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**Restoring the Classical Text:
The Enduring Appeal of Classical Hollywood**

**by
Lee Carruthers, B.A.**

**A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of
Master of Arts**

**Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
April, 2001**

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of Graduate Studies and Research acceptance of the thesis

Restoring the Classical Text: The Enduring Appeal of Classical Hollywood

Submitted by Lee Carruthers, B.A., Honours (Toronto)
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts.

Charles O'Brien, Thesis Supervisor

Bryan Gillingham, Director: SSAC

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

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Abstract

Classical Hollywood cinema has been characterized within film studies as a corpus comprised of predictable, transparent texts. This notion seems incompatible with the degree to which the same films have consistently stimulated fresh critical activity. My project emerges as a response to the paradigm constructed by Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (1985) and reconsiders their conception of classical film. I aim to generate an enriched conception of classicism that affords a new sensitivity to individual classical texts while accounting for their enduring appeal.

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Introduction: A Proposed Restoration Project

Hermeneutics is a name for the desire to know
 what it is that inspires commentary,
 or what provokes its desire for what remains undone.
 Why is it that, historically, no text is ever taken
 as being merely explicit?
 -Gerald Bruns

Since the 1970s and the advent of film studies as an academic discipline, the classical Hollywood film has functioned as a privileged object of study. This phenomenon is to some degree explicable as a question of timing; the films emerged as a relatively coherent, complete corpus immediately prior to the emergence of academicized film study, and for this reason present themselves as suitable- accessible, largely comprehensible-critical objects. Moreover, the elevation of these films within French criticism of the 1950's (and especially in critical writing in *Caliers du Cinéma*) also bears upon this situation; the attention given to films within cinema journals by both critics and filmmakers configured classical Hollywood as an artistically worthy (if economically-driven) enterprise.

My project begins with an attention to a paradox in critical studies of classical Hollywood. I refer here to the evident incompatibility between the familiar notion of classical films as predictable, transparent texts and the

degree to which the same films have consistently stimulated fresh critical activity. In my view, this incompatibility, though rarely noted by critics, reveals something crucial about classical Hollywood film as an object of study. As I will attempt to demonstrate, the familiar emphasis upon the systematized coherence of the classical film has served to suppress its material singularity. In effect, established accounts of the classical film treat the latter as a fundamentally rule-governed object about which no more can be said, or need be said.

The account that I provide in the following pages emerges as a response to the paradigm constructed by Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (1985). Thus, I often articulate my position with reference to Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's schema. How does my project differ from theirs? While my project reconsiders their conception of classical film, and offers alternatives to certain of their claims, I aim primarily to generate an enriched definition of classicism, along with a new sensitivity to individual classical films, rather than to substitute one formulation of film classicism for another. Put simply, my objection to Bordwell et al's account is not with their general assessment of classical Hollywood, nor with their conception of the classical text's formal operations; these are useful mappings that illuminate classical workings in important ways. What I find problematic are certain of the assumptions regarding the explanatory power that they attribute to their analysis. The difficulty here is with a formal definition of classicism when it is required to account for a film's interest and effects; while it is meaningful to understand an industrial context as forwarding a particular kind of product, and to conceive of this product's organization as a coherent formal system, a consideration of these factors alone cannot clarify a

text's peculiarities and pleasures. By strictly adhering to a formalist poetics, the diversity of classical Hollywood is largely suppressed. Of course, one might assume (as Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson do), that an essentially homogenous corpus produces unified individual texts, that the centrality of narrative places every detail in its service, and more generally, that the existence of a textual system guarantees an individual text's systematicity. Such assumptions, however, imply the further assumption that each film is fully explicable, while its claims to 'objectivity' are meant to invalidate other modes of analysis.

Otherwise phrased, I am dismayed by the degree to which a cogent formal system has been configured as a kind of terminus for classical study. By forwarding this model as all encompassing (it absorbs all manner of textual difference) and as definitive (it is meant to supplant interpretive investigations), the classical work is positioned as an entity that no longer arouses our curiosity because it offers no surprises. Gerald Bruns describes a similar practice in his discussion of Aristotle's poetics. He writes:

Poetics is the site or place of poetry within the organon of discourse, where *organon* means the rule, logic or system of categories and conventions that defines the rationality of our speech... Basically, what Aristotle did was to conceptualize poetry so that it could be made to fit inside Plato's Republic; that is, he described it so as to make it consistent with the demands of a just and rational state, the state as rule-governed, founded upon knowledge and the control of the unruly- a state governed by the rule of necessity as against the interventions of randomness and

contingency.¹

As these remarks suggest, the bounds of an Aristotelian poetics confine textual workings to a system of coherence and tractability; this emphasis necessarily represses those elements deemed eccentric or excessive. Similarly, Bordwell et al's historical poetics discourages ongoing speculation, and represses the impulse to formulate creative analyses because it submits textual details to preexisting tenets of convention. My discussion endeavors to demonstrate that the classical Hollywood film remains a compelling critical and popular object precisely because it imposes demands on viewers that exceed the scope of formalist poetics.

My own experience as a viewer of classical Hollywood films differs substantially from the formulation set out by Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson; indeed, a recognition of this difference motivates my account. Somewhat ironically, I find Bordwell et al's paradigm useful because it points to the limits of any explanatory system; by attempting to situate textual detail within a rational schema, it actually calls attention to those elements that resist this impulse. In this respect, the model serves as an excellent starting point for classical investigations because it supplies a coherent background for instances of textual curiosity. Hence, my project aims to move forward from the intelligibility of Bordwell et al's formulation in order to examine the textual elements that remain obscure. In Bruns' terms, I am concerned with

[t]he problem of the singular, of what doesn't fit in, of what goes its own way. For hermenutics this problem of the singular is, so to speak, one to be cherished and preserved rather than resolved

or overcome.²

Hence, my proposed revisioning of classical Hollywood does not aim to position the corpus as less of one thing and more of another, but rather to interrogate specifically the ways in which these films both stimulate and evade our understanding. I will consider classical Hollywood not as a closed system, nor as a phenomenon that is over and done with, but rather as a collection of films that continues to solicit attention by offering refractory details around which critical inquiries circulate. In this regard, I draw upon certain hermeneutical concepts introduced by Heidegger with regard to a tension that he finds intrinsic to works of art. An overview is offered by Hans-Georg Gadamer, as follows:

In his effort to understand the ontological structure of the work independently of the subjectivity of the creator or beholder, Heidegger now uses "earth" as a counterconcept alongside the concept of the "world", to which the work belongs and which it erects and opens up. "Earth" is a counterconcept to world insofar as it exemplifies self-sheltering and closing off as opposed to self-opening. Clearly, both self-opening and self-closing off are present in the work of art. A work of art does not "mean" something or function as a sign that refers to a meaning; rather, it presents itself in its own Being, so that the beholder must tarry by it.³

The distinction between 'world' and 'earth' describes the tensions I find

within the classical Hollywood text; the films offer a textual 'opening' (what film studies refers to as the diegesis or 'story world', through which character, setting and premises are established and coherently sustained), and also evidence of textual 'closings' (elements that occur within the narrative that seem to pull away from it, or instances in which textual arrangements do more than is necessary and thus appear as strange and emphatic). Moreover, Gadamer's assertion that the work of art encourages one to linger or wait is intriguing; the ongoing contemplation that this perspective suggests, as well as the authority it gives to the work itself (rather than to the paradigm that explains it) effectively challenges any conception of the classical text as a sterile formal object.

While my investigation makes use of the available film scholarship to situate and illuminate its filmic examples, much of the supporting material draws upon other fields of inquiry. As the foregoing remarks indicate, the enriched definition of classicism that I deploy comes from Gadamer's notion of the classical, as taken up by Gerald Bruns and others. This conception differs from a purely formalist understanding (such as Bordwell et al's).

Most fundamentally, Gadamer attempts to recover an earlier notion of the classical that has been displaced in formalist critical culture. In so doing, he unsettles the critical certainties of the present by returning to an older way of looking at things. What is at issue for Gadamer is the work's material dimension, or those elements which are 'self-evident'. My application of these ideas to the case of classical film is therefore concerned with the material aspects that constitute its surface, such as specific images and sounds. Indeed, I will suggest that the classical film's enduring appeal resides within

these material singularities; such details are immediate, and present, and yet ultimately refractory to our understanding.

Significantly, Gadamer's work raises basic issues concerning the historicity of the critic's relation to the art of the past. Of particular interest is his attention to the classical work's temporality; rather than situating these texts in the historical past, they are seen to function as exemplars that orient critics, artists and viewers to the future. Thus, my use of Gadamer's classicism implies a new understanding of the classical film's temporality. Instead of positioning the films as 'safe' and knowable texts, determined by a defined historical/industrial context, I wish to emphasize the films' continued relevance; if the films serve as ideal points of reference for contemporary film study, it is because they continue to captivate our interest.

In this sense, the classical film endures because it is in certain ways opaque. It is comprised of elements that are pleasing and intelligible, but also of those that remain difficult and unfamiliar. This duality constitutes the classical text's appeal and longevity; it encourages a relation of proximity (we are compelled to draw closer) and of ongoing involvement (we return to the classical to revisit its questions, to attempt to complete its ellipses). Gerald Bruns considers this latter possibility, as follows:

Imagine a text that could situate us in the world in this way, by divesting us of our concepts and removing us from familiar ground. Such a text of course could never simply be a formal object for us. The truth of such a text could never be formulated simply in terms of meanings, much less in universal terms. On the contrary, it could only be formulated as a narrative of what

happened to us in our encounter with the text.⁴

As the above lines indicate, the timelessness associated with the classical pertains to its material peculiarities; it speaks beyond historical boundaries and is never truly 'over' for us because certain of its details are obdurate, insistently challenging our sense-making efforts. This stands in sharp contrast to the model of coherence and tractability proposed by Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, and instead situates the classical work as an entity that is open to new approaches and analyses. For this reason (and for purposes of clarity), the discussion to follow will refer to Bordwell et al's model and its operative assumptions as *classicism I*. My proposed approach, which aims to extend this formulation beyond a systematic formalism, in the spirit of Gadamer's notion of the classical, will be termed *classicism II*.

More specifically, I have organized my remarks around a concept of excess that differs from its current use within academic film study, and thus supports my concern to formulate a broadened classical project. I refer to elements as excessive when they seem to exceed our capacity for understanding, whether this excess becomes manifest through a failure of interpretation, of existing critical frameworks, or by the simple intuition that a given moment offers more than we can successfully elucidate. This formulation of excess speaks to the textual instances that are not addressed by established formulations because they stand outside of its logic. My aim is not to isolate these details as 'subversive' or 'aberrant' phenomena, but to acknowledge their presence as important constituent elements. In sum, what is displaced from *classicism I* forms an essential part of *classicism II*.

My use of the term excess has certain affinities with Roland Barthes'

conception of 'the third meaning'. To this end, the detailed discussion provided within chapter two sets out a workable formulation of excess. Here I reveal certain limitations in Kristin Thompson's use of the term, as developed through Barthes and Stephen Heath, and then I go on to argue that these limitations are predicated upon her refusal to acknowledge excess within classical Hollywood cinema.

Subsequently, I peruse Barthes' work at some length in relation to specific filmic examples from classical Hollywood; in particular, I take up his later writings in *Camera Lucida* to reformulate the notion of visual excess. This approach seems in certain ways unlikely, as it raises the salient issue of Barthes' personal ambivalence toward the filmic medium. Although his delineation of 'the third meaning' rests on an analysis of Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*, the images in question are photographic stills, rather than moving images. Moreover, Barthes ultimately decries the motion picture as an object of analysis, as evinced by his 1975 essay, "Leaving the Movie Theatre".⁵ Thus, my use of *Camera Lucida* (published in 1981) may seem curious, in that it reads Barthes against Barthes' own theoretical predilections. I find, however, that certain of his ideas are productively applied to the film text; the ruminative nature of *Camera Lucida*, with its sustained contemplation of the material singularities that the camera captures, facilitates a discussion of visual excess within classical Hollywood with remarkable sensitivity. Indeed, Barthes' late writings respond surprisingly well to a film-specific project such as this one; the attentive and appreciative mode of reception that he encourages opens up the classical Hollywood film as a resonant and pleasurable object of study.

While my discussion does not concern itself directly with questions

of genre, it does examine classical Hollywood films that exist within received generic groupings. The filmic examples to be considered belong to the category of crime film: I will examine, as three case studies, a compelling gangster prototype, a celebrated private investigation narrative and a familiar film noir text. My rationale for this decision is both practical and personal. Firstly, the crime film (and the case of film noir, in particular) poses considerable difficulty for the model of *classicism I*, and is thus ripe for reassessment. Relatedly, the films I have selected have attracted substantial critical attention and motivated countless interpretive efforts, suggesting a textual richness that is appropriate to this investigation. More personally, the films in question are favourite texts whose interest for me has not diminished with repeated viewings. Indeed, they serve as effective test cases for this very reason; they remain unwieldy and reticent (in the manner of *classicism II*), rather than formulaic and familiar (as per *classicism I*).

Additionally, these films have been deemed as representative texts of their type; they subscribe to established generic tendencies and are readily identified as Hollywood studio products. Further, they have been selected with attention to their general representativeness; these are not 'cult' films or obscure B-pictures. Thus, I see the films as expressing a degree of typicality, but also as offering episodes that confound the precepts of *classicism I*. With regard to the problem that certain filmic details pose for attempts at elucidation, my discussion will grapple with the moments which seem to swell from the textual background, and to interrogate these as material instances of particular substance and power. By this, the episodes are seen to exhibit a definite texture and concreteness that is not easily ignored or subsumed within preexisting categories.

The vision of classicism that I deploy attends seriously to the irreducible material aspects of the classical film. By accepting, and indeed emphasizing, elements that are strange and unfamiliar, and merit a more flexible approach than that of *classicism I*, I aim to restore to classical Hollywood something of its affect and immediacy. My investigation will focus upon moments within the films that inspire deliberation but do not necessarily cohere with general narrative processes. Recalling Heidegger's language, these are instances in which the 'earth' is glimpsed alongside the illuminations of 'world'; these are the closings that exist within open narrative structures.

Moreover, an appreciation of the films' materiality proposes a relation of mutual engagement between film and viewer that is positive and productive. This perspective acknowledges the significance of classical Hollywood for contemporary film study, as well as its status as an enduring cultural phenomenon.⁶

Notes

1. Gerald Bruns, *Hermeneutics: Ancient and Modern*, (New London: Yale University Press, 1992), 4.
2. *ibid*, 260-261.
3. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (New York: Continuum, 1997), 103-104.
4. Bruns, 155.
5. Within the essay, Barthes explicitly refuses the motion picture as an object of analysis, on the grounds that its absorptive power (and thus its ideological machinations) prevent the critic from producing insightful analysis. His reservations about the medium do not stand in isolation, however; a number of critics (most notably, Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry) shared these concerns. For a detailed account, see Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes: the Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 435-491.
6. Many thanks to Charles Tepperman, for introducing me to Barthes' *Camera Lucida*.

1. Rethinking Classical Hollywood Cinema

They... disappeared into the intricacies of *Red River*, theorizing on the strangely casual shooting of John Ireland before the final fight between Montgomery Clift and John Wayne... On their knees in the parched grass by the television screen they looked at the scene frame by frame for any sign of outrage at this unfairness on the victim's face. There seemed to be none. It was a minor act directed toward a minor character that may or may not have ended the man's life, and no one said anything about it during the remaining five minutes of the film. One of those Jacobean happy endings.

—Michael Ondaatje

There are certain moments from cinema that stand out in our minds. Sometimes these instances offer a culmination of filmic pleasure, such as the satisfaction engendered by a happy ending, or the extravagance of visual spectacle. On other occasions, explanations such as these cannot account for why a particular film moment is memorable, or why a recollection of a brief and isolated instance is able to produce a fuller recollection of the film itself.

One might approach this phenomenon in one of two ways: by developing a careful methodological schema with which to 'measure' these moments (asking, for instance, 'how are these episodes situated in the narrative? How are they linked to preceding and succeeding events? What narrative purpose do they serve?'), or conversely, by attributing their appreciability to a matter of personal taste and/or individual response. I am

not satisfied with either of these approaches, insofar as the first seems to drain the textual moment of pleasure, while the second considers this pleasure as it concerns an individual sensibility, and thus as a phenomenon that is external to the text itself. Moreover, the experience that interests me lies somewhere between these perspectives, and insistently points to their inadequacy.

In particular, films associated with the classical Hollywood era stand as a repository of moments such as these. Emerging from a defined historical period and a highly regulated industry, this corpus bears the marks of its production context. To this end, the films may be understood as operating systematically as narrative-driven texts, and as sharing many thematic and formal resemblances. More pertinent to this discussion are certain aberrant elements, the aforementioned textual instances that seem not to fully subscribe to a determining narrative system. Having encountered the model of classical Hollywood cinema laid out by Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson (*The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 1985) and accepted certain of the insights that it offers, it is possible to contemplate this system as functioning comprehensibly and fairly predictably. Yet at the same time, this conception invites an alternative approach that raises certain questions: what kinds of films resist this mode of understanding? Which elements within the films seem to offer this resistance? To what degree do these elements depart from convention, and what effect does this departure have on more conventional textual arrangements? In order to address these issues (and various others that attend this process), an overview of the existing critical framework is in order, as is a brief examination of the responses that it has engendered.

Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* takes as its object of study a mode of film practice, operating within a

circumscribed context, that relies upon a set of particularized stylistic norms. To this end, the authors posit Hollywood filmmaking from 1917-60 "as a unified mode of film practice... a coherent system whereby aesthetic norms and the mode of film production reinforced one another".¹ Indeed, Bordwell et al's formulation offers a comprehensive account of classical Hollywood's operations as well as an explanatory framework for the relation between industry practice and product. While this model is useful for its range and intelligibility, it is difficult to apprehend its limits: as Bordwell et al conceive it, all Hollywood narratives of the period ultimately conform to classical conventions, and all classical Hollywood texts are constructed to facilitate narrative processes. Hence, the authors' arguments effect a kind of rhetorical loop that is seemingly uncontestable because it does not permit exceptional cases. Film aesthetics (how a film looks, its formal organization) are consistently explained in terms of function (the purposes that a given design or element serves). Consequently, this model eschews and must finally refuse any notion of genuine subversiveness within classical Hollywood cinema. While Bordwell's functionalist schema would seem unable to explicate aberrant (and thus extraneous) elements with any persuasiveness, it actually contends with these elements all too well by discounting their potency.

Several critics have commented upon the functionalist inclination of Bordwell's formulation in an effort to challenge the hegemonic nature of his account. Elizabeth Cowie notes:

David Bordwell sees classical Hollywood as drawing on a limited paradigm of stylistic and technical devices which offers a codified system recognizable by the spectator. This allows him to argue

that the classical system always codifies, or contains, any excessive stylistic element, any feature which deviates from the norm.²

Cowie's remarks point to the determinism of Bordwell et al's model, but also to its remarkable elasticity; its delineation of Hollywood classicism insists upon a closed, structuring system (the Hollywood industry and the limited range of options it deploys) but also an unusual degree of flexibility and inclusiveness (the system permits variation and even excess without compromising its integrity).³ A similar line of argument is developed by Murray Smith, as follows:

The classical system they posit becomes so abstract, generalized and encompassing that anything can be assimilated and nothing can make a difference... In its eagerness to avoid overstatement regarding the 'subversiveness' of this film or that genre, the functionalist bent of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* perhaps flattens the local and immediate experience of change and discontinuity.⁴

Smith's observations evince admirable restraint; he finds within Bordwell's account an eagerness 'to avoid overstatement' (rather than a deliberate use of understatement) that 'perhaps flattens' (rather than suppresses) divergent elements. The author's tactfulness speaks to the persuasiveness of Bordwell's arguments, yet also indicates the degree to which these ideas have assumed a common-sensical status within academic film discourse.

An early passage within *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* is entirely up front about its aims. Bordwell writes:

My analysis of the norms of the classical style... gives privileged place not to the aberrant film that breaks or tests the rules but to the quietly conformist film that tries simply to follow them.⁵

As the above lines indicate, Bordwell's text is cast as a reasonable endeavour that seeks (like the 'quietly conformist film') to create consensus rather than to dwell upon idiosyncrasy. A similar attitude is expressed elsewhere in Bordwell's writings, as evinced by the modest (and nearly pejorative) assessment of film criticism that he produces in *Making Meaning*. He notes:

Criticism certainly gives pleasure to its practitioners... The skilled critic finds a fresh analogy, produces an exemplar, or pulls off a powerful rhetorical effect... The comparison to which I shall often revert is that of the artisan. There are inept electricians, passable potters, and highly creative cooks. Like them, the critic practices a craft, and there is nothing inherently ignoble in that.⁶

The above remarks, while of a generalized nature, are aimed at the allegorizing textual interpreter who approaches each film so as to affix to it subjective and preconceived meanings. In this regard, *Making Meaning* sets out to perform a corrective upon "ordinary criticism"⁷ by demonstrating the extent to which it has been produced in a slipshod fashion. He writes:

Defining critical rhetoric as the persuasive use of discourse has the advantage of recognizing the comparably small role that rigorous logic and systematic knowledge play in film interpretation... The history of film criticism is largely that of predecessors ignored or forgotten, ships passing in the night, people talking at cross-purposes, wholesale dismissals of prior writers' work, and periodic cycles of taste.⁸

These remarks concerning the 'vicissitudes' of film criticism are germane to this discussion, in that they shed light upon the systematic organization of Bordwell's work and its insistence upon "the principles of meaning-making, independent of the particular meanings that are made".⁹ In returning to an examination of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, it is useful to bear these premises in mind. Firstly, Bordwell's treatment of subversive elements evinces a particular rhetorical dexterity in itself. More pertinently, the text posits an all-encompassing Hollywood system that not only contains subversive instances but actually reconfigures these as inverse proofs of classical principles.

Bordwell et al's discussion of melodrama demonstrates this tendency by asserting that the genre's excesses are finally less than what they seem. He states:

Recently critics have put forward the melodrama as a subversive genre... Yet critics have yet to construct the melodrama as an

empirically or conceptually coherent genre. If we did construct such a model, we would probably find that the genre's 'subversiveness' is itself conventionalized.¹⁰

The above observations again speak to the dismaying state of film criticism in terms of its failure to generate adequate hypothesis-testing schema. Moreover, Bordwell's remarks evince a particular certainty that the principles of meaning-making will outstrip any instance of oppositional expression. Indeed, within his formulation the very idea of subversiveness is undone by the ubiquity of conventional structures. He pursues this theme as follows:

The contradictory emotional wrenchings of melodrama are generically motivated, no more socially or textually disruptive than interpolated numbers in a musical. In such ways, conventions of the more stylized genres operate as limited plays with the classical compositional dominant.¹¹

Here Bordwell explicates episodes of textual excess as a characteristic generic element, and thus construes these moments as *apparent* ruptures that are, on closer inspection, simply expressions of melodramatic conventions. This formulation rests upon two premises: a notion of classical Hollywood as an assiduous and assimilating system, and more problematically, an assumption that what motivates an element (in this case, the expectations peculiar to melodrama) takes precedence over the effects that it creates. As noted previously, Bordwell privileges the principles of meaning-making over the potential meanings made, an arrangement that in this instance precludes

textual subversiveness.

Similarly, Bordwell's consideration of the film noir series reduces both its stylistic and thematic interest resolutely. With regard to noir's formal arrangements, he states:

(F)ormally and stylistically, all... of film noir's challenges [to classicism] nonetheless adhere to specific and non-subversive conventions derived from crime literature and canons of realistic and generic motivation... every characteristic narrative device of film noir was already conventional in American crime fiction and drama of the 1930s and 1940s.¹²

Once again, Bordwell relies upon a 'generic motivation' argument that works to displace textual dissonance by indicating its relation to familiar generic forms. More specifically, he emphasizes that

the narrative 'problems' posed by films noirs are in fact conventions taken over by Hollywood cinema from popular literature... film noir's atmosphere of fear and peril, psychological ambiguity, and abnormal mental states had already been conventionalized in psychological thrillers.¹³

Here Bordwell moves from noir's stylistic tropes to a consideration of its more abstract features (its uneasy mood and paranoid sensibility) and adroitly dismisses these attributes as established conventions appropriated from other modes of representation. This assessment yet again focuses upon the relation

between textual elements and conventional restraints, rather than considering the tensions generated within the text or the possibility that conventional elements may in fact generate unconventional effects. Moreover, Bordwell asserts that "it is not a trivial description of film noir to say that it simply indicates particular patterns of nonconformity within Hollywood. This is why films of many different sorts can be considered to belong to film noir".¹⁴ While this view accounts for noir's resistance to categorization and offers an 'objective' measure of the series, it does not contemplate the degree to which this assemblage of 'nonconformist' patterns stands as an intriguing development within Hollywood classicism and as such has generated special critical interest. Finally, the suggestion that film noir may be understood as conventional because it makes use of the conventions of crime literature seems tenuous: can the conventions of one domain (literature) truly be said to undercut the subversive potentialities in another (cinema)?

In turning to an examination of auteur films, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* presents a most emphatic argument for the regulating force of classical principles. As the foregoing discussion indicates, Bordwell's interests lie in the mechanisms through which meaning is conveyed, rather than in subjective meanings. To this end, his treatment of individual film authors goes to considerable lengths to prevent 'system failure'. He writes:

The intermittence of authorial presence works to reaffirm classical norms. Because the classical paradigm encourages redundancy, the director can choose how to be redundant.¹⁵

From the outset, it is clear that Bordwell's consideration of authorship is limited to a certain range; the text assumes "that identifying the 'author' with the narrational process... is the approach most pertinent to the history of film style".¹⁶ This conception necessarily reduces the notion of authorship considerably (by eliding abstract concerns such as 'thematic preoccupations' or 'sensitivity'), and thus produces a more specific delineation of authorial influence than is often the case. To this end, the text states:

Genuine breakdowns in classical narration are abrupt and fleeting, surrounded by conventional passages. In Hollywood cinema, there are no subversive films, only subversive moments.¹⁷

The above statement is notable for its forceful (and even polemical) resonance, and for the degree to which this assertion seems disingenuous, in light of prior arguments. Although the claim that 'there are no subversive films' is a contentious one, it is also a natural culmination of the text's premises. The concluding phrase, however, is more difficult to reconcile when one considers the lengths to which the text has gone to demonstrate that 'subversive moments' are in themselves conventionalized. Whether this inclusion signals the avoidance of an even grander claim (such as, 'there is nothing subversive whatsoever about Hollywood classicism!'), an amendment of arguments made previously (by suggesting that 'although I have not yet located a truly subversive moment, I will not deny their existence entirely'), or a concession to a kind of subversiveness that is particular to the auteur film is unclear.¹⁸ In any case, Bordwell returns even

these instances to the service of classical norms, as follows:

Most often, an idiosyncratic exploration of causality, time, or space works to reaffirm the norm by revealing the suppleness and range of the paradigm. At rarer moments, deviant narrational moments can be glimpsed. We see the norms afresh, understand its functions better, recognize previously untapped possibilities in it, and- on a few occasions- reflect upon how our trust in the norm can mislead us.¹⁹

The proposition that textual idiosyncrasies (which are presumably idiosyncratic for their blockage of classical intelligibility) invite 'us' to contemplate classical norms (rather than the meaning behind such intrusions) is extremely difficult to sustain. While these elements require norms, in that they must deviate from something, Bordwell's attempt to describe the experience of the auteur film seems at best counter-intuitive.

As the foregoing discussion suggests, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* affords a lucid account of the classical system that demonstrates the relation between aesthetic norms and the obtaining mode of production (the economics, technology and style of the Hollywood industry). The schema that the authors produce details the phenomenon of classical Hollywood with much needed clarity, and thus demystifies a familiar filmic grouping. While Bordwell et al persuasively situate film text within context in a way that illuminates its operations, the attendant emphasis upon mechanisms over meaning does not convey the enduring appeal of the Hollywood film sufficiently. Indeed, the 'objective' stance of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*

locates spectatorial pleasure in the recognition of "norm and deviation oscillating, perhaps wrestling, within the same art work".²⁰ This formulation not only sits uneasily with the usual definitions of pleasure (by equating pleasure with an attitude of analytical detachment), it is surely no less assailable than the explications offered within symptomatic film criticism. Similarly, Bordwell asserts elsewhere:

In following a narrative, we make assumptions and draw on schemata and routines in order to arrive at conclusions about the world of the story. Somehow all this may come out as pleasure, but we scarcely know how.²¹

The above remarks are disconcerting in two respects: firstly, for the unfortunate depiction of film viewing that this offers, and more curiously, for the naive spectator (who cannot be certain of her/his own pleasure) that this constructs. Indeed, within Bordwell's terms, pleasure is not only construed as an occasional, secondary component of film viewing, it also seems an unlikely outcome. This configuration recalls certain of the rhetorical strategies highlighted to this point; much as subversiveness is understood as contained (and thus rendered ineffectual) by the influence of overarching conventions, here pleasure is configured as the improbable byproduct of cognitive processes. Clearly, notions of subversiveness and pleasure thus appear as paradoxical phenomena; while they are extraneous to the Hollywood system that Bordwell presents, in that they do not serve any practical purpose or observe rational patterns, they are nonetheless subsumed within this formulation. In other words, rather than displacing these

considerations from his account altogether (and in this way conceding to their incommensurable status), Bordwell instead diminishes their conceptual and experiential significance. In so doing, the awkward relation between seemingly useless elements and an efficient, integrated system is suppressed. Hence, it is possible to appreciate the extent to which interpretive criticism is maligned in *Making Meaning*; critical projects which set out to explore material singularities such as these point to the logical limits of Bordwell's system.

For this reason, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* stands as an excellent point of departure for this investigation. The prescriptive stance that it offers encourages contestation simply because the authority of Bordwell et al's paradigm is such that all subsequent debate must be inserted within its terms of reference. Hence, the foregoing interrogation of the assumptions structuring Bordwell's account serves as a necessary preamble; having isolated these premises, it is possible to move outward from them purposefully.

As the discussion to this point suggests, the available classical schema is inadequate to the task of addressing the continued appeal of classical Hollywood cinema. Moreover, it is notable that the existing scholarship tends either to accept Bordwell's system to a large degree (including those accounts which generate substantial critiques) or to reject its methodology entirely (in the manner of Robert Ray).²² In other words, one might situate Bordwell on the side of 'objectivism', or as assuming a knowing relation to the text. Conversely, a critic such as Robert Ray may be associated with an unbounded, radical relativism, and thus as subscribing to the notion that (in some areas at least) truth is relative to the judging subject.

The reason I make this distinction is twofold: first of all, to position the extremes of film scholarship in a general way (these categories are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, but useful for purposes of clarity), and to situate this project between these axes. While it is necessary to develop something other than Bordwell's schema, it seems counterproductive to reject out of hand the insights that it offers. Perhaps the simplest assessment is to suggest that the model is a useful one, but one that addresses itself to a particularized set of concerns. As David Hoy notes on the subject of hermeneutics, it is a question of "a divergence in the very conception of what... theory needs to explain".²³ Hence, as Bordwell et al's model has obtained a kind of permanence within film discourse, it remains to consider what *else* classical Hollywood might be. This project does not propose a new system, but rather an attentiveness to a different dimension of the classical film.

In this event, viable alternatives may spring from rather remote avenues. Indeed, this effort affords a number of intriguing combinations by bringing concepts from other disciplines (such as those found in philosophy and literary criticism) to conventional understandings of classical film. At the centre of this investigation is a careful reconsideration of the idea of 'classicism' that permits a fuller appreciation of this term. In particular, what is at issue are additional meanings that this term carries that have been displaced from its current usage within film studies. Specifically, an older, forgotten notion of classicism serves this discussion for its especial sensitivity to the idiosyncratic and pleasurable moments that escape Bordwell's system. Further, many key questions about classical Hollywood can be addressed through this discovery: why do people return to these texts? What do they

have to offer us, now? What does it mean for a text to be considered classical? These issues can be considered with coherence by taking a broader view of the classical text; unlike the model forwarded by Bordwell et al, this perspective does not dwell exclusively upon formal qualities.²⁴ Specifically, it forwards another dimension of classicism that is concerned with what Gadamer calls its *normative* value, or the degree to which the text recognizably functions as a standard within culture. Otherwise phrased, the classical text is here envisioned as an exemplar- a work that stands as a prototypical case of its type. Most compellingly, this notion does not propose a text that is easily understood, readily compared to other texts, or fully comprehensible. Instead, what is important is its singularity, complexity and resistance to objective modes of understanding. The classical text in this sense cannot be easily mastered by or contained within an explanatory system; one cannot be certain of its innermost workings, or account for all of its effects. Rather, one is held in its thrall and reclaimed by it time and time again. Hence, the classical text remains compelling because it insistently presents new pleasures and difficulties.

From these premises it is possible to rethink the films of classical Hollywood in terms of the pleasure that they offer without relegating this experience to a secondary and superfluous status. Moreover, this transposition takes up instances of textual eccentricity as having interest and value, and as constitutive aspects of a broader classical project. As a starting point, it is useful to turn to an essay by Hans Georg Gadamer. He writes:

[A]s a stylistic term, the ancient concept was wholly ambiguous.

Today when we use classical as a historic stylistic concept whose

clear meaning is defined by its being set against what came before and after, this concept has become quite detached from the ancient one. The concept of the classical now signifies a period of time, a phase of historical development but not a suprahistorical value.²⁵

The above passage indicates the shift from an ancient to a contemporary, formalist understanding of classicism that brings with it a greater specification of meaning. As Gadamer notes, the more recent conception emphasizes historical placement and thus sets 'the classical' apart as a distinct and measured historical phenomenon. Clearly, this differs from the prior notion conceptually, by leaving aside the more general, qualitative component in favour of a quantitative measure. Gadamer speaks to this point as follows:

The classical is fundamentally something quite different from a descriptive concept used by an objectivizing historical consciousness... The "classical" is something raised above the vicissitudes of changing times and changing tastes... there is a consciousness of something enduring, of significance that cannot be lost and that is independent of all the circumstances of time- a kind of timeless present that is contemporaneous with every other present.²⁶

As these remarks suggest, this older notion of classicism has an entirely different resonance from its more recent counterpart, in that it is not confined to a simple temporal value. Gadamer develops this issue as follows:

What we call "classical" does not first require the overcoming of historical distance, for in its own constant mediation it overcomes this distance by itself. The classical, then, is certainly "timeless", but this timelessness is a mode of historical being... This is just what the word "classical" means: that the duration of a work's power to speak directly is fundamentally unlimited.²⁷

The above assertion raises an issue that is central to the integrity of Gadamer's argument: the author here distinguishes his notion of a timeless classical from a timelessness that is simply unmindful of historical experience. As indicated previously, Gadamer's usage does not intend to effect an objective measurement of a phase or period, but rather wishes to consider the effects of significant traditionary works. It is not difficult to appreciate the pertinence of this distinction to the project at hand when one considers the classical Hollywood text as a work that is not fully explicable in terms of determining norms and conventions, and thus in certain ways exceeds these objective limits.

Indeed, Gadamer's remarks concerning the practice of hermeneutics have particular relevance for the extent to which they describe the duality of the classical text. He writes:

Hermeneutic work is based on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness... there is a tension. It is in the play between the

traditional text's strangeness and familiarity to us, between being an historically intended, distanced object and belonging to a tradition. The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between.²⁸

As demonstrated within the discussion of Bordwell's schema, the classical film may be seen as functioning predictably, but also as asserting a kind of 'strangeness' that defies classification. Hence, the tension that Gadamer finds characterizing hermeneutic activity applies to examinations of classical cinema as well; these are films that require not only an objective placement (an historical and industrial context) but also a mode of understanding that is able to contend with resistant elements meaningfully. Gerald Bruns describes Gadamer's perspective as follows:

What interests Gadamer, for example, is the experience of being "pulled up short by the text". In our encounter with a text that comes down to us from the past (or from another culture, or perhaps from our very midst), we always find that what the text says is not what we thought (or what we would say) but something else, something other that brings us up hard against the presuppositions or forestructures that we inhabit and that underwrite and make possible our efforts of understanding.²⁹

Bruns' remarks are helpful in two respects: they elaborate upon the difficulties presented by the classical text by indicating the degree to which these works call attention to the limitations of explanatory paradigms, and

more significantly, they further suggest that even 'objective' readings engage in interpretation. Although the disinterested stance of the objective analyst assumes a kind of neutrality, the objectivist's knowing relation to the text in fact evinces an effort to contain it. An additional excerpt from Bruns extends this notion. He states:

Allegory is a mode of translation that rewrites an alien discourse in order to make it come out right- according to the prevailing norms of what is right. On its face allegory appears benevolent and accommodating... which just means, as Donald Davidson says, that "if we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and behavior of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything at all".³⁰

Here Bruns likens interpretative activity to an allegorizing process that not only insists upon textual coherence but necessarily excludes those elements which compromise this arrangement. Notably, Bruns' (and Davidson's) discernment of allegory's darker implications is apt and obliquely recalls the assumptions underlying Bordwell's account. While Bordwell's approach explicitly defines itself as objective and thus as opposed to interpretive criticism, certain important affinities exist between his assimilating classical system and the efficient translation of the allegorist.³¹ Most significant in this regard is the notion that 'utterances' which do not cleave to designated standards are rendered unintelligible and ineffectual: this assessment is

reminiscent of both the 'fleeting subversiveness' and 'scarce pleasure' available within Bordwell's formulation. Indeed, an additional excerpt from Bruns condenses these concerns. He states:

Yet the classical text always remains external to these mediations, uncontainable as mere background or as a component of a conceptual scheme. As Gadamer says, the classical text is "self-interpreting", resistant to the allegories in which we appropriate it... He understood that in allegory we (tacitly) revise the text in order to protect ourselves from it, that is, to avoid seeing ourselves in its light and having to revise ourselves under the pressure of its claim on us.³²

Here Bruns introduces an issue that effectively reverses the conventional relation between analyst and text; by positing the text as 'self-interpreting' and the allegorist as 'self-protective', the usual mechanisms of analytical distance and mastery are unsettled. Hence, the classical text is posed as not merely operating in excess of objective modes of explication, but as exerting a particular force that explodes these very strategies. Indeed, Bruns' account offers some explanation for the degree to which the pleasures of the classical text cannot be persuasively situated as a byproduct of cognitive processes: this suggestion is not so much a reasonable assessment of textual effects as it is "a way of reinscribing the alien text within one's own hermeneutical circle".³³

Having considered these alternatives as illuminating the classical text's resistant and excessive nature, it is necessary to contemplate the cultural purpose that such a work serves. To this end, Hubert Dreyfus speaks to these

issues as they emerge within Heidegger's "Origin of the Work of Art" (1936).

Dreyfus states:

A cultural paradigm collects the scattered pieces of a group, unifies them into coherent possibilities for action, and holds them up to the people who can then act and relate to each other in terms of that exemplar. Works of art, when performing this function, are not merely representations or symbols, but actually produce a shared understanding... That is, a true work of art does not make everything explicit and systematic... it generates and supports resistance to total mobilization.³⁴

As these observations indicate, the refractory nature of the classical text serves an essential purpose that permits the work to function as an exemplar. By this term, Dreyfus refers to a text which serves as "an outstanding example of a good piece of work" that "solicits the culture to make the artwork explicit, coherent and encompassing" but is also able to "resist such totalization".³⁵ Once again, the notion of a relay of strangeness and familiarity is asserted, but is here presented in terms of an essential, productive and unending struggle between these elements. Moreover, Dreyfus emphasizes the extent to which the interpretive activity that the text engenders generates conflict, rather than consensus, and in this way encourages an ongoing process of (re)engagement and reflection. This conception permits not only a renewed assessment of the classical text but also a dynamic relation to the more specific case of the classical Hollywood film. Indeed, these ideas prove sensitive to the filmic elements and effects that are disavowed by a functionalist classical schema

while accounting for the hold that these films continue to exert on viewers and critics.

This revisioning of classical Hollywood remains appreciative of the stylistic and structural aspects that the films have in common, but significantly, it endeavors to restore to these texts a quality of irreducibility. If people cherish classical Hollywood films, it is likely because they feel that there is something left to discover in them, and are not merely eager to witness (repeatedly) a certain unfolding of manifest elements. Correlatively, the pleasure that this ritual offers perhaps springs from a suspension of cognitive judgement, rather than a deployment of these faculties.

Pursuant to this concern, Derek Attridge's discussion of canonical literary texts bears upon this investigation in a variety of ways. Firstly, Attridge contemplates the reading process and the immediate experience of responding to texts. The affinities between Attridge's ideas and those organizing this account are quite apparent, as he is concerned with the phenomenon of re-engaging with a familiar text and thus forming new (and surprising) relations to it. In particular, he considers

reading as an attempt to respond to the otherness of the other, a process that... brings about unexpected reshapings of the familiar... [T]his operation is not just mechanical. If the text is truly new to me... (this condition requires neither recent publication nor a first-time reading), my response to it will involve a suspension of my habits, a willingness to rethink old positions in order to apprehend the text's inaugural power.³⁶

Attridge characterizes the encounter with a text as an encounter with its 'otherness'; as this terminology suggests, the author here draws on Emmanuel Levinas, and in this way emphasizes both a connection to and an estrangement from the traditional work. Indeed, the use Attridge makes of this concept is striking, and is readily extended to a consideration of cinema. He states:

[W]hen we read them they are part of the familiar canon. How then, is it possible to experience them with the shock of the new, as we often do?... However old the text, however familiar to me, it can always strike me with the force of novelty if, by means of a creative reading that strives to respond fully to the singularity of the work in a new time and place, I open myself to its potential challenge. Rather than the familiar model of the... work as friend and companion, sharing... its secrets, I propose the work as stranger, even and perhaps especially when the reader knows it intimately.³⁷

Attridge offers a way of placing the classical text that speaks to both its excessive nature and its continued appeal. More pertinently, the author's call for a creative reading practice indicates a need for a mode of understanding that is receptive to the text's entire workings, rather than one that seeks to organize these details as coherent and conventional patterns. Thus, it is not difficult to perceive in these ideas a potential application to classical Hollywood cinema; these films form a familiar textual corpus and yet still demand a level of investment and attentiveness. In more specific terms,

Attridge's remarks concerning the pleasurable ritual of re-encountering a text are directly applicable to the experience of film viewing. He refers to

the need to repeat the work, as a temporal, sequential experience, if one wishes to repeat the apprehension of its otherness (though exact repetition can never occur)... A straightforwardly discursive analytic commentary, valuable though it may be, cannot make these affirmations. Only a new, unpredictable, singular, creative act, as an inventive event in its turn, can do justice... I respond with much more than my cognitive faculties: my emotional and sometimes my physical self are at stake.³⁸

These comments effectively upend the objectivist's disinterested approach and yet acknowledge the text as a distinct and structured entity. Attridge does not privilege subjective response over textual specificity; instead, he conceives of text and reader as engaging in a process of mutual specification. Indeed, the author calls this "an affirmation of its occurrence, in being read, as an intellectual-emotional event".³⁹ From this perspective, the emotional wrenchings of melodrama, the nonconformist tendencies of film noir and the self-consciousness of the auteur film are not simply limited departures from a thoroughly conventionalized system, but can be considered as constitutive elements of a more richly textured experience.⁴⁰ Further, the interface that Attridge develops offers a balanced approach to classical Hollywood film that does not forward a new system, but rather advocates an openness to that which is 'other' to all systems.

What emerges from these ideas is a way of thinking about the

classical Hollywood text that is not confined to the limited interest of an "excessively obvious cinema".⁴¹ In recognizing the degree to which Bordwell et al's account effectively interprets (and allegorizes) classical Hollywood and thus suppresses a welter of textual effects, one can embark upon a kind of 'restoration project' for these films that contends with the attention that they continue to receive and their elevated status within culture. Indeed, a similar perspective is evinced in a discussion by Rick Altman. He states:

Instead of defining each event in terms of a preceding cause and a succeeding event, juxtaposition offers the permanent possibility of multiple interactions. Every screen moment is caught up in a multidimensional loom, in which several elements- foreground and background, shot scale and lighting, mise-en-scene and editing, dialogue and music- are woven together into a multidimensionally reversible fabric.⁴²

While Altman is here concerned specifically with the polygeneric tendencies within both classical and post-classical Hollywood, his observations indicate a tentative movement away from conventional critical practices. In particular, his notion of 'every screen moment' expressing multiple possibilities is apt for the extent to which it considers isolated textual instances as operating in concert with other elements but also as potentially generating singular effects. Further, the conception of the film text as a 'multidimensional loom' is suggestive; this formulation departs from the usual emphasis upon the linearity and clearly motivated arrangements of Hollywood cinema. Indeed, a

similar image is produced within Gerald Bruns' account. He states:

From a hermeneutic standpoint, tradition is more accurately not a structure of any sort but just the historicity of open-ended, intersecting, competing narratives that cannot be mastered by any Great Code... [T]he understanding of anything is not the product of interpretation, rather it is the product of the failure of interpretation to hold its ground.⁴³

From this it is possible to discern a relation between tradition and the texts that embody it, insofar as both are envisioned as intersecting phenomena that transcend any imposed context. Moreover, Bruns indicates that interpretive activity is productive, but not of actual understanding; one is compelled to interpret, but also to recognize that interpretation always fails its object in important ways. Hence, what is fundamental to the classical text is its capacity to both solicit and frustrate these efforts, and thus to be productive of culture. In a similar vein, an enriched appreciation of the classical Hollywood film encourages new discourse while refusing to be leveled by any single interpretive claim.

To make a more specific case for the utility of this proposed approach, it is useful to return to the texts which offer particular resistance to objective readings. As the foregoing discussion indicates, melodrama, film noir and the auteur film offer a range of textual manifestations to which this extended view of classicism may be applied. Indeed, this possibility requires some deliberation: if these three modes of representation have been understood within conventional scholarship as testing the limits of classical

cinema, they can now be seen as performing in a way that is productive and typical of a richer classical project. Moreover, this consideration motivates certain integral questions: how might we characterize the 'eccentric' elements within these films if not as departures from a classical system? What interest do they hold as features that are 'typical', rather than 'aberrant'? What is the nature of the exchange between viewer and this revisioned and unconstrained classical text? Significantly, these issues are addressed within Derek Attridge's account. He writes:

[T]he discussion could be expanded, *mutatis mutandis*, to other art forms... [T]he response to a text as new or other includes a sense of its "authoredness", not, that is, of any intention or activity preceding its production but of the (assumed) fact of its having been brought into existence by the creative act of an author or authors... For this reason, *pace* Roland Barthes, I find the term work particularly appropriate here, in contrast to the anonymous text.⁴⁴

The distinction that Attridge makes between 'work' and 'text' is one that is both important and appropriate to this discussion. Although it is perhaps unnecessary to explicitly substitute one term for the other, the connotative difference raises an essential point: the moments in cinema that evade our understanding, and invite repetition and reflection, are in a certain sense instances of emphatic 'authoredness'. It is not that one necessarily wishes to seek out the author of a given work (although this itself may be a rewarding activity), but rather that the encounter with a text and the attendant effort to

understand it is not fully resolved by the text itself. Instead, engaging with it is also, by implication, engaging with its author; one asks not only 'what does this mean?' but also 'what does the author mean by this?'. This suggestion does not mean to reconfigure the classical text as inextricably bound up with the intentions of an historical author (and in so doing, to recontain it as a limited auteurist vision), but rather to posit that the attempt to understand a text (and the failure to do so) requires an appreciation of its status as a product of human endeavor. Thus, the encounter is not purely one of objective assessment ('these are the rules of its functioning') but also of wonderment ('why does it do what it does?').

Significantly, this concern has particular relevance for the case of classical Hollywood cinema. Firstly, the formulation laid out by Bordwell et al emphasizes the systematic organization of both text and context. To this end, the films are regarded as products of a "group style"⁴⁵ that bespeak the workings of a regulated industry rather than the distinctiveness of individual films. Although this conception is in certain respects useful for the broad-based mapping that it offers, it does not illuminate the notion of a favourite film, in the popular sense, or the cultural value assigned to certain cherished texts. Further, classical Hollywood films have been deployed consistently as points of reference for critical and theoretical speculations, and while this phenomenon is to some degree explicable in terms of industrial and historical circumstances (the films immediately preceded the emergence of new scholarly criticism), these factors do not entirely account for this substantial (and sustained) display of critical interest. To this end, the various theoretical approaches brought to the classical text also speak to their standing as ambiguous, 'authored' works; psychoanalytic, ideological and auteurist

readings (for example) indicate the extent to which the films have been considered as expressions of an individual and/or a collective psyche. Thus, the notion of a presence 'behind' the text is implicit in any experience of it, insofar as the classical film is less appreciable as a predictable, mechanized operation than as a compelling and complex utterance.

Hence, by situating the classical Hollywood text as a filmic exemplar, it is possible to condense a variety of considerations. Firstly, the notion of the exemplar's compelling and generative nature speaks to the critical interest that the films engender; not only have these texts served as a locus for theoretical work, but they continue to function as a common ground within a vastly diversified film studies community. Moreover, these films in certain ways afford a shared language that foregrounds points of connection (classical Hollywood cinema as a corpus that sustains innumerable readings) and articulates difference (a given theoretical standpoint is distinguished from another through a common text, new theoretical speculations emerge in response to prior assessments). Secondly, the popular appeal of the classical Hollywood film is herein addressed, whether as a favorite film or as a 'golden age' of American filmmaking .⁴⁶ Finally, reconfiguring the classical Hollywood text as a more resonant and complex entity makes sense of its peculiarities and pleasures: the textual elements that exceed narrative coherence and conventional logic are more arresting than any systematized reading would allow, and are for this reason the source of continued contemplation.

This discussion opened with a consideration of the filmic details that garner our attention and the degree to which these instances are able to summon a recollection of the film itself. In this regard, these moments can

perhaps be called 'exemplary', in terms of their effect: they stand apart from the textual background and are 'other' to its generalized operations. Further, these details need not be informative or of consequence, in the usual sense, but are instead provocative and jarring; they provide, however briefly, an experience of indeterminacy that is in a certain sense more memorable than the narrative itself. To this end, classical Hollywood cinema persists as a compelling phenomenon because it continues to offer new experience. Derek Attridge suggests that if "one is able to break down the old creatively and not just negatively... the new comes into being".⁴⁷ Significantly, this notion confirms the continued power of the classical text as well as the need for renewed critical practices.⁴⁸

Notes

1. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger & Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, (New York: Colombia University Press, 1985), xiv. Within my discussion, I refer to this text as 'Bordwell et al's', but to specific arguments that Bordwell authors as 'Bordwell's'.
2. Elizabeth Cowie, "Storytelling: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Classical Narrative". In *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, edited by Steve Neale and Murray Smith. (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 186.
3. A key phrase in this respect is that of "non-disruptive differentiation"; according to Bordwell et al, the classical paradigm permits stylistic difference within bounded limits (*Classical*, 70).
4. Murray Smith, "Theses on the Philosophy of Hollywood History". In *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, edited by Steve Neale and Murray Smith. (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 16.
5. *Classical*, 10.
6. David Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), 40.
7. *ibid*, 33.
8. *ibid*, 39.
9. *ibid*, 10.

10. *Classical* , 71.
11. *ibid*, 72.
12. *ibid*, 76.
13. *ibid*, 77.
14. *ibid*, 75.
15. *ibid*, 80.
16. *ibid*, 78.
17. *ibid*, 82.
18. I assume that this last possibility comes closest to Bordwell's position; he does allow the classical Hollywood film to employ artistic motivation, but only "within specific limits" (*Classical*, 21).
19. *Classical*, 82.
20. *ibid*, 82. In suggesting that Bordwell et al's formulation departs from more 'usual' conceptions of pleasure, I simply mean that the viewing practice he describes does not sound very enjoyable. I recognize, also, that 'pleasure' has a particularized usage within psychoanalytic film theory; again, I deploy the term only in a general sense.
21. *Making Meaning*, 270.
22. I am thinking here of Ray's "The Bordwell Regime and the Stakes of Knowledge" as well as his subsequent work. Although he offers a creative approach to the classical Hollywood corpus, it stands as a radical rejection of Bordwell's empiricism, rather than a workable alternative. Relatedly, Andrew Britton's "The Philosophy of the Pigeonhole: Wisconsin Formalism and 'The Classical Style'", in *CineAction* (Winter 1988/89) stands as another notable (disgruntled) response.
23. David Couzins Hoy, *The Critical Circle: Literature, History and*

Philosophical Hermeneutics, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 45.

24. Bordwell's operational definition of classicism concerns its "distinct aesthetic qualities (elegance, unity, rule-governed craftsmanship) and historical functions (Hollywood's role as the world's mainstream film style)" (*Classical*, 4).

25. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (New York: Continuum, 1997), 286-287.

26. *ibid*, 287-288.

27. *ibid*, 290.

28. *ibid*, 295.

29. Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 217.

30. *ibid*, 203.

31. It is not difficult to appreciate the pertinence of Bruns' remarks to my own critique of Bordwell's formulation when one considers allegory as both containing and diminishing textual singularity and richness. Bruns further suggests that allegory "is appropriative discourse with implicit claims to universality in the sense that there is, theoretically, nothing that is required to reject as alien or just plain false" (203).

32. *ibid*, 218.

33. *ibid*, 216-217.

34. Hubert L. Dreyfus, "Heidegger on the connection between nihilism, art, technology and politics". In *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, edited by Charles Guignon, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 300, 313.

35. *ibid*, 300

36. Derek Attridge, "Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other". In *PMLA*, volume 114, no. 1 (January 1999), 25.

37. *ibid*, 26.

38. *ibid*, 27-28.

39. *ibid*, 28.

40. I emphasize these three categories because they most clearly problematize Bordwell's arguments. My investigation focuses on the crime film, for reasons indicated in the chapters to follow.

41. *Classical*, 3.

42. Rick Altman, "Why are Genres Sometimes Mixed?". In *Film/Genre*, (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 136.

43. Bruns, 205

44. Attridge, 26

45. *Classical*, 5

46. While recent Academy Awards ceremonies have tended to reference classical Hollywood in a variety of ways (tributes to Hollywood personnel, sound and visual montages, etc.), the March 2000 event was especially notable in this regard. The ceremony commenced with a protracted series of 'interactive' classical clips. Specifically, host Billy Crystal was digitally placed within these scenes, as though to locate the entire proceedings within the classical era.

47. Attridge, 22.

48. Profuse thanks to Laura Marks for her assessment of this chapter, and for all of her support.

2. Locating Excess Within Film Criticism

Kristin Thompson's "The Concept of Cinematic Excess" draws near to the concerns enumerated to this point. Especially relevant is Thompson's extended analysis of *Ivan the Terrible* (Eisenstein, 1942-6), an account that attends closely to the film's formal and stylistic systems while highlighting aspects of the film's materiality. Although Thompson's account forwards an understanding of cinematic excess that may be productively applied to classical Hollywood, her arguments necessarily elide this application. To this end, I aim to demonstrate that this incapacity to acknowledge excess within Hollywood production reinforces the assumptions of the classical model and thus renders invisible the refractory details of the classical film. Within the text's introductory section, Thompson writes:

Perhaps as important as complexity in making *Ivan* appropriate to close scrutiny is its strangeness. Whereas every film is different from others to some degree, *Ivan's* striking qualities arise in part because it differs so greatly from other films... My purpose here will be to analyze Ivan's strangeness, not to reduce, explain, categorize or tame it. To do this, I ask the question, What are the film's significant formal and stylistic

relationships?¹

It is not difficult to glean from these remarks certain points of connection between Thompson's discussion and my own. Most fundamentally, the author's aim to interrogate the 'strangeness' of Eisenstein's film without thereby 'taming' it evinces a remarkable sensitivity and permissiveness that contrasts with her (subsequent) approach to Hollywood films. Indeed, what appears as a radically different approach to the film text within Thompson's writings is really a shift in argumentation that depends upon the analytical object in question. Significantly, Thompson's investigation of *Ivan the Terrible* assumes an understanding of the film as one that 'differs greatly' from others in its high degree of artistic motivation. She states:

A film displays a struggle by the unifying structures to "contain" the diverse elements that make up its whole system. Motivation is the primary tool by which the work makes its own devices seem reasonable. At that point where motivation fails, excess begins. To see it, we need to stop assuming that artistic motivation creates complete unity (or that its failure to do so somehow constitutes a fault).²

As these remarks suggest, Thompson's receptivity to *Ivan's* excesses is predicated upon the film's acknowledged status as an art cinema classic; this formulation suggests, by implication, that these excesses are conceivable within a mode of cinematic representation (ie: the art cinema) that is by definition other than the coherent operations of classicism. Hence,

Thompson's analysis coheres with my discussion only to a point: she can find strangeness and disunity within *Ivan* because *Ivan* exists outside the domain of classical cinema, and in general opposition to the principles of classical construction. Although Thompson resists making an emphatic distinction (she allows that "Hollywood film typically strives to minimize excess by a thoroughgoing motivation"³, and thus implies that excess is characteristic of classical films, too), a binary of 'artistically-motivated excess' versus 'classical cinema' resurfaces time and time again as the foundation of her analysis. She writes:

Why... bother with excess at all? What is its value? Beyond renewing the perceptual freshness of the work, it suggests a different way of watching and listening to a film. It offers a potential for avoiding the traditional, conventionalized views of what film structure and narrative should be- views which fit in perfectly with the methods of filmmaking employed in the classical commercial narrative cinema.⁴

The above excerpt assumes two related premises: firstly, that 'traditional, conventionalized' conceptions of classical cinema are in most ways appropriate to the traditional, conventionalized nature of the films themselves, and secondly, that no particular need exists to renew the 'perceptual freshness' of classical Hollywood. I see this last consideration as revealing certain of the premises informing Thompson's account and more importantly, as providing an opportunity to unsettle the binary she constructs between the 'strangeness of art cinema' and the 'familiarity of classical

Hollywood'. Essentially, Thompson's definition and subsequent explication of excess depends upon its difference from classical Hollywood. Thus, she necessarily confines her observations to a domain outside of Hollywood practice, even when certain of her arguments lead her back to the classical text. For example, her notion of excess is derived in part from Stephen Heath's formulation, which she references as follows:

Heath is talking about the classical Hollywood film... Other films outside this tradition do not always try to provide an apparent motivation for everything in the film, and thus they leave their potentially excessive elements more noticeable.⁵

From this we may deduce that Thompson focuses upon 'other films' simply because they offer greater fodder for her analysis. More significant, however, is Thompson's response to Heath's account. Heath's detailed discussion of *Touch of Evil* (Welles' 1958) locates excess within certain stray filmic elements; he names particular instances within the film that seem to him without a clear narrative function. To this end, Thompson retorts:

These scenes provide relatively little causal material to forward the proairetic, in comparison with other scenes in the film. They do, however, contain a considerable amount of semic material about Hank Quinlan and hence provide motivation for his behavior in the rest of the film... Heath has chosen a rather easy way out of the problem by dismissing whole scenes as excess when they are simply different from more causally dense

portions of the narrative.⁶

Even in terms of a highly stylized classical film such as *Touch of Evil*, Thompson refuses the existence of actual excess; she characterizes questionable elements as indirectly contributing to narrative processes rather than as posing a kind of dilemma within the narrative exposition. Notably, when Heath writes "the scenes in Tanya's house have no narrative function", he also explains that "when Quinlan enters Tanya's, he leaves the investigation; when he leaves Tanya's, he enters the resolution of the problem of the investigation".⁷ Hence, Heath's initial assertion does not 'dismiss the whole scene as excess', as Thompson claims, so much as it identifies points of compositional instability that perhaps answer to a different (non-narrative) motivation. Moreover, it is notable that Thompson's argument assumes a continuum of causality (either more or less) that absorbs each of the details that Heath privileges. Although she herself defines excess as "those aspects of the work which are not contained by its unifying forces"⁸, she will not allow a seemingly extraneous episode within Welles' film to present any challenge to classical unity. Even if one accepts Thompson's assertion that the scene provides necessary semic material, one wonders how 'necessary' this material is; does Thompson's assessment render the episode as fully intelligible or begin to account for its interest? Does the information it offers about Quinlan really explain 'his behavior in the rest of the film'? It is curious that Thompson dismisses Heath's remarks in this manner, while stating:

Pretending that a work is exhausted by its functioning structures

robs it of much that is strange, unfamiliar, and striking about it. If the critic's task is at least in part to renew and expand the work's power to defamiliarize, one way to do this would be precisely to break up old perceptions of the work and to point up its more difficult aspects.⁹

One can only assume that for Thompson the classical text is lucid and familiar; the 'difficult aspects' to which Heath points must then be motivated compositionally (in aid of the story) rather than artistically (self-consciously). While this decision seems contrary to the critical agenda that Thompson outlines, it does permit a discussion of excess that (ironically) delimits excessive possibilities.

Thompson's explicit objections to Heath's account are in part methodological. Specifically, she finds his approach to Welles' film imprecise, and states:

None of this comes to terms with Heath's own claim (possibly derived from Barthes) that the excess arises from the conflict between the materiality of a film and the unifying structures within it. Heath, in fact, never analyzes a scene into its material and structural components to find examples of excess.¹⁰

Heath's analysis offers an exacting segmentation of the entire film and supports his arguments with reference to numerous film stills. His aim is to uncover "the design of the film in its system... the organisation of the film in its effects, its positions".¹¹ While Thompson is correct to note that Heath does

not interrogate the film's materiality in a way that is especially clear, he does pursue the conflict between it and the film's overarching structures with great tenacity. Heath refers to

the original intuition (the feeling) of an extremely openly coded film- an obviousness of systems... the easy 'difficulty' of the various elements that go to make up the signature... constantly rendered oblique, overturned; the impression of a filmic system in which the narrative was constantly deflected, out of true.¹²

These remarks, accompanied by the illustrative examples that Heath finds within *Touch of Evil*, are entirely concerned with issues of conflict and contradiction at the level of articulation. He endeavors to describe the disparity between an initial assessment of a film and the viewing experience that a film generates. Hence, what emerges is a tentative and challenging discussion that recognizes the degree to which film analysis misses its object by displacing one kind of narrative (the multiple, contradictory strands that a film offers) with another (the narrative that is produced by analysis, the version of the film that this privileges). Heath does not, therefore, produce examples of excess by analyzing a film into its material and structural components, as Thompson recommends, because he sees excess as springing from their opposition and interplay. Excess is, by this rendering, not simply a question of what remains after one has analyzed a film into its constituent elements; instead, it is a phenomenon that persists, despite these analytical efforts. In this regard, Heath does in fact confront the materiality of Welles' film (those elements which fail to integrate into a larger design, pattern or

structure), but not in the manner that Thompson wishes.

The greatest difficulty that Heath's account presents proves to be theoretical; in bringing his notion of excess to a (admittedly singular, perhaps atypical) classical Hollywood film, Heath also employs a mode of explanation that is tied to certain prerogatives of psychoanalytic theory. Thus, the dangling, inarticulate and excessive elements that he identifies within Welles' film are recuperated within another theoretical frame. For example, he states:

Consider the number of elements that break the economy of the narrative as the figures of its logic- the Menzies rejection, Tanya's, the Night Man... The motel clerk's lengthy and narratively impracticable role ('I'm the night man') is a theatrically hysterical neurosis, a permanent defense against sexuality as represented by Susan's body.¹³

Heath's comments here position filmic excess as pathology; the figure of the Night Man is excessive with respect to both rational behavior and the narrative's requirements. Without rehearsing Heath's interpretation at any length, he contends that the figure poses particular questions (what is meant by his behavior? how does this relate to the story?) that Heath speculatively answers with recourse to psychoanalytic premises (this is a figure of disturbance and instability, this figure conveys what the film is otherwise unable to express). Hence, the excessive elements are reconfigured within a psychoanalytic schema that suggests a rationale for their troubling presence within the film. Whether one finds Heath's reading persuasive is not at

issue; of greater pertinence is the critical impulse to identify and then contain excessive elements within a particular system of meaning. A subsequent observation is of greater use to this discussion. Heath writes:

That these images are banal, laughable, fantastic is the point: Susan displaced, it is as though the film is operated from the perspective of the Night Man; the narrative out of true, it is as though the film replies with the images of the panic which is the other side of its position of its 'truth', images which simply (and uncritically) over-turn it. ¹⁴

I privilege these remarks over the previous excerpt because here the psychoanalytic framing that Heath deploys is not so highly wrought; the notion of images that are 'banal' in their content yet unsettling in their effect attributes a kind of power to these instances that cannot be fully domesticated by any mode of theorizing. Indeed, while Heath explains excess within a certain interpretive context, his reading does not seek to pacify (fully explain) the image; the latter remains as a convoluted detail, embedded within the narrative and compromising its manifest progress. Moreover, Heath's contemplation of excess within the classical Hollywood text puts forth the intriguing proposition that something else (something non-classical) resides within the classical system.

Returning to Thompson's analysis, her opposition between classicism and the art cinema resurfaces in a slightly varied form. As noted previously, 'artistically motivated' moments cannot occur within the classical film because if they were to, the very distinction between classical film and art

film would no longer hold. Thus, not only is it necessary for Thompson to conceive of a film like *Touch of Evil* as essentially unproblematic (unified), the elements that comprise such a film can function only unidirectionally (in support of the narrative). In fact, Heath's analysis is meant to be negated by this consideration: if the details that he finds excessive can be regarded as semic material, then these elements are (presumably) without additional consequences or effects. By this logic, excess is not an issue of spontaneous perception ('I do not see how this relates directly, I find it excessive'), but rather one of analytical hindsight ('this element conveyed information that proved to be relevant, therefore it is not excessive'). Although Thompson indicates that the 'value' of excess is that it suggests a different way of watching a film, she does not re-engage with *Touch of Evil*. Instead, she assigns functions to potentially excessive elements after the fact. This effort to explain excess retrospectively compromises Thompson's analysis because it neglects the film's materiality.

Something of Thompson's resistance to the very notion of excess is revealed by her invocation of Barthes' "The Third Meaning". She states:

Barthes himself calls it "the obtuse meaning", and says: "it does not even indicate an elsewhere of meaning... it rather frustrates meaning - subverting not the content but the entire practice of meaning." For this reason, I prefer to use Heath's term, 'excess', rather than Barthes'.¹⁵

The above remarks are intriguing for the reluctance that they evince. Thompson deploys Heath's terminology, but refuses his analysis; similarly,

she borrows certain of Barthes' premises, but resists their implications. While Thompson is simply positioning herself in relation to other critics who appear to have similar concerns, her invocation of these critics seems curious in light of her basic discomfort with their arguments. What troubles Thompson about Barthes, apparently, is the scope of his ideas; he does not contemplate discrete elements as oscillating in a limited play of excess/containment, but instead considers the possibility that 'free' elements exceed and indeed overthrow containing (meaning) systems. Further, my previous suggestion that a given textual detail may serve the narrative and yet also impede its progress is fully taken up by Barthes. Thompson addresses this issue by way of a critique, as follows:

At one point, Barthes claims that excess does not weaken the structures it accompanies... Elsewhere Barthes acknowledges that his 'obtuse meaning' does indeed affect our perception of the film.¹⁶

While in excerpted form, the above remarks seem paradoxical, they are reconcilable when one attends to the shadings of Barthes' argument. Barthes asserts that the film text may be read at three levels of meaning. The first and second (the 'informational' and 'symbolic' levels, respectively) are perceived with relative ease. Moreover, these meanings possess a kind of integrity: "if the signification is exceeded by the obtuse meaning, it is not thereby denied or blurred"¹⁷. Barthes also asks, with respect to certain material aspects of the image, "are they not a kind of blunting of a too-obvious meaning... do they not cause my reading to skid?"¹⁸ What Thompson isolates as an

inconsistency is, in fact, a description of contradictory tendencies; Barthes allows for an element to sustain a particular signification (a second or 'obvious' meaning), but also for this signification to fall short of a potential, inarticulate signified (a third or 'obtuse' meaning). Thus, his elucidation of "a multi-layering of meanings which always lets the previous meaning continue, as in a geological formation, saying the opposite without giving up the contrary".¹⁹ From this it is evident that the kind of excess that Barthes contemplates is one of coexistence *and* of opposition. A textual detail has material properties, and a discernible signifying function, but may also exert a certain power of its own, for Barthes, a "theoretical individuality",²⁰ that refuses absolute containment. In this regard, his discussion carries forward the premises that Thompson sets out but cannot sustain.

Relatedly, Thompson produces another critique that reveals her own assumptions. She asserts:

Presumably the only way excess can fail to affect meaning is if the viewer does not notice it; this is a matter of training and background. Certainly a steady and exclusive diet of classical narrative cinema seems to accustom people to ignoring the material aspects of the artwork, since these are usually so thoroughly motivated as to be unobtrusive. But the minute the viewer begins to notice style for its own sake or watch works which do not provide such thorough motivation, excess comes forward and must affect narrative meaning.²¹

The logic of Thompson's argument is entirely clear, yet these remarks also

indicate the degree to which her assessment tends toward a basic mishandling of Barthes' position. Her suggestion that excess 'comes forward' (when motivation fails) seems not to be concerned with excess at all: if a thing is only apparent in the (relative) absence of motivating structures, can it be truly called excess? What Thompson means by this term, it seems, are those aspects of a work which exceed the analytical structures that she accepts. Barthes, in contrast, might suggest that excess is not simply outside of these structures, but refractory to their logic. He contends that

the third meaning seems to me greater than the pure, upright, secant, legal perpendicular of the narrative, it seems to open the field of meaning totally, that is infinitely.²²

The above distinction is significant; Barthes explicitly quashes a binary of narrative logic/excessive elements (which Thompson wishes to locate within his essay, so as to take it up) by refusing to reduce excess in order to make it legible. He further states:

the obtuse meaning appears to extend outside culture, knowledge, information; analytically, it has something derisory about it: opening out into the infinity of language, it can come through as limited in the eyes of analytic reason; it belongs to the family of pun, buffoonery, useless expenditure. Indifferent to moral or aesthetic categories... it is on the side of carnival.²³

Once again, Barthes' willingness to contemplate excess as not simply

subversive (of a given structure) but as anarchistic with regard to any structure, and to structure itself, clearly separates his analysis from Thompson's. For Barthes, excess is conceivable alongside other, less unruly elements because it is of a different character altogether; it is neither produced by unifying structures, nor does it remind us of them. This flies in the face of Thompson's assertion that

a perception of a film which includes its excess implies an awareness of the structures (including conventions) at work in the film, since excess is precisely those elements which escape unifying impulses".²⁴

It is not so much that Thompson cannot agree with Barthes about the elements within *Ivan* that create analytical difficulties, but rather that she does not fully concede to their intractability. This difference is expressed even at the level of word choice; for Thompson, excess can be defined 'precisely', whereas Barthes defines excess as a phenomenon about which one cannot be precise. I am tempted to finally suggest that Thompson describes excess in a way that aims to contain it by imposing distinct limitations.

While Thompson cannot be blamed for wishing to make practicable and lucid certain of Barthes' observations about *Ivan*, it is remarkable how often this effort renders certain of her claims problematic. Recalling for instance her observation that

excess is so difficult to talk about [because] most viewers are determined to find a necessary function for any element the

critic singles out. For some reason, the claim that a device has no function beyond offering itself for perceptual play is disturbing to many people. Perhaps this tendency is cultural, stemming from the fact that art is so often spoken of as unified and as creating perfect order, beyond that possible in nature.²⁵

Thompson's allusion to 'cultural' perceptions of art requires some interrogation. Although she does not say so specifically, the expectation of a unified, ordered artwork holds true only so far as classical principles are concerned; surely art in a general sense is not so consistently associated with these values, but as often with qualities of fragmentation and disorder. In light of the discussion to this point, Thompson's conflation of 'classicism' with 'art' is a meaningful one. Although she locates excess exclusively within works that are artistically motivated, and thus by her rationale, other than classical, she here forwards a general definition of art that coheres with the precepts of classicism. Beyond the somewhat misleading nature of this construction, it is important to recognize its rhetorical utility; art is commonly understood as classical, yet the classical is (somehow) not artistically motivated. By extension, while one may look to an art film and expect it to behave classically (and feel 'disturbed' when it does not), Thompson will not look to a classical film in search of artistic tendencies. What this accomplishes, implicitly, is to forward a conception of the classical text as something quite opposed to artistic impulse, and consequently, as a phenomenon that is by definition free from symptoms of excess. This arrangement permits a clearer discussion of excess than might otherwise be the case, but also tames it (by locating it in one domain, but not another) and

reduces its strangeness (by limiting its range of expression).

It is important to clarify the nature of my intervention somewhat. Thompson's discussion of excess within *Ivan the Terrible* ably illustrates this phenomenon as it operates within an exemplary film text. Her selection of *Ivan* for these purposes is well-taken, as is her assertion that the machinations of art cinema permit an expressive foregrounding of style and hence of the excessive elements that illustrate her arguments. Thompson's account leaves aside two issues that strike me as significant, however. The first is the possibility that excess can be located within classical Hollywood cinema. As I have endeavored to establish, Thompson's discussion is organized by a binary conception that tolerates excess only as a counterpoint to the more stable, transparent operations of classicism. A second, related point is that allowing for excessive possibilities within classical Hollywood requires one to rethink the very notion of excess itself. If it exists within the Hollywood system, yet has been relegated to a minor (for some, negligible) role by critics, it must then assume a subtle relation to the narrative composition. In this respect, Barthes' discussion is most pertinent; although he is concerned with a text outside of Hollywood, his attentiveness to the materiality of the image (for him, the film still) illuminates a number of relevant concerns. For example, he considers the nature of the film medium as follows:

the third meaning structures the film differently without...
subverting the story and for this reason, perhaps, it is at the level
of the third meaning, and at that level alone, that the 'filmic'
finally emerges. The filmic is that in the film which cannot be

described, the representation which cannot be represented.²⁶

Barthes' notion of the filmic is of particular interest for its imbrication of the third meaning with the intrinsic potentialities of the medium. For Barthes, these two phenomena are intertwined and concomitantly productive of a singular 'filmic' experience. What is significant about this formulation is the extent to which it not only includes but requires an element of incomprehension; it is as if the very nature of film is expressed in moments of incoherence and disarray. In this sense, Barthes' view runs parallel to certain aspects of Heath's account; although he avoids any imposition of an explanatory schema, Barthes, like Heath, understands film as a flexible and inclusive 'system' that sustains both logical structures and excess.

Correlatively, Barthes' choice of the film still as his unit of analysis is interesting, and motivates an intricate justification for the examination of an individual image over an image series. To this end, Barthes tentatively theorizes the relation between the still and the moving image in a way that is both compelling and supportive of his analytical method. He writes:

The still, by instituting a reading that is at once instantaneous and vertical, scorns logical time... it teaches us how to disassociate the technical constraint of what is the specific filmic and which is the 'indescribable' meaning.²⁷

In a certain sense, the above remarks seem incompatible with the notion of the third meaning that Barthes develops. While the isolated fragment offers a more concrete object for analysis, one might assume that an important aspect

of the third meaning, as Barthes describes it, pertains to its emergence from a succession of images (the brevity of its appearance, the rapidity with which it is replaced). As Barthes states initially:

As for the other meaning, the third, the one 'too many', the supplement that my intellection cannot succeed in absorbing, at once persistent and fleeting, smooth and elusive, I propose to call it the obtuse meaning.²⁸

By this assessment, is it satisfactory to locate this meaning exclusively within a different form, indeed, within a form that is radically other than the moving picture? While Barthes' explication is persuasive, his analysis grapples with an abstract and elusive concept of the 'filmic' within a deliberately nonfilmic form. Can we suppose from this that the third meaning is somehow dispersed as a series of images in motion? Further, can we speak about film as possessing an obtuse meaning when we can only approximate it within an isolated image? Barthes ponders these concerns as follows:

If, however, the specific filmic (the filmic of the future) lies not in movement, but in an inarticulable third meaning that neither the simple photograph nor the figurative painting can assume since they lack the diegetic horizon... then the 'movement' regarded as the essence of film is not animation, flux, mobility, 'life', copy, but simply the framework of a permutational unfolding and a theory of the still becomes necessary.²⁹

There is something convincing about Barthes' suggestion that an authentic 'filmic' comes into being (or at least becomes conceivable) by the act of 'stilling' the motion picture. The transitory nature of film, its very *raison d'être*, suppresses an aspect of its own truth; hence, by extracting the image (the film still) from its apparent form (the motion picture), Barthes conceives of the image as a potentiality rather than as a fixed representation. It is not difficult to align this notion with Barthes' own (post-structuralist) perspective, or indeed with my own general aim to question the received coherence of classical Hollywood cinema. While I would contend that a 'theory of the still' might productively lead (back) to a 'theory of the motion picture' that is similarly unencumbered by reductive framings, Barthes' analysis is enormously useful. For example, he foregrounds some of the curiosities within *Ivan* by noting

a certain compactness of the courtiers' makeup, thick and insistent for the one, smooth and distinguished for the other; the former's 'stupid' nose, the latter's finely traced eyebrows, his lank blondness, his faded, pale complexion, the affected flatness of his hairstyle, suggestive of a wig, the touching up with chalky foundation talc, with face powder.³⁰

Barthes' comments here indicate a close scrutiny of the image and an attentiveness to the elements that seem excessive, and for this reason, compelling. In particular, the details that he names seem to call attention to themselves as extreme, or perhaps false; there is about them a kind of emphasis or artifice that encourages speculation as to their meaning. He

further queries:

is that all? No, for I am still held by the image. I read, I receive... a third meaning- evident, erratic, obstinate. I do not know what its signified is, at least I am unable to give it a name, but I can see clearly the traits, the signifying accidents of which this- consequently incomplete- sign is composed.³¹

One can imagine that Barthes' experience of the film still occurs also in viewing the motion picture, but in an attenuated form. The 'obstinate' presence of these elements is deflected by their movement; the impact is disseminated across the image series. As this suggests, Barthes' discernment of a third meaning within the individual image indicates its presence (however imperceptible) when the image is set in motion. Thus, the details in question have an indirect (rather than indexical) relation to the effects that they engender.³²

This last consideration has particular implications for the study of classical Hollywood cinema. Having acknowledged the degree to which excess presents perceptual and conceptual difficulties, the reluctance of critics to contemplate excess within classical Hollywood (without also recontaining it) is unsurprising. Certainly the machinations of classical narrative complicate what is already a challenging endeavor; the smooth flow of narrative processes effected by continuity editing (the appearance of seamlessness) and fairly stable production values (the 'gloss' associated with studio product) make excess a difficult thing to discern and an easy thing to dismiss.³³ Indeed, within its formalist usage, the term 'classical' connotes the principles of

unity, balance and proportion and thus emphasizes each element's relation to the composition. Hence, the notion of a classical text that contains (and even exhibits) excess is at odds with much of contemporary film scholarship. In the chapter that follows, I will gather together the descriptions of excess delineated to this point and seek their expression within classical Hollywood.

Notes

1. Kristin Thompson, *Ivan the Terrible: a neo-formalist analysis*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), 4.
2. *ibid*, 134.
3. *ibid*, 131.
4. *ibid*, 140.
5. *ibid*, 131.
6. *ibid*, 131.
7. Stephen Heath, "Film and System: Terms of Analysis, Pt. 1". In *Screen*, (Spring, 1975, 16), 67. With regard to the issue of semic overload, neither Thompson nor Heath consider how Hollywood's star system inflects this scene's significance. Notably, it features a dramatic cameo appearance by Marlene Dietrich; surely Dietrich's presence contributes to the scene's stand-alone quality and visual potency. This notion is discussed in some detail in chapter three, with reference to James Cagney and *The Public Enemy*.
8. Thompson, 130.
9. *ibid*, 134.
10. *ibid*, 132.
11. Heath, 9.

12. *ibid*, 11.
13. *ibid*, 73.
14. *ibid*, 74.
15. Thompson, 131.
16. *ibid*, 132.
17. Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning". In *A Barthes Reader*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 321.
18. *ibid*, 320.
19. *ibid*, 323.
20. *ibid*, 318.
21. Thompson, 132.
22. Barthes, 320.
23. *ibid*, 320.
24. Thompson, 141, *emphasis added*.
25. *ibid*, 133.
26. Barthes, 329-330.
27. *ibid*, 333.
28. *ibid*, 320.
29. *ibid*, 332.
30. *ibid*, 318.
31. *ibid*, 318.
32. This experience is perhaps qualified when one has already seen the film numerous times, but I would maintain that this proposition holds, in general.
33. As I suggest within the concluding section, the home video experience perhaps facilitates the discernment of excess, in that it allows for countless re-

viewings, freeze frames, etc.

3. Talking Through Excess: *The Big Sleep*

**"My, my, my. Such a lot of guns around town
and so few brains."
-Philip Marlowe, *The Big Sleep***

The aim of this section is to demonstrate the ways in which the discussion generated to this point may be productively applied to a classical Hollywood text. As I have indicated, stray or 'excessive' elements can be discovered across the corpus by simply considering the details that seem not to cohere with a comprehensible and logical filmic system. As the overview of Barthes' "The Third Meaning" suggests, these are instances within the film text that wield considerable power as resistant material elements. While these details do not lend themselves to simple definitions, I wish to acknowledge their presence and possibility in a way that is useful and satisfying.

This discussion draws upon existing film criticism and theory insofar as these analyses tend to highlight the rich and refractory areas within the classical text. To this end, I have elected to focus upon Howard Hawks' 1946 production *The Big Sleep* as a representative work. Hawks' film has inspired numerous analytical accounts (most notably, Raymond Bellour's analysis, "The Obvious and the Code"¹) which endeavor to elucidate its

systems. Moreover, as a text that features episodes of excess and also foregrounds these as sites of particular interest and pleasure, the film serves as an appropriate exemplar for this investigation. The epigraph that I have chosen reproduces a memorable line from the film that is of especial relevance; while Hawks' production evinces an extreme cleverness, rather than a scarcity of 'brains', the notion of 'too much' of one thing, and 'too little' of another aptly describes the film's inclinations.

The discussion to follow will consider a variety of factors in order to illuminate the film's excesses. Firstly, a consideration of the film's source material and adaptation to film form will position the film's excesses in relation to their literary origins. Further, I will briefly compare the final theatrical release of *The Big Sleep* with the original, pre-release print; the contrast that this effects will serve as a partial background for my designation of the film as a 'supersaturated' text. Finally, a discussion of Howard Hawks as Hollywood auteur will contemplate the degree to which the film's excesses are explicable in terms of directorial preoccupations.

The Big Sleep has been situated critically within both genre and auteurist framings. Featuring Raymond Chandler's literary invention, Philip Marlowe, the film stands as a renowned investigative thriller, and is arguably the most acclaimed filmic treatment of Chandler's fiction. Relatedly, Humphrey Bogart's casting as Marlowe underscores this generic placement; the actor's most celebrated roles situate him as a 'tough' private investigator who comes to be (reluctantly) allied with certain American values. Indeed, the film's theatrical trailer underscores this aspect, emphasizing both Bogart's presence and the film's relation to Warner Brothers' previous adaptations of American fiction (namely, *The Maltese Falcon* and *To Have and Have Not*).

Hence, the publicity associated with *The Big Sleep* is typical of the studio period in its effort to promote the film as corresponding to a particular genre ("A Masterpiece of Mystery!") with familiar stars ("Bogart and Bacall... Together Again!"), and thus as a reliable and pleasurable product.

Conversely, as a fast-paced, dialogue-driven text, the film is easily placed within the oeuvre of Howard Hawks, in the manner of the talky productions *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) and *His Girl Friday* (1940). I would maintain, however, that the film's appeal cannot be explained by either of these framings, taken independently. Instead, the stylized cadence of Chandler's fiction (here augmented by the screenwriting talents of Jules Furthman, William Faulkner and Leigh Brackett), set into motion within the hectic machinations of a Hawksian universe result in a film that simply talks too much, offers too many flourishes and finally undermines its own narrative plotting.

With regard to a consideration of excess within classical Hollywood, *The Big Sleep* cannot be dismissed as a marginal example (the film was released as an A-picture and features notable stars) nor as a complete aberration (the film endures as familiar, classical title). Further, Howard Hawks is an exemplary director to consider in this capacity. Hawks' status as a prolific practitioner of Hollywood classicism supports this choice; his career spans the studio era and he is frequently considered as a consummate classical filmmaker. Gerald Mast describes the director in superlative terms as

perhaps the greatest director of American genre films. Hawks made films in almost every American genre, and each of these films could well serve as one of very best examples and artistic

embodiment of the type: gangster (*Scarface*), private eye (*The Big Sleep*), Westerns (*Red River*, *Rio Bravo*), screwball comedy (*Bringing Up Baby*), the newspaper reporter (*His Girl Friday*), prison picture (*The Criminal Code*), science fiction (*The Thing*), musical (*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*), racecar drivers (*The Crowd Roars*, *Red Line 7000*) and air pilots (*Only Angels Have Wings*).²

As these remarks attest, Hawks is not considered simply as an adherent of Hollywood classicism but rather as an architect of its forms; his films are herein characterized as templates for diverse classical genres and thus as texts that convey something essential about Hollywood's generic structures. Indeed, the very pervasiveness of this association of Hawks with classicism tends to blunt scholarly analyses. As Hawks' style is frequently equated with the seamless, absorptive power of classical Hollywood, it becomes difficult to abstract this style from its mode of production. To this end, Robin Wood says of one Hawks film that

the beauty of the scene... arises not from any content that can be intellectualised and removed from the images, but from the very precise timing of the acting and the editing, from gesture, expression, intonation, exchanged glance. This is why... Hawks is ultimately unanalysable.³

Wood's remarks emphasize the ineffability of Hawks' style and forward a particular challenge to analysts of the director's work. Within subsequent writings, Wood defines Hawks' classicism as

both the classicism of Hollywood (invisible technique, symmetry, orderly and logical narrative, economy of means) and an attitude to life. Classicism is Hawks's means of containing the chaos to which his work points, and which the comedies ambivalently celebrate.⁴

While Wood's accounts deploy particular approaches (the first edition of his text is a straightforward auteurist reading, the second qualifies this perspective somewhat, and places greater emphasis upon questions of ideology), in both cases his remarks isolate certain relevant factors. Wood finds within Hawks' work a kind of duality that somehow effects an overall balance; the 'chaos' of the films' subject matter is contained by its classical form (in the manner of *classicism I*). This formulation is useful to a point, but essentially forwards a dichotomy of form/content that does not unsettle a narrow conception of classicism as a regulating formal system. Although I agree that Hawks' films observe a formal conservatism and visual coherence that anchors narrative activity, I would also assert that the 'chaotic' episodes within the narrative are not so thoroughly contained as Wood suggests. If we set aside the ideological implications of these instances (which are, admittedly, Wood's primary interest), and focus instead upon their immediate effects as textual details, it becomes evident that 'chaos' can inform a film's operations and constitute its enduring appeal. As my analysis will suggest, *The Big Sleep* is perhaps better understood in terms of *classicism II*, which considers these refractory details as sustaining our interest and curiosity over time.

Raymond Chandler's novel was published 1939 and introduced the character of Philip Marlowe. This figure would reappear as protagonist within seven subsequent Chandler novels. Much has been written about the faithfulness of Hawks' film to this literary source, and it is tenable to suggest that despite the significant alterations from novel to screen (the addition or omission of individual scenes, different relations between characters, a new ending), much of the film's appeal is attributable to Chandler's use of language and ironic sensibility. A sense of the august writing talent involved is conveyed by the following assessment:

In the years before and after the wars... several of the most important themes of existential philosophy were elaborated through readings of Dashiell Hammett, Chandler and James M. Cain, who were often bracketed with Wright, Hemingway... and Faulkner... (In 1946, even Faulkner was a relatively neglected figure in the United States, where much of his income came from movies like *The Big Sleep*... meanwhile, Jean-Paul Sartre described him as a 'god'.)⁵

As the above lines indicate, the pairing of Chandler and Faulkner in the production of *The Big Sleep* deploys two important literary voices of the period within a single project. While the reputation of both figures was not yet established, the fact remains that Hawks' film is infused with language that has come to be associated with a distinctly American mode of storytelling. More pertinently, this collaboration brings a specialized vocabulary and cadence to the dialogue that largely accounts for its engaging

and irrepressible style. Moreover, the contributions of screenwriters Leigh Brackett (at the time of the film's production, a fledgling hardboiled novelist) and Jules Furthman (a frequent collaborator with Hawks, specializing in smart dialogue) round out a writing collective of singular style and ability.

It is necessary at this juncture to reference an anecdote born out of the film's production. A familiar story about the film suggests that neither Hawks nor any of the writers could figure out who killed one of the characters, the chauffeur Owen Taylor. Hawks speaks to this issue as follows:

I never could figure the story out. I read it and was delighted by it. The scenario took eight days to write, and all we were trying to do was to make every scene entertain. We didn't know about the story. They asked who killed such and such a man- I didn't know. They sent a wire to the author- he didn't know. They sent a wire to the scenario writer and he didn't know. But it didn't stop the picture from being very fast and very entertaining.⁶

This anecdote is much rehearsed within accounts of the film's production and is of particular relevance for my purposes here. The notion of a classical Hollywood text whose plot is not fully explicable (even to its creators) merits attention as a phenomenon that does not square easily with the precepts of *classicism I*. This is not an issue of slipshod plot construction and a resultant incoherence, but rather indicates an impetus at the point of production to privilege something other than logical, coherent elements. Moreover, this particular design is seen as viable in terms of audience response; there is, in fact, a recognition that the appeal of the film lies in this very refusal of

classical certainty. As Hawks attests:

When the picture was getting ready to go to New York, the publicity man said, "Howard, what will I tell them about this picture?" And I said, "Well, tell them it's kind of interesting because its told from the point of view of the detective and there are no red herrings. And if anybody can follow the plot they have to follow what he is thinking." And I can't, and he can't, so an audience might be amused. The picture turned out to be very good from an audience standpoint.⁷

Hawks' claim that *The Big Sleep* offers 'no red herrings' is evidently disingenuous; if anything, the director was fully cogniscent of the film's fragmented narrative. While I do not wish to forward an argument that conflates Hawks' intentions with our experience of the film itself, these details remain useful, if only to indicate that these perspectives are, on this occasion, mutually supportive. The convoluted plot of *The Big Sleep* was not better understood by its creators than it is by audiences; similarly, much of the film's appeal derives from its capacity to baffle (and hence 'amuse') the viewer. This, of course, stands in sharp contrast to the thoroughgoing logic and systematized execution assumed by *classicism I*, while pointing to a pleasure that is born out of dissymmetry and ideosyncrasies of style, as per *classicism II*. Indeed, critic Bruce Kawin develops a related point, and certain of its implications, as follows:

Hawks began with a 'film noir', a hard-boiled detective story

with sexy undertones; he ended with a wacky, elliptical film that, because it plays by no known rules, decisively influenced such New Wave films as Godard's *Breathless*... Hawks told a group of critics before its release, 'You're not going to know what to make out of this damn picture; it holds out its hand for a right-turn signal, then takes a left'.⁸

If *The Big Sleep* exerted the sort of influence upon the French New Wave that Kawin suggests, and yet is still considered as a familiar (and even generically typical) classical text, there would seem to be a significant disjuncture between the model of *classicism I* and the film's actual machinations. Although the paradigm laid out by Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson represents itself as a formulation to which every classical film need not adhere completely, it still cannot account for the classical film that seeks to entertain by flouting the 'requirements' of narrative construction. Indeed, the notion of a stable compositional formula is to some degree challenged by the film in question; if an investigative plot means to lead the viewer through a pleasurable maze of detail, so as to produce a satisfying resolution of these matters at its conclusion, what can one make of *The Big Sleep*, with its stray characters (such as Owen Taylor) and inchoate 'solution'? This concern is elided in David Bordwell's discussion of the film's narration, as follows:

By confining our range of knowledge to Marlowe's, the film can create curiosity and surprise. Restriction is important to mystery films, since the films engage our interest by hiding certain

important causes... One reason that *The Big Sleep* does not treat Marlowe subjectively is that the detective genre demands that the detective's reasoning must be concealed from the viewer. The mystery is more mysterious if we do not know his inferences and conclusions before he reveals them at the end.⁹

In order to render *The Big Sleep* comprehensible as a film, Bordwell considers its narrational choices in terms of the conventions of the genre. While his assessment helpfully explicates certain of the film's structures (Marlowe appears in every scene, the viewer is not privy to his thought processes, etc.), it seems not to recognize what distinguishes *The Big Sleep* as a text. Bordwell's concluding remark, in fact, describes the film as though it were conventional and transparent. His suggestion that it withholds its inferences and conclusions, so as to better reveal them at the end, avoids the (well-documented) question of *The Big Sleep's* incomprehensibility. Most significantly, by describing the film in these terms, Bordwell suppresses the classificatory difficulties that it poses. Fortunately, this concern is elaborated within discussions of the film elsewhere. Returning to Kawin's discussion, he writes:

It is in this final scene that the series of crimes is 'explained', much too fast for the audience to put it together. Even if one could follow this speech, however, one would find that it contradicts most of what has gone before... This is more of a fast curve than the plot can support; it is at this moment, then, that *The Big Sleep* blasts the genre of detection and teaches the

audience how to 'read' a film in a new way. One follows the action because it is action; one responds to each scene on its own terms, without probing beneath them for some secret, coherent structure.¹⁰

Kawin here not only highlights the improbable resolution of the film's narrative enigma, but also suggests that this phenomenon proposes compelling analytical alternatives. I accept unreservedly Kawin's suggestion that *The Big Sleep* invites an appreciative mode of reading that does not insist upon a latent system of logic and coherence. As the foregoing discussion indicates, the film runs perpendicular to the precepts of *classicism I* in important ways. I would question, however, Kawin's claim that the film 'blasts the genre of detection', and assert instead that the film wreaks havoc upon an understanding of the classical genres as fixed, monolithic categories. Otherwise, how can a film like *The Big Sleep* simultaneously embody a genre's energies (as Gerald Mast states) and also destroy its central forms (as Kawin maintains)? Indeed, what seems most tenable, in this respect, is the notion of *classicism II*. This conception sees the classical text as supporting both types of movement, and thus as an entity that can behave conventionally, but is not required to do so.

Further, the issue of the changes brought to the original, pre-release print bears out this point. Although certain of these alterations responded to practical matters (Bacall's role was expanded to improve her star persona, the romance plot between Bacall/Bogart was developed to capitalize on the success of *To Have and Have Not*), the final version of *The Big Sleep* is qualitatively different as a result.¹¹ In order to incorporate the romantic

material, key expository scenes were excised, including a clarifying plot summary. As critic Todd McCarthy observes:

In their first-draft screenplay, Faulkner and Brackett explicitly answered the question [of who killed Owen Taylor] by fleshing out a scene of Chandler's in which the detective discusses the case to date with the district attorney... A year later, when the film finally went into general release, the scene was eliminated from the picture, thus leading to the mystery that would forever after surround Owen Taylor's fate, and to the overriding reputation of *The Big Sleep* as an indecipherable picture.¹²

As these details evince, the alterations to the film produced the elliptical narrative with which most viewers (and critics) are familiar. More intriguing is McCarthy's assertion that

the first cut represents the culmination of Hawks's dedication to narrative, to classical storytelling principles, to the kind of logic that depends upon the intricate interweaving of dramatic threads. The revised, less linear cut sees him abandoning these long-held virtues for the sake of 'scenes'... of often electrifying effect.¹³

Although McCarthy's proposition that *The Big Sleep* is decidedly less coherent in its final form is well-taken, his notion of Hawks 'abandoning' the principles of classical narrative effects a kind of overstatement. *The Big Sleep*

does not evince a refusal of classicism (in the sense of *classicism I*), so much as it insists upon its own, arbitrary logic (in the manner of *classicism II*). The film demonstrates, in practice, that irrelevancies are frequently more memorable than pat narrative solutions. Indeed, McCarthy's remarks ascribe greater artistic control to Hawks than the director himself claims, and in so doing reconfigures *The Big Sleep* as a coherent auteurist vision. In the discussion to follow, I will examine several representative scenes from the film that impede linearity and coherence. I will suggest, however, that these instances do not 'abandon' classical form but rather enrich its possibility; in this way, *The Big Sleep's* frantic machinations encourage a more flexible definition of the classical text.

As a point of departure, it is useful to examine the film's opening moments in some detail. The film commences with a series of clean, informational shots that economically establish spatial and temporal parameters as well as a basic narrative premise. To this end, the opening shot focuses on a handsome door, featuring the name plate 'Sternwood'. The camera pans down and left to frame a hand, poised to press the door buzzer. This image cuts to an interior shot of a butler answering the door. A voice is heard ("My name is Marlowe. General Sternwood wanted to see me"). The camera pulls back to frame Marlowe's entry. The butler turns and the two men proceed through the foyer. The butler walks out of the frame, leaving Marlowe, centred, surveying his surroundings.

The image then shifts to a reverse long shot of a woman (Carmen Sternwood) descending a staircase, frame left. This composition captures the woman's arrival and the butler's exit simultaneously, while producing a generous view of the home's ornate interior.

A series of alternating shots supports the dialogue that follows. A medium shot of Marlowe, looking at the woman, cuts to a medium shot of the woman, returning his glance. She says, "You're not very tall, are you?" This cuts back to Marlowe, reframed (from head to toe) in a long shot. He replies, nonsensically, "Oh, I try to be". The scene sustains this pattern (of clear shot/reverse shot alternations) as the dialogue becomes stranger and more elliptical. Marlowe gives the false name, "Doghouse Reilly" and Carmen Sternwood tells him he's "cute".

As these details indicate, the film moves efficiently through the sparsest establishing material. The visuals are precise and communicative (camera movement reveals the necessary details at once, reframings occur to offer more information when required), conveying a maximum of narrative information with minimal effort. As the segment proceeds, it becomes apparent that the coherent image track creates a stable surface for the ideosyncrasies of dialogue; although the exchange between Marlowe and Carmen is desultory and frequently nonsensical, it is thoroughly grounded by static images and conventional editing techniques. More significantly, this excerpt points to the rapidity with which *The Big Sleep* shifts from straightforward, establishing material (Marlowe's first appearance, a sketch of the Sternwood home) into the illogical rhythms of its dialogue (Marlowe's false name, Carmen's non sequitur). The opening sequence thus offers a condensation of the film's strategies, in general; the coherent visual track provides a platform for the disjointed riddles of dialogue.¹⁴

Having obtained a sense of the film's mode of execution, the subsequent interview between Marlowe and General Sternwood requires examination for its linguistic excesses. Once again, the sequence features a

discernible tension between its image and vocal tracks; while the visuals remain constant (straight-on, legible compositions, lingering shots, few transitions), the dialogue is markedly overwritten, excessive with respect to verisimilitude and the requirements of classical narrative. The following excerpt is representative:

GENERAL: You are looking sir, at a very dull survival of a very gaudy life. Crippled, paralysed in both legs. Little can I eat, and my sleep is so near waking... it's hardly worth the name. I seem to exist largely on heat, like a newborn spider. [Marlowe looks over at the hothouse flowers.] The orchids are an excuse for the heat... Nasty things. Their flesh is too much like the flesh of men. Their perfume has the rotten sweetness of corruption.

It is not difficult to relate this dialogue to the stylized cadence of Chandler and/or the florid prose of Faulkner. The language here is excessively rich and resonant, effecting even within this brief passage an accretion of meaning and metaphor that is self-conscious and overripe. My concern here, however, is not with locating this excess at its literary source (the dialogue is, in fact, lifted directly from Chandler's novel¹⁵), but with the degree to which the film is able to absorb linguistic excesses, and concomitantly, with the limits of absorption, the point at which the material appears as 'excess'. As I have noted, the segment's visual (formal) economy works to balance the vocal flourishes. Yet more significantly, the language has a greater force than the film can tolerate; one is left with an impression of excess ('this section says too much, and to what end?'), a 'residue' of language that remains largely

unconnected to depicted events. I will extend my analogy of absorption to propose that the scene can be termed 'supersaturated' because it generates more material than is required. Moreover, this material rises insistently to the film's surface because it cannot be assimilated as part of a narrative 'solution'.

A second illustration is found in Marlowe's visit to Geiger's rare book shop. The apparent motivation of this scene is two-fold: Marlowe's actions reveal something of his investigative methods (he researches first editions and then poses as a book collector in search of particular items), and further, he wishes to confirm that Geiger's shop is a front for illicit dealings (Marlowe tests the clerk's knowledge of rare books and demonstrates that she hasn't any). While these revelations assist narrative processes in important ways, the scene itself generates far more information than is necessary. Specifically, the dialogue is conspicuously laden with detail, producing a welter of small facts and emphatic repetitions.¹⁶ An excerpt is as follows:

MARLOWE: Would you happen to have a *Ben Hur*, 1860?

CLERK: A what?

MARLOWE: Would you happen to have a *Ben Hur*, 1860?

CLERK: A first edition?

MARLOWE: No, no, no, no- the third, the third! The one with the erratum on page 116.

CLERK: I'm afraid not.

MARLOWE: How about a *Chevalier Audubon*, 1840, full set of course?

CLERK: Not at the moment.

MARLOWE: You do sell books, hmm?

CLERK: What do these look like? Grapefruit?

MARLOWE: Well, from here they look like books...

It is worthwhile to note that Marlowe's pose as a book collector involves adopting a curious persona (and one that is coded as effeminate); his 'disguise' consists of sunglasses, a tipped-up hat brim and an affected way of speaking.¹⁷ Hence, the viewer is required not only to take in the proffered details at a breakneck pace, but also to contend with Marlowe's playful (if unnecessary) performance as a specialist. Further, it is significant that this exchange asks impossible questions about non-existent books; the sense one develops of the scene as excessive (as saying 'too much') is underscored by the insubstantial content (it is finally 'about nothing'). A subsequent exchange develops this point:

MARLOWE: Well, I'm already late for my lecture on Argentine ceramics [an affected pronunciation of 'ceramics', with the accent on the first syllable], so I won't wait.

CLERK: The word is 'ceramics' [conventional pronunciation], and they ain't Argentine- they're Egyptian!

MARLOWE: You did sell a book once, didn't you?

The above dialogue is without relevance to the narrative, and simply offers a final, sardonic exchange.¹⁸ While one might argue that Marlowe's remarks are justifiable as an extension of his contrived persona (as a further expression of the specialist's vocabulary), this explanation is difficult to

sustain. What is foregrounded, in fact, is the scene's intended irrelevance and desire to amuse. Excesses of language are here taken up quite explicitly; the scene uses language self-consciously, and is also about the self-conscious use of language.

These detailed references are reiterated within the segment that immediately follows. Marlowe's visit to a second book shop communicates necessary information; the second book clerk actually knows about rare books, and thus establishes Geiger's book clerk as a fraud. Clarifying this fact requires yet another recitation of specialized language (the 1860 *Ben Hur*, the 1840 *Chevalier Audubon*, etc.) and leads to a sustained flirtation between Marlowe and the book clerk.¹⁹ Notably, this second segment establishes the first as 'fraudulent' in more ways than one; the playful banter that ensues is more interesting than the details themselves (the book titles are shown to be irrelevant to the proceedings) and all of the 'factual' detail is finally beside the point (the tryst between Marlowe and the second book clerk is what we remember). Hence, the 'informative' material, for all of its specifications and repetitions, and its centrality within the first exchange, is fodder for an elaborate game of language, rather than serving as a meaningful clue. The book references are dropped altogether, serving only to furnish a comic 'tag' between Marlowe and the clerk, at the segment's close ("if you ever want to buy a book...").

Further, I would suggest that the 'rain delay' within this segment (a sudden rainshower provides an excuse for Marlowe's tryst) also describes the episode's relation to the film's overall structure; the segment departs from, and thus, 'delays' plot progression. Moreover, the transparency of this excuse is evident at both levels. Marlowe does not need to wait out the rain, because

he has his car; similarly, the film does not need to develop this episode because it has already demonstrated that Geiger's book shop is a front. Hence, Marlowe's foolish explanation ("I'd rather get wet in here") conveys something of the film's prerogatives; it chooses to dwell upon minute details and to linger in particular spaces for pure amusement value. The fact that these instances stall narrative progress considerably and ultimately prove to be inconsequential speaks to *The Big Sleep's* idiosyncratic operations, more generally. Although the book seller (and the *Ben Hur*, 1860) recedes from the narrative entirely, the scene plays as a satisfying vignette. In fact, the episode is more fully rendered than are subsequent scenes explicating the film's plot.

Relatedly, Kristen Thompson discusses the notion of narrative delay within her analysis of "The Ordinary Film". Deploying a neo-formalist method, Thompson examines the narrative construction of *Terror By Night*, the competent (if little-known), final installment of Universal studio's Sherlock Holmes series. In particular, Thompson borrows Boris Tomashevsky's distinction between 'bound' and 'free' motifs to account for extraneous elements within the film. She states:

A bound motif is necessary to the the presentation of a narrative; its elimination would damage the clear linearity of narrative progression... A free motif is one that could be omitted from the causal chain, even though it does play one or more formal roles in the work... A free motif will have one or more functions relating to the bound motifs. For example, a nightclub chanteuse's number in a gangster film may be unnecessary in itself, but it may create atmosphere, provide a motivation for a

conversation at a nearby table, help characterize the villain as lecherous, and so on.²⁰

By this rendering, the book shop episode within *The Big Sleep* might be situated as a kind of 'free motif' that indirectly aids larger narrative concerns (Marlowe's masculine charm, his stylized way of speaking, his idiosyncratic 'investigative' method, etc.). Yet significantly, this assessment considers neither the effect such scenes engender nor the degree to which a film may foreground these episodes as sites of particular interest. Additionally, Thompson notes:

The classical film is linear in its narrative progression; that is, the basic narrative causality will be clear, with few or no gaps left in the chain of cause and effect...The famous linearity may be hidden by a syuzhet that introduces digressions and delays, even while the film takes care to cue us to those events that are most important in our understanding of the fabula.²¹

Here a possible argument for the book shop scene as delineating a 'free motif' is seriously compromised; as I have indicated, *The Big Sleep* increasingly confounds (rather than clarifies) its narrative object. Further, the notion of a latent linearity does not square with the film's operations when one recalls the decision at the point of production to eliminate necessary expository material in favour of amusing and narratively inconsequential episodes. Most evidently, the film does not offer the kinds of helpful cues that Thompson suggests, and even emphasizes irrelevant information (such as

the book titles) to such a large degree as to thoroughly confuse the viewer. Hence, my invocation of Thompson at this juncture is meant to demonstrate that a strict adherence to the model of *classicism* I works to contain stray elements in a manner that is less than persuasive. Significantly, the instances that offer the most resistance to this model are frequently those that offer the greatest filmic pleasure. I understand this convergence as pertinent to any discussion of classical Hollywood, and as a meaningful aspect of its reception. How can we be satisfied with a formulation of the classical text that may seem sensible "only in retrospect"²² and gives the least credence to a film's most appealing elements?

Perhaps the most celebrated instance of dialogue within *The Big Sleep* is a veiled, bantering exchange between Marlowe and Vivian Sternwood (Lauren Bacall). The exchange concerns, on the face of it, the subject of horse racing; it is immediately apparent, however, that this topic serves as a mere pretext. An excerpt is as follows:

MARLOWE: Speaking of horses... you've got a touch of class, but I don't know how far you can go.

VIVIAN: A lot depends on who's in the saddle. Go ahead Marlowe. I like the way you work. In case you don't know, you're doing all right.

A consideration of the above dialogue must attend to certain contextual factors. Firstly, the exchange was developed by screenwriter Philip Epstein (coauthor of *Casablanca*) as a new scene intended to highlight the chemistry between the two leads.²³ Further, the unsubtle double-entendre that the

dialogue effects was a necessary means of circumventing the censors. Beyond these practical concerns, the exchange may be understood as adhering to the tendencies that I have described to this point. Once again, a stable and coherent visual track foregrounds the vocal track; the exchange is achieved through a limited number of two-shots that occasionally shift to emphasize one of the figures as they are speaking. Additionally, the dialogue is informed by its own curious logic, rather than working to forward narrative processes directly. It is a conversation about sex that pretends to be about horse racing, while the ultimate object of the discussion is the case itself (Vivian tries to persuade Marlowe to drop the case, Marlowe endeavors to discover why she does so). As demonstrated by the book shop scenes previously, the film's articulation of narrative concerns is circuitous and rather arbitrary; if the 'point' of all of this is to present Vivian as distracting Marlowe from the investigation, and Marlowe as resisting her influence, the euphemistic exchange that results achieves this aim in an exceptionally roundabout fashion. The layers of inference, while fairly unsubtle, effectively obscure the scene's purpose; one cannot determine with absolute certainty what it is really 'about'.

This tendency toward distraction is the film's most consistent feature; the narrative inquiry is either buried in a welter of extraneous detail (verbal excess) or displaced entirely in pursuit of other, more amusing, matters (stray episodes that are pleasurable, but inconsequential). That the film sustains this pattern, while seeming to effect balance and unity is remarkable: how can a text disregard principles of coherence and comprehensibility and yet give the appearance of wholeness and integration? Does this possibility (a text built out of asymmetrical parts, yet suggesting

symmetry) not call into question the rational system of *classicism I*? More to the point, does the critical acceptance of *The Big Sleep* as a generic exemplar implicitly recognize a broader classical project (such as that proposed by *classicism II*)?

A partial response to these questions emerges from the available scholarship. One way in which the phenomenon of a fragmented classical narrative has been explicated is in terms of the notion of attractions. Although this conception has been developed with reference to arresting visual spectacle within early cinema,²⁵ the term is useful for my purposes here. I would propose that the extraneous narrative strands and moments of verbal excess within *The Big Sleep* function as 'attractions'; these occasions exist as fairly autonomous vignettes that operate as 'asides' from narrative processes. This suggestion accounts for the appeal of these moments, in that they are appreciable as individual pieces of business within the film, and also for their tangential relation to the narrative proper.

Henry Jenkins' analysis of early sound comedy considers these kinds of instances as scattered set pieces responding to a need for diversified entertainments. Jenkins calls this fragmented subgenre "anarchistic comedy",²⁵ in reference to the disruptive effect that these comic attractions engender. Building on this formulation, Frank Krutnik observes that

comedian-centred films were not organized simply in accordance with the narrative-based aesthetic of classical cinema. They exhibit, instead, a combination of fiction-making and performative entertainment spectacle. In these films, aspects of the classical representational paradigm coexist with a

presentational mode of attraction.²⁶

Krutnik finds these 'anarchistic' films to foreground fragmentation and disruption, and to present a style of comedy in which a range of elements compete for the central focus. Although the instances of spectacle that he isolates have both a visual and vocal dimension, (in that they deploy a characteristic mode of gesture and joke structure that is derived from vaudeville), Krutnik's remarks illuminate the peculiar machinations of *The Big Sleep*. Hawks' film also exhibits a curious hybrid form in which a shift from coherent narrative articulation to episodes of distracting excess may be discerned. Further, Krutnik identifies

a determined resistance to principle of narrative integration. In each instance, plot continuity is dissipated rather than consolidated from scene to scene... with little regard for 'classical' norms of motivation or causality.²⁷

Although the above observations specifically address the comedy of the Marx Brothers, they apply to Hawks' film as well. The notion of a plot that is dissipated by individuated pieces of business is apt in light of *The Big Sleep*'s inchoate investigative premise. Moreover, the film similarly privileges entertaining episodes over a clear plot exposition, indicating a motivating impulse that is unconcerned with narrative progress. Hence, the notion of individuated 'bursts' of performance spectacle disrupting (and possibly upending) narrative coherence has been recognized as a characteristic of classical Hollywood comedy. While *The Big Sleep* evinces a blend of comic

and dramatic elements, its convoluted structure is produced by insistent comic ruptures.

Indeed, it is reasonable to conceive of Hawks' film as deploying and even acknowledging its excesses to comic effect; the film introduces distracting elements so frequently, and with such relish, as to suggest a certain self-consciousness. For example, critic Molly Haskell discusses the "proliferation of women" within 1940's crime film, and within *The Big Sleep* in particular. She states:

Howard Hawks ... actually increases the number of women from the Chandler novel... In contrast to most crime melodramas, where plot and its unraveling are all, the plot of *The Big Sleep* is next to incomprehensible, and the women are what it's all about: Lauren Bacall's sleek female lead, Martha Vicker's spoiled, strung-out younger sister, Dorothy Malone's deceptively dignified bookstore clerk, Peggy Knudsen's petulant gangster's moll, and an unbilled woman taxi driver.²⁸

While Haskell's approach to the film takes an auteurist stance, so as to consider Hawks' representation of women, her comments convey the recognition that *The Big Sleep's* foregrounding of (numerous) female characters tends toward excess. Haskell does not note, however, the degree to which this choice serves as a self-conscious comic trope. For instance, when Marlowe visits Eddie Mars' gambling house, he is greeted by two identically-clad hostesses. That they are presented as visual 'twins', simultaneously delivering the same message, results in an amusing moment of verbal excess:

the message is rendered incomprehensibly because it is spoken by two people at once. Hence, the proliferation of female figures becomes a kind of motif within the film. By placing 'too many' women within its diegesis, *The Big Sleep* acknowledges excess as a source of its chaos, and as a serviceable 'running joke'.

This pattern indicates that *The Big Sleep* not only features excessive episodes but exploits these at the expense of narrative coherence. The film is organized around individual 'bits' that are only peripherally related to the investigative plot; these instances initially deflect, and eventually disable plot articulation. As I have suggested, these behave as distractions/attractions, and as 'spectacles' of verbiage. Finally, they are more compelling than the narrative enigma, as a popular film guide notes:

The story is virtually incomprehensible at points, but who cares when the sultry mood, the incredibly witty and memorable script, and the performances are so impeccable? 29

What remains, then, is the question of the film's apparent symmetry and classical proportion. I would propose that while the film presents a fragmented plot, and seems even to revel in its desultory effects, it balances these elements with its formal conservatism and a careful arrangement of material. The dialogue, although disruptive and frequently irrelevant, offers its own logic and unity; it is simply pleasant to hear, charming and compellingly written. Further, these episodes of verbal excess occur with enough regularity to assume their own pattern of reoccurrence; the language of the film creates a stable rhythm of instability. As noted previously, the

editing effectively integrates individuated episodes; while each has its own composition and character, it feeds back into the film's narrative folds.

Rather than reading the film in terms of *classicism I*, and thus understanding it as accepting certain classical precepts, and refusing others, I suggest instead that *The Big Sleep* forwards the possibility that the pleasures of classicism need not be bound up with a reductive model. More specifically, Hawks' film points to the satisfactions engendered by incoherence (riddles of dialogue), illogic (the development of narrative 'dead ends' and unnecessary information) and uncertainty (an incomprehensible plot). By considering the narrative as a premise that permits these elements to be played out, rather than the reverse formulation, in which all elements are in service of the narrative, what emerges is a notion of classicism that is more broadly appreciative of compositional variance. Thus, *classicism II* is useful for its responsiveness to textual ambiguity and its attentiveness to the film's actual operations; it allows for both the film's visual coherence *and* its excesses. As I have indicated in the foregoing chapters, this enriched understanding of the classical text is able to account for its longevity as a critical and popular object because it celebrates the very details that provoke contemplation and commentary.

Notes

1. Bellour's "The Obvious and the Code" offers an exacting analysis of a twelve-shot segment from the film. He concludes that specific patterns of similarities and differences between shots make the narrative intelligible to us. In *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, edited by Philip Rosen, (New York: Colombia University Press, 1986), 93-101. See also note 14.
2. Gerald Mast, *Saint James Film Directors Encyclopedia*, edited by Andrew Sarris, (New York : Invisible Ink Press, 1998), 213.
3. Robin Wood, *Howard Hawks*, (London: Martin Secker Warburg Ltd., 1968), 10.
4. Robin Wood, "Retrospect". In *Howard Hawks: American Artist* . Edited by Jim Hillier and Peter Wollen, (London: British Film Institute, 1996), 172.
5. James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir In Its Contexts*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press Ltd., 1998), 23.
6. Peter Bogdanovich, "Interview with Howard Hawks". In *Howard Hawks: American Artist* , edited by Jim Hillier and Peter Wollen, (London: British Film Institute, 1996), 60.
7. *ibid*, 60.
8. Bruce Kawin, "Hawks and Faulkner". In *Howard Hawks: American Artist* , 146.

9. David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson, *Film Art*. 4th edition, (New York: Mc Graw-Hill Inc., 1993), 78-79.
10. Kawin, 149
11. While these details are provided by innumerable accounts, I found this information accompanying the DVD version(s) of the film. Many thanks to Nick Nguyen for allowing me to 'borrow' this item from his impressive collection.
12. Todd Mc Carthy, *Howard Hawks: the Grey Fox of Hollywood*, (New York: Grove Press, 1997), 382.
13. *ibid*, 395.
14. This observation would seem to cohere with Bellour's analysis of the film's shot relations.
15. This speech appears in Chandler's novel almost verbatim, with the exception of the word 'corruption' substituting for 'prostitute'. Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, (New York: Random House Inc., 1976), 7.
16. The substance of this exchange appears in the novel in a less emphatic form; the film renders the scene as a more rapid-fire and repetitive questioning. Moreover, the experience of watching the film continuously is, of course, different; it is difficult to catch all of the dialogue in a single viewing. I have found certain of these ideas supported by Lea Jacob's analysis of *His Girl Friday*, which indicates that "the scenes are built around the lines and the way the actors perform those lines... stylistic decisions about editing follow from this priority". "Keeping Up With Hawks" in *Style*, Volume 32, Number 3, (Northern Illinois University Press, Fall 1998), 405.
17. Although Hawks' recollection of filming this scene suggests that he and Bogart developed the character on the set, Marlowe assumes this persona

within the novel as well. Chandler writes: "I had my horn-rimmed sunglasses on. I put my voice high and let a bird twitter in it" (Chandler, 20). For details of Hawks' memory lapses, see Joseph McBride, *Hawks on Hawks*, [London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1996], 127.

18. This exchange does not occur within the novel. In Chandler's text, Marlowe waits in the book shop for Geiger to reappear with "nothing to think about but my trigonometry lesson" (Chandler, 21). As this suggests, Hawks et al elaborated on this point for comic effect, producing the word play on 'ceramics' that is featured in the film.

19. Marlowe's tryst with the book shop clerk was developed for the film; in Chandler's novel, Marlowe obtains a description from the clerk and leaves after telling her she would "make a good cop" (Chandler, 26, also in the film).

20. Kristin Thompson, "The Ordinary Film". In *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), 54-55. Notably, the film that Thompson analyzes, *Terror by Night* (a thoroughly unsuspenseful feature), was produced the same year as *The Big Sleep* (1946).

22. *ibid*, 54.

23. While Hawks claims in several accounts to have developed the scene on the set, Todd Mc Carthy notes that screenwriter Philip Epstein created this scene to "raise the sexual stakes" between Vivian and Marlowe (McCarthy, 392).

24. I refer here to the notion of attractions developed by Tom Gunning. See "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, its Spectator and the Avant-Garde", in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, edited by Thomas Elsaesser (London: British Film Institute, 1990).

25. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins, "Acting Funny". In *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 158.
26. Frank Krutnik, "A Spanner In the Works? Genre, Narrative and the Hollywood Comedian". In *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, 17.
27. *ibid*, 20.
28. Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape* , second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 208.
29. John Pym (ed.), *Time Out Film Guide*, 8th edition (New York: Penguin, Putnam Inc., 1999), 94.

4. Visual Excess: Looking at *The Public Enemy* and *The Killers*

While the ineffability of the human face is hardly an unfamiliar notion within studies of artistic media, it proves to be a uniquely salient issue in light of an inquiry into the enduring appeal of the classical Hollywood film. An instructive, if initially unlikely, point of comparison can be found in Renaissance art; specifically, in Leonardo DaVinci's *Mona Lisa*. I reference this work for two reasons: firstly, it is familiar enough to be recognized without a specialized knowledge of fine art (indeed, the image circulates endlessly within pop culture, seemingly divorced from its originary context), and further, its composition observes what are widely recognized as classical principles, yet allows for considerable variation in interpretation. Indeed, what has been celebrated about the *Mona Lisa* is precisely its enigmatic qualities; the uncertain expression that it offers is the source of its interest as a cultural object. Consider, for instance, the following account by art historian E.H. Gombrich, whose discussion of classical form is deployed by Bordwell in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*. Gombrich writes:

A fame as great as that of Leonardo's '*Mona Lisa*' is not an unmixed blessing for a work of art. We become so used to seeing it on picture postcards, and even advertisements, that we find it

difficult to see it with fresh eyes... But it is worthwhile to forget what we know, or believe we know, about the picture, and to look at it as if we were the first people to ever set eyes on it... Like a living being, she seems to change before our eyes and to look a little different every time we come back to her. Even in photographs of the picture we experience this strange effect.¹

The above remarks are striking for their relevance to my discussion to this point; Gombrich here describes a mode of viewing that encourages new attentiveness and a suspension of preformulated knowledge. Moreover, he suggests that such openness is possible, and even necessary, when engaging with a masterpiece because the work's power lies in this intimate exchange. These observations have clear affinities with my proposed approach to classical Hollywood; whether the encounter is with 'high art' (such as DaVinci's portrait), or 'low art' (such as a commercial studio product), the classical text sustains its appeal when we assume an attitude of openness and receptivity. Gombrich details the encounter with the *Mona Lisa* as follows:

Sometimes she seems to mock us, and then again we seem to catch something like sadness in her smile. All this sounds very mysterious, and so it is; that is so often the effect of a great work of art. Nevertheless, Leonardo certainly knew how he achieved this effect, and by what means... He had clearly seen a problem which the conquest of nature had posed to artists-- a problem no less intricate than the one of combining correct drawing with a harmonious composition... But only Leonardo found the true

solution to the problem. The painter must leave the beholder something to guess... If we look carefully at the picture, we see that the two sides do not quite match.²

Hence, the composition's power lies in a careful assemblage of details; the enigmatic quality emerges from a slight (but discernible) asymmetry, a tension between the line that is firmly drawn, and the one that is "left a little vague".³ Thus, a deliberate formal technique cultivates ambiguity by its contrast with exacting detail; the question of Lisa's expression occurs because it is less comprehensible than other elements within the portrait (her finely rendered hands, the folds of her sleeve). I find this phenomenon to be pertinent to my examination of classical Hollywood, because the images that I am drawn to achieve a similar effect; they fall under the heading of what I refer to as *classicism II*. While many things can be learned from the formal elements of a text, I am more compelled by the questions that the text leaves unanswered.

Having considered a classical Hollywood film that exhibits excesses of language, the case study to follow will look to the classical text for symptoms of visual excess. My discussion is to some degree informed by existing accounts that have endeavored to locate this phenomenon within the classical genres (melodrama being the most salient case in point)⁴, but differs from these efforts in terms of my approach to the object in question. I am interested in identifying and analyzing the visual instances that exceed the usual modes of explication; certain images seem to transcend the narrative context in which they are placed, and to exist as compelling, autonomous 'moments'. I will suggest that on such occasions the visual

power of the image is so great as to overwhelm narrative processes; the single image can be so resonant as to dislocate the usual processes of recognition/identification ('I am looking at a particular thing') and to invite instead a more thoughtful mode of assessment ('I am uncertain as to what this image is saying; I would like to know more about it'). These moments will be situated as material instances whose visual power arises from a network of influences. To this end, I will consider an image's individual composition, the relation between the image and those that surround it, the unique visual qualities introduced by an actor's performance/ persona, and consequently, the questions that an image poses on its own terms. This list of variables is neither definitive, nor exhaustive, but rather emphasizes those elements that seem most determining of an image's 'impact'. Curiously, the images that I have designated as excessive are representations of human faces; in these instances, the effect of excess seems to spring from the mutability of facial expression. Although my remarks are not meant to address these kinds of depictions exclusively (indeed, they might be extended to other sorts of images to productive ends), I find that the human face carries with it a poignancy that is especially productive in the context of my approach to the image.

The phenomenon that I wish to describe is spontaneous and complex. It may begin with the arrival of the image as a pure composition, where one is struck by a particular graphic arrangement, a relation of one line to another, contrasts of light and shade. From this arises a process of questioning: what am I actually looking at? What does this image convey? What can this possibly mean? In a certain sense, this experience seems not to be one of 'excess', so much as of 'difference', because it engenders a distinct

mode of viewing. Yet it pertains to excess in that what the image effects is a kind of accident⁵ (despite its careful composition); it is a foregrounding of detail that the narrative does not require, and for this reason cannot explain. Hence, the result is a suspension of rational (viewing) processes in response to the image's materiality. These instances are doubly arresting, seeming to stop the narrative momentarily and also the usual mechanisms of narrative viewing. This notion suggests a connection between the 'arresting' image ('it makes me stop and think') and our need to arrest it ('I stop the image so as to contemplate it'), in a way that recalls Barthes' discussion of the third meaning. Indeed, Barthes describes a similar phenomenon within his later writings. He states:

If I like a photograph, if it disturbs me, I linger over it. What am I doing, during the whole time I remain with it? I look at it, I scrutinize it, as if I wanted to know more about the thing or the person it represents... I want to enlarge this face in order to see it better, to understand it better, to know its truth.⁶

While Barthes' interests here dwell upon the medium of photography, his observations are useful also to a consideration of film. He refers to the 'disturbance' that an image effects as something that invites deliberation, provoking the sense that the image is something more than what it explicitly represents. The process of looking that he describes is also pertinent, as it involves a slow scrutiny, an effort to penetrate the image's essential 'truth'. Although Barthes characterizes this experience as one that occurs while contemplating a still photograph, and as an event that emerges from this

type of 'static' encounter, I would claim that the motion picture, too, engenders this kind of experience. As I have indicated previously, classical Hollywood film at times offers moments that stand aside from narrative processes and are not reducible by their logic.⁷ It is more difficult to discern these details as autonomous 'units' because they are set in a series, and appear only fleetingly. Yet I maintain that certain instances within the classical text solicit our attention in the way that Barthes describes; however momentary and incomplete, such instances remain an important part of the viewing experience. Most significantly, I propose that the refractory presence of such instances is essential to the work's classical appeal, here understood by what I term *classicism II*. If we feel compelled to return to classical Hollywood, and to yield repeatedly to its pleasures, these elements of discord are an important part of this process.

To this end, I have selected two films that feature lucid narrative organization (a readily discernible story and plot, orchestrated through classical editing and conventional narrative cues) and are readily situated within the classical corpus. I will suggest that these texts, while representative of Hollywood classicism (in the sense of *classicism I*), generate details and effects that are not bound to these prerogatives. My specific concern is with visual elements that seem resonant beyond their narrative function.

The two texts that I will examine are associated with the generic category of the crime film. My rationale for this selection is two-fold: the crime film's graphic style produces a wealth of visually arresting moments, and further, these moments are closely affiliated with the films' interest and appeal. Thus, my analysis will demonstrate that the crime film features

certain tendencies that are at odds with the obtaining classical schema. As my overview of Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's model indicates (chapter one), the received conception of classical Hollywood refuses the notion of truly 'subversive' filmic elements. Rather than taking the contrary position, and arguing for an absolute upending of convention, I will situate these details within an enlarged definition of classicism that supports (and even requires) elements of coherence and ambiguity.

William Wellman's 1931 feature *The Public Enemy* stands as a prototype of the gangster cycle. The narrative is centrally concerned with the 'career' of its protagonist; it details Tom Powers' ascent from petty thief to crime boss, his eventual decline and death. Notably, the production coincides with two related developments in Hollywood: a renewed interest in realistic depictions of social life and a heightened concern with the effect of film representation upon public morality. As Frank Miller notes:

The censors' objections to gangster films can be traced to a number of legitimate concerns. They feared that any realistic treatment of the subject would teach people -particularly the young and impressionable- how to commit crimes. Even though most movie gangsters ended up dead or in jail, moralists still complained that the pictures made crime attractive.⁸

The Public Enemy stands at the centre of the controversy, between the two other notorious gangster prototypes *Little Caesar* (LeRoy, 1930) and *Scarface* (Hawks, 1932). Upon viewing the film, it is not difficult to appreciate the sensation it caused in terms of the criminal activities it depicts and their

dynamic execution.

The raw visual style of *The Public Enemy* is to some degree attributable to an important aesthetic trend of the period; early sound productions endeavored to describe a reality-based content with an appropriate form, deploying realistic urban settings, reduced interiors and hard lighting codes. The relation between the film and its production context is further delineated in the following excerpt:

As Tom Powers -a character modeled on Capone's chief rival in Chicago, Deanie O'Bannion- James Cagney slaps and shoots his way to the top of the rackets, even taking revenge on the horse that accidentally kills his boss... Even with local cuts, *The Public Enemy* was a big hit, breaking box-office records set by *Little Caesar* only a few months earlier. The combined success of these pictures spurred the production of still more gangster films, leading to still more complaints. Reformers urged Will Hays to put a stop to the genre.⁹

As Miller's comments suggest, Wellman's film was well-received by audiences and formed a template for a cycle of films that followed. My examination of the film recognizes its status as a generic prototype (and thus as a text that resembles others) but focuses upon the details that render it singular and peculiar. In particular, I am interested in the curious interface that *The Public Enemy* evinces; it manages to be generically typical and textually eccentric at once.

In general terms, *The Public Enemy* operates in a comprehensible

fashion that observes classical storytelling principles. Despite a fragmented structure (the phases of development that constitute the narrative are signalled by chronological indicators such as '1909', '1917', etc.), the narrative forms a coherent arc that charts the gangster-protagonist's 'rise' and 'fall' compellingly. The chronologized sections produce a 'docudrama' effect, foregrounding the film's status as chronicle of social realities. The early sections provides essential narrative and thematic information that describe the protagonist's origins. The character of Tom Powers is established in broad strokes, (brief vignettes anticipate the self-promoting 'mastery' he will assume), as is his 'sidekick' Matt, a punishing paternal figure, and an initial revenge quest. Hence, the narrative assembles a rationale for the events that follow by emphasizing the unique nature of the protagonist and foreshadowing key narrative conflicts. These details are integral to the film's progression; the repetitions and rhymes that mark the narrative trajectory are initiated within these preliminary sections.

I wish to emphasize, however, that the film's clear and communicative approach at times foregrounds the singularity of its protagonist in ways that problematize conventional classical precepts. While a cursory assessment of the film (or indeed of films of this generic type) might configure its depiction of Tom Powers as consonant with conventional constructions of the goal-oriented protagonist, the protagonist in question resists the principles of consistency and psychological transparency in important ways. Powers is presented as a solipsistic figure whose inclinations remain ambiguous. In the simplest sense, his essential opacity violates classical expectations of motivation and explicability. This 'difference' compromises arguments for the film's tractability and coherence; an

enigmatic quality permeates the narrative and surfaces on occasion within episodes of visual excess.

To develop this point, I will focus upon a sequence that occurs late in the narrative, in which Tom Powers witnesses his friend/partner Matt being shot. This is a strange moment, alternating between overhead shots of the slain friend and the assembling crowd, and medium shots of Powers, shielded by a wall. In an obvious sense, this perspectival exchange differentiates Powers from 'straight society' and cleaves objective and subjective views of a single event (the more objective shot of men gathered about Matt's body/Powers' personal response, unseen by others in the diegesis). What is odd here, and figures as a 'disturbance', in Barthesian terms, circulates around Powers' expression: he appears in this instance to be smiling/grimacing in a way that is entirely ambiguous, and startling (figure 1). Upon closer scrutiny, his figure appears dark against a neutral background, forming a dynamic focus within the frame. The shielding wall (frame left) is mottled concrete, a coarse urban surface that splits the composition. More obliquely, this bifurcation replicates Powers' strange expression, wavering between smile and grimace. While the character is established as monomaniacal and violent (and even as someone who enjoys violence), it is impossible to fully recuperate this moment by narrative evidence; the look itself evinces an uncertainty and complexity that does not cohere with familiar categories (despair, anger, surprise) or lend itself to ready interpretation ('he must feel this way, his expression communicates this attitude', etc.). Moreover, this is not a random detail that may go unremarked by the viewer; rather, it is presented repeatedly and emphatically. Powers' 'look' is described in two shots of increasing duration; in the final image, he retreats into the shadows,

and the sequence concludes.

An image surfaces later in the narrative that is visually similar and thus serves as an instructive point of comparison (figure 2). The sequence that immediately follows Matt's death describes Powers' effort to avenge this act. It is clearly motivated by a simple juxtaposition (a relation between events is expressed through editing transitions: Matt is killed/Powers obtains a gun). The 'revenge quest' includes a medium shot of Powers, peering through a metal railing, followed by a long shot of the Western Chemical Company, where the rival gang assembles. These images alternate twice, until Power steps out from behind the railing. This image effects a subtle, formal 'rhyme' for the instance described previously, but inverts the lighting codes; while Matt was gunned down in harsh daylight, Powers now emerges from rainy darkness. Another difference is yet more significant; here Powers' expression is firmly contoured, and made explicable by a defined narrative context. While this image recalls the first, its effect is lessened by its comprehensibility; Powers' face appears maniacal, but purposive, reducing ambiguity considerably. I draw attention to this contrast to demonstrate an important qualitative difference; while the first shot was strange and uncertain, the second is simply intense. Within Kristin Thompson's conception of excess, perhaps, one would deploy a retrospective logic, and explain one image with recourse to the other ('what I know now explains what I did not know then'). Instead, I maintain that each occurs at a different register: the first evinces uncertainty, and has a quality of placelessness that does not cohere with the story world, while the second is sharply focused, and is propelled by a defined motivational context.

The distinction that I am endeavoring to make draws close to two

related concepts that Barthes delineates in *Camera Lucida*. He states:

The studium is ultimately always coded, the punctum is not...
What I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name
is a good symptom of disturbance... to say nothing, to shut my
eyes, to allow the detail to rise of its own accord into affective
consciousness.¹⁰

The distinction between 'studium' and 'punctum' differs slightly from the specific application I wish to make of it, insofar as Barthes locates these within a single image, as coexisting elements. Yet these terms offer a productive way of thinking about the paired images from *The Public Enemy*: the first, unnameable image corresponds to the 'punctum' (figure 1), while the second, coded image forms the 'studium' (figure 2). Further, this extension of Barthes' formulation supports another integral point; as the images arrive differently, and invite different responses, one cannot be required to explain the other, nor can it be said to negate its effects. Indeed, the experience that Barthes evokes is one of affect, rather than cognition,¹¹ and thus complements the discussion I have developed to this point.

Having considered an excessive image in some detail, it is possible to account for its power in other ways. In this regard, Richard Dyer's account of stars and star personae is pertinent. He states:

The signs of performance are: facial expression; voice; gestures...
body posture... body movement... Of these the first is often held
to be the most important, on analogy with its primary

importance in interpersonal communication in everyday life. Yet just as its importance may be the greatest, so too is its ambiguity.... when it comes to deciphering facial expression we are at a considerable loss. Aside from films that use this ambiguity in the service of the notion of the eternal ineffability of the face as the window to the soul, most films... narrow down the range of meanings that a facial expression considered in isolation may have. Nonetheless, ambiguity is seldom totally eliminated.¹²

Dyer's discussion considers the ways in which star performance and narrative inform each other, generating a combined appeal or magnetism. His remarks concerning facial expression/ambiguity are of especial relevance for their implicit relation to classical principles. Dyer's remark that 'most films' restrict the range of potential meanings suggests the limits of classical coherence, while his assertion of a persistent ambiguity concedes to their failure to contain certain effects. Indeed, the notion of Cagney's performance(s) as 'larger than life' and as substantially shaping the narrative context has been developed elsewhere.¹³ While I am interested in the singular qualities that an actor brings to a text, and in the extra-textual knowledge that informs our viewing experience,¹⁴ my concern here is with a related, but distinct, phenomenon. My attentiveness to discrete episodes within the classical text approaches the image more or less on its own terms; I want to consider the kinds of energies that the film image yields as a specific, material entity. Hence, the encounter in question is one of uncertainty, rather than of revelation; the image poses more questions than the narrative (or viewer)

can answer, and in this capacity exists as excess.

In a related vein, Barthes' essay "The Face of Garbo" addresses similar issues. He is concerned with the face-as-object, and with the transcendent experience that this phenomenon can engender. He writes:

Garbo still belongs to that moment in cinema when capturing the human face still plunged audiences into the deepest ecstasy... the eyes alone, black like soft strange flesh, but not in the least expressive, are two faintly tremulous wounds.¹⁵

What is striking about the above passage is Barthes' approach to viewing relations; by his assessment, the image assumes an unusual authority, while the viewer is enthralled by this display. Implicit in Barthes' observations is the notion that the image's power derives in part from the unique capacities of the photographic medium, and concomitantly, that this power was most in evidence during a particular phase (or 'moment') of Hollywood practice. This introduces an interesting point in light of *The Public Enemy* (1931); the film is historically proximate to those that Barthes discusses (the silent feature *Love*, produced in 1927, and the primitive sound film *Anna Christie*, 1930). Indeed, there is a unique quality about the images that these early productions offer that is perhaps attributable to the lighting techniques in use and/or the compositional strategies carried over from silent film practice.¹⁶ More to the point, Barthes' comments emphasize the impact and ambiguity of Garbo's face-as-object; while his observations suggest an otherworldly condition (while mine are concerned with a more mundane contemplation), the image's ability to transfix the viewer certainly speaks to the appeal of *The*

Public Enemy.

Returning to the film, the conclusion that it presents is particularly shocking and seriously problematises any conventional notion of narrative closure. Specifically, the images comprising this conclusion are singularly disturbing, in terms of their content and mode of articulation. The series proceeds as follows: an interior shot of the Powers' family home, centring upon the front door. Tom's brother, Mike, opens the door, revealing Tom's bound and bandaged form, propped up vertically. / A long shot of the corpse, raised to full height within the door frame. The figure is released and topples to the floor, face down. Mike leans over the body. / A medium shot of Mike, framed from the waist down, standing by the corpse. / A medium shot of Powers' mother, blithely preparing a room for Tom's return. / Return to Mike, crouched by the body. / A long shot as he stands, then steps slowly and deliberately forward (directly toward the camera), eventually obscuring our view of the body. / An overhead shot of a stalled phonograph, whose needle skips endlessly.

While these images establish the protagonist's death, they seem without the marks of narrative closure, and are deliberate, shocking and sudden. It is difficult to say which of the series is most disturbing: the first delivers the 'surprise' of Powers' death, and offers his grotesquely draped corpse. The fifth is perversely rendered; its floor-level positioning severs the brother's figure (presenting only his legs and feet) and thus implicitly assumes the corpse's viewpoint, in reverse (figure 3). Most curiously, his movement toward the camera (his legs come to fill the frame) is inexplicable as a meaningful action. Although this odd framing occurs elsewhere in the film (on a prior occasion, Powers storms toward the camera on his way to the

Western Chemical Company), here Mike's purpose and destination are entirely unclear, and perhaps cause the viewer to wonder where he is headed. The awkwardness of this vantagepoint draws attention to the physical space that the camera occupies (one wonders if the actor will need to step over it) and in this way points to the artifice of the set-up. The final shot may be read as functioning symbolically, with its image of the arrested family phonograph. Yet this reading cannot account for the abruptness (or the grotesque nature) of this transition, which visually links Powers' lifeless form to the jerky action of the phonograph needle. Indeed, the effect of these images was not lost on a reviewer at the time of the film's release, who encapsulates the film as "repulsive in some aspects, plus a revolting climax".¹⁷

The film's production context and status as a quasi-social document offer some explanation for the extreme awkwardness of this ending; the prevailing production code would not permit the film's release without a clear articulation of the gangster's punishment.¹⁸ To this end, a concluding intertitle seals off the narrative and thus attempts to contain it as a simple didactic structure ("The end of Tom Powers is the end of every hoodlum. 'The Public Enemy' is not a man, nor is it a character-- it is a problem that sooner or later we, the public, must solve"). This consideration to some degree explicates the ending's artificial (and inappropriate) summation; the final sequence seems 'tacked on' and false, fully contradicting the dynamic portrayal of gangster life the film produces to that point. Moreover, the ending was not intended as such, in the film's original conception; additional scenes describing Mike avenging his brother's death were considered too "brutal" for public consumption.¹⁹ As these factors indicate, *The Public*

Enemy's abrupt conclusion answers to a particular production context. Yet my interest in the film is not undone by these considerations; these images are the material of the film to which critics and audiences respond. That a rationale exists for their presence and specific arrangement does not deter from their impact, or alter their effects; instead, the circumstances of the film's production and release tend to enrich my appreciation of its singularity as a text. Edward Mitchell's discussion of the gangster genre evinces a related point. He writes:

while he somehow cannot succeed, the film gangster hero insidiously demands our admiration... Although the environment may mold and motivate the gangster, it never wholly determines him. Tommy Powers is more attractive than the Putty Noses or Paddy Ryans he comes in contact with. He retains possibilities that were never theirs.²⁰

I include this excerpt because it speaks to the peculiar tensions by which *The Public Enemy* operates; while working to demonstrate the film's typicality as a generic text, Mitchell also calls attention to the gangster's compelling qualities and the degree to which these 'outlive' his narrative context. In a similar vein, I am suggesting that the modes of explanation offered by production histories (and, of course, the model of *classicism I*) inform, but need not inhibit, the encounter of viewer-with-text. Rather, these concerns illuminate the details that are not contained or diminished by such frameworks with remarkable specificity.

While in certain ways my examination of *The Public Enemy*

touches upon issues of performance style and production context, the details that I have isolated stand as forceful instances that exceed these explanations. Indeed, these moments encourage contemplation because they remain unfixed, and seem to hover uncertainly within recognizable narrative structures. As my rehearsal of Gerald Bruns' writings suggests (chapter one), instances such as these invite interpretive activity; one looks to more stable aspects of the composition in order to make sense of these fragments. Yet my experience indicates that such interpretive approaches are frequently inadequate; these moments seem inevitably to throw off our best sense-making efforts.

To locate further illustrations of visual excess, I have selected Robert Siodmak's *The Killers* as an exemplary text. The film was produced in 1946 and is frequently designated by critics as the *locus classicus* of the series.²¹ In keeping with my rationale for film choice, it is important to note the representativeness of Siodmak's film; within the film noir category, *The Killers* is a familiar title that cannot be relegated to the margins of Hollywood production. As James Naremore notes:

We should recall that *The Killers* was a major studio production based on the work of a prestigious novelist [Ernest Hemingway] and that it received Academy Award nominations for best director and screenplay; no doubt it played in 'grindhouses', but it also played in expensive ones. Such a film is quite different from Lewton's B-budget horror pictures for RKO, which were confined to the lower levels of the industry.²²

Hence, Siodmak's film serves this discussion as a template for the film noir series and as a text whose peculiarities cannot be attributed to an eccentric, B-film status. Further, the film's star, Burt Lancaster, appeared in subsequent film noir features such as *Brute Force* (1947), *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948) and *Criss Cross* (1949) in a similar capacity. Much as Cagney's appearance in *The Public Enemy* set the tone for the gangster genre, Lancaster's performance came to typify certain tendencies of film noir.²³

The narrative of *The Killers* deploys an explicit investigative structure in order to describe an enigmatic condition: insurance agent Riordan pieces together the events leading to a man's murder, so as to discover the man's reasons for passively awaiting his own death. As Frank Krutnik states in *In a Lonely Street*:

The film comprises a series of asynchronous flashback 'testimonials' from diverse characters, these being contextualised within the framework of the investigative quest... The central enigma... is 'Why did the Swede refuse to save himself? What has robbed him of his masculine motive power?'... It is this enigma which propels Riordan's quest.²⁴

The above remarks not only indicate the film's general narrative pattern, but also find within this pattern an interpretive possibility; the Swede's fatalism is here configured as symptomatic of an impaired masculinity, and Riordan's quest thus implicitly corrects an aberrant condition. While the persuasiveness of his reading is a matter that falls outside the parameters of this discussion, I find Krutnik's account useful as an indicator of the instances within *The*

Killers that invite an interpretive response. Notably, the author writes:

There is a disturbing contradiction... between Swede's physically evident masculinity (the stress upon his muscled body, displayed through his vest) and his inertia when faced with danger.

Instead of taking positive action, he lounges on the bed, his face hidden in shadow... He just lies there as the hoods burst through the door and shoot him.²⁵

Here Krutnik's observations draw closer to the ideas informing my discussion; the author's identification of a 'disturbance' within the film's opening sequence describes the film's sustained narrative dilemma through a single, enigmatic image. While the details that the author names are deployed to organize a particular argument (in Krutnik's view, the film's effort to contain a problematised male subjectivity), it is significant that he extrapolates this reading out of a single visual puzzle. More pertinently, the author finds within this image both the narrative question ('why does he just lie there?') and its answer ('it has to do with the discrepancy between what we see and what we know'). In so doing, Krutnik situates this instance as a kind of visual synecdoche; it is an image that seems to encode the film's latent meaning.

As this example suggests, the film presents yet another instance within classical Hollywood that stimulates inquiry because it resists explanation. The image that Krutnik isolates is configured as a demonstration of his reading because its presence signals a 'closing' within the text. Hence, the image poses questions and must be reckoned with as a material instance

that means something significant. To this end, Krutnik's analysis endeavors to dismantle the image for the 'disturbing contradiction' that it offers and to set things right in terms of (his assessment of) the film's overall project.

What is most pertinent, in this regard, is that this single instance motivates interpretive activity, and conversely, that the critic's response works to recuperate filmic details within its own system of meaning. As I have indicated previously, it is not Krutnik's reading that is at issue, but rather the filmic moment that invites it. The disturbance that the author identifies stands out from the textual background in a way that is provocative, yet the image's power need not reside within the relations that Krutnik privileges.

To this end, I will address the same moment (figure 4) in some detail, while attempting to resist a conventional focus upon narrative primacy or a sense of how the film should operate. This approach permits, with respect to *The Killers*, a recognition of elements that are not transparent and self-articulating; what surfaces instead is a foregrounding of effects that arise from particular compositional arrangements and juxtapositions of shot scale. I will also suggest that this image initiates a series of similar, rhyming instances (figures 5, 6, 7). While these are more amenable to the narrative context, I understand them as describing an abstract condition. The film repeatedly offers emphatic images of what might be termed 'human angst' or 'suffering', conditions that in themselves defy coherent expression.

In specific terms, the aforementioned image of the Swede's passive waiting dwells not only upon his inert body (as Krutnik observes) but also upon his facial expression. A single shot, sustained for a languorous 38-seconds, describes this expression as follows: a medium close-up of the Swede's prone form, his face averted, and in shadow. The camera moves in

to a close-up; he rubs his eyes and turns his head, detecting the sound of a squeaking door. His face is now illuminated. The camera lingers here for over 20 seconds. He slowly sits up, and the camera moves with him, still trained on his face. This new framing becomes even tighter; the camera moves in slightly for the last two seconds of the shot. Within this final composition the face appears bisected; while the left side is starkly illuminated, the right is obscured by shadow. This arrangement is provocative and incomplete; as the right eye is indiscernible, the focus is upon the left, with its empty, deer-like gaze. As this summary indicates, the question of the Swede's condition, as it is registered in his face, is described by the film in a deliberately oblique fashion. The slight movement within the shot does not distract from its potency, but rather serves as an intensification; the issue of the Swede's inaction (he does nothing to avert disaster) is dramatically expressed because it is all the shot depicts ('this is what his waiting looks like'). Indeed, this image is repeated, subsequently; a series of shots alternating between the Swede and the approaching killers culminates with this close-up, producing a final glimpse of his face before the killers burst through the door. While the details that I have named satisfy the principles associated with *classicism I* (they engender suspense, and thus motivate narrative events), they also exceed these requirements. As I have argued with reference to *The Public Enemy*, the image raises questions that the narrative cannot answer (we do not yet have a context for the Swede's behavior), and more significantly, that are in certain ways unanswerable ('what is it to know that you are about to die?').

The Swede's disquieting expression resurfaces, in variation, across the body of the film. His recognition of a figure from the past, his discovery of

a woman's betrayal, and his realization that his boxing career is finished (figures 5, 6, 7) recall the image of the Swede's waiting (figure 4). Notably, these occasions qualify, but cannot satisfy, the enigma that the initial figuration poses. These episodes are fatalistic, and perhaps commensurable with Krutnik's reading, yet they overflow these contexts in important ways. I would propose a less pragmatic view of their functioning that locates these instances as partial responses to the question of the Swede's 'condition'. They are more determined than the first image, because they are positioned more comprehensibly within the narrative. More specifically, they assemble a background (and rationale) for the Swede's passivity that is finally inadequate; while the images reanimate the narrative enigma ('why does he just lie there?'), they cannot penetrate the Swede's experience. To explore this notion, I return to Barthes' delineation of the punctum, in *Camera Lucida*. He offers a specific example, as follows:

In 1865, young Lewis Payne tried to assassinate Secretary of State W.H. Seward. Alexander Gardner photographed him in his cell, where he was waiting to be hanged. The photograph is handsome, as is the boy; that is the studium. But the punctum is: he is going to die. I read at the same time: This will be and this has been; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose... the photograph tells me death in the future... Whether or not the subject is already dead, the photograph is this catastrophe.²⁶

It is easy to appreciate the relation between Barthes' object and the shot that I

have singled out from the film (figure 4); both images capture the unthinkable experience of 'waiting for death'. Although Barthes' theorizing insists upon the specificity of the photographic still, the scenario that he describes does much to illuminate the excesses of *The Killers*. In fact, I consider Siodmak's film to be premised upon the kind of disturbance that Barthes identifies; the film delivers a 'catastrophe' within its opening sequence for which the Swede's expression is a forceful condensation, and which the narrative's unfolding cannot dissipate. The question of temporality is an important one, in terms of this image's relation to the narrative structure; in Barthes' language, it shows us 'death in the future' (the Swede awaits the killers) before the film tells us 'death in the past' (Riordan's investigation). Hence, the questions that the Swede's expression solicits are uncoded by temporal certainty; they are suspended, like Barthes' photograph, in a disconcerting, anticipatory space. It is little wonder, then, that the narrative investigation seems unresponsive to the Swede's nameless 'condition'; his enigmatic stare is occasioned by the narrative, but unassuaged by its logic because it conveys an experience of temporality (quite literally, an emphatic 'waiting') that is unique within the film. Similarly, the secondary, rhyming instances (figures 5, 6, 7) shed light upon the Swede's condition, but are no more illuminating than the half-light of his bedside lamp. If *The Killers* poses a concrete narrative enigma, as Krutnik indicates ('why does he refuse to save himself?'), it also describes an experience that is half-formed and inarticulate ('how does it feel...?').

My suggestion that *The Killers* works to describe a nameless 'condition', rather than a specific narrative dilemma, is born out by the film itself; the Swede's expression not only recurs as his response to narrative

circumstances, as I have indicated, but is taken up by a minor character, as well. A final, anguished component of this enigmatic series does not centre upon the Swede at all, but rather upon the hood 'Blinky' Franklin. Franklin's delirious bedside confession late in the film formally resembles the episodes named to this point (figure 8). While this image is less resonant than the Swede's initial stare, the transposition of his expression to a secondary character complicates an argument for its direct narrative function by dispersing certain, unified meaning.

Indeed, this notion of *The Killers* as offering a textual description rather than a narrative prescription respects the integrity of individuated moments (as arresting and irreducible) and considers the extent to which the viewer may be uncomfortably implicated in their effects ('what exactly am I looking at?'). Most compellingly, this conception takes up the riddle that Krutnik identifies and reconfigures it on a broader scale; the disturbance emerging from 'what we see' versus 'what we know' need not be limited to the contours of narrative. Instead, *The Killers* may be understood as treating this issue more diffusely; it both depicts and invites an experience of uncertainty. In fact, the film's dismissive conclusion expresses just this kind of evasiveness; the concrete result of Riordan's quest is negligible, and for this reason, comical (the insurance company will be able to decrease their premiums by "one tenth of a cent"). In this way, the film concedes to the contrivance of its investigative premise and to the possibility that other filmic elements support its meaning. To this end, Krutnik's reading sees Riordan's quest as a restoration of masculine potency; this is the film's 'real' agenda. Conversely, my remarks forward a single, suggestive image as an interpretive locus, but do not designate a single interpretation.

Images such as those I have isolated do not describe their own functioning, and are for this reason are difficult to analyze with any adequacy. Indeed, their unwieldiness points to a significant issue: do the images themselves contain disturbance (such that we respond to their arrangement and content), or does the disturbance emerge from their relative placement ('I seem to know this image better when I understand its context')? This apparent binary is an awkward one to negotiate and speaks to Barthes' predilection for the photographic still. The removal of the image from the flow of narrative processes permits a more coherent consideration of its materiality, but also negates the effects that motion (movement within the shot or the progression of an image series) may engender. Although the isolation of the image is necessary for purposes of clarity, my investigation is film-specific and therefore must contend with the image relations that the motion picture generates. Thus, I will suggest that the images that I have isolated are doubly-marked; a problem is figured at the level of content and context. As I have suggested with reference to *The Public Enemy*, Powers' expression is nebulous, and shifts before our eyes; in *The Killers*, the Swede's waiting is almost unreal in its vacuity. That both figures are proximate to a death scene (Power's friend's, the Swede's own) perhaps contributes to the images' perversity and peculiarity. Relatedly, both instances exploit the camera's voyeuristic capacity; the viewer is privy to revelations that are unseen by those in the diegesis. Beyond these considerations, it is significant that each instance is without a direct, explanatory context; the narrative has not told us enough about Powers to make his reaction fully comprehensible; similarly, the first section of *The Killers* foregrounds the Swede's essential opacity. Hence, these instances demonstrate a remarkable interface that

facilitates their textual impact; the films set inexplicable experience within an 'unexplicating' frame. As Barthes says of the punctum, these instances gesture toward a "subtle beyond-- as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see".²⁷

Within my discussion of excess proper (chapter two), I posit a conception of the classical text that sees it as supporting elements which function multi-directionally. A given detail may serve the principles of *classicism I* ('this expression is ambiguous, but seems to be motivated this way'), yet may also offer substantial resistance, as per *classicism II* ('it is impossible to know what is meant by this expression; each time I return to it, it suggests something new'). This consideration has important implications for my project because it accepts certain of the insights afforded by a formalist schema such as Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's without foreclosing future investigations. Indeed, underpinning my discussion is the notion that *classicism I* offers but one way of seeing the classical text, and that this perspective emphasizes its familiarity. In response, my own investigation has endeavored to restore to the classical text the singularities integral to *classicism II*. By examining individuated moments, one is confronted by their material specificity, and in this case, with a kind of visual potency that exceeds familiarizing precepts. Moreover, I find this acknowledgement of the unfamiliar to be productive, and worthy of the texts in question. These details lend a material power to the work that is an essential part of its appeal; indeed, their presence enriches the classical text's composition by disturbing that which is comprehensible, and sometimes merely formulaic. Hence, by forwarding a vision of classical Hollywood that includes the conventional, but also the thing that cannot be conventionalized, we are able to re-engage

with the text attentively, and also pleasurably. In this sense, my designation of classicality indicates more than a formal perfection and propriety; it speaks to an interaction between text and viewer that is mutually constituting, and for this reason, enduring.²⁸

Notes

1. E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1989), 228.
2. Gombrich, 228-229.
3. *ibid*, 228.
4. As my introduction suggests, the scope of this investigation has been reduced, for reasons of practicality, to the specific case of the crime film. The notion of excess has been developed, in a quite different capacity, with reference to melodrama, as well. Prominent in this regard are Linda Williams' analyses, which set out horror, melodrama and pornography as 'body genres' (films that invite an embodied response). See "Body Genres" in *Fugitive Images; from Photography to Video*, edited by Patrice Petro, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1995).
5. By this, I am not suggesting that the image is a formal accident, but rather that it produces additional effects that seem coincidental to narrative concerns.
6. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, translated by Richard Howard. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 99.
7. Instances such as these might, in some cases, amount to holdovers from the pre-classical 'cinema of attractions'.

8. Frank Miller, *Censored Hollywood : Sex, Sin & Violence on Screen*, (Atlanta: Turner Publishing Inc., 1994) 57.
9. *ibid*, 58.
10. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 52-53.
11. By this, I wish to make a general distinction between spontaneous, emotional responses and perceptions that are distinct from emotion/volition.
12. Dyer, "Stars". In *Film Theory and Criticism*, fourth edition, edited by Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, Leo Braudy, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 622.
13. See Patrick McGilligan's study, *Cagney, the Actor as Auteur* , for a detailed account of this phenomenon.
14. Extra-textual knowledge is of particular relevance to the case of classical Hollywood, as the construction and manipulation of star personae/ star vehicles played an important part of the marketing of studio product. Two especially insightful accounts on this subject are Richard Dyer's *Stars* , (London: British Film Institute, 1979) and Miriam Hansen's *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991). An excerpt from the latter evinces this point: "The star performance weakens the diegetic spell in favour of a string of spectacular moments that display the 'essence' of the star... In such moments of display the star system seems to tap a persistent undercurrent of the 'cinema of attractions'".
15. Barthes, "The Face of Garbo". In *Film Theory and Criticism*, 628.
16. This suggestion is somewhat speculative; however, the unique 'look' of films of the period is perhaps attributable to soft-style lighting techniques. These worked to reduce image contrast by various means (filters, lenses, soft

film stocks), creating a diffuse, often portrait-like, effect. Clearly, the images I discuss have a very different quality, featuring bright, natural lighting (figure one) or dramatic lighting effects (figure four).

17. John Walker (ed.) *Halliwel's Film and Video Guide*, 1999 edition, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 1999), 646.

18. While I have consulted a number of accounts concerning the effect of censorship/public pressures on gangster film production, my discussion draws upon Frank Miller's text. A more recent account is Johnathan Munby's *Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening the Gangster Film from Little Caesar to The Public Enemy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), which situates textual peculiarities in relation to the constraints of censorship. Finally, Robert Sklar's *Movie -Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975) is also useful in this regard.

19. Miller, 57.

20. Edward Mitchell, "Apes and Essences: Some Sources of Significance in the American Gangster Film". In *Film Genre Reader*, edited by Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 163-4.

21. James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press Ltd., 1998), 20.

22. *ibid*, 140.

23. By this, I refer to received understandings of film noir as a post-war phenomenon; Lancaster's 'damaged' persona is consonant with the notions of disillusionment and fragmented subjectivity that are seen to inform the noir cycle.

24. Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: film noir, genre, masculinity*, (London:

Routledge, 1991), 114-115.

25. *ibid*, 115.

26. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 96.

27. *ibid*, 59. While Barthes' assertion is made with reference to the erotic image, its application here seems tenable; the notion of eroticism as emerging from a partial revelation (rather than a full disclosure) aptly describes the half-rendered images in question.

28. This chapter is indebted to Bart Testa for his delineation of the gangster film's 'narrative arc'. Profuse thanks to André Loiselle, for furnishing the accompanying video captures and to Nick Nguyen, who provided copies of the films in question.

Conclusion: Temporality and Classical Hollywood

**"The cinema is an invention with no future."
-Louis Lumiere, 1895**

My discussion to this point has endeavored to position classical Hollywood as a corpus that speaks beyond the framings of *classicism I* and remains as a rich and refractory cultural phenomenon. To this end, it is necessary to consider the manner in which the 'magic' of classical Hollywood is sustained within contemporary culture, in light of new attitudes, technologies and modes of reception. In the following section, I will briefly examine one crucial aspect of classical Hollywood's post-cinematic presence in contemporary media culture: transformations in the temporality of the viewing experience associated with the showing of classical films on television.

Certain historical factors are pertinent to a consideration of classical Hollywood's reconfiguration as an entity viewed at home, rather than within theatres. Significant in this regard is the agreement reached in 1960 between the film industry and the Screen Actors and other guilds; after this date, virtually all of Hollywood's feature films became available to television.² As William Lafferty notes:

NBC ushered in the era of prime-time, network feature film when it debuted 'NBC's Saturday Night at the Movies' on September 21, 1961. For the program's first season, NBC obtained 31 post-1950 features, 15 in color, from Twentieth Century-Fox, with the initial offering of *How to Marry a Millionaire*.³

Clearly, this event altered the manner in which classical Hollywood was received by audiences, while presenting the corpus to a new generation of viewers.⁴ Indeed, the phenomenon of the classical film as a televised event has not disappeared, though it has taken a variety of new forms. The tradition of 'Saturday Night at the Movies' persists on public television, and as a regular part of late-night programming elsewhere. Most notably, the acquisition of studio holdings by Ted Turner, while a point of contention for filmmakers, critics and viewers, assures the continuance of classical Hollywood on specialty cable. The change in viewing spaces is addressed by Barbara Klinger, who observes that

more consumers view films on television than in theaters. Television is not only the most important ancillary exhibition site for films, but it is also a critical screen experience for viewers that plays a significant role in contemporary film spectatorship. Rather than consider television, then, as a spurious meditation of the cinema that will forever fall short of the celluloid ideal, we might rather explore how its associated institutions and environments provide a legitimate, parallel field for spectator's experiences of a domestically realized, "genuine" cinema.⁵

As these remarks suggest, the shift from theatrical to domestic environments of reception presents a new set of circumstances and viewing prerogatives. This transition is of particular relevance for my discussion, insofar as the technologies associated with home viewing can be seen as both helping and hindering an appreciation of classical Hollywood. I will develop this assertion within the remarks to follow.

If classical Hollywood has found a new venue of reception within the domestic sphere, its accessibility and appeal for contemporary viewers must be understood in this new context. To this end, the introduction of television remote control and videocassette recorders stands as an important development; such devices proliferated within American households rapidly, permitting an unprecedented manipulation of filmed materials.⁶ The ease with which the contemporary viewer may record, pause, rewind or fast forward poses a new relation of viewer-and-text, in which we are able to shape and organize the viewing experience. Moreover, the ease with which films may be recorded, stored and viewed conveniently allows for repeated and/or partial viewings. As Anne Friedberg considers:

Now that 'time' is so easily electronically 'deferred' or 'shifted' one can ask: has the VCR produced a new temporality, one that has dramatically affected our concept of history and our access to the past? The VCR treats films or videotapes as objects of knowledge to be explored, investigated, deconstructed as if they were events of the past to be studied.⁷

Although Friedberg's remarks assume a serious-minded viewing practice that perhaps better describes the activity of the professional film critic than it does the experience of the 'average', or casual viewer,⁸ the notion of time-shifting is salient for my purposes. Recalling certain of Barthes' objections to the motion picture, and most specifically, the notion that film's persistent 'present tense', to use Metz's phrase,⁹ inhibits textual analysis, one is faced with a number of questions. For example, what might Barthes have made of film as a more readily manipulable medium? Might it make possible an analysis of the motion picture that is less compromised by an 'hypnotized' mode of engagement?¹⁰ Furthermore, might this manipulable temporality help to generate precisely the 'obtuse meanings' that Barthes had found lacking in film?

As a concluding thought, I find the issue of the classical text's temporality to be an important one, and I would like to position this project, however tentatively, in relation to this concern. In response to Barthes' later writings, I have indicated that cinema, and classical Hollywood in particular, is especially sensitive to his approach, because it offers material instances that are assertive and refractory. While cinematic, rather than photographic, in nature, these moments create a kind of 'pause' within the viewing experience. Relatedly, such details exceed narrative logic, and point to the explanatory limits of *classicism I*.

Further, my designation of *classicism II* describes a text that comes down to us from the past, but also guides us toward the future. A traditionary work, it continues to press upon us, and to influence contemporary thought. Hence, my application of these ideas to film studies suggests that classical Hollywood, while of a past era, sustains a forceful presence within culture.

Finally, my discussion of *The Killers*, suggests that the film's opening sequence produces a unique temporal zone, set as an emphatic 'past' to the narrative's 'present'. This example illustrates the concerns that I have taken up most explicitly; a single instance can be seen as conflating the distinctions of past and present. In fact, this tangled temporality supplies much of the film's power.

I reiterate these considerations so as to extend them to our understanding of the classical Hollywood film, which I have suggested be regarded as a phenomenon that straddles multiple temporalities. In this event, the classical text shows up as a work of the past that speaks to the present; it situates the 'pastness' of the photograph within an emphatic present tense. Within film studies, classical Hollywood illuminates the past, as history, and the present, as theory. Hence, our approach to these films needs to be as flexible as the experience they offer. In this spirit, Michael Wood writes:

Humphrey Bogart sits at a table behind a drink, moodily staring into the middle distance, a glint of heroic self-pity in his eyes. We are looking at a shot from *Casablanca* (1943) which has come to represent for many people... the essence of that film. Blown up into a poster, scattered through the clubs, cafés, foyers, flats, dens and dormitories of the Western world... a certain quality remains, an aspect of the shot *both then and now*.⁹

As Wood's observations attest, approaches to classical Hollywood that construe it as an historical object in the conventional sense (as a static entity,

sealed off within a finite context), severely limit our understanding of Hollywood films as a cultural phenomenon. My investigation began with attention to a discrepancy between the model of *classicism I* and my own experience of the classical Hollywood film, and has attempted to describe a material dimension that resists familiar modes of formalist analysis. In contrast to *classicism I*, the alternative understanding that I develop aims to account for the enduring impact of Hollywood films in film culture. My hope is that the intervention proposed by *classicism II* suggests a new range of applications and possibilities, restoring excess to an 'obvious' cinema.

Notes

1. William Lafferty, "Feature films on Primetime Television". In *Hollywood in the Age of Television*, edited by Tino Balio, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 246.
2. *ibid*, 245. Within this article, Lafferty observes the irony of this film choice. *How to Marry a Millionaire* was shot in color and cinemascope; these features were conceived as film-specific attractions, intended to lure viewers away from television and back to the theatres.
3. For a detailed account of this phenomenon, see Balio's text, above.
4. Barbara Klinger, "The New Media Aristocrats: Home Theater and the Domestic Film Experience". In *The Velvet Light Trap*, (42, Fall, 1998) 4-19.
5. See Anne Friedberg's account, "The End of Cinema: Multi-Media and Technological Change". In *Reinventing Film Studies*, edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 438-451.
6. *ibid*, 444.
7. Relatedly, discussions of new viewing technologies tend to overlook the actual practices of audiences during the studio era. Thomas Doherty's study of American movie audiences asserts that while motion picture exhibition "could run like clockwork, the audiences... did not". Specifically, his account

describes the common practice by which patrons might enter the theatre mid-programme, remain for the second screening and leave at the point at which they came in (or perhaps remain for repeated screenings). In this light, the fragmented and/or repetitive viewing practices associated with video culture do not necessarily indicate a new impulse. For details, consult "This is Where We Came In: The Audible Screen and the Voluble Audience of the Early Sound Cinema". In *American Movie Audiences*, edited by Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby, (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 145.

8. Metz, Christian. *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, translated by Michael Taylor, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 98.

9. I recognize also that the reconfiguration of classical Hollywood for domestic viewing raises significant issues of 'authenticity' (from the cuts imposed by networks to the distortions effected by colorization and 'panning and scanning' techniques). These issues, while troubling, cannot be developed here at any length. I will suggest, in brief, that my discussion does not mean to present technological innovations as necessarily enlightening or emancipatory; indeed, they serve economic imperatives too well to merit such descriptors. Rather, I would concede that the technologies of home viewing present both new pleasures and new difficulties. We may now view and purchase classical Hollywood, in a variety of formats, with unprecedented ease; what accompanies this phenomenon, ironically, is a contemporary 'classical' whose relation to the original has been effaced. Perhaps the conceptual conundrum that this presents will motivate future investigations.

10. Michael Wood, *America at the Movies*, (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1975), 24-25.

Appendix

Figure One

Figure Two

Figure Three

Figure Four

Figure Five

Figure Six

Figure Seven

Figure Eight

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