

## CHAPTER ONE



### *Cinema: The State of the Art*

#### I

To all appearances, the business of cinema goes on as usual. Yes, movies are being made. The production lines in the studios keep churning out their images. The digital effects specialists stay up late at night to meet endless deadlines. Films open in Berlin or Cannes. Critics write their reviews. People talk about the latest releases at work or during dinner with friends. More than ever the filmmaking industry is part of our everyday cultural landscape. *Premiere* tells us what is going on. Critics on TV give thumbs up or down. *Hard Copy* and *Entertainment Tonight* keep us abreast of the successes and distresses of the stars and would-be stars. Even the historians of the medium regularly bring out fresh editions covering recent developments in the field. Once a year, the Academy Awards are seen the world over. Week after week, *Variety* tabulates the receipts. The money keeps pouring in. Another blockbuster year for the motion picture industry is in the works!

On the surface indeed, nothing has changed and it is business as usual in Hollywood. If we dig a little deeper, though, it is not difficult to see that this background of continuing normality, glamour, and professionalism in the industry in fact hides radical transformations that have influenced the conception, production, distribution, and reception of films in the last

thirty some years. Anyone who has lived this period of history knows what I am talking about. On the one hand, blockbusters now totally dominate the scene, technology is big business, budgets go through the roof, and celebrities are all over the place. On the other, foreign films are rare and tame, the art cinema has disappeared, and real independents are out of luck. But it is not just the movies that have changed, audiences have changed as well. Once upon a time, difficult films by Jean-Luc Godard could attract a sizable crowd in a first-run theater, whereas today, apart from mediocre productions made to order for the American market, foreign films have a hard time playing one week in a small run-down theater. Some say it is the subtitles, others blame difficult narratives. More generally, there seems to be a lack of interest in the U.S. today for serious filmmaking. Whatever the reason, this restructuring of both the business and the market presents aspiring filmmakers with poor alternatives. Let me offer a quick example from the class room. To illustrate time condensation in the cinema, an instructor shows the last scene of *2001* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968). The classical beauty of the shots mesmerizes everyone even though, for most, this is not their first viewing of the piece. But then someone breaks the mood by questioning the slow pace and the ambiguity of the scene, saying that today not even Kubrick would be allowed to shoot it this way. And even if he did, there is no doubt that it would be struck from the final cut of the picture. And if it were still in the release prints despite the odds, audiences would not stand for it, leaving the theater in droves, impatient, unwilling to confront the challenges of a more demanding kind of cinema.

What this example attempts to make clear is that, today, the choices for a young filmmaker are rather limited. The themes must be explicit, the action relentless. The language of cinema has shrunken. The possibilities of using the medium fully have been considerably narrowed. Sure, the entertainment industry requires yearly infusion of creative talent, fresh blood necessary to keep itself at the cutting edge of style and technology. But that is as far as it goes, for each talent will be harnessed so as to produce only what is needed to turn the project into an exciting package. At this point the classroom becomes silent, each student reflecting about his or her future: stereotyped characters, car chases, people shooting at each other, endless explosions, stunt people flying through the air, an orgy of fast cuts, and loud, loud music throughout. Options are not attractive either: truly independent films (not low-budget Hollywood movies) have a hard time raising capital. And, when released, they can manage only token advertising so that, even with good reviews, these films come and go

in a week, without a fighting chance of reaching their potential audience. For the filmmaker then, it is back to square one, once again raising money for the next project that will barely get any release, etc.

I believe it is important to face this impasse. I also think that to learn from what is presently going on in the industry, one needs to understand how and why these changes came about. Rather than moaning about the lack of taste of audiences or complaining about the greed prevalent in the business, one needs to go back and analyze what brought us here in the first place. But even this is difficult for there is no single nefarious decision that can be pointed to, no malevolent conspiracy between the big players in the field as would be the case in a Hollywood script. Rather, we are dealing with isolated events, each one giving rise to consequences whose exact breadth and particulars could be noted only after the fact. All together, using Wayne C. Booth's words, the circumstances we find ourselves in make up "an *uncontrolled* experiment of vast proportions, the results of which we will never fully know."<sup>1</sup>

My view is that three factors contributed the most to the present situation. First, there was the rapid evolution of Hollywood into a winner-take-all economic model which made it very difficult for independents and foreigners to compete. Second, the thrust of the counterculture movement in the sixties pushed Hollywood into embracing a cinema of experience rather than one of reflection. Third, in the arts themselves, the debasement of aesthetic values made possible by postmodernism undermined both the artist's self-confidence and the value of material created outside the culture industry's immediate concerns.

It may be true, as Perry Anderson suggests, that "no class in history immediately comprehends the logic of its own historical situation."<sup>2</sup> Disoriented and confused we surely are. In cinema, the forces of entertainment appear indeed to have won the day. Yet, the medium is too important to be abandoned without a fight to the barons of the culture industry who see no distinction between it and Coca-Cola, popcorn, or any other product of mass consumption. My story is a rather circuitous one. Please, bear with me.

## II

Although Hollywood earned its global ascendancy mostly by chance—World War I devastated the European cinemas and ended their domi-

nance in world markets—there was also, no doubt, a better business acumen here than elsewhere. Most formidably, the system was rationalized early on so as to be able to deliver time and time again products that would be of interest to a large audience for a reasonable cost. The industry's success, Janet Staiger convincingly writes, was due to two major factors. On the one hand, those in charge were able to “simplify, standardize and consolidate” the entire production process so as to make it as efficient as possible. On the other hand, each project could lay claim to some textual differences, some unique production values.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, if Hollywood never looked back after World War I, it is because it was able most of the time to avoid getting stuck in norms so rigid they bored spectators. The system thus remained eclectic throughout its history, welcoming foreign personalities and experimenting with ideas and styles that had proved themselves elsewhere.

Internally Hollywood evolved from a system of filmmaking controlled by cameramen working on their own to a unit of specialists operating under the leadership of a director. Quickly though, to combat inefficiency and reduce production costs, the core operation shifted to someone who could coordinate these matters from the outside—a central producer for each studio. By the thirties, following a sharp drop at the box office, decentralization became popular, each studio now employing a number of producers, each in charge of eight to ten films per year. By the fifties, the forced breakdown of the studio system saw the beginning of a series of structural changes whose consequences are still with us today.<sup>4</sup>

For the first time, the studios lost their corporate independence. Paramount became a part of Gulf and Western, United Artists was absorbed by Transamerica, Warner Brothers was taken over by Kinney National Service, etc. That these particular marriages did not last long is inconsequential. Each studio became merely the leisure time division of a conglomerate made up of radically different industrial concerns (an oil company, an insurance business, etc.). Although the change was seen at first as having little impact beyond bookkeeping, it turned out to have a profound influence on the entire studio culture. Think about it: the old rivalry between studios had now been complicated by the fact that each studio had to compete—in attention, financing, and revenues—with the other money-making ventures within each industrial group. Much more scrutiny than before was thus brought to the entire process of manufacturing and marketing the products of the film division. In other words, the new owners were not going to repeat the mistake of the studios which,

early on, failed to acknowledge television as a potential source of income for their products.<sup>5</sup> Rational business practices were therefore forced upon an industry that had grown in relative protection from outsiders. “Hot-shot” CEOs were suddenly surveying their new domains with calculative eyes: was it possible to extract new profits from movies, conquer new markets, and generally increase filmmaking revenues?

### III

The answer remained in doubt until an entirely new breed of players replaced the ill-fitted combines. You are familiar with today’s names: Disney, Sony, Seagram’s, Time-Warner, etc. The new owners differentiated themselves from their predecessors because their joint interests stood in related areas: television networks, cable companies, printing presses, publishing houses, bookstore chains, radio stations, record companies, newspapers and magazines, advertising and billboard companies, etc. Instead of remaining autonomous, each company could now be used to help the others reach maximum audience exposure. Indeed it is the effective “synergy” between them that made possible a vast increase in receipts and profits, and helped redefine a movie as a lead item for a variety of ancillary goods.

Typically a big picture’s opening is now accompanied by the simultaneous release of a book based on the film’s story and a CD of its music. At the same time, all sorts of merchandise—clothing, toys, lunch boxes, etc.—become suddenly available in stores everywhere. The film’s animated characters inevitably pop up on McDonald’s packaging. And eventually, the picture’s “concept” or characters are exported to theme parks, television shows, video games, CD-ROM’s, etc.<sup>6</sup> With a campaign in full swing, the “product” can now be encountered not only on theater screens but also in all areas of daily life: in advertisements on TV, billboards, magazines and newspapers, in book and record stores, in restaurants and department stores, in supermarkets, even on people themselves as they advertise the film on their T-shirts and baseball caps. Or vice versa, the picture itself can function as a billboard for other products, for instance when a protagonist “happens” to smoke a Marlboro cigarette, shop at Macy’s, or eat some Häagen Dazs ice cream. All these gimmicks and alliances have clearly expanded the reach and visibility of a film, turning it into an event that one needs to see in order to participate in

the cultural exchange of daily life. To orchestrate the multitudinous possibilities of each product, each media company affiliate employs synergy managers “whose job it is to work out how their division can add value to others, and others to theirs.”<sup>7</sup> Through this kind of saturation then, the big movie did not just increase its share of the market, it aimed at monopolizing it. As noted by Theodor Adorno, greedy expansion fits the logic of the capitalist enterprise, for its ultimate objective is “to handle, to manipulate, to absorb everything,” leaving “[no]thing beyond itself untouched.”<sup>8</sup>

The new communication companies were certainly helped in their marketing expansion by the technological changes of the last twenty years. The introduction of the VCR and pay cable technologies, for instance, fattened the gross revenues of films to the point that, today, more money is made from these distribution circuits than from the theatrical box office alone. In economic terms, all of this meant that the old law of diminishing returns for a product, once postulated by Alfred Marshall and others, had finally been overruled.<sup>9</sup> Although depending upon the success of a film in its initial theatrical release, the new markets could in fact generate exponential returns for its producers. Clearly, the economic tables have been dramatically turned around with only big movies and global marketing now capable of consistently delivering rich monetary rewards, a situation described by W. Brian Arthur as the law of *increasing* returns, “the tendency for that which is ahead to get further ahead, for that which loses advantage to lose further advantage.”<sup>10</sup>

#### IV

The amount of attention and money involved in all these synergies required a radically new kind of product: the blockbuster. As Robert H. Frank and Philip J. Cook point out in their analysis of the new economic trend, there are only a few books on the *New York Times* best-sellers list.<sup>11</sup> These are the books which will be reviewed in the press, these are the books which will be advertised and financially supported by the publishers, these are the books which people will hear and read about, see displayed in bookstores, and buy. Only so many books make it, the others don't. Each time a book manages its way into the charts, another is removed. To turn a profit at all, a book must make the list and stay there for a while. That is where the rewards are. The more copies that are sold,

the more a publisher can lower the cost per volume. Twenty books that sell five thousand copies each lose money for the publishing house, one that sells one hundred thousand copies guarantees that the company will be in the black at the end of the fiscal year. The same situation applies to films. Only so many films become hits at the box office. For the lucky ones, each print, each video, each release venue effectively lowers its overall distribution cost per viewer.

Whereas studio movies were put together from the inside out (the script largely determining the choice of the director, the actors, etc.), blockbusters are assembled from the outside in. They may originate, for instance, in a company's need for a big movie for Christmas or the Fourth of July.<sup>12</sup> That is followed by lumping together actors, writers, directors, musicians, etc., big names, recognizable names, names that can be counted on in a global marketing campaign. No one seems to care "whether or not [these people are] right for the material."<sup>13</sup> Worse, "the script is the last thing that people focus on."<sup>14</sup> Everything is based on which personality, what genre, what theme, what kind of action, cutting style, or special effect is popular with the audience right now. Not surprisingly, this approach has often resulted in "high concept" scripts, super heroes, cardboard characters, nonstop action, an ultrafast pace, and a brassy score. The purpose, remember, is no longer to make a film but to generate a short-lived but omnipresent brand name whose contents can be exploited in as many venues as possible. The difference between the studios of yore and today's corporate structures is not unlike that between an old county hospital and a modern HMO. Sure, doctors, nurses, and staff people made a living out of caring for people, but turning a profit was not the organization's primary reason for being.

According to Lawrence Kasdan, director-producers George Lucas and Steven Spielberg must bear responsibility for the industry's evolution. They "changed every studio's idea of what a movie should do in terms of investment versus return. It ruined the modest expectations of the movie business. Now every studio film is designed to be a blockbuster."<sup>15</sup> Practically speaking, the need for blockbusters has pushed the industry to go with known quantities only, regardless of cost. Harold Vogel puts it this way:

It may be less risky to pay a star \$1.5 million than to pay an unknown \$100,000; the presence of the star may easily increase the value of the property by several times that \$1.5 million salary

through increased sales in theatrical and other markets, whereas the unknown may contribute nothing from the standpoint of returns on investment.<sup>16</sup>

Absolute performance (how good someone actually is) has become less important than relative performance (how much additional money can this person generate as opposed to someone else), with the winner grabbing most of the rewards. This way of doing things has been characterized by Frank and Cook as “the winner-take-all society.”<sup>17</sup> While Bruce Willis, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Michael Douglas, Sylvester Stallone, Eddie Murphy, and others are paid millions for their participation in a film, only twelve percent of the actors registered in Hollywood find work in any given year and barely ten percent of the lucky ones earn more than \$5,000 a year for their efforts.<sup>18</sup> For the three large agencies which dominate Hollywood life—Creative Artists Agency, William Morris Agency, and International Creative Management—the lesson does not go unnoticed: the value of a film is no longer located in the worth of its drama or the talent of those working in it. What matters most of all is the participants’ fame, their celebrity status, their ability to support a package with global economic potential. Selling stars, writers, and directors as private labels, these agencies assemble and reassemble their pawns in ever more exciting combinations. “The goal,” Arthur suggests, “becomes the search for the Next Big Thing.”<sup>19</sup> The agents may speak warmly of creative personnel and talented individuals, but that carries as much resonance as Jack Valenti talking about art during the Academy Awards. Who you are as a human being, how much talent you have means little to the agents. What they need is brand appeal, someone they can sell.

For Hollywood then, the huge stars, the big script, the state-of-the-art technology, the one hundred million dollar budget, and the ubiquitous advertising campaign make plenty of economic sense. To be sure, this gambling is not for the faint of heart. As the stakes keep increasing, the producers end up putting all their chips on one big bet without knowing really what the odds are.<sup>20</sup> But that is Hollywood’s problem. For its competitors at home and abroad though, the increase in production and distribution costs has been devastating. Working with small budgets, unable to match the scale of Hollywood’s products on any level, these producers can no longer meet the demands of spectators jaded by extravaganzas. For the customer, because a theater ticket, video rental, and cable subscription cost the same regardless of the kind of film being watched, a blockbuster movie appears to give more entertainment value for the money. Put differ-



ently, one could say that the big Hollywood movies have redefined the audience's expectations of what a film is. "Market norms" in effect, Robert Kuttner writes, "drive out non-market norms."<sup>21</sup> Small projects with an unknown cast, a more adventurous narrative, maybe even an idiosyncratic style, will find it increasingly difficult to reach the finish line. So while it is possible for a filmmaker to produce a film on a mini-budget with the help of actors and crew (and the continuous support of farsighted equipment companies like Clairmont Camera), the release of a film involves an entirely different group of players. Newspapers, magazines, and billboard companies are not likely to give you a rebate on your ads because you're a nice guy and your film got good reviews. The same with networks, local TV stations, and cable companies. As for Jay Leno, David Letterman, and the gossip press, your unknown actors have nothing to offer that could possibly interest them. All in all, if it costs the same to release a genuinely independent film as it costs to release a run-of-the-mill Hollywood movie, and the latter will far outperform the former in the marketplace, why go through the effort? For independent producers then, the temptation is to play the only cards that will guarantee them at least some distribution time: the sleaze, the freaky, the outlandish, sex and violence beyond the norms Hollywood is comfortable with. In the end, the winner-take-all environment has polluted the air, infecting most with jackpot fever, leaving independents with few options but to look for shock value.

## V

My second point has to do with the changes in filmmaking brought about as a result of the counterculture movement in the sixties. As far back as 1962, Tom Hayden of the Students for a Democratic Society was claiming that the national power structure excluded ordinary people from the "basic decisions affecting the nature and organization of work, rewards, and opportunities."<sup>22</sup> Before long, the sixties saw the radical rejection by the younger generation of all the values held by their elders. Every entrenched segment of society came under attack: the political power, the world of business, the conventional social virtues, traditional morality, consumerism, the whole "Eisenhower-Disney-Doris Day façade" as a *Rolling Stones* editor was eventually to put it.<sup>23</sup>

But we need to slow down here. Why this sudden rebellion by the young? First there was the excitement provided by a young president in the

White House, following eight years that had been dominated by older men who stuck to views shaped by their experience in the forties: Dwight Eisenhower as President, Foster Dulles as Secretary of State, and Charles Wilson from General Motors in charge of the economy. Not only was Kennedy young—and his wife beautiful—but his vitality, liberal social ideas, and an economic policy resolutely directed toward growth, resonated well with a generation disenchanted by the ever-present social conformity propounded by families, churches, businesses, and the media. For a while, the Peace Corps and other New Frontier programs were able to quench the idealistic thirst of the young. The failed invasion of Cuba and the shock of multiple political assassinations, however, quickly reawakened doubt about who was really in charge of the country. Were there conspiracies after all? LBJ replaced Kennedy. The Great Society got moving. The war on poverty blitzed through Congress: school lunches, Head Start, etc. With the Civil Rights Act, the Administration assuaged some of the shame of segregation that had been exposed to the world by Martin Luther King Jr. and his marchers in Birmingham and elsewhere. Yet explosion after explosion continued to rock the land. Racial unrest destroyed parts of many cities. An unpopular war was raging in Asia. Draft cards were burned on campuses. ROTC recruiters were expelled from colleges and universities. Dow Chemical came under attack for manufacturing napalm. Other businesses were indicted for being socially or ecologically irresponsible. There were sit-ins everywhere. Large demonstrations in Chicago, Washington, and elsewhere united all those who demanded not only an end to the war but also radical changes in the way this country was run.

On the cultural front, hair grew longer, clothing loosened up, jeans were everywhere, the pill pushed sex out of the closet, film and book censorship disappeared, and rock music exploded on the scene, at Woodstock and in the record stores' cash registers. More ominously, drugs became prevalent. Ken Kesey perfectly summarized the mood of the times when, in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, he portrayed the United States as an asylum-society with nefarious leaders bullying and domineering the rest of the population.

## VI

Through it all, Hollywood remained aloof, incapable of addressing the issues that were tearing the country apart. Although in the past, the stu-

dios had learned to use the screen quite effectively to mobilize not only GIs but also the population at large against foreign villains, they now faced their worst nightmare: an impossible topic and a divided audience at home. There was simply no way to entertain people on these issues. And to talk about them concretely was risking alienating those in the audience who saw things differently. Let us remember: from the beginning, the entire system had been built around a mass audience whereas it was now facing ideologically fragmented groups. Caught by surprise by the rapid shift in mores and the dissension in the land, the studios' more conventional products felt flat, banal, out of touch with what was happening. Rock Hudson romancing Doris Day simply would not do when Kent State students were being shot by the National Guard on campus lawns and the mayhem in Vietnam was brought fresh every night into people's living rooms.

But what else was there? Well, there was the foreign cinema. The numbers speak by themselves: during the fifties when the major studios released an average of 250 films per year, there were about 170 imports available yearly. By the sixties, in a moment of crisis for the American film industry, these figures were turned around—Hollywood now producing only about 150 movies on a year-to-year basis while there were about 250 imports available for distribution.<sup>24</sup> The herald year for foreign films was 1964 when 303 features were offered to the market place! These numbers, however, should be taken with a grain of salt. Not every foreign film was actually released during that time and not every film was memorable.<sup>25</sup> In fact many were no better than Hollywood's run-of-the-mill products.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that a segment at least of the general public (the younger audience mostly) was now interested in exploring a different kind of cinema, subtitled though it may have been. In retrospect, it is clear that this tentative move toward more mature themes and styles was a marriage of convenience rather than anything else. The appeal of these films at the time may have been based primarily on their sexual frankness. Furthermore, following the New Wave in France and elsewhere, many characters were decidedly younger and their faces, refreshingly, were allowed to remain ordinary, a far cry from the glamorous treatment usually given stars in Hollywood. Finally, it is also possible that the stylistic immediacy of these films (e.g., hand-held camera work and jump-cutting) appealed to the young because it felt anarchistic and was perceived as a joyful violation of the aesthetic norms of the past.

Even though the films created by François Truffaut, Federico Fellini, Vera Chytilová, and many others slipped into the mainstream, gaining market share against their Hollywood opponent, it took some time for American independents to take advantage of the situation. Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* eventually pulled it off in 1969, aligning the film thematically and stylistically with the rest of the revolutionary culture enjoyed by the younger audience. Faced with this visual upheaval, it was easy at the time to believe that the modernist revolution that had seized music, painting, and literature at the turn of the century had finally reached film as well. In film in particular, for the very first time, what was perceived as the avant-garde dominated the cultural scene.<sup>26</sup> Surely no turning back was thinkable at this junction. Filmmakers here and in the rest of the world were going to keep probing the limits of the medium. A film Renaissance was finally at hand.

## VII

This view of things turned out to be dead wrong after all. The support of high culture by what was after all mostly middle-class youth proved as lasting as its endorsement of the new left and black radicals. Most observers at the time got it wrong because they interpreted mere experimentation for lasting conviction. More specifically, once American films were able to provide novelty without subtitles, outrageous homegrown characters rather than aloof foreign ones, boisterous sex encounters in lieu of refined erotics, and quick cutting as a substitute for genuine aesthetic experimentation, spicing it all with a newly charged but uniquely American violence, the passing endorsement of the foreign cinema came to an end. It had been but a misalliance from the beginning.

In the other arts too, the current was flowing from stateliness toward confrontation, energy, and immediacy. Happenings were in vogue. The Living Theater in New York fostered performance art, breaking down the traditional boundaries between actors and spectators. "Action painting" and the quick, bright, colorful, iconoclastic pop art of Andy Warhol became the rage in many galleries. And, of course, the rock music of the Rolling Stones, Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix, Janet Joplin, and so many others attracted all those rebelling against the stifling rigidity and conformism of the previous generation's mores. Certainly, in the long run, rock had a lot more to offer to the kids than the rest of culture

put together. You didn't have to bring anything to it for it spoke to the body rather than the intellect. As a music manager put it then, "rock and roll music is one of the most vital revolutionary forces in the West—it blows people all the way back to their senses and makes them feel good, like they are *alive* again in the middle of the monstrous funeral parlor of Western civilization."<sup>27</sup> Not only were you able to experience the sound's vibrations running through your entire body, a huge crowd could respond identically to a given beat, generating a Dionysiac sensation in everyone. Sharing marijuana surely helped. As Todd Gitlin remembered it, "the point was to open up a new space, an *inner* space, so that we could *space out*, live for the sheer exultant point of living."<sup>28</sup> More so than the other arts then, rock epitomized what was going on. Yet, if we look at its undercurrents, we cannot fail to notice how in tune it was with a consistent characteristic of the American psyche: although the celebration may have been pagan in its effusive bodily displays, it nevertheless remained thoroughly evangelical in spirit. It was, in other words, a populist reaffirmation of natural instinct, of vital impulse over the need for ratiocination. In the end, the culture industry had no trouble hijacking this audience, taking it for a ride, giving the kids an illusion of antiestablishment rhetoric while simultaneously reaffirming traditional distrust toward rationality and artistry.<sup>29</sup> This point, however, requires some elaboration.

## VIII

In a remarkable essay now largely forgotten, Richard Hofstadter once emphasized the continuing importance of anti-intellectualism in American life.<sup>30</sup> Working from the point of view of the fifties (they feel just like the nineties), Hofstadter focused his attention on the continuing values in the history of this country that militate against those who elevate the life of the mind. Foremost in his judgment was the influence of the Protestant evangelical movement which, early on, rebelled against the mediation of the learned clergy, insisting that the common man was naturally capable of understanding right from wrong without the help of any special learning. Uniting these believers, Hofstadter wrote, was "the feeling that ideas should above all be made to work, the disdain for doctrine and for refinements in ideas, the subordination of men of ideas to men of emotional power or manipulative skill."<sup>31</sup> The sense of independence, of having but oneself to count on was nurtured as well by the Westward

movement which, as Alexis de Tocqueville noted, not only rewarded fast-thinking individuals but also insulated them from the reach of the New England elite.<sup>32</sup> These two forces eventually combined to produce a popular ethos that stood in deeply felt opposition to the acquired learning of the educated classes. By the end of the nineteenth century, the mentality was solidly anchored throughout much of American society. According to this view, Hofstadter summarized, “the plain sense of the common man, especially if tested by success in some demanding line of practical work, is an altogether substitute for, if not actually much superior to, formal knowledge and expertise acquired in the schools. . . .”<sup>33</sup> Integral then to the American spirit is the notion that the common man can do no wrong. Anyone can judge a situation and take action. Just show me how to use a gun, I’ll know when and whom to shoot. Those who flaunt their intellect on the other hand are seen as a dangerous aristocracy most ready to discriminate against, take advantage of, and oppress common folks. Hence they are to be distrusted, rejected, and opposed.

Not surprisingly, antiestablishment feelings present in the counterculture turned against intellectualism in the arts. Theodore Roszak made this particularly clear when he wrote that the thrust of the movement was aimed at the previous generation’s “egocentric and cerebral mode of consciousness.” He continued, “In its place, there must be a new culture in which the non-intellective capacities of the personality—those capacities that take fire from visionary splendor and the experience of human communion—become the arbiters of the good, the true, and the beautiful.”<sup>34</sup> In practice, this meant that high art, especially in music, painting, and literature, but also, eventually, in the art cinema of Europe and elsewhere, was not in sync with the mood of the times. It was perceived as theoretically grounded, abstruse, and unnecessarily demanding. Difficulty and obscurity had been elevated at the expense of all other artistic values. And that was the case only because artists had to please the mannered taste of pretentious older critics, totally cutoff from the joy and dynamism of life. In *Against Interpretation*, Susan Sontag certainly reflected the mood of the times when she took a shot at the then dominant New Criticism school in literary studies. Typically, what these critics enjoyed most was to argue endlessly about the meanings articulated through the organic unity of a text, turning the work into an exegesis that sucked all life out of the material. Not addressed by that process was “the pure, untranslatable, sensuous immediacy of some of [the] images.”<sup>35</sup> In film, *Last Year in Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961)

would offer a good example of pure visual pleasure. Sontag also mentions the sudden intrusion of a tank rumbling through a city street at night in Ingmar Bergman's *Silence* (1963). These images in her view should not be explained symbolically; they had to be experienced on a pure phenomenological level. The critical practice of the times simply did not do justice to such immediacy of the art. In fact, Sontag went on, "to interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world."<sup>36</sup> Such cerebral disposition merely flaunted "the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability. . . ."<sup>37</sup> In other words, critics had seriously narrowed the possible play made available by the work of art. Not only that, David Steigerwald makes clear, "by turning art into an intellectual activity, interpretation denied the artist access to everything that could not be rationally understood, which is to say, nearly everything that comprised life itself: nature, impulse, desire, madness, passion."<sup>38</sup> For Sontag, moreover, it was important "to recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more," for a work of art, after all, was an experience first, it was "a programming of sensations" before anything else.<sup>39</sup> The direct physical or emotional effect on the spectator was the important factor. It did not matter therefore whether an effect originated from a Rauschenberg painting or a record by the Supremes, the impact was equally valuable.<sup>40</sup> But we must be fair to Sontag: her views were inclusive rather than prescriptive in spirit. She had recognized that the old standards for the arts were fully out of tune with contemporary cultural demands and she was making a bid to keep them afloat within the new paradigm. "From the vantage point of this new sensibility," she wrote, "the beauty of the machine or of the solution to a mathematical problem, of a painting by Jasper Johns, of a film by Jean-Luc Godard, and of the personalities and music of the Beatles is equally accessible."<sup>41</sup> Only today do we know that these different aspects or luminaries of modern culture were incompatible after all, that, for instance, the success of the Beatles sent Godard packing. Likewise her celebration of the "luminousness" of images in the films of Alain Resnais, Ingmar Bergman, or Yoshiro Ozu failed to carry the day after all. Far from it, the general agreement that images could be immediately felt, directly experienced, undermined artistic complexity in texts. As Steigerwald points out, Sontag's push against interpretation "left herself no way to fend off the corrupting force of the market place."<sup>42</sup> Art in the long run got ransacked while business profited mightily from all the protest songs.<sup>43</sup>

## IX

All in all then, the counterculture radical demand that art could be directly apprehended by the senses, without any training, any research, or any effort by the mind, fell in step with the anti-intellectualism in American life that Hofstadter had so convincingly described. Yet the counterculture's attack against what it saw as impersonal, abstract, stuffy, intellectual art seriously misfired insofar as this was not bourgeois art at all. In fact, as Daniel Bell argued in his book on the cultural contradictions of capitalism, the original bourgeois social values, those that stemmed from the Protestant ethic and Puritan beliefs, were no longer even operating in society at the time, having been progressively engulfed, since the beginning of the century, within other ideas intimately linked to business.<sup>44</sup> Whereas

the basic American value pattern emphasized the virtue of achievement, defined as doing and making, and a man displayed his character in the quality of his work . . . by the 1950's, the pattern of achievement remained, but it had been redefined to emphasize status and taste. The culture was no longer concerned with how to work and achieve, but with how to spend and enjoy.<sup>45</sup>

Instead of attacking the encroachments of business values into the realm of culture, the radical movement hit the wrong target, assaulting modernism, an artistic style born out of distaste for the bourgeoisie and rejection of capitalism. Tragically, the counterculture's profound dislike of aesthetic distance made it an ally, on this point at least, of the culture industry. Certainly, the easy consumption and immediate pleasure already programmed in the products of the latter were not out of line with the demand for immediacy sought by the former. Although stuck creatively at the time, the entertainment industry eventually found a way to provide participatory thrill without the foreign cultural baggage of the sixties. To keep the new audience turned on, it was discovered, all you needed was a great display of energy speaking directly to the senses. And that is what we got.

## X

At first, Hollywood was quite incapable of matching the kind of immediacy and involvement that could be generated in happenings, rock con-



certs, etc. Typically, since Griffith, viewers had learned to identify with a film's principal characters. The classical cinema manipulated this involvement through techniques (preferential staging and lighting, more close-ups, etc.) integrated into a plot that progressively restricted the world to a series of action sequences that put the protagonist at risk. Through it all though, the point of view remained respectfully spectatorial in tone: one essentially *looked* at an action unfolding out there, in the diegetic world.<sup>46</sup> Much more than this therefore was needed for the movies to release the kind of punch, the physical absorption, the immediate rush, that other types of contemporary entertainment were now able to deliver. For the jaded younger audience certainly, partial identification with a character in an otherwise placid, detached spectacle, was no longer enough. They groped for total involvement, absolute participation in the show. How could this be achieved? More so than any other techniques, motion within the frame and camera movement were found to provide just the kind of visual stir needed to grab the spectators' attention.

## XI

But let me go back for a moment. Action scenes had always been Hollywood's forte. Faster cutting, violent motion on the screen typically took over when characters stopped talking. All at once the visual activity on the screen swelled. The pace sharpened as a result of someone's chasing someone else. Or there could be an outburst of frenzied action with one character hitting another, the crashing of a body against a piece of furniture, with general mayhem ensuing, etc. When analyzed, an action scene can be said to work on two levels. First there is the interest in the diegetic action: what is happening to the protagonist, how much danger is involved, how will everything turn out. But second, there is also, for the eye, a series of quick responses to multiple stimuli. The eye indeed is programmed to react at once to any change in the peripheral vision area. The flurry of activity therefore punches the optic nerves all the way to the visual cortex. Although essentially a disturbance, the sensory staccato raises the stakes, sending a thrill to otherwise inactive little conduits. As a result of this twin maneuvering, the psychological identification with the character in danger is intensified by a visceral reaction based on the quickening of the stimuli. But whereas the first response benefits from careful character conditioning and narrative buildup, and is thus dependent on

the craft of the filmmakers, the payoff of the second is fully automatic in nature: one has no choice but to react.

Let us focus on this reflex action for a moment. What does it mean? How does it work? More than a hundred years ago, much research focused on what happened to a body in the grip of strong experiences like grief or fear. Darwin, among other scientists, carefully noted the physical results of fear: there was the widening of the mouth, the stretching of the eyes, and the raising of the eyebrows. The heartbeat would quicken and the skin could get pale. In addition, the individual would often perspire, muscles might shiver, etc.<sup>47</sup> The prevalent idea at the time was that the sight of something fearful was communicated to the mind, which responded accordingly by activating all kinds of responses in the body. William James, however, reordered the terms of this scenario. In his essay on psychology, he contended that “the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact,” that “our feeling of [these] . . . changes as they occur *is* the emotion.”<sup>48</sup> His conclusion was truly radical:

We feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble. . . . Without the bodily states following on the perceptions, the latter would be purely cognitive in form, colorless, destitute of emotional warmth. We might then see the bear and judge it best to run, receive the insult and deem it right to strike, but we should not actually *feel* afraid or angry.<sup>49</sup>

To go back to Darwin's example, one's experience of fear was now construed as a direct bodily reaction to specific stimuli, a sensation that does not immediately involve the mind. Insofar as film is concerned, this would mean that the spectator can in fact be agitated through bodily stimulation rather than mental apprehension.

## XII

Years later, James's ideas would find their application in the cinema thanks to Slavko Vorkapich. In a remarkable article published in 1972 in *American Cinematographer*, the famous montage specialist isolates “kinesthetic or implicit motor impulses” which are passed through joints, muscles, and tendons so that at the end we duplicate internally whatever it is we are watching. “To kinesthetically feel,” he explains, is to somehow reproduce

these movements [a door opening, a billowing curtain, a wave breaking, etc.] within our body.”<sup>50</sup> Motion, construed as the key to the visceral response of spectators, could now be generated in all kinds of ways. The point can be made clear using the last scene in *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991), when the two women have been cornered by the police on a canyon plateau. There are a few camera movements in the scene but they are not particularly spectacular, and neither is the editing. The excitement rather originates from within the shots themselves: in each of them something is afoot that grabs the eyes’ attention. Let us take a look. An extremely long lens first dramatizes the sudden rise of the helicopter from within the canyon walls, emphasizing its size, making us feel that it is literally on top of the women. The turbulence of the blades immediately raises a storm of dust all around and throws the women’s hats out of the car. Their hair now waves freely in the wind. Tight close-ups of the actresses make us share their confusion. Long shots frame tens of police cars rushing to the scene, with all their lights flashing. The women panic: there is an extreme close-up of Susan Sarandon’s foot pushing on the accelerator followed by a tight shot of a tire screeching forward with dust being kicked up. As they realize they are trapped, the film cuts to a series of extreme close-ups showing bullets being loaded in the barrel of a shotgun, a magazine being shoved into a chamber, fingers tightening on a trigger. The lead cops argue in front of the rotating blades of the helicopter. A cross-bar targets the back of the women through a long lens. More bullets are loaded. As the women decide their fate in tight close-ups, the sun which backlights Geena Davis’s head is reflected off the face of Susan Sarandon. Their hair continues to flutter in the wind, etc., etc. In all these shots, the emphasis is no longer on storytelling (conveyed through conventional staging and editing) but on creating an internal tension within the images through a visual displacement of some sort.

This kind of filmmaking is as different from Eisenstein’s notion of shocks as it is from standard action scenes in the classical cinema. Eisenstein indeed also looked at ways to infuse his images with kinetic stimulations of all kinds, but his goal was to help the audience expand beyond the present action to the larger meaning of the scene. A shock, he wrote, is anything “that is known and proven to exercise a definite effect on the attention and emotions of the audience and that, combined with others, possesses the characteristic of concentrating the audience’s emotions in any direction dictated by the production’s purpose.”<sup>51</sup> In *Strike* (1924), the Russian director crosscuts the Cossacks shooting

the demonstrators with cattle being butchered in a slaughterhouse. Our visceral reaction to the real blood gushing from the bodies of the animals thus provides a powerful simile for the workers' "massacre." In Scott's film to the contrary, the kinetic flux leads nowhere, its only function being to intensify the viewers' attention on the moment itself, shot after shot. The hair fluttering in the wind mesmerize our eyes. The blades of the helicopter rotating behind the police energize what would otherwise remain but a dull confrontation with undeveloped characters. Daniel Bell, I believe, has sharply pointed out the difference between the two types of shocks: "The effect of immediacy, impact, simultaneity, and sensation as the mode of aesthetic—and psychological—experience is to *dramatize* each moment, to increase our tensions to a fever pitch, and yet to leave us without a resolution, reconciliation, or transforming moment, which is the catharsis of a ritual."<sup>52</sup> So whereas Eisenstein's shocks lead us toward revolutionary solidarity, Scott's keep us hyperventilating during the scene but deflated a moment later when the credits roll and we leave the theater without instructions as to what to do with our excess emotions.

When compared to the classical cinema, today's movies can be seen as belonging to another breed altogether.<sup>53</sup> Then, spectators remained essentially aloof witnesses watching the action from afar. Now, the scene is organized for the sake of effects. By focusing on the physical action of a scene, the buildup of character is eliminated. In other words, one goes immediately for the jugular and stays there. Additionally, still in *Thelma and Louise*, what is seen of the action is shown impressionistically, as if the entire events were now perceived from the women's own point of view. The viewers thus experience the helicopter's surge as the women do, immediately, viscerally. The faces of the protagonists appear very close as they would be were we standing just next to them. The police action becomes nothing but moving vehicles, dust, lights flashing, bullhorns, guns, and cross-bars. Every shot is articulated to emphasize some motion or the dance of light. Identification with characters out there has given way to an incestuous relationship with them. Viewers react to the action at the same time and with the same subjectivity as the characters do. Put another way, spectators can be said to access the scene on a first-person basis. They are excited by the images first, they process the information second. Immersed in the scene, our eyes vibrate in response to the pulsating stimuli. The diegetic world has become our world as well.

## XIII

A second attack on the senses was made possible by Garrett Brown's invention of the Steadicam in 1976. At first the new stabilizing device was used to supplement regular filmmaking rather than as an alternative to it. More specifically, it integrated both the convenience of handheld shooting (a practice somewhat inimical to the Hollywood spirit) and the steadiness of the dolly.<sup>54</sup> One could now follow a protagonist past sharp turns and up a flight of stairs without any shakiness marring the image. Beyond this, the Steadicam focused the attention of filmmakers on camera motion as a device capable of engaging audiences' participation. But, unlike the views which emanate from the camera when it is handheld (when one feels the pressure of the air as it surges ahead) or from a dolly which is weighed down by gravity, there is a definite insubstantiality to Steadicam shots. In fact, the Steadicam look can be described as pure penetration of space, a zero degree of kinetics. Its effect, speed, Jean Baudrillard wrote, "is itself a pure object, since it cancels out the ground and territorial reference-points, since it runs ahead of time to annul time itself, since it moves more quickly than its own cause and obliterates that cause by outstripping it."<sup>55</sup> In other words, camera motion could now separate itself from the world of the characters and address the senses on their own. Suspended in midair, whirling around, the camera could make itself known and provoke reactions unconnected to the limited, diegetic space occupied by the protagonists. Rock videos showed the way by using the new possibilities to the hilt, capturing the attention of the younger audience and redefining visual style for the rest of the industry in the process.

To strengthen its hold over its young customers, Hollywood had no choice but to follow suit, adapting its filmmaking to the virtual world made possible by the Steadicam and all the other devices that similarly helped disembodied the camera style. Whereas, in the classical cinema, camera movement and action scenes were used as visual punctuation mostly, with the regular, more sedate narrative resuming just afterward, in contemporary filmmaking, motion of one type or another could be added at any time to spice up a shot. In *Bound* (The Wachowski Brothers, 1996), for instance, as a protagonist is making a phone call, the camera abruptly takes off and rushes along the long telephone cord, all the way to the plug on the wall, and through the plug, to the other side, onto the cord again, the telephone, and the character who answers the ring in the apartment next door. Viewers are thus taken on a totally arbitrary but

irresistible ride through space. The faster the motion, the quicker the reaction by the eyes. The eyes have no choice but to respond to the visual changes. They are thus engaged—James-like—independently from the mind which reacts by storing momentarily story and characters on the back burner. And the more often this kind of motion is used, the less time the mind has for ordinary mental activity

It is this hijacking of the eyes by the camera style that has defined the American cinema since the eighties and made it so successful here and abroad. There is no way indeed for anyone to reject the powerful immersion in pure space. The engagement is reflexive before all else. We are made to experience abrupt and novel sensations. Whereas in the classical cinema, one would look at the screen from a seat in the theater, partly identifying with the world of a character, the new camera style forces viewers within that world. William James described a similar phenomenon when he recalled that “if our friend goes near the edge of a precipice, we get the well-known feeling of ‘all-overishness’, and we shrink back. . . .”<sup>56</sup> Today the film technique keeps us on the edge as well, even when we do not care much about the well-being of the character involved. Witness for instance, the last sequence preceding the arrest of the main protagonist in *Goodfellas* (1990). Martin Scorsese keeps the juices flowing by forcing the camera to fly through space, surging toward a pot of pasta or rushing to the protagonist’s car without conventional cue or motivation. Whether we want to or not, he makes us experience the world through the coked head of the character. What matters is the flux of it all.

These are the kind of shots that have transformed our cinema. The key factor here is that spectators are made to participate and become accomplices of the action rather than its witnesses. Aesthetic distance has been eliminated. For directors, this means being in charge of a roller coaster, and their talent is now gauged in terms of their ability to produce as many thrills as possible. For audiences bred on such effects, different kinds of filmmaking, say *Secrets and Lies* (Mike Leigh, 1996), will feel terribly slow, dull, uneventful, unbearable even. Abroad too, this boisterous cinema is altering local taste, destroying independent film cultures. All in all, the deintellectualization of art and the primacy given to sensual responses by the body—the guiding principles of the counterculture movement in the sixties—have led to a filmmaking style today that is entirely driven by stimuli which mesmerize and keep audiences coming back for more.

## XIV

Whereas counterculture assaulted the leading principles of art from the outside, postmodernism has undermined them from the inside. I do not intend here to provide a full-fledged account of the postmodern movement, for this has been done very successfully elsewhere.<sup>57</sup> Rather, I will focus on those ideas that have most impacted the welfare of artists and filmmakers. But before we proceed with the current trend, we need to reacquaint ourselves with the foundation and ethos of modernism, the art movement that came under attack.

At the beginning of the century, the situation for artists was without historical precedent. Believing they could escape neither the ravages of the industrial revolution nor the dominance of art by the market place, artists carved up special places where serious and controversial art could still be exhibited: galleries, museums, concert halls, art cinemas, etc. These modern sanctuaries were established to protect art from the general commodification of life. Emerging from the creative will of dissident artists, beautiful and unique works could be appreciated there by the public, without the coarse pressure of buying and selling found everywhere else in society. Modern art was thus strongly romantic and affirmative in its nature: individual creators standing against the low standards pushed by the flourishing mass culture.

In achieving these goals, however, modern art alienated itself from popular support. Its texts became highly formal, theoretical in nature, often abstract or dissonant, and a great deal of time, education, and effort were required before their complex formal structures could generate a gratification of some sort for those willing to engage them. Artists came to be resented by many as pretentious parasites who had little to offer to common folk. As Adorno put it: "While people resign themselves to the unintelligibility of theorems of modern physics, trusting that they are rational just the same, they tend to brand the unintelligibility of modern art as some schizoid whim."<sup>58</sup> Why can't I just look at this painting and understand what it shows, just like I see and recognize the things around me? Why all these sounds in this music? Why this complexity, this difficulty in this book? Why be so hermetic? What's wrong with plain speaking?

Modern art's liberation then, as Horkheimer and Adorno were quick to point out, turned out to be a costly one. "The purity of [this] art," they wrote, "which hypostasized itself as a world of freedom in con-

trast to what was happening in the material world, was from the beginning bought with the exclusion of the lower classes. . . .”<sup>59</sup> By escaping to a new world of forms, artists abandoned their ability to speak directly about issues that were the concern of the masses. They now exclusively addressed specialized audiences, a situation which pushed them further and further afield. Eventually this led to the adoption of an “international” style that retained few connections with the different national cultures within which artists in fact worked. For all of that, it remained that modern art, by its very nature, posited a field of activity, a world whose values were very much at odds with those pushed by the mass media. The mere presence of that art offered a possible refuge from the crass commodities of the consumer industry everywhere on display. This is why Adorno, in his *Aesthetic Theory*, insisted that modern art, for all its shortcomings, nevertheless produced the only works which countered the presence of commercial interests. “Works of art,” he wrote, “are plenipotentiaries of things beyond the mutilating sway of exchange, profit and false human needs.”<sup>60</sup> High art, by its very presence, implied that not everything in life was for sale. It even had the potential to reveal their alienated existence to those caught up in the ideological spin of the times. Modernism, at least in Adorno’s eyes, had thus an utopian social effect: “Art respects the masses by presenting itself to them as that which they might become, instead of adapting itself to them in their degraded state.” “Culture,” he concluded, momentarily “keeps barbarism in check.”<sup>61</sup>

## XV

What was possibly an admirable solution at the beginning of the century was less clearly so at its close. Artists became disillusioned with museum culture as well as with self-imposed exile from daily life. Beyond that, some unexpected applications of semiotics, psychoanalysis, Marxism, etc., in the sixties and after, suddenly exploded the conventional ways through which art and artists were viewed. Semiotics, to take a single example, was revisited long after Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure proposed their seminal insights about the working of language. First, Peirce made us realize the distance between a referent (what is out there) and a sign (a word, for instance). For Peirce, although we have direct contact with the world, our signs are merely the *interpretants* of that world. They cannot by definition bring across the fullness of material objects. Because of this, our



knowledge about the world cannot ever quite encompass our experience of it. As for Saussure, he demonstrated the absence of link between a word (a signifier) and what is meant by it (its signified). Take any word and you will find no connection between it and the concept it denotes: what is the rapport between the four letters t-r-e-e and the mental association we get from that word? Or between t-r-e-e, a-r-b-r-e, and b-o-o-m, the same idea in different languages? The language system which is our link to the real world out there is thus arbitrary from the start.

In practice though, Saussure reassured us, the fact that signifiers and signifieds were not securely linked did not keep us from communicating effectively. Those who followed him disputed this assertion. For the post-structuralists indeed (Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault among others), the fact that “in language there are only differences,”<sup>62</sup> that there is no such thing as an unimpeachable connection between a signifier and its signified, puts great stress on the entire system. At least “tree” could refer to something solid. But what about a “lie”? Where is it? And what happens when a word has meanings beyond the one chosen by a speaker? A bias, for instance, refers not only to prejudice but also to an oblique cut in clothes making, a special twist given to a bowling ball causing it to change direction, and the voltage inherent in a microphone design. Which is the correct meaning? Context most often is counted on to save the day. Additionally, we find our sentences infiltrated by slips of the tongue, puns, allusions, eponyms, synecdoches, symbols, metaphors, words hiding within other words, slang which playfully deforms and reforms meanings at will, all extras that function within language like banana peels in a Laurel and Hardy movie. Barthes had no trouble seeing the consequences of such a polyphonic thrust: “Everything signifies ceaselessly and several times,” he wrote, “but without being delegated to a great final ensemble, to an ultimate structure.”<sup>63</sup> Each word then resonates with idiosyncratic inconsistency and the longer the sentence the more difficult it becomes to keep the meaning in check. Sometimes not even the immediate context surrounding a word is capable of determining what is being said in the first place. We have to grasp the whole before being able to go back and specify the meaning of each part—a bewildering proposition to be sure. If language is thus shown to be so radically imprecise in its functioning, maybe our assumptions about how we construct meaning needed to be thoroughly reassessed as well.

The cultural revisionism was thorough. To start with, without strong links between referents and what we use to represent them, how

could we be sure of a smooth transition from one realm to the other? Could we really be confident that even images were truthful to the event one wished to evoke? The old notions of historical truth and documentary objectivity were logically among the first to come under attack.<sup>64</sup> With language such a questionable ally, how could we ever get to the truth of any event indeed? Isn't the writing of history only a genre that owes more to internal narrative demands than to the brute facts they claim to relate? And what are the consequences of this for documentary filmmaking? Doesn't any recording automatically alter an event's authenticity? Shouldn't we rather acknowledge the subjectivity of the process and limit ourselves to first-person inquiries? Or perhaps, sensing that documentary fact is a fiction anyway, present reconstructions of the way things might have been (as in *The Thin Blue Line*, [Errol Morris, 1988])?

Second, if language is a figurative operation, it is foolish to expect ideas to navigate within a discourse without being deformed by it. This is made clear on an everyday basis when we attempt to correct an obvious misunderstanding by telling our listener: "What I meant to say is. . . ." What happens in such cases is that the other party placed our words within another context, a set of references different from our own, a situation which altered the intended communication. In the plane of art, therefore, texts were now said to be coproduced by readers and viewers who inevitably experience new texts within their own specific frame of reference, modulating them accordingly in the process. The integrity of any text is thus only wishful thinking. Stable meanings cannot in fact be controlled by the writer or the artist, for no meaning can ever be said to be actually present, right there, at that moment, in this word, this sentence, or this image. Meaning emerges rather as a consequence of a certain construction within the text and a specific context outside of it. Hence, as soon as a text enters the public domain, it becomes the object of universal play, something Derrida called *différance*, a combination that continually delays and defers meaning as the original signifiers of a text encounter other signifiers in other texts and realms elsewhere, those brought in fortuitously by historical circumstances, by listeners, readers, and viewers everywhere. Reading and viewing texts thus become creative activities that contribute to their actual meaning.

All in all, postmodernism activated a shift of interest from the question of meaning in a text to the operations of language itself. How we construct this meaning out of this text became more important than understanding the intentions of an author or the limited interpretation