

NEOBAROQUE FILM

Hollywood Baroque: The Steadicam Years

If I could just create the kind of world I'd really like to live in . . . I wouldn't be there.

—*Robert Creeley*¹

Illusion, Delusion, Collusion

More and more it seems possible to desecrate a lynchpin moment of new American cinema in *Purple Rain*. Not only does Prince's film bring the nightmare Oedipal dialectic of Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* to the entertainment media; not only does it render the incoherent, fractured narrative of Haile Gerima's *Harvest 3000* in popular form; but it gathers the forces of film about its moments of spectacle, subordinating an already picaresque narrative to the sudden coherence of sound and image in sublime moments of performance, to recreate as pure decoration the melodrama of its most obvious thematic model, in terms of production history, stardom, narration, and camp, the Judy Garland version of *A Star Is Born*.

The film exists as a series of alternating surfaces: the show, the fetish, the spectacle, the soundtrack album, the star, the performance, the auteur—and most of all the triumphant coincidence of all of them in the production numbers. The articulation of sound and image across the shot-reverse-shot cutting, so unnecessarily obvious, constructs the relation between star persona and audience as antagonistic, or at best agonistic, deferring the utopian moment of the performer's ecstatic integration with the crowd, the crowd's with the performer, into the invisible realm of the score. Already a nostalgic reconstruction of the Minneapolis scene of the late 1970s, *Purple Rain*, that

narcissistic exploration of an already fantastic world, is an early monument of the Hollywood baroque.

Purple Rain sold 205,000 soundtrack albums on its day of release (Prince 2000: 135). The Wagnerian ambition for cinema to become a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total multimedia experience, has not been lost: it has been dispersed. The film offers only one part of an experience, the second part of which is provided by the soundtrack, promoted as a discrete item. Prince of course also provided the score for the 1980s' third-biggest grossing film: *Batman* (fig. 9.1), stylistically and in terms of cross-media promotion the typical baroque movie. The vistas of backpacks, fast-food, and breakfast cereal tie-ins opened up by *Star Wars* at the end of the 1970s reached a finely honed plateau in the marketing of the Tim Burton/Anton Furst adaptation of Frank Miller's *Dark Knight*. DC Comics, a Warner product line, had taken a market lead in the conversion of the comic book into the graphic novel, signposted by the 1986 publication of Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*. Carrying the juvenile market of the comics into the "mature" zone of gothic imagery, enigmatic narrative, and vivid graphic language, the graphic novels of the early '80s brought a new sensibility to '70s' attempts to capitalize on figures like Superman. Camp and irony met with the future-noir established as a newly characteristic form of science fiction by John Carpenter's dirty, cluttered, cheapo starship *Dark Star* and canonized in Lawrence G. Paull's production design for Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (Bukatman 1997; Bruno 1987; Sammon 1996).

At the same time, the success of horror films in the wake of *The Exorcist* brought an admixture of sadism and an attraction to the gruesome, centered on previously marginal terrains of the Batman mythos like Arkham Asylum. The new comics not only restored Batman to credibility, they freed the masked avenger from the economic and psychic limitations of a single actor (as already flagged in the "mobile signifier" James Bond identified by Bennett and Woollacott 1987). Moreover, as the first baroque moved from feudal personification to the more abstract geography of El Dorado or Paradise, so the neobaroque moves away from the promotion of fantasy anchored in the star persona to situate it in the diegetic universe from which it springs—Gotham City—and which it further promotes and develops. Hollywood's promotion of diegetic worlds like *Star Trek's* Federation Space not only reconfigured the production of fantasy, it enabled and encouraged immersion in the myth delinked from the specific film text. Toys, computer



| Figure 9.1 |

Batman: Anton Furst's designs for Gotham city stay in the mind long after the plot is forgotten.
Courtesy BFI Stills, Posters, and Designs.

games, fan fiction and Web sites, novelizations, comics, soundtrack and concept albums, fashion accessories, and collectibles, many of them manufactured by wings of the same horizontally integrated corporation, extended the reach of the event film while reducing the cinema premiere to the status of product launch for a raft of brands on a synchronized lifestyle marketing strategy (Meehan 1991).

Purple Rain not only opened the door to African American cinema for African American audiences: it refocused Hollywood on its lost black audience. Prince, at the height of his creative and popular bent, could bring with him the African American and gay audiences, and at the same time reconfigure Batman's Furst-designed body armor as the latest incarnation of Brando's leather jacket in *The Wild One*: the concretized wish of the white urban youth who formed Hollywood's core audience, to inhabit, as literally as possible, a black skin. This is only one of dozens of ways that Hollywood undertook to create a fantastic setting in which the apartheid nature of the North American nation-state could be resolved. The multiracial deck of the

starship Enterprise showed the potential for harnessing popular utopianism to the manufacture of profit. A specific task of the Hollywood baroque is to bring wholeness, a healed and healing world that runs against the acknowledgment of difference.

At the same time, as Biskind notes, “Like *The Godfather*, *The Exorcist* looked ahead to the coming Manichean revolution of the right, to Regan nattering about the godless Evil Empire” (Biskind 1999: 223). The enemy of neobaroque unity is not so much plurality as the metaphysical evil that most clearly emerges in the mainstream horror film after *The Exorcist* but also, as Barry Keith Grant observes, in the yuppie nightmare cycle of the 1980s and ’90s (Grant 1998: 280), distinguishing them from the screwball comedy that inspired so many of them. This binary opposition of Good and Evil leads toward both the pursuit of sublimity and the profusion of motifs. The neobaroque is enmeshed in intrigue, passions, grotesques, a fascination with primal forces of water and electricity, an unstable, even violent rush to eclecticism, a shotgun marriage of reason and irrationality, a rage for freedom in a period of domination. More turbid than turbulent, that era extends back into the 1970s, when the movie brats began their assimilation into the reformed Hollywood system. In the first years of the twenty-first century, we have not yet moved beyond that tortured effervescence. The idea of the baroque has connotations of excess, decadence, a falling off from overripeness. Though it moves between fetor and ecstasy, its roiling, yearning activity should indicate that these qualities are not ends in themselves, nor things to be aspired to, but moments of a more central dialectic between wholeness and proliferating differences, totality and emergence, global power and the micropolitics that escape it.

Thomas Elsaesser summarizes the attributes of the “New Hollywood” under four headings: a new generation of directors, new marketing strategies, new media ownership and management styles, and new technologies of sound and image reproduction (Elsaesser 1998b: 191). Of these latter, none is so immediately revealing for this enquiry as the steadicam. The twenty-minute process shot that opens Brian de Palma’s *Snake Eyes* (1998) (fig. 9.2) contains everything we need to know about the film that limps after it. The central structure is already clear from the way in which the camera is restricted to the point of view of Nicolas Cage: he is being lied to, and, not quite incidentally, he is lying to himself. De Palma’s bravura shot, mim-



| Figure 9.2 |

Snake Eyes: Describing space by navigation, not analysis, de Palma's Steadicam roves between omniscience and point of view, lying and lying to itself. Courtesy BFI Stills, Posters, and Designs.

ing a reel-long take (though equally clearly the product of digital editing) is not entirely without purpose. Throughout the movie we will flash back to this sequence, unraveling its tricks, its illusions, its red herrings. A decorative flourish becomes the structural principle of the film itself.

It takes chutzpah to open with a shot like this after Altman's stunning parody of the mobile crane shot in the opening sequence of *The Player*. Since Altman's film the knowing audience is party to the tricks, which depend on that knowingness for their spectacular functions. Now that the audience grants de Palma a postmodern and ironic permission, the gratuitousness of this elaborate maneuver becomes the rationale not only for the shot itself but for the whole film. Our job, as viewers, is to be witnesses to the elaboration of spectacle. Contemporary cinema, for reasons both commercial and ideological, offers itself to a double audience, one that succumbs to the spectacle and one that appreciates it. The bulk of any given audience will enter the film with this double vision in place, pleased to be connoisseurs of effects and their generation, but equally delighted to be suckers for the

duration, enjoying both spectacular technique and the spectacle itself, illusion and the machinery of illusion.

Cleverly providing himself with an Aristotelian unity of place and time (the boxing stadium in Atlantic City, the ticking clock), de Palma sets himself the problem of delivering all necessary back-story in audiovisual terms that can be naturalized in the diegesis. The hypervisible, hyperaudible protagonist bedeviled with delusions is the willing victim of a charade, a massive event designed for the sole purpose of deceiving him. The theme has occupied de Palma over a large part of his career (*Blow Out* and *Body Double* spring instantly to mind). Nor of course is de Palma alone here: the intricate, obsessive, and if necessary total manipulation of reality to secure an illusion, the willingness of its victims, and often enough the tragic consequences of piercing it, form the single most popular topic of the Hollywood baroque, from *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* to Schwarzenegger's *The Last Action Hero*, *Total Recall*, and *True Lies*, from *House of Games* to *The Truman Show*. Our double role as integrated onlookers is enshrined in the complexity of the shot, in which we shift fluidly from panorama to point of view, between sharing and observing the illusory nature of his experience. In fact, the protagonist is alone in failing to perceive the construction of his world: to everyone else, including the other actors whose unnecessarily camp performances ought to give the game away, the artifice is not only transparent but heavily signaled at every turn.

Illusion, then, is not only a spectacle: the spectacular collusion in its construction, and the spectacular innocence of protagonists who cannot perceive its artificiality combine in an entirely artificial diegesis. Truisms of the contemporary well-made script—there should be no exposition that cannot be accommodated into the diegesis, and no loose ends—have become sufficient qualities for a baroque film since William Goldman's script for *The Sting*. Here the qualities of *vraisemblance* and probability are suspended in favor of the construction of a transparently artificial script of algorithmic elegance.

Classically, the story is a ritual construction *in* time that works through the conflictual structures of reality and finds for them a magical resolution. But the baroque story in its purest form is a purely abstract construction *of* time. In this new mode, stories seek not to control but to imitate nature. This imitation needs to be understood not as nineteenth-century realism

but as sixteenth-century *Imitatio*, a concept Rosamund Tuve characterizes as possessing three levels. At the first level,

the artifact was designed to please on grounds of its formal excellence rather than by its likeness to the stuff of life. . . . On [the] second level images must assist in Imitation conceived as involving the artist's *ordering* of Nature, and his interpretation must have coherence . . . on a third level: Imitation as truth-stating, as didactically concerned with the conveying of concepts—not simply orderly patterns but what we should commonly call “ideas” and “values.” (Tuve 1947: 25)

The blockbuster movie does indeed, in its elaboration of “right artificiality,” produce just such ritual incantations of unexceptionable truisms: do right, don't mess with nature, look after your own. These truths are open to ideological analysis, but such analysis can scarcely deliver more interesting results than that many of our most successful movies have themes as banal as the *vade mecum*s of the sixteenth century. But such Eisensteinian images are not the point of the film, any more than the desultory narratives over which they are stretched, for example, in Jan van Bont's *Twister*. The point is that such ideological motifs, such clichés, provide the basis for the intricate weaving of spectacle and narration into a braided web on whose embroidery, abstract as a Bach fugue, the audience will sit in final arbitration. As we reach the end of a film like *Snake Eyes*, we should survey the whole plot as if it were a knot garden, a spatial orchestration of events whose specific attraction is its elaboration of narrative premise into pattern, its reorganization of time as space.

The intrinsically decorative structuring of narrative, the extrusion of elaborations and fugal variations from basic premises, form part of the fundamental spatializing project of the Hollywood baroque. In the opening sequence of *Snake Eyes*, camera mobility and plotting are synonymous, both contrapuntally constructing elaborations on the motif of spectacle (boxing, policing, life) as illusion. In *Strange Days*, a film only slightly more elaborate than *Snake Eyes*, there are few shots in which the image is not at least re-framed, and far more frequently caught in the pirouettes and rotations of Matthew F. Leonetti's hallmark steadicam cinematography. The characteristic establishing shot of Bigelow's millennium movie, as in films as various as *Super Mario Bros.* and *Fatal Attraction*, not only features fluid camera

movement but flamboyantly crowded mise-en-scènes packed with more incident than any single viewing could take in, held in extravagantly deep focus. The effect is in some ways like that described by Dai Vaughan in the Lumière early films: “The unpredictable has not only emerged from the background to occupy the greater portion of the frame; it has also taken sway over the principles” (Vaughan 1990: 65). But the difference is that, where the Lumière and all subsequent realists leave space in frame for the contingent, the Hollywood baroque orchestrates the entire fabric of the film. In *Fatal Attraction*’s nightclubs, like the enriched cityscapes of the remastered *Star Wars* trilogy, it no longer matters whether the protagonists are ciphers like Luke Skywalker or tormented personae like Michael Douglas: the diegesis has engulfed them in its own dynamic. Both narrative and stylistics have been subordinated to the exploration of the world of the film. If classical cinema operates in time, as a linear construct whose narration and stylistics focus on the exposure of the story, the baroque takes time as its raw material.

In the Hollywood baroque, film is no longer a time-based medium (a function now occupied by television) but the medium of movement. Spatialization takes over from narrative the job of managing the film’s dynamics. Movement here is sculptural, architectural, or geographical rather than temporal, and space itself is malleable. Classical decoupage—establishing shot, two-shot, shot-reverse shot—no longer governs because, with one swooping sequence-shot, we can establish the diegetic space without stabilizing it according to the 180° rule. The entrances into the nightclubs in *Pulp Fiction* and *GoodFellas* mobilize the diegetic space itself, much as Gotham City is mobilized in Tim Burton’s *Batman*. Where the destabilization of space once was restricted to the generic construction of the nightmare in horror films and such cognate scenes as the grand finale of *High Plains Drifter*, the Hollywood baroque needs no subjective alibis to explain its lack of equilibrium.

So fundamental to the Hollywood baroque is this motion that the occasional descent into more formally classical structures, such as the shot-reverse-shot dialogue scenes that punctuate *Snake Eyes*, seem flat, talky, and crude. The regression to classical cutting appears symptomatic of uncertainty rather than austerity, lack of vision rather than clarity, indeterminacy rather than symmetry. Some similar feeling obviously dogs Bigelow in *Strange Days*, a film whose shot-reverse-shot dialogue scenes are always

framed against mobile back projections and crowd scenes, frequently constructed by inserting cutaways into what would otherwise be fluid camera movement through diegetic space.

Immobility now strikes us as false because it belongs to an emphatically narrative cinema. Though narrative resurfaces in the baroque, like shot-reverse-shot structures, it appears as borrowings, residues, homages, reflexes, regressions, alibis, and quotations. The baroque's central tendency derives from a parallel genealogy in realist cinema. Coppola's and Scorsese's investigations of Italian American culture and Spike Lee's explorations of African American neighborhood life draw on and extend the realist paradigm, not least because they diminish the role of narrative in favor of exploring the diegesis. These films emphasize the spatial in residual narrative structures, especially in Scorsese's typically deranged and humbled salvation scenes. Nonetheless, the point of films like *Do the Right Thing* and *The Godfather* is not how their protagonists acquire the values of their communities, but how those communities reproduce themselves. Even *Raging Bull* and *GoodFellas* have less to do with the shock of enforced innocence with which the heroes gaze back at the world in the final shot than with the mesmerized gaze into alien worlds that the films evoke in their spectators.²

Vagueness

This spatialization process is carried through into the design of stereophony and multitracking in contemporary Hollywood. This needs to be carefully distinguished both from the “deep-focus sound” Rick Altman (1994) finds in *Citizen Kane*'s appropriation of radio drama techniques, and from Robert Altman's realist use of multiple microphones in the ensemble-cast movies of the 1970s (Schreger 1985). In the baroque cinema, it is not simply a question of multitrack recording, but of a process in which the initial cacophony is reconstructed in such a way as to guide the auditor's attention from level to level—as for example in the extraordinarily engineered synchronizations of voice-over, dialogue, wild-track, and skillfully remastered pop theme in the scene in *GoodFellas* in which Ray Liotta's wife first meets the mafia wives. Altman's soundtracks for *Nashville*, *A Wedding*, and *M*A*S*H* belong to a realist aesthetic of synchronized location recording. Tom Fleischman's sound designs for Scorsese, Lee, Demme, and Sayles, by contrast, produce their effects by creating not so much a soundscape to explore as a guided tour through the diegesis (Fleischman 1994). Here the mobilization of the ear is

accomplished, as it is in the use of deep-focus crane shots through crowded mise-en-scènes, by the strict subordination of apparent excess to the overall trajectory of the film, frequently through the use of hyperamplified motifs like David Lynch's fans, drips, and hissings. Where the realist aesthetic engages us as arbiters, the baroque recruits us as collaborators. The sequence shot with its characteristic combination of structured multitracking, staging in depth, deep focus, and mobile camera is the central device of this recruitment.

There is a sequence in Robert Rodriguez's *Desperado* in which the Mariachi, having wiped out Brucho's men in the bar, staggers out into the street followed by the last survivor of the carnage. The sequence, lasting 2 minutes and 3 seconds, is composed of 47 shots. Since the first shot lasts 20 seconds, the average shot length for the remainder of the sequence is 2.2 seconds, with some important variation in the rhythms of the shots and their relation to the beat and the lyrics of the Los Lobos song ("Don't look back, into the strange face of love") on the soundtrack. The sequence opens with the camera zooming in to the door of the bar as it opens and the Mariachi walks out; dollying out, racking focus, and panning left to follow him out of frame before dollying in and panning slightly further left to pick up his pursuer; dollying out, panning left again, and racking focus to follow him out of frame. The shot is accompanied by the jangling spurs of the Mariachi, synchronized throughout the sequence to his movements, and the duller thud of his pursuer's footsteps, which, unlike the spurs, will be drowned out in the rest of the sequence by the score. Throughout the process shot backgrounds are kept in focus. The next twelve shots are composed in depth along the axis of the sidewalk, save one shot, which crosses the line to establish the urgency of the scene as a build-up to action, and adding that slight edge of vertigo which helps both engage the audience and establish the half-mystical 360° perception of the Mariachi.

At this juncture, we move out of the axis of the sidewalk: only the continuity of the score keeps us alert to the contiguity of the spaces. Carolina is crossing the road, causing two cars to ram into one another, with a jump cut along the axis of vision adding to the sense of impact. The score drops in volume during an instrumental passage to allow the soundtrack to focus on the crash, then powers up with the vocal line as we move to a profile shot of Carolina that brings us back into the sidewalk axis, then her view of the Mariachi, then his of her. A micronarrative of reaction shots establishes a

relationship, while the major plotline, the pursuit, heads to climax. Here the cutting is faster, and includes the zoom shot, while the score drowns out diegetic sound until the climactic gunfire. The sequence ends with six shots taken from below of the Mariachi's reaction to the death of the pursuer, with Carolina holding, helping, and taking him away in cross-faded jump cuts concluding with an empty sky and fast fade to black.

Desperado does not need uninterrupted process shots to establish the mobility of space that so obsesses the Hollywood baroque. We are guided here as so often in our explorations of diegesis by the centrality of a specific consciousness that is not entirely embodied in the protagonist but tends to gather in the space around them. In the opening shot, for example, we are granted a look into the eyes of the Mariachi, and we simultaneously see that he is being followed. In classical composition, that knowledge would connote omniscient narration. But when the Mariachi reacts to the presence of Carolina, we realize, with gathering momentum, that this omniscience belongs to the Mariachi. In this way, the Hollywood baroque uses the conventions of establishing shots and intercutting not to establish an external view, but to create an ambivalent space in which we may or may not share consciousness with a protagonist. This doubleness is a dialectical structure, in which, once again, we are both participants and spectators, internal and external to the action, while the space of the action itself becomes doubled as on the one hand the objective reality of omniscient narration and on the other the subjective and therefore potentially illusory space of the protagonist's consciousness (a possibility pursued to extreme effect in *Memento*). This dialectical construction of fluid spaces and mobile interactions between characters and audiences is a "narcissistic" space, since its characteristic is, as with the centering of the soundtrack on the sound effect of synchronized spurs, to organize the space, both auditory and eventually visual, around the natural vision but also the peripheral awareness, the omnidirectional sensitivity, ultimately the global consciousness of the hero. That sense of mystical union with the environment is of course a strategic element in the construction of the noble savage, and an important element in contemporary New Age orientalism.

The lyrics to the score of *Desperado* add a further ambiguity in a clash of subjectivity and address—who is speaking, and to whom, or are we eavesdropping on an internal monologue? This is one of the characteristically unclosed elements typical of the neobaroque's love of movement, and one

that leads to further loss of equilibrium. One of the most significant difficulties lies in resolving spatialized narratives, leading to the ambiguous and ambivalent endings of so many contemporary films. Cynically, one can always read these as ways of keeping open the diegetic possibility for a sequel. But this is only part of the crisis management of a cinema that must, commercially, come to an ending. Not only do films fade out rather than conclude, or rely on entirely formal negotiations of completion, as in the knot-garden model of script-based baroque cinema; certain narrative forms that have never really addressed themselves as linear frequently reveal, as in the closing sequence of *Desperado*, what seems to be one pass of a cyclical history in which the same or similar narratives will cycle forever—implicitly in Sal and Mookie's final scene in *Do the Right Thing*, explicitly in the *Godfather* series. At one extreme, this will provide the universe of *Star Wars*, with its serially unresolved New Age binarism of the Force and the Dark Side, while at the other it brings the perpetually asymmetric Möbius strip of *Lost Highway* (Elsaesser and Buckland 2002: 186).

Some classical films, among them *Sunset Boulevard*, *The Cobweb*, *Sullivan's Travels*, *Dodsworth*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, and most obviously *Citizen Kane*, appear to work on similar models of depth and surface. The classical, however, depends on a planar construction, in which each layer of depth is distinct from the others, as in the famous sequence of *Kane* in which the boy Kane and his sled, his father, and his mother and Thatcher occupy three meticulously separated zones of the image. In a typical neobaroque shot, mobile camerawork (and digital compositing) eliminates the cut between layers to promote a vectoral movement totalized in the bounded world inside the spatial image. Then, like the deluded protagonists of *Three Kings*, the audience is in place to savor the ingenuity of the artifice in which they have been caged. Inhabiting the here and now becomes problematic, as we confront the foregrounded recordedness of the illusion to which we are invited to submit. Classical spectacle deployed a closed system of linear narrative to shut down the future: the baroque marks out the limits to our habitation of the present.

The 1999 blockbuster effects movie *The Matrix* came impregnated with the figures of the baroque. Its camerawork is for the most part less strident than *Strange Days*, although the climactic chase through the apartment block in steadicam, despite sporting more edits than Bigelow's equivalent scenes, functions in precisely the same way as her steadicam sequences in *Strange*

Days, *Point Break*, and *Blue Steel*. In *The Matrix*, constant if less flamboyant reframing characterizes even dialogue scenes and delivers pyrotechnic steadicam and process shots, including a hallmark lightning zoom (derived from the Hong Kong action cinema) on the God-shot (from the ceiling or sky into the floor or roof). The film resolves its story-telling dilemma in expositional shot-reverse-shot sequences by using constantly mobile back-projections, notably in a sequence in a car on the way to visit the Oracle, where acid video colors throw the reality of the city—disembodied by the lack of street sound—into question. The multilayered soundtrack again uses a hyperamplified motif—the ringing of telephones signaling connection to and escape from the computer simulation of the title—to guide the auditor through the spatialization of the diegesis as soundscape. Other motifs, like the sound of wipers on the office window during the firing scene early on, similarly oversignal their function, flagging the later possibility of escape via the window-cleaners' cradle in the following scene.

This oversignaling clearly refers us to the film's referential structure, less to the cyberspace of internet than to that of computer games, constantly evoked in the use of mobile phones to guide protagonists through the mazes of the city. This relation between the operator and the protagonist also informs the relation between God-shots and point-of-view shots, notably again in the early sequence that culminates in a composite of a cell-phone tumbling down the canyon between skyscraper facades. Editing forms a crux in the baroque: how and where is it possible to cut a sequence shot whose motivation lies in its subjectivity? With the addition of an operator, the double motivation becomes clearer than it was in the example from *Desperado*: it belongs with the double-vision of the player. Here the dialectical relation of fetishist and voyeur is no longer at the core of the film, having been superseded by the position of the narcissist. The dialectical relation between the sucker and the connoisseur is itself doubled in that relation between the protagonist in the game and their controller, the game-player. Hence the possibility exploited thrice in the film of mapping God-shots into points of view.

The use of mobile camera has the recessional sensibility of a Vermeer raised on *The Maltese Falcon*. The opening sequence, Neo's first meeting with Morpheus and the scene of Morpheus's torture feature strongly foregrounded blocks of shade or color—the backs of chairs, coats, telephones—forcing awareness of the depth of the image. Balanced against these

compositional devices, the parallax enhances continuities between gradations of depth rather than, as in the more obvious use of diopters, their independence from one another. The motif of fluid instability—the liquid flame that pours out from the elevator shaft during the raid to rescue Morpheus, the rippling glass wall of the skyscraper as the helicopter plunges into it—establish the link between mobility and illusion. The moment in which Neo, having realized his powers, flexes the walls around him after assimilating Agent Smith echoes the abstract presentation of the Matrix as the space between letters and pixels on the computer screen (a motif that picks up from *Blade Runner's* endlessly enlargeable photograph a dream of the artifact as complex as reality). Though the narrative wants us to puncture the illusion, it is illusion we came to witness. The film's liquid instability enacts that contradiction.

Even those who are not science fiction buffs find the lengthy exposition of *The Matrix* patronizing: Hollywood has no faith in its audience. We are entering a period of vagueness of which *The Matrix* is only an early symptom. The visual regime of the indecipherable has been coming for some time. Blockbuster releases since the summer of 1998—the season of *Armageddon* and *Lost in Space*—feature major scenes in which the geography of the diegesis is radically unclear. In *The Matrix* this is neatly tied into the peripeteias of the plotting and the diegetic theme of illusion to form a reasonably convincing aesthetic rationale for the ambiguity of many of the spaces. The baroque tends toward the cloudy and disorienting, its tendency to remain unclosed resulting in a preference for questions to be left unanswered, identities to be guessed at. The normative cinemas found beauty in clarity—the glistening surface of spectacle, the hard edge of referential reality, the adamant certainty of the image. Now we move toward an appreciation of the indeterminate.

In the movement from plane to recession, we parse in a new form that transition from tactile to visual, from the metaphysics of being to the culture of change, isolated by Wölfflin in his *Principles of Art History* as the dividing line between classical and baroque culture: “movement is attained only when visual appearance supplants concrete reality” (1950: 65; see also Wölfflin 1966). Hollywood enters a new territory of vagueness inaugurated by doubling, encoded as illusion, and confronted as crisis: the space between material and immaterial, turbulence and the end of history.

Ecstasy, Totality, and the Grotesque

Kant's beauty is always dependent on a shared taste; a materialist's on the synthesis of conflicting evolutions. The sublime, by contrast, speaks from some space beyond the common sense of communicative communities. The authoritative domain of the turbulent baroque is irrational, visionary, internal, asocial, and individual. It poses itself as the final resolution of the dialectic. The beauty of the normative cinema is ultimately communicative: realism speaks through the social formation of individuality, total film from the triumph of the state. Classicism's superficiality is the product of the spectacular commodity's dominance of communication. The neobaroque, however, turns inward to some unfixated and infeasible textual transcendent within the surface. One avatar of this transcendence is the undecidably vague, a misty configuration of valueless differences. Another is the completion that only awaits discovery. The neobaroque is in love with destiny.

Whereas in the classical the context determines the individual will, in the neobaroque individual destiny conquers context. Not only is the baroque protagonist individual and illusory, he (sadly, the baroque seems no less sexist than its predecessor) is also fated. From *Phenomenon* to *Little Man Tate*, biology as destiny returns with a vengeance—the call to become what you already are, a genetic transcendence that depends only on recognizing the mystery of “potential” that will allow the hero to escape both the sublunary material world of his social class (*Good Will Hunting*) and the ideological constraints of an illusory external control (*The Matrix*).

In the literature that has grown up around the parallels between the late twentieth and seventeenth centuries (e.g., Benjamin 1977; Beverley 1993; Buci-Glucksmann 1994; Calabrese 1992; Deleuze 1993; Maravall 1986; Ndalians 1998), Benjamin is alone in defending the value of the term “allegory.” Allegory in the contemporary baroque is that mode in which the particular is surrendered to the general and universal in the interests of a final anagogical principle in which all specificities are demolished in the universality of the transcendent (see Hermeren 1969; Mitchell 1986; Panofsky 1962; Steiner 1981). Such is the closure of *The Matrix* as allegory of struggle against the externality of social mores. The alternative is, in the predestined yet voluntaristic miasma of the neobaroque, unthinkable.

Neo's ecstatic revelation of his powers in *The Matrix* is celebrated in a shot in which the world dissolves into fluid numbers: mere digits, revealing the poverty of the mechanical world. Transcendence in the film *Pi* also takes,

in the first instance, the form of the parallel and remote universe of number, but now it is a sacred technology of mathesis to which Max, the protagonist, devotes himself in solipsistic studies, remote from both the Galilean “universal language” of natural mathematics and from the universal currency of information in the global economy. This transcendence of absolute number is also associated with a visual language that assimilates the cinematographic to animation in step-motion sequences that, like the slow-motion of *Desperado* and the animation of digital stills in *The Matrix*, dematerializes with a mixture of dread and exhilaration, a combination that, in *Pi*, comes as a premonition of an epileptic fugue. As sickness and unconsciousness, but also as extreme life, filmic technique both describes and risks actualizing what it shows: the viewer’s act of viewing is undertaken in the knowledge that the flicker of projection might instigate the epilepsy it recounts. Eliding the description of extreme states with the possibility of evoking them, like the transports of Charles Borromeo before images of the crucified Christ, leads us to the baroque’s ecstasy, its assimilation, without will, into the transcendence of art. For *Pi* this enactment of ecstasis is at its most intense in the transitional scenes that take us from climactic epileptic bliss (white, silent) to recovery (black, ringing phone).

Part of *Pi*’s mathematical narrative premise concerns a Jewish sect for whom the Pythagorean mysticism of the Golden Section has been assimilated to the numerology of the Kabbalah, repository of the most arcane rabbinical traditions including belief in the numerical encoding of the Bible. Cut to Fibonacci rhythms, which it also depicts in the form of snail shells, Golden Sections, Leonardo’s humanist torso, overlaid spirals, formulas, and numerical series, *Pi* offers, to the point of incomprehensibility, to enact mathematics as total allegorical explication of existence. But it is precisely that totality which brings about the crisis of representation. As Max, the protagonist, approaches the realization of the mystical unification of pure maths, natural numbers, and the chaotic systems of the stock market, his epilepsy becomes more and more violent, and the film veers more and more cruelly and abruptly toward surreal, wide-angle sequences of paranoia and self-mutilation, or alternatively through sequences of cascading edit patterns toward the white light of the epileptic fugue. *Pi* cleverly orchestrates the decorative function of its mathematical motifs in the construction of a baroque architectonic structure in the same moment that it reveals the

superficiality and emptiness at its heart, marked with the sign of epileptic absence.

At the same time, like its big-budget brothers, *Pi* is a profoundly narcissistic film. Recruiting popular histories of number (Cubitt 2000a) and popular mysticism concerning epileptic fugue, it works up the image of destiny—genetic genius—as prison to justify harrowing scenes of intimate self-doctoring for pain, the experience that will take Max to the threshold of an escape to the cathartic beyond. By picturing the community of seekers as either self-interested profiteers or uncanny zealots, the baroque *Pi* shows all community as false—false as the rabbi’s attempt to inveigle Max into a bogus Cohen family—and so restricts communication to self-communing face to face with the unmediated cosmos. Thus *Pi* can function as the transcendental descriptor of a prison that erects its own walls in the act of describing them, while depicting a world of leaking intimacies (the sensual sounds seeping through Max’s walls), in which the falsely normative heterosexual family can become the family of destiny and self-mutilation is the sole escape from a too dangerous because too ecstatic biological destiny.

“You’re not a mathematician: you’re a numerologist”: Max’s old professor, guardian of the absolute purity of pure math, voices a certain disgust with the loss of classical purity. As *memento mori*, disgust works on the central taboo of contemporary society, justifying the display of putrefaction through its association with redemption, notably here in the probing of the fetid brain with a ballpoint pen and the final cure, excising the equated mind and brain with a power drill. Like tonguing the anal recess and its spinal interface in *ExistenZ*, dependent on the effect of sound (the pre-echoed blurping fish of *Pi*), disgust proposes itself as the opposite of the self-sustaining clarity of the classical, but equally clearly proposes that the two elements must be understood in a single thought: there is no absolute division between the mental and physical worlds, just as there can be no divorce between desire and intelligence, materiality and transcendence.

Baroque cultures are fundamentally allegorical. Their field is not description of the real but its ordering in free-standing semantic structures whose reference is to other semantic structures, including those that would have been held in dialectical opposition by classicism, like the indecorous irruption of disgust into the space of the transcendent. Such are the rustic jokes, satyrs and priapi of the Tivoli Gardens, monument to the triumph of

artifice in the ordering of nature. In this sense, baroque allegory is rhetorical, the audiovisualization of the *ars bene dicendi*, asking to be judged not on its verisimilitude but the elegance of its structure and the eloquence with which it voices “what oft was thought but ne’er so well expressed.” Films like *The Matrix*, *Desperado*, *Strange Days*, and *Pi* share with others like *Twelve Monkeys* an allegorical structure of this kind, symptomatized in the hyper-detailing that, in a curious inversion of Bazinian realism, dematerializes the image in its excess of signifiers and functions as an allegorical fugue on themes of hyperreality, illusion, and the Code. At this juncture, narrative conclusions become almost impossible because of the allegorical burdens they have to bear. Hence the implicit tragedy of the closing lines of dialogue in *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show*: there is no exterior to the fiction except, perhaps, another stage set.

Baroque cultures arise as dialectical expressions of a crisis of absolute power. The Church Triumphant of the Counter-Reformation (see Blunt 1940) and the capitalism triumphant of the end of communism both face the crisis of the end of history. The seventeenth-century Baroque is legible as the expression of an absolute state confronted with the crisis of its own mode of signification. The Catholic Church, until then the central force toward modernization in Italy, was driven by self-preservation (after the collapse of the Mediterranean economy following the Turkish capture of Istanbul) into the arms of Spain, whose monarchy and especially whose systems of taxation belonged to the dying feudal order, but which would be buoyed up for a hundred and fifty years by its American gold. Caught between these forces, the Church opted for a denial of “pagan” classicism in favor of a return to authority and discipline, sweetening the pill by abandoning humanist rationalism for the swooning ecstasies of Bernini and Pozzo. And yet, as John Beverley observes, the Spanish baroque “was, like postmodernism today, at once a technique of power of a dominant class in a period of reaction and a figuration of the limits of that power” (Beverley 1993: 64). Both turn toward ultimate things in their pursuit of a resolution to the crisis: toward transcendence and the sublime. Both face both ways, toward the transcendental and toward the grotesque (see Wind 1998). Yet both fail in their refusal of dialectics, their insistence on one side alone possessing the right.

The classical paradigm in its heyday stands in opposition to but in close relation with the realist paradigm: the greatest achievements of the period—

Stroheim, Keaton, Renoir, Mizoguchi—swing between the symmetries of the classical and the openness to contingency of the realist. But even here another lineage of modernity is apparent, the subterranean strand of the grotesque, the surreal, the irrational that emerges, indeed, in exactly these directors. For many, this Bataillean disorder is the emergent form of a new and radically postmodern cultural poetics: Buci-Glucksmann calls it the baroque. But for Benjamin, on whom she bases her argument so forcefully, the optical unconscious reveals the verso of a normality that remains radically unchallenged by it, since this is precisely its necessary other. When the Mariachi moves his choreographed way through the charnel house of *Desperado*, when the bullets or kickboxers stand in empty air in *The Matrix*, we are treated to the interior of the classical surface. In some films, this effect opens up the spectacle of the spectacular, introducing a near-Zen metaphysics built on the emptiness of the commodity, a spatialization bootstrapped out of its ephemerality as in a number of Ridley Scott's films, notably *Gladiator*. In others, like *The Matrix*, *Casino*, and *Apocalypse Now*, the invitation is to navigate those nebulous internal spaces where the powers that support the bubble of style twist in meaningless flux.

The transcendence of the Hollywood baroque belongs to a society of power in which colonial and imperial expansion has not ended but undergone a novel reorganization. As the seventeenth century was the epoch of the map, the archive, and double-entry bookkeeping, the spatial media par excellence of the new Atlantic imperium, so is the neobaroque of databases, spreadsheets, and geographical information systems. Information technologies are not qualitatively different from the instruments of imperial bureaucracy. Steadicam navigation of indeterminate space is the spatial art of globalization as the carved fountain was of imperialism. The neobaroque is the stylistic turn of capitalism in the moment of its uneasy triumph, confronted with the completion of its historical destiny without achieving the justice, peace, and commonwealth it was intended to bring.

In the magical ascensions painted onto ornate domed ceilings by the great Jesuit artist Pozzo, the world is gathered around the adoration of splendor. Even truth surrenders to *trompe-l'oeuil*. The neobaroque learns from the older not just the richness of décor, not just the instability of matter that at any time can lose its crystalline hardness and tumble into the *informe* (as in the Trevi fountains), but also how to engineer the spectacle about the fixed void on whose foundation alone its splendor coheres. It is the

price of baroque coherence that the subject become abject and that the abject evaporate, for coherence is the spectacle's only true product. Once that single leap of self-abasement and self-abnegation is made, the world orchestrates itself as spectacle, and spectacle articulates itself into a single unity. In cinematic terms, the infinite is first totalized so that it can then be unified, at which point the subject is rendered as the zero of utter emptiness. Of its geometry, Marina Benjamin comments "The all-pervasive fractal, twisted and inward-looking, is so utterly self-referential it replicates itself on resolution and, since it has no frame of reference outside itself, it is incapable of transformation" (Benjamin 1999: 13).

This is the playfulness of the new Hollywood blockbuster movie: an appeal to self-loss in the modeling of a coherent spectacle, whose offer is of a coherence that is impossible in the contemporary world, and whose cost is that the diegetic world can cohere only if the spectator surrenders to abjection and volatilization. For the neobaroque sublime to conquer, it must sublimate the sense of self. The familiar abstraction of mind and body, of observer from observed, of subject from object, here reaches a new formation: everything will be relinquished in favor of coherence. The new world needs to be utterly absorbing: this is why special effects are so central to the new Hollywood, and also why the neobaroque is so unafraid of displays of mawkish emotionalism. To quote Spielberg, "The equivalent of the mother-ship landing in *Close Encounters* is, in *E.T.*, perhaps a tear out of Henry Thomas's eye. That was my equivalent of a super-colossal special effect" (cited in McBride 1997: 330). Affect, thrill, shock displace themselves from the audience to the spectacle. The vanishing point is no longer in the image but in the rapt attention of the viewer.

Database Narrative and the Montage of Affects

Earlier avant-garde techniques for alienation concentrated on breaking up identification with characters. The neobaroque responds by inviting identification with fictional worlds. Here the stakes are higher, in the sense that the existence of the fictive world depends on the abnegation of the viewer. Of course, this also means moving away from the knots of ethical distancings that were available to the classical cinema and its identifications. So, for example, *Peeping Tom* was a viable if gruesome critique of the powers of identification; *Strange Days* (fig. 9.3), effectively a remake of the story if not



| Figure 9.3 |

Strange Days: empathizing rather than identifying, Bigelow's Steadicam yields no truth, only emulations and betrayals. Courtesy BFI Stills, Posters, and Designs.

of the film, is no such thing. We can only empathize with its protagonists, not identify with them. And Bigelow's world yields no truth, only emulations and betrayals.

A new tactic emerged in the advance of minimalism in the 1960s and '70s. Artists like Donald Judd and Carl André and musicians like Philip Glass, Steve Reich, and Terry Riley developed a modular construction of works from simpler primitives, run in series with minor variations. The attempt there was to strip the human out of art. "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art," in conceptual artist Sol Lewitt's phrase (1992: 834), allowing the materials to generate their own higher levels of organization according to structural logics established as the sole creative act of the artist. This is not to claim a patrilineal descent for neobaroque Hollywood, which in any case appears to have derived its new structures equally from the emerging digital workplace and from whatever social and cultural tendencies likewise informed the minimalists. Rather, it indicates a felt need for a

cultural form that excluded subjectivity, and that placed truth outside the human, in closed, rule-governed worlds.

The modular structuration of these worlds has a further impact in neobaroque cinema. The coherence that passes for truth exists only in modular events, segments of the film that stand alone as discrete units, most of all the effects sequences. Recent films like *Star Wars, Episode Two: Attack of the Clones* move from set piece to set piece along only the slenderest thread of narrative, like washing on a line. Each set piece sequence acts to trigger a rush of emotion: putting a clock on the action, staging the spin-off computer game as sport, escaping from ghoulish caverns. The scream, the laugh, the tear, the white knuckles, the racing pulse: the stimuli are clichés because the emotions they elicit and that audiences seek are clichés. Market research ensures, as far as anything can, that expectations will be met. Of course, such expectations derive from the past, never from the future, and so the hectic overproduction of affects is only ever repetitive of old emotions. The clothes-line model of effects sequences held up by a perfunctory narrative builds on Hollywood wisdom (“Don’t tell me: show me!”). Structured in accordance with the most trusted modes of narrative, each set-piece sequence miniaturizes the older classical plot into a few minutes of film, condensing as it simplifies the emotional content, delivering the intensified segment as an event in itself, and building, from the succession of events, a montage of affects that together establish the visceral goal of neobaroque entertainment.

The diegesis of the neobaroque is not only self-enclosed but self-referential. The repetitive nature of the montage of affects is a theme for a number of neobaroque movies, *Groundhog Day* being the most egregious example. More significant still is the phenomenon of spatialized narrative. Lev Manovich notes the importance of the database as an alternative source of narrative in digital media computer games and digital installations (Manovich 2001: 225–228). Daughter of the filing cabinet, the database is a device for the ordering of materials, as such intrinsic to Hollywood market research, scriptwriting, and editing. Lévi-Strauss’s (1972) vision of narrative as an assemblage of narratemes, each of which functions by analogy as a card-index, was a predigital adumbration of the narrative possibilities of this extranarrative form. *Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, *Snatch*, and *The Usual Suspects* only appear to be narrative. In fact they are the result of one of many possible rifles through a database of narrative events whose coincidence is more structural or even architectural than temporal. Beyond the

modernist opposition of narrative and nonnarrative, the structuring of such films depends on the satisfaction to be had from realizing the pattern underlying the events, in Manovich's terms "discovering the algorithm." For this to work, every loose thread must be picked up, every action matched with another, and the submerged symmetry of the classical narrative tradition brought to the surface to be displayed.

In this way the narration, too, becomes spectacular, as we wait for the moment in which the various unraveled lines are knitted into a satisfying coherence. In the process, narrative reveals the coincidences, the flukes of chance that give us this specific version of the story, making play of the casuistry that allows the manipulation of narratemes to pretend to some sort of causality. We are not taken in by these stories. Rather the pleasure derives from the craft with which they are put together. Like the washing-line of the montage of affects, the construction of the database narrative is modular, encouraging games with flashback (*Memento*), time travel (*Twelve Monkeys*), and temporal dislocation (*Pulp Fiction*) to demonstrate with even more brilliance the command over events enjoyed by the pattern-making impulse.

The effect is to make the narrative, like the diegesis, spatial. Deprived of causal chains of anything more than pure luck, good or bad, the protagonists have only to understand, as the audience must, their position in the web of events to realize their goal. That goal, however, already exists as the resolution of the riddle of the world they inhabit. Personal destiny coincides with the destiny of a Hegelian world, whose task is to understand itself.

This shared ideology in turn explains an oddity in the neobaroque that distinguishes it from the "trajectories" (Deleuze 1989: 64) of Keaton. Keaton's world is animated, in the sense that any object can be full of anima, of soul, of its own will and whims: the playfully retreating girl revealed as—exactly—a horse's ass in *Our Hospitality*, the effervescent transformations of *Sherlock Junior*. The neobaroque world is capable only of disappearing, as in *Dark City* and *The Thirteenth Floor*. It may promote illusion (and thereby be capable of revealing the truth behind the illusion), but it is incapable of betrayal, or any willed action, as once it was in the days of Keaton, Chaplin, and Lloyd. Their artistry arose from the happy fault of cinematography—its readiness to believe in appearances, and most of all, in its unappeasable appetite for movement, its gullibility with respect to the self-governing activity of its world. The world of *Groundhog Day* has no will of its own: it exists only to force its protagonist to discover how to live in it. Even

its denizens are manipulable objects in the hero's quest. Like the solitaire player, the film moves its pieces to create an orderly pattern in which the absurdity of the premise—a shuffle of the deck, a throw of the dice—abolishes chance and clears the way for destiny.

For the fictive world to present itself as coherent, it must eradicate subjectivity as the potential source of novelty. The cleanest cut is to deprive the characters of futurity by endowing them instead with a fate: a foregone conclusion that empties the future of its difference from the present. Once it is clear that biology is destiny—as it is in different ways for the heroes of *Phenomenon* and *The Sixth Sense*—the details of the story fall into their patterns, and the purpose of subjectivity is fulfilled at the moment in which it is absorbed entirely into the pattern of the world. With destiny, there is no need for anything more than the sketchiest story.

Self-doubt, for example, is no longer sufficient motivation for a narrative: it is simply an obstacle to be overcome as the pattern hurtles toward completion. Even doubt will be explained as the necessary corollary of a certain task required. The neobaroque's spatialized narratives, with their array of actions and consequences plotted as on a map, take the picaresque structure of the road movie to the extreme. Where a film like *Vanishing Point* (“The Car. The Road. The Girl. The Shack. The End”) leaves us in no doubt that the hero will die, it is more existentialist than nihilistic: what the character does matters. In *Groundhog Day*, it doesn't. The end is already appointed. All the character needs to do is come to it. The coincidence of personal fulfillment and absorption into the world reduces the future from a process of hope to an object of faith. Externalizing the inward struggles of Neo, his shipmates aboard the *Nebuchadnezzar* are distinguishable only by the quality of their beliefs. What narrative there is devolves upon that single, efficient distinction.

Locking into a pattern at its conclusion, the database narrative reveals its gestalt. The task of the protagonists is to realize themselves as elements of an infinitely repeatable, enclosed horizon of rule-governed patterning. The neobaroque hero inhabits his environment with utter omniscience like *Desperado's* Mariachi (fig. 9.4), like Brandon Lee's character in *The Crow*. The diegesis is a knowledge base, its secrets resources to be picked up and used, like the energy and weapons in computer shoot-'em-ups. Samantha/Charly in Renny Harlin's *The Long Kiss Goodnight* is alert to the secret power struggles of her world even though she has had her memory erased: her



| Figure 9.4 |

Desperado: The hero as center of a world's consciousness; a world realizes itself in the assimilation of the hero. Courtesy BFI Stills, Posters, and Designs.

body already remembers what her conscious mind eventually recalls, that the banal world dissimulated a double lie. Paranoia films, from the grit of *Conspiracy Theory* to the wilder reaches of *X-Files: The Movie* and the parody of *Men in Black*, similarly have the world reveal its capacity for truth by first shattering the illusions of the neophyte, and then requiring him to assimilate the new world revealed at the subliminal level of instinctive knowledge and instinctual action. The only act of will required is the statement of belief. After that, the environment (the Force) takes over. The world can realize itself in the assimilation of the heroic subject.

The neobaroque is a Hegelian cinema, in the sense that its goal is not narrative closure but the revelation of truth as destiny: “that the actual world is as it ought to be, that the truly good, the universal divine Reason is the power capable of actualizing itself” (Hegel 1953: 47). Perhaps it is a cinema out of Leibniz, for whom humans’ true love of their creator

makes the wise and virtuous work for whatever seems to conform with the presumptive or antecedent will of God, and yet leaves them satisfied with what God in fact causes to happen by his secret will . . . recognising as they do that if we could sufficiently understand the order of the universe, we should find that it surpasses all the desires of the most wise, and that it is impossible to make it better than it is, not only for the whole in general, but for ourselves in particular. (Leibniz 1973: para. 90, 194)

Contemporary cinema is more ambitious than contemporary philosophy, but neither undertakes to understand the universe any longer. Instead, the neobaroque builds experimental worlds in which the honest actor must discover that “preemptive or antecedent will” that animates her world in order to subjugate herself to it. The film world is a windowless monad, a simple structure unafflicted by connections to the rest of the world, entirely inward.³ Where this universe distinguishes itself from Leibniz’s and Hegel’s is in its relentless secularism. For Hegel, “World history in general is the development of Spirit in *Time*, just as nature is the development of the Idea in *Space*” (1953: 87). Hollywood deals in the multiple histories of multiple worlds, and with the particular rather than the general. In its secular pluralism, the ambition for evolution of the Spirit has been cast aside, for it demands a future that the premise of eternal repetition cannot sustain. At the same time, the notion of an Idea that seeks to fulfill itself in the physical world is too cold and abstract to motivate an audience. Hollywood’s achievement in the neobaroque is to have produced a series of worlds in which Spirit develops in space. Hence the worlds thus created are subject to human will and structured according to the rational-irrational binary that shapes contemporary pop psychology.

There is infinity in these enclosed monads, albeit only the infinity of the inside of a sphere. The film world seeks an audience that will realize it by uncovering its secret algorithm, but which will also by that act dissolve its separate identity into the unity of the new world. Neobaroque films are not

simply total cinema, though many exhibit characteristics of totalitarianism. They are, as Justin Wyatt (1994) argues, extremely visual, lavishing light on strikingly graphical compositions. Spatializing narrative as database fits with this attention to the illumination of the screen as pure style, a style that moreover is as likely to motivate the storyline as to be motivated by it. As image becomes composition, narrative becomes pattern, and the whole comes to a moment of gestalt coherence. This goes counter to Kristin Thompson's description of cinematic "excess," which she defines as stylistic innovations that are motivated neither by the narrative, in the classical manner, or by artistry, in the manner of the art-house film (Thompson 1986: 132–134). Thompson's excess works against the grain of the narrative, establishing a conflict between story and an environment strongly marked by design and composition. But such stylistic traits appear excessive only when viewed from the grounds of a cinema presumed to be normative. In fact, quite the opposite process is in train. In creating a world rather than a narrative, the neobaroque seeks instead a circumscribed perfection removed from history and thence from dialectical process. Of the classical cinema, Adorno wrote, "In its attempts to manipulate the ideology of the masses the ideology of the culture industry itself becomes as internally antagonistic as the very society which it aims to control. The ideology of the culture industry contains the antidote to its own lie. No other plea could be made for its defence" (Adorno 1991: 157).

Today that plea can no longer be entered. Certainly there are films that in various ways conform to Comolli and Narboni's (1977) "category 'e,'" the film that tries to present the dominant ideology but does so in a contradictory way that reveals the workings of ideology itself. The most successful films, however, succeed because they have nothing to say: no roots in the social or the material world, alternatives to reality, neither antidotes nor commentaries.

We might seek forebears in the European artistic and political avant-gardes, in Jancsó's *Red Psalm*, with its formal, elegant epithalamium for land and people in revolt, in Resnais's *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad*, folding its players in layers of time. Or we might choose Welles's *Mr. Arkadin*, whose eponymous villain feigns amnesia and hires an investigator to unearth his past so he can murder all its witnesses. Arkadin, writes Deleuze, "makes out that he is recouping all the splits in himself into a grandiose, paranoid unity which would know nothing but a present without a memory, true amnesia

at last” (Deleuze 1989: 113). Deleuze places the crisis of cinema history at the end of World War II, in the European reconstruction.

The equivalent moment for the United States came later, between the Vietnam War years that periodize U.S. cinema for so many commentators (e.g., Wood 1986; Corrigan 1991; Cook 2000) and Reaganomics. Welles, Resnais, Jancso, even Buñuel, that most lapsed of lapsed Catholics, explore the persistence of the past in the present. In the windowless monads of the neobaroque, the past has disintegrated, no more than a comforting repetition of the governing pattern—the comfort of the final scene in *What Dreams May Come*. Where Leibniz and Hegel sought an end to history in the reunion of humankind and nature, Hollywood offered an escape from history by the subjection of hyperindividuals to artificial worlds, narcissistic mirrors in which the unwilling subjects of modernity may unravel the knot of self and disappear into the arabesques of spectacular coincidence, illuminated by flashes of visual, aural, and physiological shock.

Neobaroque Hollywood film is not dialectical because it eschews time. In place of change it seeks truth, the unique, permanent, and perfect truth of secret worlds hidden from history. Out of the milling equilibrium states of the spectacular, the neobaroque produces pattern. For those tired of the endless, chaotic trudge through daily life, it brings the sense of completion. For those for whom all hope is lost and who therefore can only believe in miracles, it produces unity out of nothingness while it annihilates the overburdened self.
