

Brno Lecture 1

“What the Hell, It’s Only History ...”: American Cinema History and the Problem of Interpretation

Opening Remarks about the series:

Does Cinema History matter?

What is involved in writing it?

Why care about what old pictures people saw, how and where they saw them,
and what they thought about them?

And how do you find out?

In this paper, I’m seeking to explore a question that I’ve worried about, one way
or another, for most of my working life. One version of the question is ... why
would you want to write a history of entertainment? And if you were to do that,
what sort of history should it be?

“What the hell, it’s only history.” (and the anecdote may be apocryphal, but what
the hell ...)

Valenti’s use of the term “history” is, I think, a specifically American usage most
clearly explained to me by the advertising tag-line for the 1994 Jean-Claude Van
Damme movie, *Timecop*, “Turn back the clock, and you’re history.” “History” is
something completed, dead, and therefore irrelevant because it is situated in the
past.

As a visit to the film section of any bookstore will tell you, there is a fair-sized industry in publishing books about how Hollywood has got history wrong—a publishing industry almost as substantial and about as turgidly wrongheaded as those interminable discussions of whether movie adaptations of literary works are sufficiently “faithful” to their sources. It is self-evidently true that the movie industry has displayed a persistent lack of concern over the historical accuracy of its representations, adapting historical events, like any other source material, to an already established set of commercial and ideological conventions. In Hollywood, history is first of all a production value; its first obligation is to be entertaining. As the terms of a Warner Bros. contract with the subject of a biopic explained, the studio considered itself “free to dramatize, fictionalize, or emphasize any or all incidents, or interpolate such incidents as [the] Producers may deem necessary in order to obtain a treatment or continuity of commercial value.”¹

Hollywood has been no less cavalier with its own historical record. At one level it has simply destroyed a good deal of that record, destroying prints to recover the silver, burning script libraries to save on the rental costs of their storage ... In another register, the industry has treated its own history in the sense implied in *Timecop's* other tagline: “They killed his wife ten years ago. There's still time to save her. Murder is forever... until now.” History, the dead past, can be returned to and rewritten “in order to obtain ... a continuity of commercial value”: we do, to paraphrase *Rambo*, get to win this time.

To my horror, I recently came across the declaration, by a self-styled “film history professor,” that he has “occasionally used *Singin’ in the Rain* in class to show the introduction of sound, since it is a reasonably accurate portrayal of the period.”²

During the movie, you may recall, Donald O'Connor discovers the principles of sound dubbing by standing in front of Debbie Reynolds and moving his mouth while she sings. Hollywood's history of itself offers history as entertainment. It's not accurate, but it's entertaining, and we share the curious expectation that the history of entertainment must itself be entertaining.

Film history continues to be written under this expectation. The most widely reproduced version of the introduction of sound—that it was introduced as a last desperate gamble by an almost bankrupt Warner Bros.—persists in circulation because the fantasy of the kids from the ghetto making good with an invention the big studios had turned down corresponds far more closely to the expectation of a Hollywood story than does the prosaic account of actual industrial practice. Jack Valenti and his predecessors have participated just as enthusiastically in this repackaging of material from the past to suit present entertainment needs: in a statement celebrating 30 years of the movie ratings system in 1998, for example, the MPA happily repudiated the instrument of self-regulation it had administered from 1930 to 1968 as “an absurd manifesto called the Hays Code [which] literally offered a list of do's and don'ts for filmmakers and performers.”³ In 1934, the MPPDA similarly repudiated the history of the evolution of self-regulation for a more melodramatic account in which it was rescued from sin and federal censorship by virtuous hero Joe Breen riding at the head of the Catholic

Legion of Decency. It's not accurate—every major claim in the standard historical account of the introduction of the Production Code is factually incorrect—but it's entertaining, and thus it remains the standard account of a history obliged to conform to the conventions of a Hollywood narrative.

Frustrating as I find it, simply saying "It ain't so," or even demonstrating it, doesn't seem to be enough—in large part because all the industrial pressures of Hollywood both then and now act against the revelation of a prosaic history of economic forces.

I want to propose a distinction between what I will call film history on one hand, and cinema history on the other. The distinction I am proposing is between an aesthetic history—essentially of relationships of influence between individuals or individual objects, and the history of a social and cultural institution. The history of stylistic influence borrows its methods and rationale from the practices of art and literary history, and it is predominantly a history of production and producers, concerned with issues of intention and agency underpinning the process of cultural production, usually at the level of the individual, and relatively little interested in anything—other than influence—that happens after the point of production. The writing of such histories requires very few sources, which may be one of the reasons why it was the most substantial form of history writing in the early development of Film Studies, when there were few primary sources available and few trained historians to use them. Perhaps the most prominent residue of this form of film history is the continued prominence of the idea of genre as a way of understanding Hollywood history, and I would suggest, a

principal means by which a history of the relations between films has substituted for a history of cinema as a social and cultural institution.

As Rick Altman argues, genre critics have succeeded in avoiding a serious engagement with historical issues by adopting “the transhistorical model offered by myth,”⁴ essentially establishing a mechanistic procedure by which social and political meanings are ascribed to genres, compartmentalizing their cultural function as a predetermined textual property.⁵

The history of the American cinema is, however, not the history of its products any more than the history of railroads is the history of locomotives. The development of locomotive design forms part of the history of railroads, but so, far more substantially, do government land policies and patterns of agricultural settlement. To write a history of texts and call it a history of Hollywood involves omitting the social process and cultural function of cinema, and denies the contextual significance of the material conditions under which movies were produced and consumed.

As an academic discipline, Film Studies has been formed primarily in the image of literary studies. Its earliest academic practice was—and predominantly still is—textual interpretation. Methodologies of textual interpretation have also dominated most attempts to construct cultural histories of the movies, including most historians’ use of film as symptomatic evidence. Social and political historians have, in the main, borrowed from film historians, and thus incorporated back into their histories the genre-based, mythological, and therefore ahistorical assumptions about the relationship of movies to the culture of which they are a

part. **Even as they are** incorporated into a larger version of social history, the movies remain under the obligation to entertain. Thus you will find accounts of *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* or *Scarface* appearing as diverting boxed features on “social realism in the movies” to alleviate the statistical tedium of histories of the early Depression.

These accounts rely heavily on a largely undeclared application of an idea of reflection, which has proved to be the most persistent metaphor for understanding cinema’s relationship to the society it forms part of. Aesthetic presumptions about the camera’s reflection of the optically real are transformed into expectations that the artefacts of popular culture must reflect a social reality connected to their production. How this relationship functions is seldom articulated, but while the word “reflection” is itself often avoided, the talismanic powers of the term “ideology” are frequently invoked. The terminology of ideological analysis has, however, often done little more than complicate and obfuscate what is usually a fairly straightforward analytical procedure relying on a concealed metaphor of reflection.

The metaphor of reflection encourages the historian to span the distance between artefact and context by engaging in critical interpretation rather than occupying too much time and energy in empirical research. Because the movies as cultural objects are positioned for interpretation, it seems to follow that they should themselves be understood as interpretations of or commentaries on their historical, political or social context, or alternatively as historical symptoms inviting such interpretation. Theories of ideology encourage acts of interpretation

as necessary to the process of decoding an encoded text. Ideology, understood as a system of representations, becomes the dark glass through which the critical historian looks at artefacts in search of truth. Once a symptomatic reading of a text has identified its codes and its structuring absences, the artefact will reveal both ideology and truth: ideology as the revealed system of encoding, and truth in the artefact's now clarified reflection of the historical real.

Textual interpretation thus provides a methodology by which two discrete objects, an historical condition (for instance, the social conditions of the early Depression) and a cultural object (for instance, a movie about "one particular miscarriage of justice" such as *Fugitive*⁶) are brought into the kind of historically entertaining juxtaposition proposed, for example, by Robert McElvane in his book *The Great Depression*, when he suggests that *Fugitive* "was the perfect expression of the national mood in 1932: despair, suffering, hopelessness. ... [The] film was 1932."⁷ Where and when this juxtaposition takes place remains, however, unclear. It is not, apparently, being claimed (certainly it is not being documented) that this is how audiences understood and interpreted *Fugitive* at the time of its release. Rather, we remain close to the ideas elaborated by Siegfried Kracauer in the late 1940s, that some movies, or some "pictorial or narrative motifs" reiterated in them, may be understood as "deep layers of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimensions of consciousness."⁸

At about the same time that Kracauer was writing, producer John Houseman expressed the fear that future generations, viewing *The Big Sleep* or *The Postman Always Rings Twice* would deduce from them:

that the United States of America in the year following the end of the Second World War was a land of enervated, frightened people with spasms of high vitality but a low moral sense—a hung-over people with confused objectives groping their way through a twilight of insecurity and corruption.⁹

Houseman's fears have, indeed, been confirmed by the vast body of subsequent criticism that has deployed what his contemporaries **Martha Wolfenstein** and Nathan Leites called a "psychoanalytic-mythological" interpretation of American culture in the invention of *film noir* as an expression of a general American cultural condition of "post-war malaise."¹⁰ Andrew Dowdy's comment is typical:

If we had only movies by which to measure cultural change, those of the fifties would give us an image of an America darkly disturbed by its own cynical loss of innocence, an America prey to fears more pervasive and intense than anything admitted to during the war years.¹¹

Interpretative strategies such as these have a strong seductive appeal, offering critics of popular culture the opportunity to make their objects of study meaningful by demonstrating their utility as surfaces reflecting the spirit of the times—the *Zeitgeist*. Such arguments, however, rely much more on critical ingenuity in textual interpretation than on any precise location of movies within the historical circumstances of their production and consumption. As criticism, it is often highly revealing. As history, however, it is much more problematic, at least if history's purpose is to establish the range—and therefore the limits—of available interpretative frameworks in any given set of historical circumstances.

In a rebuttal of Houseman's gloomy interpretations, writer Lester Asheim noted that the most popular movies of 1946 had included *The Bells of St. Mary's*, *Blue Skies*, *The Green Years*, *Easy to Wed*, and *Love Letters*. Questioning Houseman's selective sampling, he suggested that if a future audience were to see *The Razor's Edge*,

they will deduce that our generation was an intensely earnest group of mystical philosophers who gladly renounced the usual pleasures of this world in order to find spiritual peace. From *State Fair* they can conjure up a nation of simple agrarians whose major problems centered around the prize hog and spiked mincemeat. And what would they make of a generation reflected in *Road to Utopia*?¹²

However glib Asheim was in his choice of examples, his critique is pertinent to any investigation of the politics or ideology of an entertainment industry. Film historian Robert Ray has argued that in the postwar period there was "an enormous discrepancy ... between the most commercially successful movies and those that have ultimately been seen as significant."¹³ Ray exaggerates only the uniqueness of this period: film history has, in almost its entirety, been written without regard to, and often with deliberate disregard of the box office. We need to be aware, I think, of the enormous selectivity of film history, of how much has been omitted in the attempt to construct American film history as a story its historians want to tell and their audiences want to hear: a story of crisis, innovation, anxiety and the elevation of the junior branch. This conventional film history omits the great majority of Hollywood's most

commercially successful products—Janet Gaynor, Nelson Eddy, Betty Grable, Shirley Temple—because, I suppose, no-one wants to write the history of a cinema of complacency.

In much the same way as some stars and some films have acquired a cult critical status unrelated to their box-office earnings, some periods of Hollywood's history have come to be understood as more reflective of their cultural moment than others. Curiously, these tend to be periods of economic uncertainty, declining audiences and "turbulence" in Hollywood's conventions of representation. On the face of it, it is difficult to see why movies produced during such periods should be regarded as more *zeitgeistig* than those produced in periods of larger, more stable audiences and under more secure representational regimes. On the other hand, one of the attractions that periods of "turbulence" have for critics is that they are often seen as giving rise to new forms: *films noirs*, for example, have an obvious appeal as objects of critical study; and a similar case can be made for many of the movies of Hollywood's "Golden Age of turbulence" in the early 1930s. George Lipsitz has recently offered a rationale for these critical preferences in his account of Hollywood in the late 1960s and early 1970s as being characterized by what he calls "genre anxiety": "by the intrusion of social tremors into cinematic representations in such a way as to render traditional genre icons unsatisfying and incomplete."¹⁴ This seems to me, however, to be a self-fulfilling argument : since Lipsitz already knows that "the genre anxiety of the 1970s stemmed from a racial crisis so pervasive that it permeated films in genres

usually isolated from political and social controversies,” he also knows what the “genre anxiety” he discovers means.

From a perspective such as Lipsitz’s, however, these periods of turbulence come to be perceived as doubly rewarding for study, since their innovative movies were also *zeitgeistig*. Such historical accounts almost inevitably become self-fulfilling, since they treat the movie-as-text as their primary historical evidence and, not surprisingly, select the most compelling examples as the evidence they present. In the process, an orthodox cultural history is constructed from a critically-prescribed canon of films. **Film history** is much more likely to view the *Zeitgeist* of 1953, for example, through the mirror of *The Big Heat*, distributed and received as “a modest picture,” than through *The Robe*, the first CinemaScope production adapted from the year’s best-selling novel, and one of a sustained cycle of lavishly-budgeted and commercially successful Biblical epics addressed to the 60 percent of Americans who affirmed the American Way of Life through church membership. **Although** Cecil B. DeMille explained to his audiences in the prologue to *The Ten Commandments* (1956) that “the theme of this picture is whether men are to be ruled by God’s law—or whether they are to be ruled by the whims of a dictator,” explicitly paralleling it to the crusade against “godless” Communism, the Biblical blockbusters of the 1950s have been subject to even less critical examination as artefacts of ideology or of the popular mood than have the period’s musicals. One reason for this may be that critics have failed to discover anything subversive in these movies. **Ironically**, much contemporary criticism is as concerned to investigate the subversive potential of Hollywood

cinema as were the anti-Communists, and although they come to praise the authors' subversion, not to incarcerate them, their methodology is also strikingly similar—and perhaps the comparison provides a salutary warning about the potent excesses of interpretation.

In February 1949, eleven leading members of the American Communist Party (CPUSA) were put on trial under the 1940 Smith Act, charged with intending to conspire to advocate the violent overthrow of the United States government at some undetermined time in the future. The trial's purpose was to establish a constitutional basis under which Communists could be arrested and interred in the event of war. Since the defendants had committed no overt acts of sedition, the charge hung on questions of textual interpretation. The prosecution argued that the "classic texts" of Communism were written in an "Aesopian language" of metaphors, synecdoches and antitheses that could hardly ever be taken literally – a kind of use of language also sometimes called "Orweelian. A call for the peaceful transition to socialism was, thus, properly interpreted as a deliberate attempt to mislead the dupes and enemies of Communism and covertly advocate the violent extinction of the ruling class. Under this argument, which was upheld by the Supreme Court in *Dennis v. United States* in 1951, people could be imprisoned on the strength of a textual interpretation, and, as historian Alan Filreis puts it, "the normal hard work of gathering external evidence could be dispensed with."¹⁵ Moreover, the mutability of the "Aesopian language test" meant that anything could be interpreted as meaning anything else, since works

were evaluated according to predetermined assumptions about the author's intent in a malign application of the *politique des auteurs*.

Dennis v. United States is a salutary reminder of the relationship between interpretation and power. Those critics who would valorise the subversions and subversives they discover in Hollywood might bear it in mind. The claim that Douglas Sirk's melodramas, to take an obvious example, provided "a devastating indictment of the entire society's world view" tacitly assumes that the gullible audience—made up, in one critic's imagination, of "women plying their handkerchiefs"—were either "duped" into accepting a misleading meaning for the narrative or secretly propagandised or both.¹⁶ It is an unwarranted assumption, unsupported by evidence. Hollywood was never in the business of making "subversive" films, but perhaps at no time was it less likely to do so than in the early 1950s.

This is not, however, to suggest that the movies were free of ideology or free from politics. In the turbulent production season of 1947-8, Hollywood's politics could be found, among other places, in State Department reports on the suitability of individual movies for export, on the basis of their conformity to the government's Overseas Information program,¹⁷ in the Congressional Committee rooms in Washington, DC, where the House Committee on Un-American Activities was one of three Congressional inquiries into aspects of the industry, in the Academy Award ceremonies, where the production industry applauded its own courage and social conscience in making **Gentleman's Agreement**, and in

the two university research projects investigating that movie's impact on public opinion.

In the late 1940s—not by any means uniquely—there was a climate of concern about what sociologist Franklin Fearing called “the question of the cultural values in our society which films express and the extent to which the films communicate these values.”¹⁸ In some of their public pronouncements, industry executives seemed to recognize that Hollywood's own pre-war isolationism of “pure entertainment,” free from any political content, could not be recovered, and instead proclaimed their intention to consolidate their wartime image of social responsibility. A number of government agencies, including the CIA, took an active interest in Hollywood's representations.

In April 1953, **Cecil B. DeMille** was appointed as a special consultant to the Eisenhower government on cinema. Working with the White House staff responsible for creating the United States Information Agency, charged with the task of presenting “a favorable image of America abroad while at the same time convincing the world that communism contained the seeds of its own destruction,” DeMille argued—entirely in line with the assertion of conservative critics about how alleged communist propaganda had functioned in the movies—that the “most effective use of American films is not to design an entire picture to cope with a certain problem, but rather to see to it that in a ‘normal picture’ the right line, aside, inflection, eyebrow movement, is introduced.”¹⁹ This was by no means an eccentric view of ideological expression in Hollywood. In 1943, Elmer Davis, Director of the Office of War Information, had proposed that “the easiest

way to inject a propaganda idea into most people's minds is to let it go in through the medium of an entertainment picture when they do not realize that they are being propagandized" by, for instance, "casually and naturally" introducing propaganda messages into "ordinary dialogue, business and scenes."²⁰ In keeping with such a spirit, and in the expectation that Hollywood's expression of political opinion or belief would be indirect, veiled, concealed or encoded, the **House un-American Activities** Committee investigated Hollywood subversion, and had their expectations confirmed by Jack Warner's declaration that "Some of these lines have innuendos and double meanings, and things like that, and you have to take eight or ten Harvard law courses to find out what they mean."

This is a fascinating, and fascinatingly improbable, fascinatingly indirect, aesthetic and ideological strategy. Where might it have come from, and how did it develop? My answer is that the textual indeterminacy, and therefore the need for critical interpretation of the movies' conventional representation of political subject matter was derived from the conventions developed for the representation of their most frequent subject matter, romance. Textual indeterminacy is a structural property of Hollywood movies, resulting from the economic conditions of their circulation: their distribution to a multiplicity of venues for a multiplicity of audiences, and the requirement that the single object serve multiple audience pleasures. The principal instrument by which textual indeterminacy was negotiated in Classical Hollywood was the Production Code. Primarily occasioned by the coming of sound, the purpose of the Production Code was to find ways of retaining the interpretative malleability of silent cinema

within the constraints of a technologically and materially much more inflexible medium. As Lea Jacobs, Ruth Vasey and I have documented in some detail, the early 1930s saw the development of these strategies of malleability, and the late 1930s saw their largely successful operation in, for instance, the highly sophisticated innocence of the discourse on sexuality in the screwball comedies or Astaire-Rogers musicals, in which only the characters remained innocent of the suggestiveness that typically underpinned their social relations.

On the one hand the Production Code strove to eliminate any moral ambiguity in a movie's narrative progression through the rigid imposition of a deterministic plot line, ascribing every character a position on a fixed moral spectrum, and thus both confirming and contributing to Hollywood's adoption of melodrama as its fundamental mode. But at the same time, precisely the same forces obliged movies to construct strategies of ambiguity around the details of action—the spectacle, the cinema's erotic performance—which they were not permitted to present explicitly. What could not be shown was graphic, explicit, unambiguous, unmistakable, sexual behaviour. Instead what could be shown was mistakable sexual behaviour, the presence of which could always be denied. The rules of both conduct and representation under these conditions were perhaps most cogently articulated by **F. Scott Fitzgerald's Monroe Stahr**, explaining to his scriptwriters how the audience is to understand their heroine's motivation:

At all times, at all moments when she is on the screen in our sight, she wants to sleep with Ken Willard. ... Whatever she does, it is in place of sleeping with Ken Willard. If she walks down the street she is walking to sleep with Ken

Willard, if she eats her food it is to give her enough strength to sleep with Ken Willard. *But* at no time do you give the impression that she would even consider sleeping with Ken Willard unless they were properly sanctified.²¹

In devising representational strategies to achieve this effect, Hollywood was manufacturing a product that would play to undifferentiated audiences: in the institutional parlance of the 1930s, to both “innocent” and “sophisticated” audiences alike. Having chosen not to divide its audience, Hollywood was obliged to devise a system that would allow "sophisticated" viewers to read whatever they liked into a formally "innocent" movie, so long as the producers could use the machinery of the Production Code to deny that the sophisticated interpretation had been put there in the first place. Much of the work of self-regulation in the 1930s and 1940s lay in the maintenance of this system of conventions, which operated, however perversely, as an enabling mechanism at the same time that it was a repressive one. As PCA Director **Joseph Breen** persistently argued, the Production Code was not so much a system of censorship as an alternative to one: a system by which censurable content could be coded and codified so as to avoid censorship.

This “deniable” mode of narrative construction accommodated both the sophisticated and the "innocent" viewer at the same time by providing pictures that, as the trade paper *Film Daily* put it, "won't embarrass Father when he takes the children to his local picture house," it. So long as the story remained comprehensible at the “innocent” level, innocence was protected, because “innocent” viewers were not educated into sophistication by being forced into

some half-understood suggestive interpretation. On the other hand, a “sophisticated” audience willing to play a game of *double-entendre* could find hidden, “subversive” or “repressed” meanings in almost any movie by supplying “from its own imagination the specific acts of so-called misconduct which the Production Code has made unmentionable.” They might in the process supply more plausible motivations for the behaviour of characters in scenes that had been designed, according to Elliott Paul, to “give full play to the vices of the audience, and still have a technical out” as far as the Production Code was concerned.²²

What I want to draw attention to here is the invitation to interpretation in the mode of construction that I have been describing. Much of the work in the narration of any Hollywood movie involves offering the audience incentives to “read into” or activate the movie’s elisions, contradictions and absences in ways that open up an intertextual field of possible meanings not explicitly articulated by the movie-as-text. In this way, movies provide considerable autonomy to individual viewers to construct the story they please. The interpretation of the story as a whole is less malleable than the play with detail offered during the viewing experience, but it manifests itself as an invitation to interpret the story as allegory, which is what genre critics usually mean by “myth.”

Movies, particularly those that have been identified as potentially subversive—have become and remained politicised through their accretion of interpretations based on strategies of metaphor, allusion and allegory. 1950s westerns, for example, are frequently interpreted as allegorical explorations of “the social

implications of endangered individualism,” the “problem of society's being able to withstand internal corruption and external challenges,”²³ or “covert commentar[ies] on race relations.”²⁴ Given the representational and interpretative regimes I have been describing, it is hardly surprising that such movies should find themselves possessed of multiple, often contradictory, interpretations.

Both at the time of its release and subsequently, *High Noon* (1952) was seen by some critics as a political allegory, in part because its writer, Carl Foreman, had refused to testify before HUAC and had been blacklisted. Contemporary European critics, however, considering the movie outside the immediate circumstance of its production, interpreted *High Noon* as an ‘explanation of American foreign policy’ during the Korean War. According to Harry Schein, the movie was an allegory in which the community of Hadleyville represented the United Nations, timorous in the face of the Soviet Union, China and North Korea, while only the ‘very American’ sheriff displayed the moral courage to face aggression with righteous violence.

High Noon circulated both as a familiar Western melodrama and as an object of controversy, subject to contradictory, mutually incompatible political interpretations. Clearly President Eisenhower, who declared *High Noon* to be one of his favourite movies, was not watching the same movie that Paramount executive and CIA correspondent Luigi Luraschi had seen when, acting in what he understood to be conformity with CIA policy, he used his position in the

Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to ensure that *High Noon* was not awarded the Best Picture Oscar in the 1953 Awards.²⁵

Through its deployment of the conventions of melodrama *High Noon* invites the viewer's identification with the moral position occupied by Marshall Kane and eventually adopted by Amy, but it does not—in keeping with the strategies described by DeMille and Warner and operated and elaborated through the Production Code—itsself ascribe to itself a meaning external to the story events. Instead, it invites the ascription of such a meaning through its invitation to allegorical interpretation, and it is—in keeping with the industry's economic procedures under the Code—catholic in its accommodation of conflicting ideological interpretations.

But there were also limits to the interpretative ideological malleability of *High Noon* in 1953, limits constructed less by the movie-as-text itself than by the interpretative and discursive framework in which it was placed. Genre historian John Lenihan has, for example, suggested that Joseph McCarthy himself could be identified with “the strong individualist who refuses to compromise with that which threatens the community,” and that the availability of such an interpretation reveals “how closely Foreman's liberal polemic resembles the arguments of those he attacked,” and therefore the common assumptions shared by both pro- and anti-McCarthy forces.”²⁶

That such an interpretation is possible and even plausible from this historical distance tells us something consequential about both Hollywood's structure of melodrama and allegory and also about Cold War discourse, but that is not to

say that such an interpretation can be assumed to have circulated in 1953. The limits to allegorical interpretation were imposed less by the restrictions of the text itself than by the discursive framework within which it circulated. No liberal critic at the time would have reason to make Lenihan's point, while no conservative critic would seek to redeem a movie made by blacklisted ex-Communists and fellow-travellers. I have found no evidence that such an allegorical interpretation circulated publicly at the time of the movie's release, and given the discursive frameworks within which the movie circulated, there is no great likelihood that such an interpretative framework would have been available to any but the most wilfully perverse of spectators.

Let me offer you one more example of the conventional constraints on interpretation that affected the ambiguous allegories generated by Hollywood's institutions of representation. In early November 1954, Robert Aldrich submitted a draft script of *Kiss Me Deadly* (USA 1955) to the Production Code Administration (PCA). In an accompanying letter, Aldrich described the changes he and scriptwriter A. I. Bezzerides had made in the script's source material, the Mickey Spillane novel *Kiss Me, Deadly*, published the previous year.²⁷ "Being reasonably well aware of the Code and its interpretation," Aldrich continued, "we have also avoided any direct conflict with the Code Administration." Then he hesitated. "Of course," he noted, "there is always the problem of interpretation."²⁸ Taken out of context, this comment seems prophetic: Since its critical discovery by writers for *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Positif*,²⁹ *Kiss Me Deadly* has been subject to multiple acts of interpretation and has in the process become a canonic

subversive *noir* text, a conscious political allegory and a deliberate generic and ideological subversion of its source.³⁰

Its initial reception was, however, somewhat different. For many liberal critics, the extraordinary commercial success of Spillane's books, combined with the excesses of their content, had made Spillane "a symbol of the most terrifying aspects of American culture, and his fantastic success a vindication of their worst fears."³¹ In a *Saturday Review* article called "Mickey Spillane and His Bloody Hammer," published in November 1954, Christopher La Farge argued that Mike Hammer "is the logical conclusion ... of McCarthyism," in the belief that the ends justify the means. According to La Farge, Spillane had succeeded in making acceptable to a huge public a character who "mocks at and denies the efficacy of all law and decency, flouts all laws, statutory, ethical and moral, delights in assault and murder that is brutally executed, [and] sets his personal judgement always above that of all other men."³²

La Farge's article was published three days after the *Kiss Me Deadly* script was submitted to the PCA. It articulates, with some precision, the position Aldrich subsequently expressed about Hammer. But as an artefact in cultural circulation in 1955, *Kiss Me Deadly* occupied a more contradictory position than Aldrich's comments suggest. It was marketed at the existing urban male blue-collar audience for crime films and for Spillane's novels. The "exploitation value" of its source material clearly required the delivery of what *Variety* described as a "combo of blood, action and sex which has attracted exploitation b.o."³³ Advertising and promotional material consistently identified Spillane as the

movie's author, and featured his name far more prominently than those of any of the cast and crew: one tag-line used on a number of advertisements called the movie "Mickey Spillane's latest H-Bomb!"

The movie's commercial obligation to meet the expectations of its intended audience ensured that it would also attract the hostile attention of those various cultural forces critical of its source material. The process of adaptation had, therefore, to find ways of anticipating and accommodating the likely objections of those "responsible citizens" decrying the effects of violence in the media and also, to a lesser extent, the criticisms of the liberal cultural elite. The movie's encounter with the Production Code Administration was the principal site of these accommodations.

The Code required two fundamental changes to the novel's plot in the process of adaptation: the central plot device had to be changed from drugs to something else—to what became the mysterious Pandora's Box containing "The Great Whatsit." Secondly, the novel's portrayal of Mike Hammer as "a cold blooded murderer whose numerous killings are completely justified" had to be changed, since his "taking of the law into his own hands and successfully bringing the criminals to 'justice' by killing them, is in complete violation of the Code." The movie acquired its two most distinctive and culturally resonant features—its thermonuclear MacGuffin and its attitude to its protagonist—through its encounter with the Production Code Administration, which in due course awarded it a Seal of Approval, and described its ending as "moral."³⁴ Aldrich, in return, was fulsome in his praise for the treatment he had received:

In the Spillane pictures we have a unique and difficult problem. The properties are of great commercial value and yet there is not morality, or integrity, or respect for American tradition, or the due process of law.

It is most gratifying to know that your office understood and agreed with what we have tried so hard to accomplish. Namely, to successfully marry the commercial value of the Spillane properties with a morality that states justice is not to be found in a self-appointed one man vigilante.³⁵

Whatever he may have said privately or later, **in publicity promoting** the movie, Aldrich maintained that “we have kept faith with the 60,000,000 Mickey Spillane readers ... we have made a movie of action, violence and suspense in good taste.”³⁶ It was, however, largely this publicity which caused *Kiss Me Deadly* to fall foul of the Legion of Decency, the movie ratings agency of the Roman Catholic Church, which denounced the movie and Spillane together, leading Aldrich to complain to the PCA that “The Legion has even failed to recognise any voice of **moral righteousness** which is particularly disturbing since so much time and effort was spent in finding and properly developing such a voice in the film.”³⁷ While this dispute was resolved by some further minor adjustments to the editing, these adjustments seem to have had little effect on the movie’s reception. It was largely ignored by the liberal press which might otherwise have shared Aldrich’s evaluation of Spillane, but it was one of a couple of dozen movies cited for its excessive violence and dubious morality during the 1955 Senate Subcommittee hearings investigating juvenile delinquency, chaired by Estes Kefauver. In these public forums, at least, Aldrich’s critique had not

surfaced: the interpretation he proposed, which we now find so evidently *zeitgeistig*, was not legible through the interpretative predispositions created by the source material, and the contradictory forces operating on the movie's production and promotion. In a 1956 interview with Francois Truffaut, Aldrich regretted "having accepted the job" of making the movie: "when I asked my American friends to tell me whether they felt my disgust for that whole mess, they said that between the fights and the kissing scenes they hadn't noticed anything of the sort."³⁸

I do not want to contradict *auteurist* claims made on Aldrich's behalf for his subversive intentions, but I do want to suggest that the institutional framework within which these intentions may have surfaced determined their possibility. The PCA's insistence on the movie's anti-heroic treatment of its protagonist required the attitudinal shifts that are, by critical convention, attributed either to Aldrich and Bezzerides as authors or to *noir* as a sensibility.

In making this argument, I have addressed *film noir* because it seems to me that the critical invention of *film noir* is paradigmatic both of the ways in which film history has substituted for cinema history, and of the role that genre has played in this process. A body of recent critical thinking about genre—Neale, Altman, Staiger, Williams—all argue, to my mind conclusively, that the extent to which the industry conceived its product in terms of genres has been exaggerated. As Janet Staiger puts it, "Hollywood films have never been "pure," that is, easily arranged into categories. All that has been pure has been sincere attempts to find order among variety." Few would argue that the collection of generic labels

and distinctions we work with has any overall coherence; but arbitrary and inconsistent as it is, it is also now established, and it is not going to go away. We are unlikely to improve on it; on much the same principle as that by which Noam Chomsky argues that if apes could talk, they would, if criticism could have developed a more systematic means of classifying genres, it would have done so. We can live with an incoherent system of classification, but Janet Staiger points to a more substantial problem when she observes the historical error committed “when a subjective order visible in the present is mapped onto the past and then assumed to be the order visible in the past”³⁹

Genres are critical categories: the industry has no interest in categorizing its products as such. The industry categorises its audience, and then seeks to produce product that will appeal either **to** or **across** the demographic groupings of its audience classification. I could have made a comparable case about the influence of genre on the understanding of film history by discussing the critical invention of melodrama, which would have led me to take issue at greater length with Rick Altman’s permissive attitude to the re-writing of film history—particularly with what he calls “attempts to capture jurisdiction over the right to redefine the texts” by the invention of new genres or the redefinition of existing generic terms—as a rhetorical strategy by which all cultural products remain permanently available “to serve as signifiers in the cultural bricolage that forms our lives.”⁴⁰

My point of disagreement with Altman is that, as a historian of cinema, I am concerned not with “the cultural bricolage that forms our lives” but rather with the cultural bricolage that formed the lives of earlier audiences.

If the “turn to history” is to be more than an evasion of the political engagement explicit in the critical positions of the 1970s, then it must seek not to extract the objects of attention—the movies—into an alternative, more comfortably entertaining account of intention or influence, but instead seek to situate them as concretely as possible, in as much detail as possible, in the circumstances of their circulation.

¹ Quoted from Custen in *Hollywood Cinema*, p. 312.

² Tom Stempel, *Movie Audiences on Movies and Moviegoing* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2000), p. 16.

³ “Voluntary Movie Rating System Celebrates 30 Years of Providing Information to America's Parents,” Motion Picture Association of America, Press Release, 27 October 1998.

⁴ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* pp. 16, 20.

⁵ Braudy in Browne, p. 288.

⁶ Joy to censor boards in Chicago, Toronto, New York, October 17, 1932, PCA File, *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*.

⁷ Robert McElvane, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Times Books, 1984), pp. 208, 213.

⁸ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), pp. 6,8.

⁹ John Houseman, *Vogue*, 15 January, 1947, quoted in Lester Asheim, “The Film and the Zeitgeist,” *Hollywood Quarterly*, 2;4 (1947), 416.

¹⁰ Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites, *Movies: A Psychological Study* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1950), p. 11.

¹¹ Andrew Dowdy, *The Films of the Fifties: The American State of Mind* (New York: Morrow, 1975), pp. 66-7.

¹² Asheim, 416.

¹³ Robert Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 140-1.

¹⁴ Lipsitz in Browne, pp. 215-6.

¹⁵ Alan Filreis, “Words with ‘All the Effects of Force’: Cold-War Interpretation,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 39 (Summer, 1987), p. 309.

¹⁶ Roger D. McNiven, “The Middle-class American Home of the Fifties: The Use of Architecture in Nicholas Ray’s *Bigger than Life* and Douglas Sirk’s *All That Heaven Allows*,” *Cinema Journal* 22:2 (Summer 1983), p. 55; Jean-Loup Bourget, “Sirk and the Critics,” *Bright Lights* 6 (Winter 1977-8), p. 8.

¹⁷ Quoted in James J. Parker, “The Organizational Environment of the Motion Picture Sector,” in Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach and Muriel G. Cantor, eds., *Media, Audience and Social Structure* (Beverly Hills, Ca.: Sage, 196), p. 154.

¹⁸ Franklin Fearing, “Influence of the Movies on Attitudes and Behavior,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 254 (November 1947), p. 71.

¹⁹ Eldridge, p. 158.

²⁰ Elmer Davis to Byron Price, January 27, 1943, quoted in Koppes and Black, p. 64.

²¹ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Last Tycoon* (Harmondsworth, 1960), 51-2.

²² Harold J. Salemson, *The Screen Writer*, April, 1946, quoted in Ruth Inglis, *Freedom of the Movies: A Report on Self-Regulation from the Commission on Freedom of the Press* (Chicago, 1947), 183-4; Elliot Paul and Luis Quintanilla, *With a Hays Nonny Nonny* (New York, 1942), 63-4.

²³ Lenihan, p. 121.

²⁴ Peter Biskind, *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), p. 229.

²⁵ Eldridge, p. 155

²⁶ Lenihan, pp. 120-2.

²⁷ Letter, Robert Aldrich to Geoffrey Shurlock, 10 September 1954, *Kiss me deadly* file, Production Code Administration archive, Department of Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills (hereafter PCA).

²⁸ Aldrich to Albert Van Schmus, 3 November 1954, PCA *Kiss Me Deadly* file.

²⁹ Charles Bitsch, "Surmultipliée," *Cahiers du cinéma*, No. 51 (October 1955), p. 3; Claude Chabrol, "Evolution du film policier," *Cahiers du cinéma* No. 54 (1955), translated as "The Evolution of the Crime Film," (trans. Alain Silver) in *Film Noir Reader 2*, eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight, 1999), p. 32.

³⁰ Adrian Miles, review of *Kiss Me Deadly*, *CTEQ* Vol. 2, 1996 (http://cs.art.rmit.edu.au/projects/media/cteq/v2/kiss_me_deadly/htm). See, for example, Robin Wood's description of the critique of the hero as "devastating and uncompromised." Robin Wood, "Creativity and Evaluation: Two *Film Noirs* of the Fifties," (*CineAction* 21/22, Summer/Fall 1990), reprinted in *Film Noir Reader 2*, p. 101.

³¹ Rosenberg, "Mass Culture in America," p. 5; O'Brien, *Hardboiled America*, p. 105.

³² Christopher La Farge, "Mickey Spillane and His Bloody Hammer," *Saturday Review*, 6 November 1954, reprinted in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (New York: The Free Press 1957), pp. 177, 184.

³³ *Variety* review of *Kiss Me Deadly*, 27 April 1955.

³⁴ Aldrich's letter to Shurlock of 11 February, quoted below, begins by expressing his "appreciation and gratitude for your office reconsidering their decision not to pass my picture *Kiss Me Deadly*." The PCA file, however, contains no details of any changes required, which suggests that the matter was relatively minor and resolved informally through discussion. In a 1970 interview with Alain Silver, Aldrich reported having had some difficulty with the way that Madi Comfort, the bar singer, handles her microphone. "Appendix: Interview with Robert Aldrich," in Silver and Ursini, *Whatever Happened to Robert Aldrich?*, p. 351.

³⁵ Letter, Aldrich to Shurlock, 11 February 1955, PCA *Kiss Me Deadly* file.

³⁶ Aldrich, "You Can't Hang Up the Meat Hook," *New York Herald Tribune*, 20 February 1955, Section 4, p. 4.

³⁷ Telegram, Aldrich to Shurlock, 18 April 1955, PCA *Kiss Me Deadly* file.

³⁸ Edward Gallafent, "Kiss Me, Deadly," in *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, p. 241.

³⁹ Staiger, *Perverse Spectators*, p. 62.

⁴⁰ Altman, p.82.