



Christian W. Thomsen, Angela Krewani, eds.

Hollywood: Recent Developments

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In many years of collaboration a research group with scholars from Germany, Austria, Switzerland and the United States has looked into the most recent developments of Hollywood and its movie productions of the 1990s and the first years of the new century.

Technical and distributional questions of the film market played as important a part as those of transnationalization and new digital technologies. Interdependences between computer games and movies are scrutinized and then, of course, focal points of thematic developments. They reach from remakes and blockbusters to Steven Soderbergh and the works of other independent filmmakers, from science fiction via old and new myths to questions of gender research.

Hollywood's treatment of the most important political event and trauma of the new century, the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001 on the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center in war, action, science fiction and disaster movies is dealt with and also the new wave of documentary films (Michael Moore and others). The Pentagon's influence on the film industry has also to be seen in this context.

A major focus of this book is dedicated to the interdisciplinary cooperation between film research, art history and architecture. The present study closes with articles about Hollywood and Las Vegas, American cinema architecture and the role of architecture in recent Hollywood movies.

Christian W. Thomsen is professor of English literature and media studies at the University of Siegen. Since 1982 he also teaches architectural history, theory and criticism. He was cofounder of Germany's largest media research institute and coeditor (together with Helmut Kreuzer) of a five-volume history of German television. He is author of 26 books and editor of another 55 books. He published more than 300 articles on literature, theatre, film, architecture, design and the development of modern media in leading journals of Germany, Great Britain, Austria, Switzerland, the USA, Canada and Japan. He taught as visiting professor in Copenhagen, London, Jerusalem, Vancouver, Los Angeles and Houston and organized many international symposia and art exhibitions. From a director of stage and radio plays he grew into filmmaking and produced and directed 25 documentaries so far.

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Hollywood grew to be the most flourishing factory of popular mythology since the Greeks.

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Hollywood: Recent Developments

Menges

Hollywood

Recent Developments

edited by
Christian W. Thomsen
Angela Krewani



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Hollywood

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Preface

I, Christian Thomsen, started cherishing a particular liking for the cinema when I was about ten years old. As a youngster in post-war Germany in the late 1940s and 1950s visiting our local movie theater cost about a dime. I loved westerns and those American films where beautiful cars cruised along Californian beaches. I tried to imitate the sheriffs' walk with large-caliber colts at their hips, always on the alert and ready to draw.

But one thing puzzled me from very early on. I had no idea about editing techniques and wondered how film music was created. I first imagined camera crews being accompanied by bands of musicians. It became more puzzling with symphonic orchestras. Enjoying films with African scenarios, jungles, adventure stories in exotic settings, I wondered how on earth film producers could make us believe that there are whole orchestras playing in a humid tropical environment while an expedition is searching for hidden treasures or gangsters are hunted on a river. Just think about sensitive string instruments and their tuning!

Getting more knowledgeable I thought this highly unrealistic, even absurd and ironic. Music and action for me often fell apart; the sole function of film music seemed to me the creation of dramatic emotion – a poor surrogate for something that should have been told in moving images, with the art of acting and sounds suited to the action. What I wanted – even in early student days – was an integrative sound concept as part of an overall aesthetic concept for the mixed medium of film. This should consist of visual, auditive and body languages as well as of environmental texts of setting, architecture, nature etc. I had to wait a long time for this and even today old mistakes of a mere supporting background of film music are frequently repeated.

Meanwhile, my notions about sound tracks have considerably deepened. Reflecting on the most characteristic and noteworthy developments of Hollywood since the early 1990s, I think that – together with the rapid growth of an entire CGI industry and their ever more spectacular effects – it is the quality of sound that has improved most. The creation of sound worlds, the immersion into an organically composed whole of visual and auditory experiences has dramatically changed our perception of Hollywood films.

Today, sound worlds – of which music is only a part – are at least as important as special effects. Born from the tradition of 19th century European symphonic music as I still remember it from my youth, film music and sound tracks have grown into a multi-sensory experience. They support actions, emotions, moods and ideological contents of movies as well as deeply influencing our aesthetic and intellectual facilities – via subconscious levels – without illustrating and explaining visual levels in the sense of program music.

The »director of sound« has been upgraded comparable to the former cameraman who has risen to the status of »director of photography«. The film's director ranks equal with the leading actors at least.

In a star-oriented – even star-possessed – Western culture they all tend to become stars and entrepreneurs of their own. Only the script writer's role still seems to be underrated. But: without scripts, no movies. And without sound and music much of the visual experience becomes pretty banal.

The extreme proliferation of sound ties in with a general impact of today's cinematic visual systems that turn cinema into a »cinema of visual and aural effects«: Besides the upgrade of sound systems the reception of film is optimized through special effects, usually being produced digitally. Although a digital cinema could offer new and fantastic worlds to explore, special effects are employed to augment the viewer's immersion into the film. This tendency goes along with a highly developed cinematic architecture, which also points to the notion of cinema as »special event«.

As counterpart to these developments stands the televisualization of most parts of the film production: Recent figures evidence that about 50% of the revenues emerge from the video and DVD home market – in this respect the filmic experience is vanished in favour of the completely different involvement of watching TV. And TV itself has been developing new formats that constantly undermine the cinematic experience it historically had tried to achieve.

As another consequence of the televisualization of film production occurs the transnationalization of film production. Since productions for television are somewhat smaller in production costs and Hollywood itself has ventured into global corporate culture, executives turned to European broadcasting stations intending joint projects: This brought the international heritage genre into being. This genre feeds on literary adaptations of canonical novels, generally by eminent literary figures such as Henry James, Jane Austen or Charles Dickens, just to name a few. These films set

out to recreate an authentic experience of times gone by through elaborate mise-en-scène, romantic landscape and period costumes. But over the last years the genre has branched out into more contemporary settings as well: Although not being period pieces movies such as *Bridget Jones' Diary*, *Notting Hill* and *Chocolat* sport images of contemporary France and England. Especially the films referring to France allude to French national film culture without being French at all. Thus national film cultures are incorporated into Hollywood, which – in return – becomes increasingly globalized.

Whereas the reference to European tradition plays a minor role within Hollywood film production, the integration of Asian films and their aesthetics has been pivoting over the years. Especially Hong Kong films and their martial arts scenes have highly affected Hollywood film production as it can be watched in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* or in the *Matrix* series. Particularly *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a seminal example for a new but steadily increasing form of transnational or global cinema referring to a set of national traditions and being closely affiliated with Hollywood. The film was made with a relative modest budget of \$ 15 million and it earned more than \$ 200 million worldwide. It earned \$ 128 million in the movie theaters and an additional \$ 112 million on the video and DVD market. Although the film was not directly produced within Hollywood, but shot on location in China, it displays the global aspects of film production, which are also quite common within recent production structures. Much of the money came from the various divisions of Sony – being itself one of the major players in Hollywood at one time. Funds were provided by Columbia Film Productions Asia, Sony's Hong Kong branch that was set up in order to produce films for the Asian local markets, Sony Picture Classics in New York bought the US distribution, Columbia Pictures in Hollywood endowed the rights for Latin America and Sony Classical provided the funds for the soundtrack. (Klein, 2004, 18–19)

As mentioned above, the film was shot on location in China, the soundtrack was recorded in Shanghai, the post production took place in Hong Kong and the film finally was edited in New York. Thus the production and screening of *Crouching Tiger* provides the perfect example for the new, globalized movie, which cannot be traced back to an authentic cultural situation or even to a certain pattern of national film production. Thus Christina Klein concludes her essay on *Crouching Tiger* with some remarks on the global characteristics of this film which also very easily can be understood as a delineation of the trends towards globalization within Hollywood. »*Crouching Tiger* stands as an exemplary instance of transnational cinema. ... The production and consumption of these films take place on a multinational rather than a national scale, and the aesthetic affiliations they make cross multiple cultural boundaries. Thus, the national-cultural identity of these films is surprisingly fluid; it changes depending on whether one looks at studio ownership, sources of financing, production locale, the ethnic or legal identity of the cast and crew, audiences, narrative and cinematic style, or thematic concerns. The emergence of this cinema makes it vitally important to develop critical tools that enable us to read films from a transnational perspective.« (Klein, 2004, 37 f)

Although the *Matrix* alludes to martial art movies as well, it also tempers with the tradition of the Japanese manga and anime: It is well known that the narrative forerunner to *Matrix* is an anime called *Ghost in the Shell*. But Japan has not only entered Hollywood economically, but it is shaping filmic narratives as well, either in the form of fascination with a foreign culture and as fear of being outmoded by this strong economy and culture. Whereas Ridley Scott's *Black Rain* and Michael Bay's *Pearl Harbour* voice the fear of being overtaken by Japan, Edward Zwick's *The Last Samurai* delivers an unabridged fascination with ancient Japanese culture. In a somewhat critical vein American manhood and American values are depicted as degenerated comparable to Japanese codes of honor, fighting and masculinity. As Barbara Wyllie notes, American masculinity seems to be in a big crisis, up to a point where it erases all other concerns. (Wyllie, 2003, 181) In order to conquer the crisis in masculinity, the superhero re-enters the screen: Letting the 1990s pass there is an overwhelming collection of male superheroes, The Terminator and all the other fighters overstress their masculinity in order to cover up the fear of female dominance as it is expressed in Ridley Scott's *G.I. Jane*. This development may correspond to the upsurge of academic masculinity studies in the US. (Mosse, 1996; McLaren, 1997)

The construction of gender identities has experienced a change over the last years. While *Thelma and Louise* weren't allowed to leave male culture and patriarchal relationships, women today can do as they want to. Maybe *G.I. Jane*'s entrance into the military world is not everybody's cup of tea, but comedy in particular seems to overturn established gender relationships. Diane Keaton in *Something's Gotta Give* favors a younger lover, even if she ends up with the old, Viagra driven friend, played by Jack Nicholson, who steps around the role of the super hero by giving

the old fool instead. The remake of the *Stepford Wives*’ functions in a similar fashion, being a black parody on the 1950s family values: In this case even well-educated women are not allowed to take up professional careers but are – with the help of nanotechnology – turned into perfect, Barbie-like housewives. This film opposes the intentions of a political right-wing movement of returning to the outlived family values of the 1950s.

Talking about the theory of the short story, Edgar Allan Poe always emphasizes unity and totality of effect which should form the aesthetic core of a story. We are concerned that it is exactly this quality, the artistic and technical unity of effects, which – apart from all the other developments dealt with in this book – counts most when we discuss positive achievements of recent Hollywood films.

We are fully aware that our book does not cover the entire range of recent developments in the film industry. But we are optimistic that it will contribute substantially to an ongoing discussion on a number of important aspects. We are grateful to all contributors and the international cooperation which is stimulating and mind-enhancing.

Nonetheless, we think this book turned out much more homogeneous than we imagined this experiment could be. We thank our secretary, Anne Weber, »Hippo«, Kevin and all the other student assistants, who helped to turn manuscripts and pictures into data packages. Where would we be without them?

After all, even if we are critical we love Hollywood. We owe much of our interior landscapes to the visions, the characters and the stories of that most characteristic ingredient of American culture. And, of course, to the people who earn their living by creating those complex products resulting in contemporary movies. We hope for fruitful response from our readers.

Christian W. Thomsen

9/11. Before and after

Before

»The Plot of the Event of September 11 – the destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Center by terrorists – might have been written by Hollywood, or by Baudrillard. So fantasmatic, so familiar was the scenario that it fitted seamlessly into the manichaen agenda of the Pentagon hawks planning the next American war and the next. Indeed, a perfectly plausible paranoid response reads this plot as a plot on the part of those who have most thoroughly benefited from it.«¹

Here we will ask about the role of Hollywood, and its interdependence with the events around 9/11. Even if we know that a fully satisfactory answer to so complex a question cannot be given, it remains a key question to be researched when dealing with Hollywood’s developments in the early 21st century.

Did Hollywood anticipate, conjure up, contribute to 9/11? What was its reaction to 9/11? Has anything changed in Hollywood’s mainstream treatment of 9/11 related topics like terrorism, war, interior and external politics, disasters, the science-fiction treatment of aliens, extraterrestrial events? These are the questions to be discussed in short in this contribution.

There certainly were greater catastrophes in human history, but never before has a nation – a world power – received a more traumatic blow and shock.

In early November 2001, film director Robert Altman argued that the current wave of violent movies had »created the atmosphere« that »set the pattern«, in which terrorists could plan and execute acts of mass destruction. Yet, »in the American imagination these fantasies have been around for a long time«. ² And, indeed, even when we concentrate on only a few films released in the decade preceding 9/11 it cannot be overlooked that »it was prepared by years of ideological work which created a ready-made explanatory framework« and that »it is precisely now when we are dealing with the raw Real of a catastrophe that we should bear in mind the ideological and fantasmatic coordinates which determine its perception«. ³

The latter have to do with language and sets of images spread by literature, films and other media creating fragments of reality consciousness in our mind. When uttering such a constructivist position I remember my Vietnamese friend Thien with whom I studied in London in the years 1964/65 at the height of the Vietnamese war. Thien, who was later to become President of the University of Saigon and cruelly tortured by the Vietcong, came from a 4000 year old Vietnamese family. His thesis was: »The Americans will lose this war.« Asked why, he replied: »Because they hardly know any conjunctive. They only know black and white, yes and no. But we«, he continued, »we have seven different varieties of conjunctive in our language, henceforth in our mind oscillate seven shades of grey between black and white, seven possibilities of perhaps between yes and no.«

That war, almost as unjustified and false in its causes as the present disaster surrounding the Iraq politics of the George W. Bush administration and the reasons given for the war, is still a haunting trauma in the American psyche. It still offers ammunition for election campaigns and inexhaustible material for the film industry. Iraq and the false pretenses surrounding possible connections with 9/11, as it will turn out, might last even longer. The roots are deep and have grown from a distant past. Just to mention a few stages in an ongoing process: rigid Calvinism and its inhuman double moral standards as exemplified in Hawthorne’s *Scarlett Letter* (1850); sectarian Christian fundamentalism of many Bible Belt preachers ready for self-righteous crusades in the name of an unrelenting god of their own making; arms fetishism glorified through a pioneer period and as skillfully as unscrupulous, exploited by the NRA and the various lobbies of the arms industry; the deep seated fear that foreign or even extraterrestrial invasions might devastate the New World, the New Found Land, the earthly paradise of the chosen people of WASP origin; McCarthyism and other related campaigns to puff up political opponents from mere scapegoats into gigantic dimensions of Satan incarnate: Milosevich, Saddam Hussein, Bin Laden, to name the most recent ones. And who will be the next?

In the age of moving images the film industry is deeply involved in the creation of a set of collective mind patterns from the very beginning. Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1926) still lurks behind every movie-skyscraper demolition. *King Kong* (1932/33) and all its filiations in their fantasies of rape and destruction still testify how much the world is turned around by »sex and bananas«, by exotism and commercialism, by power games, by dreams of adventure and heroism. Doomsday



1-8. *Independence Day*, directed by Roland Emmerich, 1996.

