity. Welles dismissed Bogdanovich’s excitement reminding him that he only made the film to prove he could be a studio hack.  

56 The relationship between Welles and Huston would last both of their lifetimes, and is worthy of future critical study. Huston established himself as a factory director and “bankable” with the success of *The Maltese Falcon* in the same year as *Citizen Kane* opened to lackluster response. Huston would be denied auteur status by the New Wave, but would then go on to be an exemplary maverick, or more correctly “macho,” director. Welles would cast him as his maverick director in *The Other Side of the Wind*, who is trying to comment on the state of being a dinosaur in the field of the foreign art films and New Hollywood cinema brats.  

57 That it was his only commercial success throughout its studio work needs some slight revision. It is true that *The Stranger* is the only studio project of Welles's to make a profit, but the assumption that all his studio films were the *Ishtar* or *Waterworld* of their time is also extreme. As Jim McBride corrects:

Mainstream Hollywood liked to believe that Welles was habitually and wildly profligate as an excuse to stigmatize him for his real crimes, his lack of orthodoxy and malleability. The real “curse” hanging over his career is capitalism. He did go over budget on his first two films [*Kane* and *Ambersons*], but by sums that can hardly be considered outrageous. Furthermore, his ability to make much from small resources throughout his career has
fooled people into thinking his films must have cost more than they did, an impression heightened by media exaggeration [ . . . ] Of Welles’s four postwar Hollywood films – The Stranger, The Lady from Shanghai, Macbeth, and Touch of Evil – two, The Stranger and Macbeth, came in under budget, and only one, Shanghai, went seriously over budget [ . . . ] (What Ever Happened to Orson Welles 91)

58 To be fair McBride’s first (then revised) book is a very appreciative overview of Welles’s work, and is ultimately supportive in a pure auteurist fashion. His later book, Whatever Happened to Orson Welles, delves much deeper into the social and economic conditions and realities of Welles’s productive abilities in his later years.

59 This will resonate in my following chapter on Brian De Palma.

60 Following this lost opening passage, the film was to have a surreal opening in South America where Meineke was frantically trying to find Franz Kindler to give him a message from God. This scene is reduced to only a few minutes in the beginning of the film, but the disorienting cinematography is easily the most Wellesian in the film. As Naremore contends: “Welles frequently commented on the loss of the Latin American sequences of The Stranger, which were far more eerie and complex than my summary indicates” (271). The loss was supposedly attributed to Nims who was to cut anything that didn’t advance the story. Another missing scene is a dream sequence where Mary, upon discovering her husband is the architect of the Nazi death camps, collapses. While she hears her brother, Noah, talking outside her door, in her delirium see see Kindler holding the rungs of a cosmic ladder. The camera closes in to a single shot of his eye when he says: “You have become part of the crime.” This is Welles’s frequent manipulation of the character’s perspective to double that of the audience is only one possibility foreclosed by the studio’s control. These invisible elements for Naremore and others bring The Stranger closer into the Welles canon, but the invisible elements are only imagined and shaped by his subsequent, and far more radical experimentation in The Lady of Shanghai.

61 In truth, Welles recorded two soundtracks on request of the studio, Republic, one with accents and one without. Only the accented version apparently went to Europe.

62 Hannaford is flanked by the fictional young, hot director Brooks Otterlake played ultimately by Peter Bogdanovich, who replaced Rich Little. The competitive tension of the fictional friendship parallels Welles’s own relationship to Bogdanovich. Welles and Bogdanovich eventually fell out with each other as Bogdanovich’s success with The Last Picture Show and What’s Up Doc, in addition to Bogdanovich leaving his wife, set designer Polly Platt, for Picture Show’s leading lady, Cybil Shepard.

63 Stefan Drössler has compiled a chronological version of all the rough footage of the work print to show that the nearly completed film had certain comic merits from Welles’s performance and some fascinating editing techniques that made use of an economic use of shooting. However, critics upon screening of this rough cut dismissed The Deep as a minor work. This makes little sense to me. After viewing the film, it has similar merits and conceits of Shanghai, Touch of Evil, Mr. Arakadin and The Trial. This points to a very specific investment in many critics for Welles’s aesthetic value.

64 The following chapter delves deeper into the transformations of Classical Hollywood into its more contemporary conglomerate existence.

65 The facts of these negotiations are drawn from Joseph Karp's excellent book, Orson Welles’s Last Movie.
This phrase is Rosenbaum’s. Discovering Orson Welles, p. 283.

Easy Riders and Raging Bulls, p.16.

I find it strange in my research that there is no overarching term for the “fall” of Classical Hollywood—the period from the end of the central production unit of the Thirties—to the late Sixties where New Hollywood arguably begins. Roughly from 1936 to 1967, there should be another era called, perhaps, “The In-Between” that speaks to all the various layers of independents that channeled through and around the studio system of that entire period.

One of Welles’s most interesting narrative experiments was for television. His Fountain of Youth is a compelling and original use of the medium. It remains out of print but can be watched on YouTube.

As if to cement this trend, Walt Disney, who was lured away from UA by RKO in 1936, left RKO after Hughes took over to practice more horizontal integrations with Disneyland and his own successful television programs.

A good example of this is Hawks, who when interviewed by auteurist critics denied most of their claims to his consistent thematic use of “tough women.”

Here I must reiterate that in whatever way the auteur shifts in its description or construction, it still retains all three facets I have suggested thus far: First, the figure is a nexus of all creative inputs and intentions. Second, the auteur is a practice of genre that is only affective if one concedes that their method of grouping must be flexible and permeable. And third, it is always a rhetorical method of branding that make a specific promise. It is the critic’s and audience commitment to all three of these facets that construct the anticipation and disappointment—the expectation of failure in the cinematic author.

My detour into Hitchcock here is not to compare a maverick Wellesian “failure” to a “sell out” Hitchcockian “success,” —both are equally entitled to figural importance—but, rather, it is to diagnose a trend where these two figures intentionally engage with the popular trenches of genre cinema and, in the process, reinvent them.

Hitchcock’s reinterpretation of the “schlock” horror film laid the foundation for the slasher film, which is continues to be marketable to this day even after its postmodern phases in Scream and The Cabin in the Woods. Psycho is one of the earlier indications of the trend of elevating the B movie by means of a collaborative use of technical proficiency and studio financial backing complete with inroads into mass marketing to large audiences. While not technically a blockbuster, it looks forward to that future economic model that will restructure and renew the studio system.

One of the working titles of this book was Liberty Valance because for me it was the perfect slippery nomenclature that is at work in cinematic authorship, especially in traditional auteurist criticism—a name that promises freedom and power, or the “power of freedom,” but the character is an unregulated and selfish destructive force in a system that promotes collaborative progress.

The Hayes Code had been in place since the thirties to act as a buffer for the studios between audience reactions to certain themes and government interference. The studios obeyed the Code to not be attacked by various religious groups over unfavorable content. By the 1960s the Code was in dire need of revision for a new generation, and it would be replaced by Jack Valenti and the MPPA ratings board.
It must be remembered that the cinematic space in the sixties for schlock genre pictures, the growing exploitation films, and foreign films was a shared space. The art house that would be exclusively dedicated to intellectual fare, foreign films and documentaries, was still decades away.

This reflexive nature will be discussed at length in the following chapter on De Palma.

Of course, Truffaut and Godard are not the only members of the New Wave but their films were at the forefront of American viewership. Undoubtedly, Rivette, Rohmer and Chabrol—who also invested into Hitchcock imitation—would have their influences as well.

The American avant-garde cinema—many of which practiced anti-narrative, non-continuity films that experimented with either the structural possibilities or the inherent socio-political possibilities of cinema as an art form—resolutely and tactfully chose to remain outside of the Hollywood machinery of narrative, and, by default, outside of direct questions of cinematic authorship. Their work directly experimented with the anti-narrative potential of cinema as a pure art form.

Cassavetes expert, Ray Carney, expertly sought out and discovered the earlier version of *Shadows*. He attempted to screen the film in two Europe festivals, but neglected to notify neither Cassavetes’s wife, Gena Rowlands, nor old friend and produce, Al Ruben, both of whom controlled the late Cassavetes estate. Both were furious in that Cassavetes clearly was unhappy with the earlier version and did not intend for the print to be considered part of his works, never mind screened without permission.

As important to the Cassavetes phenomenon was his willingness to mortgage his house over and over to not only fund the production of his films but eventually to privately distribute them as well. Following similar experiments in character studies of private life with *Husbands* and *Minnie and Moskowitz*, Cassavetes hit his most successful pinnacle in complete independent liberation from both studio controlled production and distribution with *A Woman Under the Influence*. In a similar fashion as *Faces*, the film freely follows its central character, Mabel Longhetti, through her dedication to her husband and three children towards an intensity of love, loneliness and need that eventually results in a nervous breakdown and, and rightly or wrongly, a forceful institutionalization by her husband, Nick, and his mother. When she returns home, the family tries desperately to regain the quirks of the now-sedate, and nearly unrecognizable, Mabel. While the end of the film offers hope that Mabel will be able to regain her quirky character with enough social balance to not repeat another breakdown, it again, as in *Faces*, refuses to conclude with a clear future. The film evokes an incredible performance from Cassavetes’ wife Gena Rowlands, which garnered her an Oscar nomination. As powerful as the film clearly was, Cassavetes, having mixed critical support with his two earlier films, Cassavetes was unable to find a distributor for the film. He spent $750,000 of his own money (once again from mortgaging his house) to release the film by “four-walling” or renting movie theaters to show the film. The film finally ended up grossing $12 million, and Cassavetes was nominated for a Best Director Oscar. Cassavetes tried to repeat this success with *Killing of a Chinese Bookie* and the almost completely unseen *Opening Night*, but in the wake of the growing blockbuster model of the New Hollywood, it would seem that Cassavetes’s interest in letting characters roam free without visible narrative structure was contrary to the new economic formula of the ‘80s Hollywood system. After a brief studio hit with the gangster film, *Gloria*, and a return to form with *Love Streams*, based on his successful Broadway trilogy, Cassavetes’s
succumbed to a decade of cirrhosis, leaving an unparalleled and unique independent career that would only grow in importance as time passed.

83 For this quote and more, view the excellent collection of BBS films assembled with extras by the Criterion Collection.


85 I am being intentionally and playfully monolithic here by creating a type of straw man theory by capitalizing “Film Studies.” There are many different spaces of interest within film criticism that make up the entire field, especially over the four decades of De Palma’s career. I maintain a questionable hegemonic construction of film criticism in hopes that readers will assume a great deal of alternative criticisms and marginality in the established overflow of psychoanalytic, semiotic, and ideological movements within the field. I also wish to respect and consider both faces of the critical coin, a rigorous academic approach and a popular dilettantism, while remaining within the vast slippage between the two sides. I do this so I do not foreclose on alternative interpretations and arguments of all the above, but so that I do not have to take endless detours to be faithful to all these variations.

86 By “traditional” I am referring to a critical position that demands a filmmaker uphold certain aesthetic demands of originality. Of course, I think these demands are arbitrary and ultimately partisan.

87 To be clear, De Palma’s “misogyny” originates from a very specific and construction of feminism as identity politics. De Palma repeatedly fans the fire of these attacks that he victimizes women and “enjoys” torturing them, and this does not help his defense. However, there are many different readings that would reject misogyny and victimization as a trope in many of his films. And there are also examples of female heroines that triumph over masculine systems of control and subjugation via phallic violence that would directly disarm strict pornographic construction of the feminine, but would, instead, be a pornographic construction of masculine victimization. Regardless, I only wish to not have my argument digress into or be foreclosed by assumptions of one singular limited reading of identity politics.

88 The prevailing critical assumption from Mulvey forward is that the cinema is gendered thus: The cinematic apparatus is gendered as male (the Symbolic phallus for the Lacanians), and, while whomever is looking through it never achieves the full power of its gaze, the apparatus is focused upon the presented object, which is feminine. Regardless of how one approaches the cinema within this critical register, psychoanalytic or otherwise, the filming is masculine and the filmed is feminine. Most analyses of the cinematic horror genre—the genre where De Palma is most often wrongly tossed into—intensify this reading to render the gaze as a sadistic one—that the voyeuristic act of watching is equivalent to fucking and killing. The apparatus is, in most cases, a raping/killing machine. Of course, I am being intentionally reductive here. Carol J. Clover in her fantastic last chapter of Men, Women and Chainsaws, while adhering to many psychoanalytical tenets throughout her voluminous study of the horror genre, challenges this reductivism in that it does not consider the masochistic vein inherent in watching horror films. No matter if the viewer is predominantly placed in the killer’s field of vision (Halloween) i.e. masculine, or in the victim’s (I Spit on you Grave) i.e. feminine, the result is the same: One watches to be part of the violence. We “hurt” ourselves by watching. As much as arguments that purport viewer’s fantasizing about seeing the object hurt and their variegated investments in
the violent act, the viewer is also always placed in the position of the futility and finality of the victim—regardless if “she” survives. In short, our field of vision is vulnerable, or as Clover puts it, our eyes are soft.

83 But isn’t this unknowable feminine, this fear of castration, always the dead end of the psychoanalytical model? According to Lacan, neither gender can ever obtain the phallus. For some feminist critiques, the entire cinematic project is the masculine subjugation of the feminine. Thus, De Palma cannot be held singularly responsible for such a grand statement. But all humor aside, for me, De Palma shows a much greater sensitivity and respect to his feminine characters than many of his contemporaries. This sensitivity does not dislocate itself from the psychoanalytical model, but is a more careful construction of how De Palma’s cinema works with the same anxieties towards the feminine as does Hitchcock’s. But, to be sure, the pure Freudian model often leads to an impasse with De Palma, as, for example, in his supporter Robin Wood, who encapsulates his chapter on De Palma as “the cinema of castration.” While the anxiety that spans both genders in the Freudian conception can be found throughout De Palma’s cinema it can’t be completely reduced to it, especially his work before and after his “red” period—his work before Sisters and after Body Double. For De Palma, the impotency of voyeurism rather than the fear of castration has a much greater political statement—a meta-commentary and an agenda—within it. As Hitchcock arguably went beyond Freud, I would argue that De Palma goes beyond both. But can one differentiate De Palma’s political cinema from the psychoanalytical critical register, and if so, how?

84 For a greater experience of these concepts see respectively Deleuze’s Cinema 1: The Movement Image, and Jean-Luc Nancy’s The Muses.

85 I will revisit Spielberg’s debt to Hitchcock in the following threshold chapter on blockbuster development and functionality.

86 An interesting extension of this “lack” of influence in Hitchcock would be Hitchcock’s well-known envy of French suspense masterpieces, especially Clouzot’s Diabolique and Franju’s Eyes Without a Face.

87 Indeed, De Palma can very much be understood via Antonin Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty where all separations between play and audience are removed to hold the audience culpable for the play’s content.

88 Although as intimate further in this chapter, I am surprised after the great studies of Clover and others that have such a deeper understanding of all the variations of the horror genre, there has not been much revision in the critical attitude towards De Palma’s work.

89 These critics choose to focus only on his attention to violence and gore, as in Scarface (1983) or Carrie, or even more directly they diagnose his films like Dressed to Kill and Body Double as a fantasy surrogate for De Palma’s own desire to become a woman-killer!

90 From my previous Spielberg example, why is Spielberg not harangued for borrowing the entire cinematic language of Jaws from Hitchcock’s The Birds? Is it because he engages it indirectly, by replacing a small town’s fear of birds into the fear of a shark?

91 All these themes are shared by both Hitchcock and De Palma, but, according to Wood, for De Palma they are all directly related to castration. We have, however, learned to be cautious of the reductive readings of castration theory as an overarching theme that ignores a larger misanthropy: that the masculine fears that his phallus will be taken away because it (mis)recognizes it as missing from the maternal, and the feminine believes it to have already lost
the phallus. In short, via castration theory alone, all of life is simply an anxiety over losing the phallus or regaining the phallus in a symbolic register: money, power, etc. Wood recognizes Freud’s theory as being culturally and historically narrow as a universal symptom, yet he remains content with reducing De Palma’s film to exercises in castration.

98 For examples of Zizek’s readings of maternal excess see the essays on The Birds in both Looking Awry and Everything You Wanted to Know About Lacan, but Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock!

99 I have outlined this animosity between Sarris and Kael in Chapter 1.

100 For an example of this compare Laura Mulvey's repeated hostility towards Hitchcock's representation of the feminine with the argument over De Palm between Sarris and Kael. The arguments historically overlap and it is easy to conflate Sarris’s anger at De Palma’s “theft” of Hitchcock retaining the “misogynist baggage” of Mulvey’s read of Hitchcock.

101 Certain overlaps can be made with the previous chapter’s consideration as to how Hitchcock’s brand was constructed by Wassermain and the Hollywood studio system. Hitchcock's intentionality can be argued to exist in his obsession with the technical effect of cinema, but is less concrete if one considers Hitchcock as engaging critically with “ideas” such as voyeurism and scopophilia. These theories are applied by critics, not by Hitchcock-as-auteur.

102 This may be why Freudian and Lacanian readings are so dependent on unconscious intentions.

103 Although clearly including inceptive glimmers into the lifelong interaction, reworking and experimenting with the voyeuristic conceits of Hitchcock (as well as Michael Powell’s equally seminal, Peeping Tom (1960)), De Palma did initially favor the idea of becoming the “American Godard.”

104 Tarantino had gone on record before his Jackie Brown (1998) as stating that De Palma was his favorite director. Tarantino has since gone silent with this claim. Perhaps, because of his failure to effectively quote De Palma’s techniques of split-screen and perspective in the same film, he decided to distance himself from the earlier auteur.

105 It is well known that De Palma bears a deep sadness for never getting the same recognition of his cinema brat colleagues, Coppola, Scorsese, Lucas and, especially, Spielberg. But does not Spielberg, in turn, have a yearning to have De Palma’s fearlessness to deliver unhappy product with a haunting effect of reality as De Palma does? Spielberg’s closest attempt, Schindler’s List, has the critical approbation arguably because of its subject matter, which is exempt from criticism. After all, can you blame the Holocaust for being too melodramatic? But to imagine De Palma’s unflinching approach to such subject matter would be nearly impossible to conceive. Would critics dare to critique De Palma’s Schindler’s List shot for shot, finding all the derivative material. Or, in reverse, does Spielberg’s “borrowing” of Riefenstahl for Schindler’s, or his later identification with Kubrick, and his failed attempt to replicate Kubrick in A.I. make him a De Palmist? Does Spielberg’s “failure” to imitate Kubrick—he cannot trust his film to be as clinical in its storytelling as Kubrick would have been, and, thus, goes for the spectacle instead—mark him as a derivative hack, and, if so, why is he not subject to studio and critical restrictions as is De Palma? Or, is this another example of Spielberg’s inability to break from corporate demands to experiment with another master’s form whereas De Palma can break from studio demands with unfettered panache and half the budget?

106 Whom Gods Wish to Destroy, p. 2.
social
class
recognized
failure
would
runaway
of
that
an
as
quote
his
skills
to
113
blockbuster
little
some
auteurist
money
like
110
release
109
of
108
they
107
De
Spielberg’s
it
Audience
And
For
A
The
See
first
downfalls
after
was
beat
Sci
E
Close
Ken
Close
and
nostalgia
1941
(1979).
Spielberg
and
De
Palma
were
two
auteurs
that
were
both
branded
as
populists,
but
Spielberg
avoided
being
recognized
as
a
similar
imitator
of
style
while
continuing
to
engineer
his
films
towards
middle-
class
families.
Meanwhile
De
Palma
oppositely
sought
out
the
underlying
perversions
and
myths
of
the
nuclear
family
dynamic.
Spielberg
was
more
in
tune
with
the
return
to
the
traditional
social
myths
of
the
Reagan
era,
and
thus
a
safer
bet
for
Hollywood
and
its
profit
demands.

107 See Pye and Miles for the origin of the term “movie brats.” Their book precedes almost all
the
downfalls
suffered
by
their
monographs
in
the
eighties
with
exception
of
Spielberg,
whom
they
saw
as
the
strongest
potential
for
auteurist
cinema.
108 The sections concerning Coppola in this chapter are deeply dedicated to the intense research
of
Jon
Lewis.
109 The most successful use of “four walling” was by Tom McLaughlin, who bought back his
film,
Billy
Jack
(1971)
from
Warner
Brother
after
he
sued
them
for
poor
promotion.
In
its
re-
release
in
May
1973,
McLaughlin
pulled
in
$32.5
million
with
this
 technique.

110 Readers may have realized a slippage between where New Hollywood begins. For historians
like
Thomas
Schatz,
New
Hollywood
is
the
historical
point
where
the
blockbuster
as
strictly
a
money-generator
becomes
the
preferred
system
of
Hollywood.
For
myself
and
others,
New
Hollywood
gradually
emerges
as
a
supplement
to
the
Classical
system,
and
includes
the
early
auteurist
moments
of
independent
production
and
the
counter-cultural,
revolutionary
film
that
some
catalogue
under
the
other
historical
term
New
American
Cinema.
Clearly
early
blockbusters
like
Jaws
belong
within
both
interpretations.

111 A “high-concept” film means the opposite of its suggested connotation. It means that the
film’s
idea
can
be
easily
reducible
to
a
single
though
or
image
to
simplify
its
marketing.

112 For instance, Wasserman had green-lit, Lucas’s American Graffiti in 1973 with more than
a
little
degree
of
hesitancy.
This
wariness
on
Wasserman’s
part
was
confirmed
when
he
gained
Lucas’s
next
project,
Star
Wars,
proving
clearly
that
Wasserman
had
his
blindspots
in
his
blockbuster
selections.

113 And this is how Spielberg’s auteurist dimension can be recognized in comparison and contrast
to
De
Palma’s
ability
to
integrate
other
cinematic
authors.
Spielberg
had
embraced
testing
his
skills
in
television
production
while
De
Palma
was
failing
miserably
as
a
Hollywood
upstart
in
Get
to
Know
Your
Rabbit!
De
Palma
would
overtly
turn
to
his
lifelong
commitment
to
quoting
Hitchcock
with
Sisters
after
being
fired
in
Hollywood.
Like
De
Palma,
Spielberg
would
establish
a
certain
artistic
recognition
with
his
early
work.
He
received
huge
critical
praise
for
his
first
film,
but
that
critical
perception
would
change
when
he
manipulated
the
same
ability
to
quote
Hitchcock
in
Jaws.
In
a
way,
Spielberg’s
quoting
of
Hitchcock
in
Jaws
had
the
same
critical
demotion
that
Psycho
had
for
its
contemporary
critics,
but
was
in
no
way
as
problematic
as
it
was
for
De
Palma.
Spielberg
seemed
to
be
to
be
denied
critical
attention
provided
an
audience
flocked
to
his
films
in
larger
and
larger
numbers.
In
fact,
it
is
interesting
to
recall
that
after
Jaws,
Spielberg
was
almost
immediately
dethroned
by
Lucas’s
Star
Wars,
which
not
only
beat
out
Jaws
as
the
highest
grossing
film
only
two
years
later,
but
deflated
the
expectations
of
Spielberg’s
pet
sci-fi
project
Close
Encounters
of
the
Third
Kind
Following
Lucas’s
runaway
success
of
the
Star
Wars
franchise
with
the
Empire
Strikes
Back
(1980),
Spielberg
would
team
up
with
Lucas
to
create
Raiders
of
the
Lost
Ark
(1981)
and
this
would
wash
away
the
failure
of
Spielberg’s
failed
attempt
at
a
nostalgia
comedy,
1941
(1979).
Spielberg
and
De
Palma
were
two
auteurs
that
were
both
branded
as
populists,
but
Spielberg
avoided
being
recognized
as
a
similar
imitator
of
style
while
continuing
to
engineer
his
films
in
middle-
class
families.
Meanwhile
De
Palma
oppositely
sought
out
the
underlying
perversions
and
myths
of
the
nuclear
family
dynamic.
Spielberg
was
more
in
line
with
the
return
to
the
traditional
social
myths
of
the
Reagan
era,
and
thus
a
safer
bet
for
Hollywood
and
its
profit
demands.
This configuration, where quotation will risk becoming its most derivative, will not only remain within the blockbuster production of Hollywood, but will complicate the “indie” movements of the nineties and the new millennium, most notably in the cinema of Quentin Tarantino.

See, for instance, Cook’s claim in *Lost Illusions*.

Robin Wood notes that these repeated viewings of certain blockbusters were different from of Barthes’ notion of rereading. In Barthes, rereading was anathema to commercial culture that discarded anything once it was read. Rereading was attributed to a certain intellectualism that would discover new experiences in each return to the text. Repeat viewings of, say, *Star Wars* speak rather, for Wood, to a regression to infantilism—for a desire to experience the film anew like a child does.

The multiplexes are a direct supporter of or result of blockbuster investment. Because of the growing multiplex method of exhibition, Gomery is correct to credit Wasserman with an advanced understanding of the blockbuster’s future alongside his understanding of television and its marketing power to maximize the potential of the new multiplexes that replaced the single picture palaces. Gomery says,

> With *Jaws*, Wasserman took maximum advantage of the economies of scale provided by the invention of the multiplex. A complex with twelve screens (rather than one or two) gives greater flexibility, allowing revenues to be maximized when a movie, its popularity fanned by widespread television advertising, becomes a blockbuster. (219)

This, perhaps, should have been a warning to UA’s investment in Cimino’s aesthetic leanings because Rand’s main architect character is resolutely dedicated and unwavering in his approach to his art.

Coppola’s *Apocalypse* was not technically a UA production, but UA invested $7.5 for US distribution rights and lent Zoetrope money, well past its $12 million budget.

Cimino released *The Deer Hunter* in 1978 ahead of Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*. At the time in interviews, Cimino claimed he was 35 (he was almost 40) and a near-doctorate at Yale (it was an MFA for painting in 1963 following a BFA in 1961, not architecture and art as he told the *New York Times*). He also claimed he was a documentary filmmaker, but he made commercials. Cimino clearly redirected his brand with the attention from *The Deer Hunter*.

*The Deer Hunter* was a more popular success than a critical one. Tom Buckley in *Harpers* excoriated Cimino’s film claiming it knew nothing of the war, and was a Hollywood bastardization of the real horrors of Vietnam. Pauline Kael said that the film implied a greatness, but remained a little film in its scope. Regardless the film was a huge success and garnered nine academy award nominations.

For example, many gloss over the fact that in January of 1980, Kerkorian installed David Begelman as the head of MGM film production, who had in 1978 been removed at Columbia for fraud and embezzlement. Begelman’s supposedly promising line of MGM hits produced through the newly purchased UA—Buddy, Buddy, *All the Marbles, Whose Life is it Anyway?, Yes, Giorgio, Cannery Row*, and *Pennies from Heaven*. All flopped and, as an aggregate, easily equaled or lost more than *Heaven’s Gate*. In fact, Kerkorian’s UA/MGM never prospered and was ultimately sold off to Ted Turner in 1986.

Kerkorian immediately attempted to buy Chris-Craft’s 25 percent holdings in Twentieth Century Fox. Fearing a similar takeover from Kerkorian like CPI, Fox rushed a sale to former
Paramount head Martin Davis to beat out Kerkorian, and then, ironically, Davis ultimately started dismantling Twentieth Century Fox’s assets just like Kerkorian did with MGM. Kerkorian later was involved with the hostile takeover attempt of Disney with Saul Steinberg that led to Disney’s defensive hiring of Paramount’s Michael Eisner. With all these attempts to buy up the movie industry, Kerkorian had little interest in actual movie making, but was symbolic of the increasing conglomeration of the industry and the government’s progressive deregulation of the industry.

124 Had Arkoff’s company been able to make it into the eighties, and survived until the technology of videocassette and pay-television would become the refuge of other exploitation markets, most notably pornography, AIP might have been able to establish new ground.

125 The irony here is that Arkoff had given many auteurs, who established the “prestige” picture of the seventies, their start. In many ways, the prestige picture evolved directly from the exploitation pictures of Arkoff and Corman.

126 Coppola’s friend and protégé, George Lucas, deserves a small caveat in the dissolution and restructuring of Hollywood auteurism. Lucas had followed his success after American Graffiti and Star Wars by strengthening his production/distribution company Lucasfilm with the sister post-production facility, Industrial Light and Magic (ILM). Lucas had created the facility at the same time as his friend and mentor had created American Zoetrope. Lucas sequestered himself in Northern California and always felt that Coppola’s big mistake was in trying to play the game in Hollywood. What is surprising is that Lucas was more antagonistic towards the studio system than Coppola ever was. However, Lucas’s understanding of his audience seemed to make him better suited to building a studio than his mentor. Lucasfilm expanded in Industrial Light and Magic (ILM) around the same time a Zoetrope Studios. Ironically, it is worthy to note that ILM’s success evolved alongside Lucas’s decision to stop directing altogether, and rely on surrogates much like Thomas Ince did.

127 This is another reiteration of my thesis: Obviously, Cimino, Coppola and the rest intend to succeed both artistically and economically, but these acts of authorship are perceived as inevitable failures by variegated critics and audiences who view this failure as tied to the auteur’s self-conception and self-promotion of itself. This failure is embedded in its intention and its promise, thus intentional failure.

128 The term rhapsodes is a term borrowed from Bordwell in his study of early film criticism that he argues formed the journalistic foundations of film studies as an academic discourse.


130 See Tsvetan Todorov’s studies of fantasy for the traditional uses and functions of fantasy as a literary trope.

131 I am making a direct reference here to The Matrix (1999), which offers a variation of E.T. ’s retelling of the Gospels to encourage a greater understanding of reality and virtuality. The potential of deeper readings with such an accessible action movie is attributable to the great cyberpunk author and advisor, William Gibson (much like Joseph Campbell was to Lucas with his archetypes in Star Wars), and explains why the two Matrix sequels, without Gibson’s input returned the original film’s narrative to the easily digestible blockbuster narrative.

132 This will be bolstered by our analysis of Gilliam’s only independently funded picture, Tideland.

133 Gilliam renounced his American citizenship around 2006.

To counter Sheinberg, Gilliam put an ad in Variety, a tactic worthy of Griffith and Welles before him that asked: “Dear Sid Sheinberg. When are you going to release my film Brazil?” Henry Jaglom, formerly a director for BBS and friend of Orson Welles, claimed that Welles himself read the ad and responded: “It’s futile. These people never listen.” Although Welles died before Brazil was finally released, Welles would have been pleased to have been wrong with the outcome.

The specifically masculine gender of this will become challenged by Sally in *Munchausen*, and in future films-most notably Jeliza-Rose in *Tideland*.

While *Time Bandits* and Brazil respectively takes up the pivotal fantasy of a boy and a working man surrounded by an always-failing technological life-space and the bureaucratic over-documentation of said life-space, such life is always subject to random “terrorist” attacks—from Robin Hood’s gang in *Time Bandits*, for example, or from actual bombings that open Brazil and are so frequent that the population of this near-future treats the horrific, suddenness of the exploding bombs as part of a restaurant experience.

According to Schuhly, the agreed upon budget from the Putnam deal was always a more realistic $35 million for such a large scoped production, but the film was pitched, like Brazil, as a negative pickup, and for $10 million less—only a budget of $25 million—for its U.S. Release.

Gilliam had scored awesome Italian talent for the production: the brilliant Dante Ferretti for production design and famed cinematographer, Giuseppe “Peppino” Rotunno. According to Gilliam in an interview about his relationship to the cinematographer, “Peppino had a very Catholic approach to filmmaking where the director was God and the cinematographer was the Pope. Therefore, the rest of the crew had no access to God. Myself being a a good Protestant believed that everyone should have access to God . . . me.” (*Munchausen* Blu-ray extras).

For the record, I think both films have issues with pacing and get bogged down in clumsy dialogue, but both films deserve much more credit as very courageous type of filmmaking in both commercial and independent modes of production.

From this list of so many potential other chapters, most immediately deserving of another chapter, to me, would be how critics have lashed out at the reclusive Terrence Malick, who after huge periods of inactivity has become slightly more prolific in delivering very plaintive and poetic pieces that very much resonate with critically-acclaimed early works, *Badlands* (1972) and *Days of Heaven* (1978). The growing hostility towards his work by labelling it pretentious and boring is clear proof of the shift in critical taste not taking responsibility for its own disappointment.
Work Cited


___, *The Rhapsodes*


