1

INTRODUCTION

Fatal Attraction and *Scarface*

Fig. 1.1

People Have Many Different Responses to Movies

When *Zero Dark Thirty* opened in theaters in the United States in January 2013, it ignited a storm of controversy culminating with a serious threat of a congressional investigation empowered to summon the filmmakers to Capitol Hill to testify about the film! How could a fictional Hollywood film be of such interest or importance that members of Congress would launch an investigation? What was at stake? On the surface, the answer was easy. The film, which claimed to be based on a true story, is about the hunt for and eventual killing of Osama bin Laden following the Al Qaeda attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. The film included scenes of the CIA graphically torturing prisoners of war to gather information about bin Laden's whereabouts (Figure 1.1). The controversy was multi-faceted. Several members of congress went so far as to demand to know the sources for the film's claims about the alleged torturing and even demanded that the film be re-edited prior to video release, removing the scenes suggesting that torture yielded vital information. Others, including its Academy Award winning director, Kathryn Bigelow, defended the film, pointing to complex narrative ambiguity that in fact could just as easily be read the exact opposite way: after torture fails and the prisoners are treated humanely, they give accurate information. She and the studio refused any re-editing and resisted all censorship attempts.

A similar controversy erupted in 2014 when Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* opened (Figure 1.2). Some

Fig. 1.2

Fig. 1.3

Fig. 1.4

critics hailed it as a pro-Iraq war film about a genuine American war hero. Quickly, others denounced it for just those reasons, seeing the film as a predictable conservative film uniting war and American patriotism. But a third position rejected the previous two and hailed the film as a complex anti-war examination of its subject. Reportedly, one of the major pro-war commentators who hailed the film later even acknowledged that he had not seen the film when making his comments and one of the major anti-war commentators who denounced the film also acknowledged he had not seen it! They just simply presumed they knew what they had to know based upon their preconceptions of Clint Eastwood as a movie star-director-politician and Chris Kyle as a celebrated war hero who had written his account of the war in his book upon which the film was based. Clint Eastwood responded to the critical controversy by repeatedly saying he saw the film as strongly anti-war, aligning himself with the third position described above.

When *Spotlight* (2015), a much different kind of film about *The Boston Globe* 2001 investigation of alleged priest child abuse within the Catholic Church, opened it was generally hailed and critically acclaimed (Figure 1.3). The subject matter, however, was disturbing and potentially controversial with its focus on abuse and cover-up in the Catholic Church, a subject the media seized upon. But the treatment and the fact that it was based both upon actual events that had taken place in Boston and also within *The Boston Globe* journalistic investigation led to the film winning the Academy Award for Best Motion Picture of 2015.

Ironically, controversy can help box-office and bring critical acclaim to films. All three of the above films were nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture. Regardless of their opinions about them, most people considered them "serious" films within "real" historical contexts. When *Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit* (2015, Figure 1.4) came out, however, most people simply responded to it as an action-adventure thriller, one that related not to their own social reality or to history but rather to other films in the series and in its genre, such as the James Bond, Jason Bourne, or Mission Impossible films. People either liked or did not like it but few debated its agenda with the intensity with which many responded to *Zero Dark Thirty*, *American Sniper*, or *Spotlight*. Yet, we will see in the coming chapters that seemingly innocent genre entertainment films may address or mask important social and cultural issues and contain potentially challenging ideas and characters or damaging racial, class, and gender stereotypes. Regardless of whether people see movies as relating to the world in which they live or the world of other movies, any movie can evoke a diversity of responses; some are predictable; others can be unexpected. We can learn a great deal from exploring this diversity.

There are many reasons why people respond to movies in such different ways; all are important.

We have all stood in the lobby of a theater and heard conflicting opinions from people who have just seen the same film. Some loved it, some were annoyed by it, some found it just OK. Perhaps we've thought, "Well, what do they know? Maybe they just didn't get it." So we go to the reviewers whose business it is to "get it." But often they do not agree. One reviewer will love a film, the next will tell us to save our money. What thrills one person may bore or even offend another. Disagreements and controversies reveal a great deal about the assumptions underlying these varying responses. If we explore these assumptions, we can ask

questions about what provoked them and about how sound they are. Questioning our assumptions and those of others is a good way to start thinking about movies. We will soon see that there are many productive ways of thinking about movies and many approaches that we can use to analyze them.

Fig. 1.5

In *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* (1992), Bruce Lee (Jason Scott Lee) sits in an American movie theater (Figure 1.5) and watches a scene from *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) in which Audrey Hepburn's glamorous character awakens her upstairs neighbor, Mr. Yunioshi. Half awake, he jumps up, bangs his head on a low-hanging, "Oriental"-style lamp, and stumbles around his apartment crashing into things. The audience in the theater laughs uproariously at this scene of slapstick comedy but Lee does not. To the contrary, he becomes more and more enraged until finally he and his girlfriend leave the theater.

Fig. 1.6

Lee is Chinese, his girlfriend is white, and *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* has shown him to be the victim of anti-Asian prejudice in the United States. In this scene, Mickey Rooney, a white man, plays Mr. Yunioshi, an Asian man, who is the butt of the humor; the character's appearance (exaggerated make-up that makes him appear to be bug-eyed with "buck teeth"), dialect (he speaks with an exaggerated accent), and actions (comic ineptness), all reinforce stereotypical and degrading views of Asian behavior (Figure 1.6). Lee feels that this characterization, combined with the audience's laughter, reflects and contributes to his own assimilation problems. Others in the audience, however, do not see the movie in this way at all. They respond, or think they respond, only to the slapstick: the same scene, but very different responses. Furthermore, Lee's girlfriend initially joins in the laughter but becomes uncomfortable when she senses his pain.

Movies and Entertainment

Why do we go to the movies? Most of us go for entertainment. Indeed, Bruce Lee and his girlfriend are on a date when they see *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, a common context in which young people see movies. Going out on a date, having fun, and eating popcorn may all make it seem as if movies are fairly simple things that do not require much thought. Just sit back and enjoy them. But, as *Dragon* illustrates, having fun is not isolated from serious issues. Lee does not go to the movies in order to contemplate his social oppression but, in the midst of a light-romantic comedy, that is precisely what happens. He comes to an awareness that motivates his entire career: he will soon dedicate his life to offering alternative images of Asian men in the cinema. However worthy, we should note that this scene constructs a motivation for Lee that shapes the film's thematic development in a manner that highly simplifies biographical reality, the consequences of which we will discuss below.

Far from being frivolous, entertainment may actually provide a pleasurable smokescreen beneath which disturbing issues can be either reinforced or, more helpfully, contemplated. Different genres lend themselves to the examination of particular social and cultural issues. The modern horror film, beginning with *Psycho* (1960, Figure 1.7) and including

Fig. 1.7

Fig. 1.8

Fig. 1.9

such films as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), locates the most hideous horror at the center of the home and family. People go to those films, of course, to get scared to death, shriek, and jump out of their seats, not to contemplate whether the once joyous nuclear family with a working father and housewife mother is an outmoded institution that has become the breeding ground for psychotic murderers. Yet, as we will see in Chapter 5, it may be precisely because we enjoy being scared to death that these films can take such an unflinching look at the family. All of those films have also recently been remade: *Psycho* in 1998, *The Hills Have Eyes* in 2006 (Figure 1.8) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in 2003 (Figure 1.9) and in Chapter 6 we will discuss the significance of such remakes. Similarly, most people go to action/adventure spy films because they enjoy the excitement of the chases and fights, the exotic locales, the dazzling espionage gadgets, and the last minute escapes, not because they want to contemplate changing gender roles within American society, ongoing Cold War dangers, and corruption within the US government. Yet, a film like *Salt* makes very clear that that, in part, is what the genre is about.

At times, different films or genres reflect virtually opposed responses to common cultural concerns. As the modern horror film has focused upon the collapse of traditional images of the supportive nuclear family, a number of recent historical epics have championed a return to conservative family values and linked the maintenance of those values with grand issues of national identity and continuity. Films like *War Horse* (2011), *Braveheart* (1995), *Saving Private Ryan* (1997), *Gladiator* (2000), *The Patriot* (2000), and *Pearl Harbor* (2001) begin with devastations to or dysfunctions within traditional families and show their damaged heroes going on to help save their nation during a time of crisis; these films conclude with a sense of a triumphant society realigned to "proper" values. *War Horse, Saving Private Ryan, The Patriot*, and *Pearl Harbor* all close with images of strong nuclear families that signify national continuity. *Gladiator* closes with the dying hero envisioning an Elysian reunion with his lost family, and the implication that his sacrifice has made the Roman Empire safe for similar families. Such endings could hardly be more different from the endings of recent horror films, but modern horror films and historical epics both respond to a common cultural impulse – anxiety about the decline of the traditional family at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries.

Part of understanding movies is understanding the complex ways in which they relate to the society that produced them. People frequently assume this with movies like the Nazi propaganda film, *Triumph of the Will* (1935), but we will see that it is just as useful in exploring issues of race, class, and gender in a wide variety of genres including horror films, historical epics, action/adventure spy films, comedies, and Westerns. A Western like *Posse* (1993), for example, with its large cast of central black characters, seems odd when compared with classic Westerns, such as *Red River* (1948), *High Noon* (1952), and *Shane* (1953), which have no central black characters and frequently do not even contain marginalized images of blacks. The "civilized" West, these films assume, was a West peopled with whites. *Posse*, however, explicitly refers to the fact that the historical "West"

contained many blacks; this implicitly leads the viewer to question their absence in traditional Westerns. When we look at the vast majority of Westerns from 1900 to 1970 and see virtually no blacks anywhere, we begin to learn about the racial priorities of American society and of the film industry during that period. The same is true with, for example, the near absence of Jews in the genre. *Deadwood* (2004–2006), a revisionist Western television series, foregrounds this with a central Jewish character who is a salesman nicknamed "the hardware Jew."

We can often learn a great deal not only from what we see in a film but also from what we do not see, from what the film ignores. Films about national US law enforcement agencies such as the FBI or the Treasury Department seldom explored the sexuality of major historical figures involved in them but *J. Edgar* (2011) presents the powerful FBI Director, J. Edgar Hoover, as a repressed homosexual who barely understood his sexuality and whose confusion led to destructive professional behavior. Such a sexual/historical interpretation would have been inconceivable until recently and is simply invisible in most movies dealing with the FBI from the 1930s through at least the 1970s.

Certain films "push all the buttons" and stimulate widespread enthusiasm or anger at the time of their release. Such reactions can reveal a great deal about the ways in which we look at films and think about them. In 1915, *The Birth of a Nation* became a lightning rod for both adoration and fury for its representation of blacks and the Ku Klux Klan. In 1993, both *Jurassic Park* and *Schindler's List* pushed all the buttons, but they were different buttons.

Jurassic Park is, worldwide, one of the largest grossing box-office movies ever made. Half a year after *Jurassic Park* appeared, its director, Steven Spielberg, released *Schindler's List*, one of the most critically acclaimed films of that year. They are very different kinds of film. *Schindler's List* received twelve Academy Award nominations, whereas *Jurassic Park* received only three, but earned much more money. *Jurassic Park* was, in many ways, exactly what Spielberg's fans expected – a fantasy filled with childlike wonder and moments of great terror, like Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975). *Jurassic Park* also spawned two sequels and a number of video games and amusement park rides, comparable to *Jaws*, which inspired three sequels as well as video games. *Schindler's List* seemed to come from a "different" Spielberg, since it is a three-and-a-half-hour, intensely serious, black-and-white film about the Holocaust. It has inspired neither sequels, nor video games, nor amusement park rides. Most of the critical respect went to *Schindler's List*; most of the money went to *Jurassic Park*.

Yet we must question rather than simply accept the seeming dichotomy between these two films. The Academy Awards typically honor serious films that represent Hollywood in a respectable light. That may help explain why many of the most successful genre directors such as Charles Chaplin, Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, and Blake Edwards never won best director awards during the years in which their best comedies, mysteries, and Westerns were made and why directors like John Ford who won such awards only did so for his non-Westerns. Perhaps to acknowledge the oversight, the Academy honored all of these directors late in their careers, or in Ford's case for other films. Blake Edwards, for example, received an Oscar for lifetime achievement in 2003, a decade after making his last film, *Son of the Pink Panther* (1993, Figure 1.10), one of his typical physical comedies. This neglect of genre directors may also help explain why comedies seldom win best picture

Fig. 1.10

of the year and why, when they do, they are likely to be comedies with overtly serious subject matter rather than slapstick. From this perspective, *Jurassic Park* is too much of an action-adventure, science-fiction film to be taken seriously. But this may tell us more about the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences than it tells us about anything intrinsic to *Jurassic Park*.

If we switch perspectives to that of authorship, as we will expand upon in Chapter 4, we may begin to notice unexpected similarities between Spielberg's genre entertainments and *Schindler's List*. Although the latter film is about the Jews during the Holocaust, its central character is an Aryan played by Liam Neeson, a handsome young actor. He thus parallels the character of Indiana Jones played by Harrison Ford in the series of popular films featuring that character. Furthermore, the victimized Jews are reduced to an historical backdrop of undifferentiated people who show no active agency in their salvation; they must be saved by Schindler, who thus becomes a hero figure like Indiana Jones. Is this a whole new Steven Spielberg?

A different perspective entirely involves formal issues. In 2009, James Cameron's *Avatar* pushed all the buttons primarily because of its innovative use of 3D, a mode of cinematography and exhibition that had seemed marginal to the film industry since a short burst of popularity in the early 1950s. Its runaway success (it has, to date, earned an astonishing near-$3 billion worldwide) led to dozens of new 3D films being made and many older films, like Cameron's 1997 *Titanic*, being converted for 3D release. *Avatar* can be discussed productively in many ways, but, for the general public in 2009, a major part of the film's appeal was its new digital 3D process, which marked a big technological advance upon the older process. Soon after its release, many people would go to see other films in this new 3D format film just as many people would see new sound films at the beginning of the sound era. It now appears unlikely that 3D will become a new norm for filmmaking, as sound and color did in their eras but, whatever its fate, a decade from now, its novelty will have faded and people will view these films in different ways than they do now. There will be different buttons to push.

Critical Approaches to Understanding Movies

Throughout this book, we will be encouraging a critical process that is, by definition, never finished. As soon as we stop questioning, we are in danger of accepting easy and obvious "truths" that can blind us to important issues. Let us return for a moment to *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* to illustrate how this works. As we have suggested, the film provocatively dramatizes the evils of racial stereotyping in Hollywood films. As such, many might think that it should simply be embraced as a progressive step forward. Notice, however, that in the movie theater scene that we have discussed, Lee, the central character, is with his girlfriend. He is the one who has insight and, when she sees his rage, she adopts his position. If we just look at this scene, there is no problem. He, after all, is Asian and she is white, so it makes perfect sense that he would recognize the ugly racism of the film they are watching and she would adopt his insights. This, however, is not an isolated incident. *Dragon* constantly reinforces traditional gender roles by marginalizing her role and limiting her to comparatively brief scenes in which she is seen primarily as a girlfriend or wife-mother. She is narratively subordinate to the central male character in a manner that, as in most Hollywood films, *Dragon* never questions or challenges. At every level, *Dragon* asks us to unquestioningly accept current stereotypes of women in film that are equivalent to the racial stereotypes in *Breakfast*

at Tiffany's that so anger Lee. Yet, how many people watching *Dragon* are equally angered by its treatment of women as passive, marginalized characters who are beautiful to look at and whose primary function is to support important men?

Fig. 1.11

People respond differently to films depending upon their gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and personal background. In *Dragon*, Lee's race and American experience make him respond to *Breakfast at Tiffany's* differently from the rest of the audience. In actuality, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* received many different responses at the time of its release. A brief survey of them complements the fictionalized Lee's response in *Dragon* and points to many central issues we will be exploring in the following chapters. In 1961, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* was primarily perceived as a sophisticated romantic comedy. It was also seen as a star vehicle for Audrey Hepburn. Holly Golightly, the character that she plays, was, by early 1960s standards, a freewheeling, daringly sexual woman (Figure 1.11). This image departed significantly from Hepburn's previous starring roles, such as those in *Roman Holiday* (1953) or *The Nun's Story* (1959). During production of the film she was concerned that her character should not be too shocking for her fans. She wanted, in other words, to change her image but not to change it too drastically. But Audrey Hepburn was not the only famous name associated with this film. It was based on Truman Capote's popular novella of the same name. As always happens in such cases, many people focus attention on similarities and differences between the novel and the film: how "faithful" is the movie to the novel; what "changes" have been made and do those changes help or hurt the movie?

Capote himself was unhappy with the film for various reasons, including the fact that he had envisioned Marilyn Monroe as Holly Golightly. One could hardly think of star images more different from those of Monroe and Hepburn. Monroe's "sex kitten" image emphasized her large bust and hips and wiggly walk. Hepburn's image, to the contrary, emphasized her near-emaciated, lean, "boyish" look. Monroe was an important type for the 1950s; Hepburn for the 1960s. In fact, her *Breakfast at Tiffany's* "look" featuring big sunglasses, Givenchy "little black dress" with no emphasis on cleavage, and pearls was widely imitated in the 1960s and is still used in fashion ads.

Within the industry, and increasingly for the public, another famous name associated with the film was that of its director, Blake Edwards. He had his first major box-office success with the immensely popular military service comedy, *Operation Petticoat* (1959), which starred Cary Grant and Tony Curtis, two hugely successful stars of the time. But Edwards had never directed a sophisticated comedy. Some saw the film as marking a major shift within his career not unlike that which *Schindler's List* has come to be seen as marking within Spielberg's career. Yet, another film director, Radley Metzger, saw the film at the time of its release as opening the door to the treatment of disturbing sexual topics and themes in a manner that would not offend audiences. Based upon his perception of *Tiffany's* as a sexually daring and groundbreaking film, Metzger made a series of successful and critically acclaimed films such as *Carmen, Baby* (1967) with much more overt and graphic sexuality than that in *Tiffany's*. Related to sexuality but in a profoundly different manner, *Tiffany's* developed a cult following and remains an immensely popular film within the gay male community.

Some of these responses to *Tiffany's* may seem bewildering. How is it possible that the same film can be seen by mainstream audiences as a nice romantic

comedy, by another film director as the inspiration for making heterosexual soft-core pornography, and by gay men as a cult classic? Is one of these perceptions more correct than the other? Is someone "misreading" the film? For those who respond to the film primarily as a literary adaptation, we should ask, "What is the relationship between a novel and a film based on it?" Can a film be "faithful" to its literary source, or is the concept of "faithfulness" a murky one that may obscure rather than illuminate its subject? In what sense can the film be seen as a Blake Edwards film, particularly one such as this for which he receives no screenwriting credit? What are the assumptions behind attributing a film's authorship to its director? What can we learn from studying *Tiffany's* in relation to Edwards's following films, *The Days of Wine and Roses* (1962) and *The Pink Panther* (1964)? For those who see the film as a star vehicle, in what sense does an actor like Audrey Hepburn shape and control her performance in a film? Is it her performance, or is her performance part of something larger that someone else controls? How does the character of Holly Golightly differ from those of previous Hepburn parts? Questions like these lie at the center of each of the following chapters. They are complex and require careful consideration. In many cases, assumptions that many of us share about the nature of movies will have to be revised or discarded.

Outline of the Book

Most of the following chapters employ the structure of this one, with the first half introducing the chapter's basic critical focus and the second half illustrating it with close readings of individual films.

Most of us begin our thinking about movies when we see reviews, increasingly on-line or on social media, but also in newspapers, television, and radio. We have great respect for good reviewers but our enterprise is fundamentally different from theirs. Their job is to give you their opinion on how good or bad they think a new movie is and, implicitly, let you know whether they think you should see it or stay home. In short, did they like it or not or, as the cliché has become, did they give it a thumbs up or a thumbs down? Our job is to help you learn how to think critically and analytically about all films you see, whether or not you like them. Indeed, we use many films as examples throughout this book that we do not necessarily "like" and we do not as coauthors always agree about which films are good or which we like. That is even true of some of the films we use as major examples at the ends of the chapters. We have chosen all our examples because they work well to illustrate the point we are making, not because we like them. As much as possible, we leave our likes and dislikes out of the discussion. The second half of this chapter, for example, uses *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and *Scarface* (1932) to introduce approaches that later chapters will develop more fully. The book's underlying premise remains constant: that there are many productive ways to think about movies; that we must never think we know everything about a movie; and that the more we learn about movies, the more that knowledge will help us to understand not only those films but also important aspects of our culture. Far from destroying our pleasure from movies, this process enhances our appreciation of the complexities of this popular, influential art form and others related to it, such as television. We hope the book generates a thumbs up for such critical and analytical thinking about movies.

Since the world of film is constantly changing, it is important for us to keep up with major changes in order to understand new films as well as to reevaluate what

we have traditionally believed about movies. We introduce two such developments here that, taken together, indicate significant changes in how films are made and studied. Traditional films and television programs ended with a sense of closure with the spectator knowing what happened and why. Today, many movies are commonly part of serials, sequels, and prequels and television programs are part of a lengthy season or of multiple seasons where individual episodes leave many questions unanswered until the end of the season and, in many, complete closure does not come until the end of the entire series, frequently after many years. Furthermore, these new, more open-ended narratives take place in what media scholars and industry professionals term a transmedia environment, one in which stories, sometimes with the same characters and related storylines, are being told simultaneously in different media platforms such as television, film, video games, and on-line with users not privileging one over the other. Think of Batman. And the spiral widens with comic books and graphic novels in what seems a never-ending storytelling vortex.

Another recent development relates to the intersection of what scholars term the **transhuman**, the complexity of a world in which medical science is integrating increasingly complex electronic and mechanical parts, into the human body, and film narratives and representations of that body via computer generated graphics (CGI). These developments raise a host of new questions, which we will explore. How do we identify with such "cyborgs" or "robots" in comparison to the human characters or to combinations of the two as for example in the TV series *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–2009)? What role does sophisticated CGI play in creating such characters and identifications? We are far from the early cinema version of *Frankenstein* (1910) or, for that matter, from the first sound version (1931), and we will examine how CGI narratives about the transhuman have flourished in the transmedia age.

We have arranged the chapters in such a way as to systematically expand our understanding of film while avoiding potential pitfalls and confusions. Chapter 2 discusses narrative structure or the manner in which a film's story is told and organized. Most people, when asked what a movie is "about," think first in terms of its storyline, so a look at the ways in which movies tell stories is a useful place to begin a study of their meaning. This is what many aspiring filmmakers feel they must master as they begin to learn their craft. We will examine the standard narrative techniques as well as alternatives to them, and then illustrate those techniques with a detailed look at two films from different narrative traditions. *Jurassic Park* (1993) is a popular film within the Hollywood narrative tradition; *Rashomon* (1950) is a widely respected one which works in an entirely different tradition, that of the international art cinema. Studied together, these films reveal a good deal about how movies tell stories, including how they integrate visual imagery into storytelling.

Movies do much more than tell stories, however, and they also tell stories differently from other narrative forms. The novel *Jurassic Park*, for example, is obviously not the same thing as the movie. We cannot begin to think with any sophistication about movies until we understand their formal workings, the things that make them different from other art forms such as plays or novels. Once again, this is an understanding that is essential for aspiring filmmakers and critical thinkers. Chapter 3, on formal structure, discusses the basic properties of film, such as cinematography, sound, and editing and shows how these formal properties function in two films from different periods and different national cinemas, *Rules of the Game* (France, 1939) and *The Sixth Sense* (United States, 1999).

These early chapters deal with approaches that help us to understand the workings of individual films. The remainder of the book explores larger contexts that enable us to group films in relation to other films and to relate them to cultural issues. It is essential, however, to begin with the specific dynamics of the individual film because, unless we have a detailed sense of the construction of a film, we cannot intelligently and accurately relate it to larger issues.

In Chapter 4 we move from issues specific to individual films to those that emerge when we look at relationships among many films. The first of these is **authorship**. One traditional way of relating artworks to larger concerns is by raising the issue of authorship. This is a complicated issue since film is a collaborative form, but we show why the director is commonly considered the author of a film and then examine two films by quite different American directors from different decades: *The Searchers* (1956) by John Ford and *Jungle Fever* (1991) by Spike Lee. We show how placing these films within the perspectives of their directors' other works can give us valuable insights.

Genre, the subject of Chapter 5, is an entirely different context into which we can fruitfully place film. Genre study relates films not to other works by the same author but to other works of the same type, such as Westerns, musicals, horror, or action-adventure films. At times, film genres can share similar properties with genres in other entertainment forms, such as Western or science-fiction novels, action-adventure video games, or police procedural television series. Understanding how genres work shows us how different eras have treated similar material in different ways and helps us to understand the role of both formula and creativity in genre films. We discuss *Sin City* (2005) in relation to both the detective genre and *film noir*, and *Gunfight at the OK Corral* (1956) in relation to the Western.

Chapter 6 looks at a major phenomenon of the past thirty years: series, sequels, and remakes. This approach explores individual films within the context of movies that are either sources for them or other films to which they are related by sharing common characters or continuing stories. We examine as examples the classic 1933 *King Kong* and the 2005 remake of it, as well as *Goldfinger* (1964) from the popular James Bond series, which has continued for over half a century.

Stars constitute a major part of the appeal of some films as well as a substantial part of their budgets. Some people, in fact, will select which movies they view mainly in terms of the actors in them. Chapter 7 looks at the difference between stars and actors and at how an actor's "image" can contribute substantially to a film's meaning. We show how such an image changes over time and examine the careers of a major female and male stars from the perspective of their work in two films made decades apart: Marlene Dietrich in *Morocco* (1930) and Clint Eastwood in *Dirty Harry* (1971).

Up to this point, this book explores ways in which film can be understood by either examining internal aspects of the films themselves or by relating them to patterns within the world of cinema, but that world does not account for much of the significance that film has or what we can learn from it. To understand this, we have to consider wider areas. In Chapter 8, we explore audiences and reception. The same film can mean different things at different times and even different things at the same time to different spectators and audiences. Much of this depends on the reception context in which the film is viewed. Reception contexts include how a movie is advertised and publicized as well as such things as public outcries and protests. This chapter will look at the initial reception of Charles Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris* (1923) within the context of the popular comedian's career at that time and how its meanings shifted at different points in his career,

and at *The Crying Game* (1992), a controversial film whose initial reception context included a highly successful advertising campaign with which popular reviewers initially played along, creating a reception context that was soon to be altered.

Another way in which we can learn about film by stepping outside its world is to look at its relation to other art forms, the subject of Chapter 9. We will look at areas of similarity and difference with art forms to which film is often compared: theater (a performance art) and literature (a narrative form). We will illustrate these relations by means of two movies based upon novels, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1932), one of the many movies based upon Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (and influenced by plays based upon the same novel), and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011), an American film based upon the popular Swedish crime novel of the same English name, which had also served as the source for a 2009 Swedish film.

As well as being an art form, film is part of the mass media, and Chapter 10 examines film's relation to the other mass media of radio and television. While all three media use narrative, the formal properties and industrial practices of each make of them very different things with different capabilities and traditions. Blake Edwards had a long, successful career that included work in radio and television narrative series and many Hollywood feature films. We will illustrate the differences and similarities among these media using one of his works from each medium: the radio show, *Richard Diamond, Private Detective* (1949–1953); the television show, *Peter Gunn* (1958–1961)*;* and the movie, *Victor/Victoria* (1982). We then explore the difference between classical television from the analogue era and digital HDTV focusing upon *24* and *Homeland*.

At this point, with a number of critical perspectives behind us, it is important to look at some of the major theories of film. Most people assume that film is in some ways "realistic," though they mean many things by this. We examine the theoretical assumptions underlying *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925), a Russian formalist film from the silent era, and *Umberto D* (1952), an Italian film made within a realist tradition. Film theorists help us explore and understand such notions as realism, and it is important that we do so before moving on to discuss social and cultural issues, since naïve notions about realism block exploration of such issues.

The next three chapters take up the vital issues of gender, race, and class in film. All of us are in part defined through the nexus of these three categories, whether we are a white, middle-class man living in the suburbs or an African American woman living in the inner city. Films draw upon, promulgate, and challenge common ideas about race, class, and gender in our culture. They frequently do so implicitly rather than explicitly and by invoking invisible norms by which we judge characters and actions: masculinity is the norm against which femininity is judged; the middle class is the norm against which the lower and upper classes are judged; heterosexuality is the norm against which homosexuality is judged; and white is the norm against which people of color are judged.

Chapter 12 examines how movies construct gender (e.g., masculinity and femininity) and sexuality (e.g., heterosexuality and homosexuality). These assumptions affect not only characterization but also narrative structure and visual style. We have chosen *American Gigolo* (1980) as a film that represents masculinity in unusual ways and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1990) as a film that represents femininity in a challenging departure from Hollywood norms. Yet, both films contain contradictions that caution us from simply thinking of these representations as all good or all bad.

Chapter 13 similarly examines representations of race and ethnicity in film. To do so, we raise questions about what stereotypes are, how they function, and whether

they affect all people in the same manner. We also consider the related issue of role models and show how seemingly progressive films with positive role models may nevertheless be racially troubling. Close readings of *LA Confidential* (1997) and *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), films which both engage and challenge traditional racial representations from profoundly different perspectives, conclude the chapter.

Chapter 14 explores class in a comparable way. Economic class stereotypes characters in much the same way as race and gender does. Frequently these issues intertwine, as in the common representation of certain minorities as belonging almost exclusively to a servant class. American culture also promulgates class myths such as the ones that rich people are miserable and that we are all better off being middle class or that class injustices exist only in other societies, not in the contemporary United States. We then analyze two Hollywood films of different genres made within a year of each other, yet one of which, *Pretty Woman* (1990), simply affirms common notions of class while the other, *The People Under the Stairs* (1991), challenges those notions.

Chapter 15 breaks the pattern of the book and concentrates entirely upon one film, *Citizen Kane* (1941). Undoubtedly the most heralded and praised American film of all time, it enables us to illustrate how the major approaches of the book can be applied to a single film and gives students a model that integrates many useful methods for thinking about any film, including those that they will see in the years to come.

Chapter 16 analyzes the three most significant current trends at work in the world of cinema: globalization, digitalization, and convergence. We will examine how the global economy has changed the way that movies are made and marketed; the way that digital technology has changed not only such things as visual effects in films and in most instances eliminated the use of 35mm and also how it has created new home and/or mobile viewing contexts; and how the once separate entertainment and technology industries have converged or come together in an increasingly interrelated manner, creating a new transmedia environment. All of these developments are not only changing the nature of cinema but will continue to have a profound impact upon its future. In the United States, 2012 marked the near total conversion of commercial theatrical exhibition from 35mm film distribution to digital formats. 3D and Imax as well as the combination of 3D Imax have become important theatrical formats in recent years and China has emerged as a major force in the global market, all of which we will consider in the final chapter.

We turn now to two detailed analyses of individual films: *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and *Scarface* (1932). They are commercially successful films from different genres and different eras in film history that attracted a great deal of attention at the time of their release, generating controversy and conflicting interpretations. These analyses provide us with useful springboards from which to introduce many of the topics with which the remainder of this book will be concerned.

Fatal Attraction (1987)

When Vice-President Gore appeared on the *Late Show with David Letterman* in 1993, during an attempt to lighten and popularize his image, he joked that his security code name was "Buttafuoco." He was referring to the then widely publicized case in which Joey Buttafuoco's teenaged lover attempted to murder his wife. It was often called the "Fatal Attraction" case and was not alone. At around the same time, national attention focused upon the case of a Long Island

schoolteacher, Carolyn Warmus, who actually murdered her lover's wife. This was also called the "Fatal Attraction" case.

"Fatal Attraction" has become a popular expression to describe almost any romantic triangle that ends badly. It comes from the 1987 movie that became the second highest grossing film of that year, behind *Beverly Hills Cop II*. But, unlike *Beverly Hills Cop II*, *Fatal Attraction* generated widespread and passionate debate. That controversy is helpful to us because it reveals common assumptions about movies.

Reception

One of the most helpful assessments of the film came from one of its producers, Sherry Lansing, who called it a Rorschach test for everyone who sees it. Different people see it in different ways. This happens with all films but the differences are more immediately obvious with controversial ones like *Fatal Attraction*.

Perhaps the best place to begin is with the film's unanticipated and widespread popularity, not only in the United States but also in Europe. This came despite the fact that many critics did not consider the film particularly good, describing it as overly manipulative. Its popularity was visible at the box-office as well as in the number of newspaper and magazine articles written about it, widespread reports of intense and vocal responses in theaters, talk-show discussions in which the term "Fatal Attraction Syndrome" was used as a pop psychological term to describe ruinous erotic attractions, a *Saturday Night Live* parody, and the widespread use of the title to characterize and popularize situations like the Joey Buttafuoco and Carolyn Warmus cases. Much of the talk-show interest focused in particular on women who were characterized as resembling the Glenn Close character, successful single women frustrated by their lack of a traditional husband and family.

Fig. 1.12

The movie is about a brief affair (Figure 1.12) between a married man (Dan, played by Michael Douglas) and a single woman (Alex, played by Glenn Close). When the man tries to end it, she refuses and, after first attempting suicide to gain his sympathy, she begins to threaten him and his family. She finally invades his house brandishing a knife and is shot dead by his wife (Beth, played by Anne Archer).

While Alex, who has a traditionally masculine name, is established as an independent career woman, her independence is shown to be a veneer hiding her desperate envy of Dan's close relationship with his wife and daughter. In a key scene, she stands outside his house and secretly watches as he gives his daughter a pet rabbit while the whole family sits cozily beside a fireplace (Figure 1.13). The domestic serenity of the scene is so disturbing to Alex, implicitly because she is so jealous of the other woman, that she staggers away to vomit uncontrollably (Figure 1.14). Her initial suicidal frustration turns against the family. She kills the child's rabbit and later tries to kill the wife.

Fig. 1.13

Different reviews described the film as "about" many things: a warning about the dangers of casual sexual relationships, even a masked warning about the dangers of sex in the

Fig. 1.14

age of AIDS; a melodrama about the importance of and dangers to family life; a condemnation of independent, sexually active career women; a half-horror film that turns such a woman into a monster; or even a feminist slant on a triangular relationship, since it is the woman who initiates the affair. The extreme hatred the film generates toward her can be read as a narrative form of punishment that actually reveals the extreme menace such a powerful woman possessed as a social threat at that moment in American history. By turning the woman into a monster, the film simultaneously acknowledges her power and seemingly absolves the audience from feeling guilty about taking pleasure in the spectacle of her graphic killing.

The film resonated in the late 1980s, in which the conservative Reagan administration sought to reverse what it considered the excesses of 1960s liberalism and, most appropriately in this case, those of the "sexual revolution" and the rise of feminism, by emphasizing "family values." From this perspective, the film can be seen as a corrective to many movies of the 1960s and 1970s in which people experiment with different sexual partners without harmful consequences. Here, there are brutal consequences that imperil the husband's cherished family life and lead to Alex's death.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, many films such as *The Turning Point* (1977), *An Unmarried Woman* (1978), *Norma Rae* (1979), and *Private Benjamin* (1980) showed single women living productive lives without the necessity of marriage to be happy. This film depicts such a lifestyle as a cover-up for desperate unhappiness caused by a lack of involvement with a nuclear family. Some feminists argued that the film was part of a brutal backlash against feminism that sought to remove the option of a happy, single life for women and, in fact, represented single women with sexual desires as monstrous threats to society. Others countered that, although the film undoubtedly strove to achieve that end, it nevertheless created a strong point of identification and sympathy with the "monstrous" woman and made the "normal" family appear smug and repulsive. Rather than accept the film's family values and condemnation of the independent career woman at face value, such a response rejects those very values and opinions. We will see in Chapter 12 that such gender issues comprise an important aspect of film criticism. It is also important to stress that although we have been emphasizing the 1987 reception context here, many spectators today including students still respond similarly to the above-described dynamic of the monstrous, independent, sexually active, career woman who threatens family values and they still cheer her brutal death at the end.

Film as a Construct rather than Reality

Part of the above response brought attention to the important fact that a film is not a "natural" but a constructed object. Many reviewers attributed what they perceived as the overly manipulative quality of the film to its director (Adrian Lyne), who had a background as a maker of television commercials. They considered him clever with "surface" effects but as having little depth. Such a response reveals many assumptions. In calling the film manipulative and excessive, the reviewers presumed that certain moments in the movie were "more" than the material "required" or even that some styles of filmmaking presumably are not manipulative, whatever that may mean. They particularly cited the scene in which the child's rabbit is found killed and the ending, which depicts Alex as a knife-wielding monster resembling the supernatural killers in the *Halloween* movies.

Alex appears to be killed twice, by two people. When she attacks Beth, Dan comes to Beth's rescue and pushes Alex into the bathtub, attempting to drown her (Figure 1.15). A number of close-ups show her apparently dead – under water, eyes open, the water no longer rippling from the struggle; everything is still and quiet (Figure 1.16). Suddenly, she rises from the water, brandishing the knife, as if returning from the dead to kill Dan (Figure 1.17). Beth enters the room and shoots her through the heart (Figure 1.18). Such an ending strongly mimics endings in horror films like *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) in which the monster is apparently killed only to rise again and, in some cases, to be killed yet again. Since *Fatal Attraction*, such endings have appeared in a number of mainstream films such as *The Jackal* (1997) in which Bruce Willis's character, a brutal international assassin, is apparently killed by his nemesis, played by Richard Gere, only to rise again and then be shot dead by another character. In fact, what was once an exciting plot surprise in thrillers can become, over time, an expected one. After John Travolta's villain appears to be blown up before the audience's eyes in *Swordfish* (2001), and even after his scorched body is graphically displayed on an autopsy table, some opening-day audience members said aloud, "He's coming back," and he does.

Fig. 1.15

Fig. 1.16

Fig. 1.17

Fig. 1.18

Norms for Judging the Film

The way some reviewers objected to the excesses of *Fatal Attraction*'s ending point to their assumption of a "proper" dramatic norm. Deviation from this norm becomes excess, or manipulation. Such an assumption, however, obscures the fact that the norm is equally manipulative, although it is likely to go unnoticed since it conforms to expectations. Furthermore, norms for different types of movies are different. The ending would not be excessive in a horror film; on the contrary, if many recent horror films did not have such endings, they would be considered deficient. Most of *Fatal Attraction* conforms to norms for romantic thrillers; its use of devices more appropriate to horror films at the end violated many reviewers' notions of what is "realistic" for romantic thrillers. It is important to note, then, that many notions of realism conform less to any correspondence with "real life" than with the standards accepted for films of a certain type.

The DVD of *Fatal Attraction* includes two endings shot for the film, the one in the release print and the original one. The film's release version ending accounts for much of the excitement it caused in theaters at the time. It did so by turning Alex into a homicidal monster, and then by letting audiences revel in her brutal destruction. It is not only the fact of her demonization and obliteration that contributed to the film's success with audiences, but also the formal manner in which Adrian Lyne shot and edited it. A look at some of the shots in the sequence preceding the attack illustrates this and points not only to the role of a director in
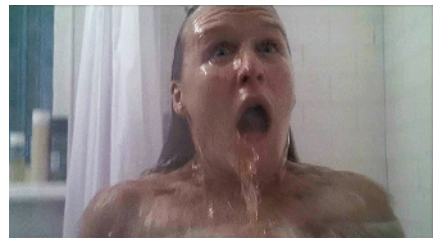
Fig. 1.19

Fig. 1.20

Fig. 1.21

making a film but also to the value of close formal analysis in showing how style shapes what we see in a manner that prevents the separation of style and content in informed critical analysis.

The Style of the Ending

The sequence opens with a shot of water swirling into a bathtub drain. The bright light makes the porcelain ominously white, recalling a similar shot of water in a drain during the famous shower murder scene in Hitchcock's *Psycho*. Here, Beth, dressed in white, is filling the bathtub. During the following scene, the bathroom is brightly white, with the light becoming more and more diffused by steam (Figure 1.19).

The bathroom shots are **intercut** with shots of Dan downstairs as he goes about the house checking the locks, so the ominous sense of danger from Alex outside builds. He puts a kettle of water on the stove. The lighting downstairs is a warm amber, which contrasts sharply between cuts with the bright white of the bathroom. In the bathroom, Beth looks vulnerable with her black eyes from an auto accident (Figure 1.20). When she wipes steam from a mirror, she, and we, are shocked to see Alex in the room. We then get a full shot of Alex holding a large knife (Figure 1.21).

The scene is intensified by a number of carefully organized elements. Alex, also dressed in white, does not lunge right at Beth but, with a puzzled look on her face, asks Beth what she is doing there – as if Alex belonged in the house and Beth were the intruder. This adds an aspect of insanity to her threat, which is further intensified with shots of her absentmindedly cutting her thigh with the knife and not reacting to the pain. A number of shots of overflowing liquids build the explosive tension in the scene. The bathtub overflows, blood drips on Alex's foot, and finally the kettle downstairs boils and whistles. Then Alex attacks. The audience-pleasing excitement of the ending comes from much more than the simple story element of an attack; it comes in part from the way in which the director organizes and edits the specific images and sounds of that attack.

The Original Ending

The debate over manipulation would not have been so intense had the original ending been used. When the film was test-marketed with the original ending, audiences objected because they did not feel that Alex suffered enough. Where the ending in the release version borrows its violent impact from horror movies, the original one has more muted associations of artistic drama.

In the original ending, Dan and Beth are quietly raking leaves when the police arrest Dan for murder. Alex has been found with her throat cut and his fingerprints on the knife. When Beth searches for their lawyer's telephone number, she comes across a menacing audiotape that Alex had sent Dan in which she threatens

suicide. Alex has killed herself in a way that implicates Dan who has been arrested, and it seems as if the tape will exonerate Dan. In the final shot we see a flashback of Alex in her bathroom. As *Madam Butterfly* plays loudly, she slowly begins to cut her throat.

This ending is much quieter than that of the release version. It makes Alex less of a monster and gives Dan no chance to partially redeem himself by coming to his wife's rescue. The test audiences specifically objected to the fact that Alex's fate was not punishment enough for her behavior. In the release version, they sometimes cheered and shouted vulgarities when Dan strangled her and then again when Beth shot her.

Unity

By the standards of classical Hollywood filmmaking the original ending is, however, more complex and unified than that of the theatrical release version. A standard rule of Hollywood filmmaking is that there should be no irrelevant plot elements: things introduced should be woven tightly into the fabric of the film. The original ending provides an ideal example. First, it reintroduces the threatening audiotape that Alex had sent Dan and that we have heard earlier. Second, the last shot shows Alex in her bathroom where she had originally attempted suicide by slashing her wrists when Dan prepared to leave for the first time. It is also where Dan had cared for and comforted her. Third, the knife is the knife with which each had threatened the other during the brutal fight that occurred when Dan broke into her apartment after Alex had briefly kidnapped his daughter. Finally, *Madam Butterfly* works on a double level. It is not only an opera about a woman who commits suicide after a man abandons her but it is also a favorite of both Alex's and Dan's. Their love of the opera helped bring them together; it also signifies their estrangement when she bought two tickets to a performance and he refused to go. On the night of the performance we see her alone in her apartment dementedly switching her light off and on as *Madam Butterfly* plays on the soundtrack. Now it plays it as she kills herself.

The two endings point to an important aspect of movies: they are shaped by a multitude of forces, from screenwriters to directors to producers to studios. Even when seemingly finished, they may be changed extensively as a result of audience testing.

Even then, they are not necessarily finished. They are often cut or cropped or even colorized for television viewing; footage is often added for international distribution sometimes with multiple versions for different countries or video and DVD releases; and, years after a movie's release, "director's cuts" or restorations are released with new material (as is the case with the DVD version of *Fatal Attraction*). It is useful then to question if a film is ever even a single thing. Not only is it possible to interpret a film from a number of perspectives but, in some cases it is also possible to develop a number of perspectives about what if anything constitutes the definitive version of the film.

The Development of the Movie

Fatal Attraction is based upon a story that became the basis for a 45-minute short film, *Diversion*, by screenwriter James Dearden. Producer Sherry Lansing originally supported the development of the film as a big studio feature because she felt it was important to develop sympathy for the single woman and show the

guilt and responsibility of the man. By the time the script had gone through several stages of development, the final film did exactly the opposite. It soft-pedaled the man's guilt and made a monster out of the woman. The original developers of the script – Dearden, Lansing, and her partner Stanley Jaffe – were involved with the project until the end. They got screen credit and did not claim that the project was taken away from them. They participated in the complex process of developing an idea into a commercial film, even though basic aspects of its meaning changed along the way.

   Directors often have a greater role in this than many realize since they not only shape the form of a film via visual motifs, composition, lighting, and editing, but they also, generally without screen credit, shape and reform the story. Adrian Lyne acknowledges this in the interview on the DVD of the film. He speaks of his dissatisfaction with the ending in the script and the reasons for reforming it into his original ending for the movie. In that version, Beth does not find the tape and Alex has succeeded in framing Dan for killing her. Lyne also speaks of the preview reactions to his ending that led him to change the film into its release form. Comparably, Blake Edwards, responding to preview reactions, added a number of slapstick scenes to the end of *Blind Date* (1987), drastically altering the final third of the movie. Like Adrian Lyne, he gets no screenplay credit.

Glenn Close's Star Image

Fatal Attraction involved another transformation of an entirely different kind – that of a star's image. Glenn Close changed her image entirely with *Fatal Attraction*. Previously, after success as a stage actress, she was largely known for playing "good," largely asexual, women in movies like *The World According to Garp* (1982) and *The Big Chill* (1983). Those movies earned her two of her six Academy Award nominations but, while she was respected as an actress, did not make her a star. No one considered her for *Fatal Attraction* and, unusual for an important actress, she campaigned and tested for it. Her success with it turned her into a major star and has affected the kind of roles in which she has subsequently been cast, such as the ruthless and sexual manipulator in *Dangerous Liaisons* (1989) and, in a role directly reminiscent of *Fatal Attraction*, the ruthless, independent, sexually active career woman in *The Paper* (1994), as well as the crazed, jaded movie star in Andrew Lloyd Webber's stage musical, *Sunset Boulevard*, the greedy heiress in *Cookie's Fortune* (1999), and the sinister Cruella de Vil in Disney's *101 Dalmatians* (1996) and *102 Dalmatians* (2000). More recently she has played featured roles as strong, middle-aged women in TV series like *The Shield* (2005) and *Damages* (2007–2012) and the title character in prestigious films like *Albert Nobbs* (2011). As we will see in Chapter 7, a star's image is a carefully constructed entity, often an enormous financial asset, and something that helps create a film's meaning in basic ways.

Scarface (1932)

When Paul Muni appeared in the title role in *Scarface*, he had no star image. A successful stage actor, associated with the Jewish art theater in the 1920s, he had appeared in a few undistinguished and virtually unknown films. The success of *Scarface* led to his becoming one of the most prestigious star actors of the 1930s, but one with a profile very different from that of Glenn Close. As we discuss in

Chapter 7, there is a major difference in films between stars and star actors. Stars like Clint Eastwood, Will Smith, Marilyn Monroe, and John Wayne establish charismatic star images that follow them throughout their careers. Audiences perceive all of their roles as variations upon their persona, such as sexpot, genial contemporary everyman, or rugged cowboy. Many such stars often play a greater variety of roles than they are given credit for, but their fans' perception of them returns to the dominant star image. Star actors, to the contrary, often have no dominant image and often pride themselves on the diversity of roles they play: examples are Leonardo DiCaprio, Johnny Depp, Marlon Brando, Meryl Streep, Tom Hanks, and Laurence Olivier.

In the 1930s, Paul Muni was a pre-eminent star actor, so much so that some critics commented that he never looked the same from film to film. He became associated with roles in "prestige" historical dramas and commonly played highly ethnic or foreign characters, often using elaborate make-up. His ethnically Italian gangster in *Scarface* was only one example; others included the title French physician in *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1936, for which he won a Best Actor Academy Award), a Chinese peasant in *The Good Earth* (1937), another nineteenth-century Frenchman in *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937), and the eponymous Mexican revolutionist in *Juarez* (1939).

Interestingly, *Scarface* also produced an actor with an indelible star image, George Raft. From the time of *Scarface*'s release, Raft became associated with gangster characters and, although he tried repeatedly, he could never divest himself of the typecasting. His attempts to break from his gangster image and develop a more "wholesome" one made him legendary for poor script decisions. He purportedly rejected the lead in *High Sierra* (1939) because he did not want to play another gangster, and the lead in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) because he did not want to play a private detective with questionable morals. Both roles went to Humphrey Bogart and helped establish his career as a major star. Raft's attempts to avoid his gangster image, combined with Bogart's successes, became something of an industry joke. Hearing that a film about Mark Twain was to be made, Bogart quipped that he hoped the studio would offer it to Raft because he (Bogart) would love to play it. Raft never divested himself of the image. A quarter of a century after *Scarface*, in *Some Like it Hot* (1959), and nearly a decade after that, in *Casino Royale* (1966), he was still playing parodies of his coin-tossing, gangster role.

The Gangster Genre

Along with *Little Caesar* (1930) and *The Public Enemy* (1931), *Scarface* helped establish the urban gangster genre that began in the early sound era and generally involved the meteoric rise and violent end of a young male criminal. His rise frequently involves the murder of the previous mob boss and his frenzied acquisition of extravagant consumer goods (clothes, automobiles, apartments) as well as women. The genre has often been seen as a critique of consumer capitalism, with the gangster as stand-in for the successful businessman.

Each of the three films mentioned launched the career of a major actor (Edward G. Robinson in *Little Caesar*, James Cagney in *The Public Enemy*, and Muni) and the genre became a male action genre. The films generated much controversy since they were accused of glorifying crime and reveling in violence. The stars created by the genre soon distanced themselves from it for more law-abiding roles and the genre itself, for a number of reasons, soon became marginalized as a "B"

genre, seen as unsavory, overly formulaic and repetitive, receiving little critical attention and seldom drawing established stars or major studio financing. As we see in Chapter 5, however, the components and industry profile of genres change over time, and by the 1970s the genre would achieve a new respectability with films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The Godfather* (1972), and the 1983 remake of *Scarface* starring Al Pacino.

Set during the Prohibition era, *Scarface* tells the tragic story of the rise and fall of Tony Camonte (Paul Muni), a small-time Italian mobster who takes over a crime organization before being killed by the police in a shoot-out. Although the Depression backdrop of bootleg liquor and Camonte's rise and fall typify conventions of 1930s gangster films, *Scarface* is in other ways highly unusual for the genre.

Scarface is not only a cornerstone of the gangster genre but it was also significant for the careers of important Hollywood figures. Independently produced by the legendary Howard Hughes and directed by Howard Hawks, it began the star careers of Paul Muni and George Raft. Furthermore, its cinematographer, Lee Garmes, and one of its writers, Ben Hecht, are among the most respected in their fields in film history.

We will discuss *Scarface* in ways that continue where we left off with *Fatal Attraction*, introducing various approaches that this book will take. We have already looked at star image and genre. We will now consider the film's reception and social context (see Chapter 8), then develop its formal construction (see Chapter 3), discuss a remake (see Chapter 6), and touch upon issues such as race, ethnicity, and class (see Chapters 13 and 14).

In pairing *Scarface* with *Fatal Attraction* at the beginning of this book, we hope to make another point. It is not unusual for older people to declare that "Movies today just aren't what they used to be" and complain that things such as sexual content, graphic violence, and profanity render contemporary films inferior to those of Hollywood's "Golden Age." Comparably, younger people sometimes adopt a condescending attitude toward older films in black and white, or silent films. Even when praising such films, some use patronizing terms like "It was good for films back then." We hope to break down both prejudices and show that, regardless of their era, films can be complex, entertaining, and worthy of serious analysis.

Social Context

Scarface was as controversial a film in its day as *Fatal Attraction* was in 1987. In 1932 there was widespread concern that gangster films glorified violence and might corrupt the young. This tapped into the extensive publicity of the era given to actual gangsters like "Scarface" Al Capone and anxiety that a wave of violence was overtaking the country. Many films in the genre were marketed as coming "from the headlines," or directly representing contemporary urban reality. Studio attempts to avoid censorship led to a number of significant changes in *Scarface* before its release and, even when it was released, it appeared in different versions in different states (many of which had different censorship boards). What we now accept as the standard release version of *Scarface* opens with a written prologue directly asking the viewer what should be done about violence in society. The prologue, along with a scene of a newspaper editor meeting concerned citizens, was added after censors objected to the film's violence. The studio responded by claiming that the film was not a glorification of violence but rather an aggressive indictment of it as a pernicious social problem. Yet nothing in the film hints either

at the causes of its characters' violence or at what might be done to eliminate such behavior. In fact, *Scarface* is notable for its lack of any real social context. The film represents gangsterism as a form of male bonding and contrasts it with the family sphere and the home, which is the traditional place for women. This narrative structure gives central importance to Tony's obsessive concern with keeping his sister at home with their mother and thus far removed from his world of male violence. He fails in this mission: Cesca (Ann Dvorak), his sister, ends up dying in a hail of police gunfire.

Such thematic observations highlight the fact that film is never an unmediated depiction of reality but always a construction. *Scarface* might have had its inspiration from "the headlines" but is not equivalent to them, just as the headlines themselves are mediations of the events they report. We will now describe the rigorous formal structure of *Scarface* as a way of illustrating this.

The X Motif and Male Violence

Howard Hawks, the director, structures the film around a visual motif of Xs (see Chapter 3 on formal analysis). Initially, the X motif is associated exclusively with male violence but it later becomes complexly interwoven with the world of women and romance. Indeed, this is already hinted at in an early use of the X motif. An X-shaped scar on a close-up of Tony's face in a barbershop identifies him as the title character (Figure 1.22). Shortly after, a woman asks him how he got the scar and he replies, "In the war." Another gangster cynically interjects, "Yeah, some war with a blonde in a Brooklyn speakeasy." Scars resulting from wars are traditional signs of masculinity that show that a man has been tested in violence and survived. The scars imply that he is tough, not weak. Tony's scar, however, implies an inability to control women.

Scarface begins with Tony killing a gangster. At the moment that he fires the shot, we see his shadow fall directly upon the shadow of a large cross or upright X (Figure 1.23). From this moment on, all the killings will be marked by the presence of the X motif. During a montage of violence, for example, we see a body lying directly over a shadow of an X on the ground and, in a high angle, we see the X shape of street signs above the body (Figure 1.24). We see a wounded gangster lying in a hospital bed with an X behind the bed (Figure 1.25); moments later, he is shot dead. Another gangster, hiding in a dark room, sits beneath and then stands in front of a large white X on the wall (Figure 1.26). He leaves to go bowling and, in a comic variation of the motif, we see him bowl a strike and die while the X is marked on the

Fig. 1.22

Fig. 1.23

Fig. 1.24

Fig. 1.25

Fig. 1.26

Fig. 1.27

Fig. 1.28

Fig. 1.29

Fig. 1.30

scoring sheet (Figure 1.27). A mass murder of gangsters in a garage takes place beneath a rafter lined with Xs (Figure 1.28) and, after the shooting, we see a bright X shape on their bodies (Figure 1.29).

It is important to emphasize that the Xs exist entirely as a visual storytelling device. They do not cause any of the violence in the film and the characters in the film have no sense of their significance. They do not, for example, resemble the Zs that Zorro might carve into his victims where the characters in the films are fully aware that the Zs symbolize Zorro's power. The Xs in *Scarface*, by contrast, exist entirely for the audience of the film.

The X Motif and Male–Female Relationships

In all of the above instances, the X motif characterizes the world of male violence. As in the old cliché, X does, indeed, mark the spot. It even functions as a form of foreshadowing, marking some who will soon be dead. Somewhat ominously, then, the X appears in the first scene between Cesca and Guino Rinaldo (George Raft), one of Tony's comrades. Cesca looks down at Guino, who stands on the street below her balcony. The shape of an X appears in the grillwork of the balcony railing (Figure 1.30) and is visible in shots representing both his and her points of view. From the start, their relationship is doomed and they are marked for death. Later, we see Cesca at a party and Tony flies into a rage at her sexual behavior. After Tony confronts her, she turns around and the straps of her sleeveless dress form a large X across her bare back (Figure 1.31). She leaves the party and we see a midshot of the X on her back as she stands looking out of her bedroom window, from which she first saw Guino. Although Tony has been obsessed with keeping Cesca out of his world, the X motif of male violence has now literally migrated on to her body.

The uses of the X motif both as a sign of male violence and as signifying a breakdown of Tony's effort to keep Cesca from that world come together in two remarkable scenes. Cesca and Guino, unbeknown to Tony, have gotten married.

Tony, enraged at Cesca's presumed immoral behavior, approaches their apartment. As he rings at the door, we see the Roman numeral X, indicating apartment number ten (Figure 1.32). When Guino opens the door, he stands directly in front of a huge, white X on the wall behind him (Figure 1.33). Seconds later, Tony shoots him.

Whereas the Roman numeral for ten has a "realistic" explanation for its presence, there is no such explanation for the X on the wall. Like the white X on the bodies of the massacred men in the garage, it appears painted on. The presence of the motif, then, cannot even always be explained by reference to the fictional world of the film, as can the doorway motif in *The Searchers* (discussed in Chapter 4). Unusual for a Hollywood film, the development of the motif takes precedence over both concerns with realism and the invisible style. The large X on the wall behind Guino is there only because the filmmakers put it there, not because it appears, for example, to be a shadow cast from light coming through a window.

Fig. 1.31

Incest Theme

The film ends ironically with Cesca being killed not only with Tony, but in the very sanctuary that he built to protect himself. He virtually imprisons himself in a fortress and yet Cesca enters it. Just as he fails to keep her home with his mother and fails to keep her from entering into a relationship with Guino, he fails to keep her out of his inner sanctuary and then fails to protect her after she enters it. Once again, the X marks both death and the failure to separate the two worlds. We see an X on the wall of Tony's room as he carries his mortally wounded sister to a sofa. That and other Xs are now at the very center of his private sanctuary.

Fig. 1.32

The scene of Cesca's death points to the unusual relationship Tony has with her. From the very beginning of the film, Cesca talks of something strange about her brother's relationship with her, and this initiates a sexual subtext in the film. Such a subtext deals implicitly rather than overtly with a sexual theme. The iconography of the climax makes Tony and Cesca appear more like lovers than brother and sister. Her death in Tony's arms recalls countless scenes of a lover dying in a lover's embrace. Within the film's subtext, Tony's obsession with keeping his sister safely at home with his mother has strong incestuous implications; the intensity of his response at the dance, for example, stems from jealousy rather than protective brotherly love. He must keep Cesca out of his world and, paradoxically, keep her for himself because of his illicit desires for her.

Fig. 1.33

Neither the X motif nor the incest theme is necessary to an understanding of the film's plot; indeed, many people have enjoyed the film with no awareness of their presence. They do however develop the aesthetic complexity of the film and an awareness of such things increases our appreciation and enjoyment of it. Interestingly, the 1983 remake of the film does not develop an X motif and the incest theme is represented quite differently.

The 1983 Remake of *Scarface*

In Chapter 6 on series, sequels, and remakes we discuss ways in which films refer to works of the past. The remake of *Scarface* appeared not only during a time in which the gangster genre enjoyed a renewed respectability but also during one in which films of the classical Hollywood era were widely quoted. Brian De Palma, the film's director, has developed a reputation for citing the works of older Hollywood directors like Howard Hawks and Alfred Hitchcock in his own films. He did not do this in isolation but as part of the first generation of Hollywood directors who received their training not as apprentices within the film industry but in academic film schools. These directors appeared after the studio system had collapsed but often referred extensively and nostalgically to its products in their own work. It is indicative of this climate that just a year before De Palma's *Scarface* remake appeared, John Carpenter, another film-school graduate, remade Howard Hawks's production of *The Thing* (1951). In addition, in 1978 a remake of Hawks's *The Big Sleep* appeared and a made-for-television remake of his *Red River* would appear ten years later in 1988.

The differences between the remake and the original extend far beyond what is immediately obvious to anyone viewing the remake, but even those differences are substantial. The 1983 film is in wide screen (2:35-1 aspect ratio) Technicolor with a four-track stereo soundtrack and has a theatrical running time of 170 minutes whereas the 1932 film is in black and white with a 1:37-1 aspect ratio, has a mono soundtrack and a 93-minute running time. Even on this technical level, it would be difficult for anyone to describe the films as "the same."

De Palma's remake of *Scarface* seems to tell a story similar to the original. Once again, an ambitious gangster who is overly protective of his sister rises to prominence in the mob and dies. The obvious differences are that De Palma's film is set in Florida during the 1980s and deals with the drug trade and with émigrés from Castro's Cuba, while Hawks's film deals with bootleg liquor and Italian Americans during the 1930s. A closer examination of the relationship between the two films reveals some of the ways in which remakes both differ from and refer back to the original film.

De Palma's film makes no attempt to slavishly reproduce dominant structures in Hawks's film but rather deals with Hawks's material in an innovative fashion. A simple illustration lies in its non-use of the X motif so central to Hawks's film. Aside from the scar on the title character's face, there is no X motif in De Palma's film; it might as easily have a different title. Why, then, is it called *Scarface*?

Part of the reason points to the film's profoundly different narrative implications from those of Hawks's film. The title of Hawks's film referred to a contemporary reality. Viewers would have associated the name "Scarface" with that of "Scarface" Al Capone, a Chicago gangster active in 1932; this would have underscored the "from the headlines" appeal of the film. For 1983 viewers, however, Al Capone was a long-dead historical figure and the term "Scarface" was likely to invoke not a contemporary gangster but rather a famous old film. This invocation of history is also evident in the narrative context.

The movie opens with newsreel footage of Fidel Castro. We soon see an internment camp in the United States for Cuban refugees in which we witness Tony Montana (Al Pacino), the title character, being interrogated about his criminal past. The historical context of the Cuban migration and later scenes of Montana working in a low-class Cuban restaurant create a social context for Montana's character and his actions. He is a man motivated by his experiences as a poor immigrant and turns to violence as a way of elevating his class status.

No such scenes nor similar motivations exist for Camonte in Hawks's film, and the difference is crucial. Hawks's film focuses so entirely on the role of male violence and the separate sphere of the family that the "real" social world is virtually non-existent. The Depression and Prohibition are reduced to backdrops for the personal relationships. De Palma's film, to the contrary, literally throws its characters into an international context with several scenes taking place in South America. Here, the "real" world of social, economic, and class experience is anything but a backdrop; it is a central presence. And just as the film develops much of its meaning from its relationship to then contemporary "headline" issues, it also in its status as a remake courts its relationship to Hollywood history. This makes it an engagement of Hawks's film, but one with fundamentally different imperatives.

Ethnicity and Class

Issues of class and ethnicity figure prominently in each film. Neither of the central characters conforms to the cultural ideal of white, middle-class male but, rather, they come from marginalized immigrant classes in the United States and seek elevation through violent crime. Marked by their accented English, clothes, and social deportment, their behavior engages contemporary stereotypes about "those" types of people being "inherently" criminal. The immigrant class for each film is different – Italian Americans in the 1930s as opposed to Cuban Americans in the 1980s – as is the outlawed business they enter – liquor during Prohibition as opposed to illegal drugs in the 1980s – but both films engage contemporary prejudices against immigrant classes. An important question, however, is whether the films promote or challenge ethnic stereotypes. And if they promote stereotypes, what significance does that have? We will return to racial and ethnic stereotyping in Chapter 13. A related issue emerges in the fact that the working-class gangsters of both films desire to leapfrog the middle class and rise directly into the wealthy, upper class. As we will see in Chapter 14 on class, this simply places them in comparably untenable positions.

The study of film tells us not only about artistic objects but also about the cultures from which they come. If we are used to simply going to movies to have a good time, it may seem that thinking about such issues as visual style and the manner in which women are represented will take the fun away. We hope in the following chapters, however, to show that the opposite is the case: the more ways one learns about watching and thinking about movies, the more one will get out of them and the more one will enjoy them.

ANNOTATED READINGS

Susan Faludi describes the shift from sympathy for the single woman to the construction of her as evil in the various story and script versions of *Fatal Attraction* in *Backlash* (New York: Doubleday, 1991). Deborah Jermyn rejects Faludi's notion that the film is a simple backlash against feminism in "Rereading the Bitches from Hell: A Feminist Appropriation of the Female Psychopath," *Screen*, 37: 3 (Autumn 1966), pp. 251–267. Chris Holmlund analyzes the reception context for the movie, as well as different approaches to character construction in it, in "Reading Character with a Vengeance: The *Fatal Attraction* Phenomenon," *The Velvet Light Trap*, 27 (Spring 1991), pp. 25–36. Todd McCarthy outlines the censorship problems that the 1932 *Scarface* encountered, as well as the different versions of the release print of the film produced to deal with them, in *Howard Hawks: The Grey Fox of Hollywood* (New York: Grove Press, 1997). Robin Wood analyzes the themes, visual motifs, and sexual subtext of the 1932 *Scarface* in *Howard Hawks* (London: British

Film Institute, 1981). Peter Lehman analyzes the X motif and relations between men and women in the 1932 *Scarface* in *Running Scared: Masculinity and the Representation of the Male Body*, *New Edition* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2007). Noël Carroll discusses the extent and manner in which 1970s and 1980s films directed by film-school graduates refer to and remake older films in "The Future of Allusion: Hollywood in the 70s (and Beyond)," *October*, 20 (Spring 1982), pp. 51–81. Shane Scott discusses the national debate in the United States about torture in *Zero Dark Thirty* in "Portrayal of C.I.A. Torture in Bin Laden Film Reopens A Debate," in *The New York Times*, Dec. 12, 2012: www.nytimes.com. For an example of Clint Eastwood's view of *American Sniper* as anti-war see, Diane Halthman, "Eastwood Talks Impact of 'American Sniper' At PGA Nominees Breakfast," deadline.com, Jan. 24, 2015. For a discussion of Bruce Lee's life and career see Dave Kehr's, "'The Bruce Lee Legacy Collection' Is a Kick," in *The New York Times,* August 2, 2013, www.nytimes.com.

FURTHER READINGS

Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and The Woman's Film, edited by Christine Gledhill. London: British Film Institute, 1987.

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Staiger, Janet. *Media Reception Studies.* New York: New York University Press, 2005.

Wood, Robin. *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan… and Beyond.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

FURTHER SCREENINGS

Breakfast at Tiffany's (1961)
Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story (1992)
Jurassic Park (1993)
Schindler's List (1993)
Zero Dark Thirty (2013)
American Sniper (2014)
Spotlight (2015)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Select a movie currently in release and formulate three different ways in which it can be interpreted and discussed.
2. Pick a film that has appealed strongly to you. Describe at least one textual and one contextual element in that film that accounts for your response.
3. Repeat the above but use a film that you actively dislike.