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BerlInversions

Murray Smith

Abstract: Todd Berliner's *Hollywood Aesthetic* advances an original perspective on Hollywood filmmaking by insisting on its fundamentally aesthetic character, and exploring its particular aesthetic features with the tools of neoformalist film analysis, cognitive psychology, and the philosophy of art. I focus on two of the book's most ambitious claims: a) that appreciation of the style of Hollywood films can play an important role in our experience of them, over and above its role in representing and expressively dramatizing narrative elements; and b) that the ideological dimension of Hollywood filmmaking serves its aesthetic purposes, rather than vice versa. I conclude by noting a common root to the resistance likely to greet Berliner's two bold inversions of conventional wisdom on narrative, style, aesthetics, and ideology.

Keywords: aesthetics, ideology, stylistic decoration, stylistic harmony, stylistic dissonance, dominant, constructive principle

Has there ever been a work reflecting on the characteristic aesthetic features, value, and experience afforded by Hollywood filmmaking with anything approaching the self-consciousness, rigor, and flair exhibited in Todd Berliner's *Hollywood Aesthetic* (2017; henceforth HA)?[1] Certainly, the history of film criticism provides us with a storehouse of writing on the aesthetics of Hollywood. But—virtually by definition—such critical writing is concerned with these aesthetic phenomena in a first-order fashion, with just those features of the films, our experience of them, and the value they might possess, rather than with

reflecting on *what these things are* in a second-order fashion. The "central question" posed by HA has just that level of abstraction: "What is it about the Hollywood movies that people enjoy that makes people enjoy them?" (xi). Of course, there is a good amount critical analysis in Berliner's book, serving both the first- and second-order functions of which I speak: illuminating the works themselves, but also showing how these works serve to exemplify the Hollywood aesthetic *and* Berliner's account of aesthetic properties, experience, and value (in general and in film in particular). To put this another way, Berliner's book offers us a theory of the aesthetic and of the Hollywood aesthetic, in which critical analysis plays a key supporting role. (I am not sure that it explicitly theorizes the role of criticism—and here I have in mind journalistic film criticism, printed and online—within the Hollywood film industry, though it could certainly do so; it would be interesting to hear Berliner on this theme.)

Some precursors do loom large in Berliner's rearview mirror—in particular, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (CHC), by David Bordwell and colleagues (1985), and Monroe Beardsley's writings on the aesthetic. Beardsley wrote as a philosopher, though, his attention ranging widely across the traditional arts, with only very occasional remarks on film. CHC, then, is a much more direct ancestor. The importance of that work and its influence (along with the school of neo-formalism more generally) on Berliner is evident, beginning with the section in chapter 1 of HA devoted to an exposition of CHC. CHC offered an account of the Hollywood aesthetic in terms of the centrality of storytelling, the emergence of a "classical" model of storytelling, and the tight harnessing of style to story, allowing for style to be foregrounded as spectacle at conventionalized moments—all of this varied, within limits, across genres and historical periods. While this account is an important ingredient for Berliner, CHC and HA are very different in certain key respects. One of the innovations of Bordwell and colleagues' work was to base their analysis on a much larger sample of

Hollywood films than had been previously been undertaken, part of which was randomly selected. CHC still discusses canonical works, but in HA Berliner swings our attention back to films that might be deemed more-than-ordinary films, prefacing the book with a paean to the “test of time.” (The shift of attention is relative, as Berliner is still interested in the ordinary work, and the influence of CHC in this respect is clear; but the shift of attention to the outstanding, unusual, or “limit” work is nonetheless significant. The epigraphs from Andy Goldsworthy and Tony Kushner, for chapters 1 and 4, respectively, are very revealing in this respect.) CHC and HA also contrast in some of their theoretical reference points: Bordwell and colleagues derive their aesthetic vocabulary and framework primarily from the Russian Formalists, and while the influence of the Russian Formalists can in turn be felt in HA, Berliner devotes much more attention to Anglo-American philosophical aesthetics (drawing extensively not just on the ideas of Beardsley, but also on those of Jerrold Levinson, Anthony Savile, and Nick Zangwill, for example).

HA is also a descendant of CHC in that it is a work of cognitive film theory, a research program effectively launched by CHC along with Bordwell’s *Narration in the Fiction Film* (NiFF), which was also published in 1985 (and which provides a comparative analysis of the Hollywood aesthetic alongside other significant aesthetic modes of film production: chiefly those associated with art cinema and historical materialism). NiFF too is cited by Berliner, and there are many points of contact with others working in the cognitive tradition (e.g., Carl Plantinga, Kristin Thompson; to my chagrin, Berliner states in two economical paragraphs (8–9) what it took me an entire monograph to articulate).[2] But the arguments that Berliner builds from the findings of psychologists and other cognitive scientists are original and distinctive. Berliner’s proposals on the interplay between processing fluency and cognitive challenge in our appreciation of Hollywood films and on the role of expertise in determining what films strike the right balance between fluency and

challenge for individual viewers—at different points in their appreciative development—are particularly significant.

So much for an overview of Berliner's many achievements in HA. I turn my attention now to two issues that mirror one another in the sense that, in each case, Berliner seeks to challenge or invert conventional wisdom on central aspects of the Hollywood aesthetic: on the roles of *style* and *ideology*, respectively.

Pull Up to the Bumper

Berliner lays out five functions of style ("the distinctive and patterned use of the devices of the cinematic medium" [86]) within the Hollywood aesthetic—style may be set to work in the service of clarity, expressiveness, decoration, harmony, and dissonance. Some further explication here is in order. The set of functions might be subdivided into two groupings on the assumption that the first pair are core, while the last three are less salient and less pervasive within the Hollywood aesthetic, though by no means rare. The clarifying function of style describes the clear *representation* of the action by means of staging, performance, camerawork, editing, and so forth; in other words, the role of style here is not merely to depict action with clarity, but to get the game of representation going in the first place. (No film narration without stylistic representation!) When conjoined with the second of what I am calling the two "core" functions of style, expressiveness, we have a version of the two classical purposes of art: representation (mimesis) and expression. But Berliner doesn't stop with these classical, core functions. Purely decorative uses of style burnish a film without contributing to the clarity or expressive qualities of the action; stylistic harmony seems to denote global, salient, decorative patterning, the effect of which is to create a heightened sense of unity in the work. Insofar as stylistic decoration and harmony can, on Berliner's view, play an important role in our experience of a Hollywood film, these paired concepts

constitute the first of Berliner's inversions—style typically being regarded as wholly in the service of storytelling in Hollywood. Stylistic harmony bears some resemblance to what Bordwell (1985) terms "parametric" or "style-centred" narration, where certain uses of style are deployed so systematically across a work that we cannot fail to notice them (or we cannot claim to have properly appreciated the work until we do so).[3] But Bordwell's style-centred narration is not quite the same as Berliner's stylistic harmony. Bordwell discerns parametric narration in a handful of highly idiosyncratic filmmakers (Theo Angelopoulos, Robert Bresson, Jean-Luc Godard, Otar Iosseliani, Yasujiro Ozu, Jacques Tati) who bend style into some very odd shapes. The stylistic harmony that Berliner identifies as a possibility in the Hollywood aesthetic is more like the conformist cousin to Bordwell's band of style-centred outsiders: we still notice his style, but it is much more familiar and "classical" than that of his parametric relatives. (Think Giorgio Armani rather than Jean-Paul Gaultier.)

For reasons that will become apparent, it is easier to identify global stylistic harmony than local decorative flourishes. (Note also that is difficult to see how a local—one-off—decorative use of an aspect of film technique can be regarded as a *stylistic* feature in the strict sense, since style indicates patterning and patterning requires at least two instances of the use of a technique. On this logic, we should be talking about "flourishes of technique" rather than stylistic flourishes.) *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974) proves us with a nice example of stylistic harmony at work. Polanksi's film adopts an elegant cinematographic style making ample use of long framings and long takes, somewhat at odds with the "intensified continuity" that had been emerging since the 1960s.[4] The color palette of the film is also striking, depicting Los Angeles—or at least the well-heeled parts of it that the film spends much of its time depicting—as a brightly lit, handsomely endowed place. For this very reason, *Chinatown* also seems to be an example of stylistic *dissonance*, insofar as Berliner says that such dissonance arises when the style of a film seems "out of harmony" with any

other element of it. *Chinatown*'s graceful cinematography and glowing light certainly seem dissonant in relation to the film's bleak moral and political perspective. (Berliner offers a similar analysis of one of his case studies, *Leave Her to Heaven* [John M. Stahl, 1945], with its malign female protagonist and saturated Technicolor cinematography.) But then we seem to have a film whose style functions at once to create harmony (heightened unity) and dissonance (the conflict between beautiful appearances and evil actions). My main goal in floating this possibility is to underline that, in Berliner's scheme, stylistic dissonance does not seem to be merely a contrary to stylistic harmony, as the underlying musical metaphor implies, but a quite distinct function of style; and so stylistic harmony and dissonance are not, as one might infer from the metaphor, mutually exclusive. Whether it is possible for a film to exhibit stylistic harmony and dissonance at once, and whether Berliner thinks this is possible, I'm unsure. But HA's model of the functions of style in the Hollywood aesthetic suggest that it is—so either the model needs some revision, or we have to accept the somewhat counterintuitive and oxymoronic idea of an elegantly dissonant film.

It's worth dwelling on the musical metaphors at work here: harmony and dissonance. As they operate in ordinary discourse, we think of harmony and dissonance as straightforward, paired contrasting states (like black and white, tall and short, and so on). That is why, at first glance, and notwithstanding the argument above, one might infer that stylistic harmony and stylistic dissonance in Berliner's model are nothing more than contrasting, mutually exclusive properties. But if we dig into the concepts in the source domain of music, the simple contrast disappears. Harmony describes a parameter of music concerning the relations of pitches within a composition. Specific harmonic intervals—the felt relationship between any two pitches—can be more or less consonant or dissonant; a perfect fifth is a highly consonant interval; a tritone—by tradition, the devil's interval—is strongly dissonant. And different compositional practices allow for greater or less degrees of

dissonance. Observance of the principles of tonal music, in which compositions have key signatures establishing a given note as the harmonic center of gravity, keep dissonance at bay. Chromatic, atonal, and microtonal approaches to composition all allow much more scope for dissonance. But the really key point here is that traditional tonal composition, while tightly constraining dissonance, still allows for enormous harmonic diversity and tonal complexity. A "harmonic" piece of music is not restricted to the most consonant intervals (the octave and perfect fifth), but may work with the vast array of interval, chord, chord progression, and cadential combinations permitted within a given key and genre. And Hollywood films are rather like tonal compositions: the absence of strong dissonance does not make for lack of complexity.

Returning to the decorative function of style—the more basic possibility that stylistic harmony builds on—Berliner develops another interesting metaphor in the following passage, in the opening paragraph of a section titled "Style Independent of Storytelling":

> At some point, it becomes impossible to separate almost any component of Hollywood film style from its narrative function; in Hollywood filmmaking, style and narrative inevitably intersect. But in attempting to isolate and evaluate Hollywood style, one can get pretty far before driving through an intersection. (95)

Although I am tempted by Berliner's seductive metaphor, in fact I think that in the Hollywood aesthetic one runs out of road for *purely* decorative uses of style almost immediately.[5] As Berliner emphasizes elsewhere in HA, even where a filmmaker intends a particular use of technique to be a stylistic flourish and nothing more than or other than that, the force of narrative gravity in the Hollywood aesthetic is so strong that viewers just can't stop themselves from looking for narrative—representational or expressive—relevance.[6]

(Anyone who's taught this question will have a large dataset comprising student testimony on the narrative interpretability of anything and everything.) That is how we get from stylistic harmony to stylistic dissonance in the case of *Chinatown*; the style of the film is not just a decorative overlay, but an ironically lustrous scrim through which we perceive a venal world. Similar objections might be raised (and have been raised—by my students) in relation to one of Berliner's first examples of decorative style, from *Stranger than Fiction* (Marc Forster, 2006): "The odd arrangement [of the two characters seated in different halves of an 'articulated,' two-section bus]," writes Berliner, "provides a realistic motivation for ornamental camera and character movement, an interesting visual effect that serves no obvious narrative function" (99). The snaking movements of the tram and the dance-like camerawork deployed here, however, can readily be seen as expressive of the constant maneuverings of Will Ferrell's character in his pursuit of Maggie Gyllenhaal's character (or so my students tell me).

So the functions of style to represent the action clearly and to represent the action with expressive force are voracious, leaving little design space or psychological space for purely decorative style—uses of technique that are strictly *independent* of storytelling. But elsewhere, Berliner writes that "stylistic devices typically serve several functions at once" (86). This formulation is, I think, more plausible, and allows us to recognize the centrality of narrative design and narrative expectations in the Hollywood aesthetic without wholly reducing the function of style to narrative clarity and expressiveness. The Coen brothers have insisted that what Geoff Andrew (1992, 21) calls "little formalist games with narrative, images, characters and dialogue" are part of their *modus operandi*. Of such games, Ethan Coen notes: "What's irritating is, some critics see the repetition as if there's a meaning behind it; as if by virtue of its repetition it has a sorta *coded* meaning. But the formal stuff is interesting in itself, takes on a life of its own" (qtd in Andrew 1992, 21).[7] We need to create

some space to recognize this dimension as a possibility within Hollywood filmmaking, no matter how fleeting and marginal it may be most of the time. Allowing that we can recognize the decorative and harmonic functions of style *in parallel with* whatever narrative functions those uses of style may be performing creates that space. As Bordwell puts it: “In storytelling films, style can be decorative in just this sense: the pattern making operates alongside or ‘on top of’ other stylistic functions” (2005, 34). Even this much will be challenged by the apostles of pan-narrativity; but with this more moderate claim regarding the decorative function of style, the burden of proof falls on the skeptic to demonstrate that the work of style is entirely *exhausted* by its narrative role.[8]

“Vice and Virtue Are to the Artist Materials for an Art”

Let us turn now to the second—and, as he says himself, even more audacious—of Berliner’s inversions.[9] This is the proposal that, in the Hollywood aesthetic, ideology serves aesthetic purposes, rather than the other way around: “Rather than view Hollywood as an instrument of ideology’s oppressive goals, as many previous film scholars have done, I want to view ideology as an instrument of Hollywood’s aesthetic goals,” Berliner states (137). This is a controversial proposal because for decades the mainstream of film studies—now virtually indistinguishable from cultural studies—has taken the unearthing of the ideological values of films to be a, if not the, core activity of the discipline. And that academic stance to a large extent mirrors and extends the everyday assumption that a primary function of stories is to convey moral lessons or messages. On this view, the aesthetic charge of a work is the sugar that makes the ideological medicine go down. Nonetheless, Berliner’s inverse hypothesis, that the ideology of a work—or rather, its ideological elements, which may or may not be consistent in themselves—are just further ingredients (or “materials,” to use Wilde’s word, a term also favored, in just the same sense, by the Russian Formalists[10]) in what is essentially

an aesthetic object, is an attractive idea for a number of reasons. It makes sense of the fact that Hollywood films have given expression to a wide range of political sentiments, from tales shedding a critical light on capitalism (from *It's a Wonderful Life* [Frank Capra, 1946] to *The Big Short* [Adam McKay, 2015]) to those which flirt with neo-Fascist authoritarianism (*The Fountainhead* [King Vidor, 1949], *Robocop* [Paul Verhoeven, 1987], *300* [Zack Snyder, 2006]). The Hollywood system is nothing if not opportunistic: if a given story can be shaped to deliver the kinds of aesthetic pleasures Berliner analyzes, few Hollywood players will lose much sleep about its politics. "The studios would promote the revolution if they thought it would sell tickets," as Berliner states (137). And as viewers, we often seem happy to shelve our ordinary moral compasses, enjoying "fictional relief" (Vaage 2013 and 2016) from the weight of our real-world evaluative judgments, especially in the context of genre fictions: how many of us who root for Dirty Harry would do so with his real-world counterpart? For all these reasons, Berliner is right to argue that in Hollywood, in a host of ways, the aesthetic tail wags the ideological dog.

Note also that Berliner's take on ideology is neither formalistic nor hedonistic. The ideological content of Hollywood films still matters—but it matters aesthetically rather than in a directly ideological fashion. If that thought seems obscure, consider this articulation of the idea by Jan Mukařovský: "[T]he influence of aesthetic value is not that it swallows up and represses all remaining values, but that it releases every one of them from direct contact with a corresponding life-value" (1979, 89), such as ethical or political value. Our aesthetic attention is not restricted to the purely formal properties of works (compositional balance or narrative proportions, for example); the substance of the story counts aesthetically as well. This is the sense in which Berliner's account is not formalistic. But if mattering aesthetically can't be reduced to the narrowly formal features of Hollywood films, neither can it be reduced to the "reassuring pleasure" attributed to Hollywood by orthodox critiques of the

"dream factory" (even if our pleasure in Hollywood films often does take that form). As Berliner demonstrates, Hollywood films can engage us and enrich our experience by presenting complex ideological frameworks, even ones displaying a measure of disunity (see Berliner's analyses of *The Asphalt Jungle* [John Huston, 1950] and *Starship Troopers*). As Berliner notes in the Introduction to HA, he conceives "of pleasure itself as a broad category that includes any intrinsically rewarding emotional experience (which might involve fear, sadness, anxiety, etc.)" (6). So while "pleasure" in a broad sense—self-rewarding and perhaps self-perpetuating engagement[11]—is at the center of Berliner's account, and as noted above Hollywood films generally eschew strong dissonance, there is no exclusive emphasis here on the "feel good" factor.[12]

Notwithstanding Berliner's general argument for the priority of the aesthetic in the Hollywood tradition, the ideology of a Hollywood film is not always a matter of complete indifference to viewers. Advocates of "affective disposition theory" argue that certain kinds of media entertainment can only be enjoyed on the basis of "moral disengagement," but this cannot be true across the board.[13] Audiences for films with an overt ethical or political dimension, like *Selma* (Ava DuVernay, 2014) or *Green Book* (Peter Farrelly, 2018), will likely have a moral-ideological motivation to see the film. The Russian Formalist concept of the *dominant* allows us to finesse this point. The dominant describes the "constructive principle" which plays the overall guiding role in shaping the elements of a given work (or category of works).[14] Applying this concept to Berliner's argument, we may agree with him that Hollywood as a system is geared toward delivering a particular kind of aesthetic pleasure (normally expressed in terms of "entertainment") and that that principle dominates the ideological ends of filmmakers working in this tradition. But not without exception: in some films, the articulation of a particular political, moral, or ideological perspective has to be *balanced* with the entertainment principle. But even here the aesthetic dimension is not being

overridden; it is rather that the ideological and the aesthetic must be aligned. Mukařovský's point comes home to roost again; we can engage with "life-values"—including ethical, political, and ideological values—aesthetically.[15] What is certainly the case is that the formal demands of the Hollywood aesthetic will shape diverse political and ideological ideas to *its* contours—the occasional left-leaning Hollywood yarn (*Reds* [Warren Beatty, 1981], *Missing* [Costa-Gavras, 1982]) will not adopt the aesthetic norms of Soviet montage or Brechtian epic theater.

There is a connection between the two motifs I've picked out of HA for discussion. Resistance to the thought that style in certain contexts plays a purely decorative role, and to the idea that a film might use ideological material as a means to aesthetic ends, shares a common root—namely, that artistic complexity is always a matter of, or constituted by, or reducible to, thematic complexity. Consider, for example, George Wilson's remark on the visual beauty of Josef von Sternberg's films as an example: "The beauty is unquestionable, but, if there is nothing more to add, their loveliness is not enough to lift the movies out of the realm of amusing, decorative camp" (2011, 168–169). Visual loveliness is ultimately trivial and only takes on more than superficial interest when it belies thematic—philosophical, conceptual, ideational—significance. As my exploration of musical metaphor above suggests, however, aesthetic unity, complexity, intensity, and subtlety do not depend on thematic substance or depth of insight alone. Sometimes in a visual work of art there is nothing more than meets the eye, though what the eye meets is really quite something.[16]

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Aesthetics of Film has just appeared in paperback, while a revised edition of *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* is due out later this year, both with Oxford University Press.

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Notes

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1 Perhaps this is also the moment to say that Berliner's book contains one of the best expressions of spousal gratitude and affection ever committed to print.

2 See my *Film, Art, and the Third Culture: A Naturalized Aesthetics of Film* (2017; first paperback impression, 2020). [note rewording for proofs] See also the symposium devoted to the book in *Projections* 12 (2) from 2018.

3 Bordwell's first detailed treatment of the idea of parametric narration lies in chapter 12 of NiFF (1985), the term "parametric" deriving from Noël Burch (1973), in which the technical "parameters" of a film play a central role. In later publications where the idea resurfaces, Bordwell tends to favor "style-centred" over "parametric," an expression Bordwell borrows from a 1927 essay by Yuri Tynianov (NiFF, 275). See Bordwell's *Figures Traced in Light* (2005) (FTiL), 34-5, for another significant discussion of the idea.

4 Berliner discusses Bordwell's concept of "intensified continuity" in chapter 5 of HA (87).

5 According to Bordwell, “systematic use of decoration is pretty rare in cinema, partly because this art form is historically so tied to denotation. We ought, for this reason, to resort to decorative explanations of film style only after fully considering other functions’ (2005, 35).

6 Berliner makes this point in relation to the viewer’s efforts to resolve narrative gaps (HA, 66–69).

7 In the interview, *Miller’s Crossing* (1990) is identified as the Coen brothers film in which this “formalist” dimension is most evident in their oeuvre up to *Barton Fink* (1991).

[8] Also relevant here is Kristin Thompson’s discussion of stylistic ‘excess.’ See her discussion of the phenomenon as it is arises marginally in Hollywood filmmaking, and much more strongly in Jacques Tati’s *Play Time* (1967), in *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (1988), 59-62. Here she defines excess as “an inevitable gap in the motivation for the physical presence of a device; the physical presence retains a perceptual interest beyond its function in the work” (259). I take Thompson to mean that no matter how strongly a device is motivated (realistically, or by considerations of story or genre), such motivation will always fall short of fully justifying why just this device has been chosen. And nothing can erase the fact that what the spectator encounters is, precisely, an artefact constituted by a set of devices, that is, technical choices.

9 The title of this section comes from Oscar Wilde, “The Preface,” in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891/2004, xxiv).

10 See, for example, Boris Eichenbaum (1965).

11 On aesthetic pleasure as a distinctive kind of “facilitating” or self-perpetuating pleasure, see Matthen (2017).

12 Berliner points in this direction by recognizing both the “hedonic” (pleasure-giving) and “epistemic” (curiosity-prompting) dimensions of films. His use of these terms in this context

is somewhat unorthodox and for that reason does not quite line up with what I am suggesting here. But in spirit, we are on the same page.

13 On moral disengagement, see Arthur A. Raney, 'Expanding Disposition Theory: Reconsidering Character Liking, Moral Evaluations, and Enjoyment,' *Communication Theory* 14:4 (2004), 348-69; also discussed by Bruun Vaage (2016).

14 Among contemporary studies in the neoformalist tradition, Thompson (1988) provides the most extensive discussion. See especially part 3.

15 Mukařovský (1979) in effect argues that different types of artefact vary according to the degree to which the aesthetic dimension is dominant or subordinate in the way that the object functions (by design, or by use). In other words, the principle of the dominant is operative not only at the level of the individual artwork and at the level of genres or categories of artworks, but at the still more abstract level where the very status of a work as a type of artistic or aesthetic object is at stake.

16 My thanks to Ted Nannicelli and Todd Berliner for inviting me to participate in this symposium.