1

INTRODUCTION

Fatal Attraction and *Scarface*

How We Think about Movies

People respond to movies in different ways, and there are many reasons for this. We have all stood in the lobby of a theater and heard conflicting opinions from people who have just seen the same film. Some loved it, some were annoyed by it, some found it just OK. Perhaps we've thought, "Well, what do they know? Maybe they just didn't get it." So we go to the reviewers whose business it is to "get it." But often they do not agree. One reviewer will love it, the next will tell us to save our money. What thrills one person may bore or even offend another. Disagreements and controversies, however, can reveal a great deal about the assumptions underlying these varying responses. If we explore these assumptions, we can ask questions about how sound they are. Questioning our assumptions and those of others is a good way to start thinking about movies. We will soon see that there are many productive ways of thinking about movies and many approaches that we can use to analyze them.

In *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* (1992), the actor playing Bruce Lee sits in an American movie theater (figure 1.1) and watches a scene from *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) in which Audrey Hepburn's glamorous character awakens her upstairs neighbor, Mr Yunioshi. Half awake, he jumps up, bangs his head on a low-hanging, "Oriental"-style lamp, and stumbles around his apartment crashing into things. The audience in the theater laughs uproariously at this slapstick comedy but Lee does not. To the contrary, he becomes more and more enraged until finally he and his girlfriend leave the theater.

Lee is Chinese, his girlfriend is white, and *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* has shown him to be the victim of anti-Asian prejudice in the
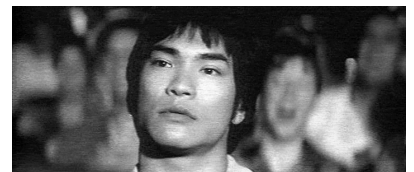
Fig. 1.1

Fig. 1.2

United States. In this scene, the butt of the humor, Mr Yunioshi, is an Asian man played by a white man (Mickey Rooney); the character's appearance (exaggerated make-up that makes him appear to be bug-eyed with buck teeth), dialect (he speaks with an exaggerated accent), and actions (comic ineptness), all reinforce stereotypical and degrading views of Asian behavior (figure 1.2). Lee feels that this representation, combined with the audience's laughter, reflects and contributes to his own assimilation problems. Others in the audience, however, do not see the movie in this way at all. They respond, or think they respond, only to the slapstick: the same scene, but very different responses. Furthermore, Lee's girlfriend initially joins in the laughter but becomes uncomfortable when she senses his pain.

Movies and Entertainment

Why do we go to the movies? Most of us go for entertainment. Indeed, Bruce Lee and his girlfriend are on a date when they see *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, a common context in which young people see movies. Going out on a date, having fun, and eating popcorn may all make it seem as if movies are fairly simple things that do not require much thought. But, as *Dragon* illustrates, having fun is not isolated from serious issues. Lee does not go to the movies in order to contemplate his social oppression but, in the midst of a light-romantic comedy, that is precisely what happens. He comes to an awareness that motivates his entire career: he dedicates his life to offering alternative representations of Asian men in the cinema.

Far from being frivolous, entertainment may actually provide a pleasurable smokescreen beneath which disturbing issues can be either reinforced or, more helpfully, contemplated. Different genres lend themselves to the examination of particular social and cultural issues. The modern horror film, beginning with *Psycho* (1960, figure 1.3, see chapter 6) and including such films as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), locates the most hideous horror at the center of the home and family. People go to those films, of course, to get scared to death, shriek, and jump out of their seats, not to

Fig. 1.3

contemplate whether the once joyous nuclear family with a working father and housewife mother is an outmoded institution that has become the breeding ground for psychotic murderers. Yet, as we will see in chapter 5, it may be precisely because we enjoy being scared to death that these films can take such an unflinching look at the family. Similarly, most people go to Westerns because they enjoy the action and the scenery, not because they want to contemplate the tensions within American society between the wilderness and the frontier and between white civilization and Native Americans. Yet, a film like *Dances with Wolves* (1990) makes very clear that that, in part, is what the genre is about.

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

Part of understanding movies is understanding the complex ways in which they relate to the society that produced them. People frequently assume this with movies like the Nazi propaganda film, *Triumph of the Will* (1935), but we will see that it is just as useful in exploring issues of race, class, and gender in a wide variety of genres including horror films, historical epics, action films, comedies, and Westerns. A Western like *Posse* (1993), for example, with its large cast of central black characters, seems odd when compared with most Westerns, such as *High Noon* (1952) and *Shane* (1953), which have no central black characters and frequently do not even contain marginalized images of blacks. The "civilized" West, these films assume, was a West peopled with whites. *Posse*, however, explicitly refers to the fact that the historical "West" contained many blacks; this implicitly leads the viewer to question their absence in traditional Westerns. When we look at the vast majority of Westerns from 1900 to 1970 and see virtually no blacks anywhere, we begin to learn about the racial priorities of American society and of the film industry during that period. We can often learn a great deal not only from what we see in a film but also from what we do not see.

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

Jurassic Park is, worldwide, one of the largest grossing box-office movies ever made. Half a year after *Jurassic Park* appeared, its director, Steven Spielberg, released *Schindler's List*, one of the most critically acclaimed films

Fig. 1.4

Fig. 1.5

of that year. They are very different kinds of film. *Schindler's List* received twelve Academy Award nominations, whereas *Jurassic Park* received only three, but earned much more money. *Jurassic Park* was, in many ways, exactly what Spielberg's fans expected – a fantasy filled with childlike wonder and moments of great terror, like Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975, figure 1.4). *Schindler's List* (figure 1.5) seemed to come from a "different" Spielberg, since it is a three and a half hour, intensely serious, black-and-white film about the Nazi Holocaust. Most of the critical respect went to *Schindler's List*; most of the money went to *Jurassic Park*.

Yet we must question rather than simply accept the seeming dichotomy between these two films. The Academy Awards typically honor serious films that represent Hollywood in a respectable light. That may help explain why many of the most successful genre directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, and Blake Edwards never won best director awards during the years in which their best mysteries, Westerns, and comedies were made. It may also help explain why comedies seldom win best film of the year and why, when they do, they are likely to be comedies with overtly serious subject matter. From this perspective, *Jurassic Park* is too much of an action-adventure, science-fiction film to be taken seriously. But this may tell us more about the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences than it tells us about anything intrinsic to *Jurassic Park*.

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

Critical Approaches to Movies

Throughout this book, we will be encouraging a critical process that is, by definition, never finished. As soon as we stop questioning, we are in danger of accepting easy and obvious "truths" that can, in fact, blind us to important issues. Let us return for a moment to *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* to illustrate how this works. As we have suggested, the film provocatively dramatizes the

evils of racial stereotyping in Hollywood films. As such, many might think that it should simply be embraced as a progressive step forward. Notice, however, that in the movie theater scene that we have discussed, Lee, the central character, is with his girlfriend. He is the one who has insight and, when she sees his rage, she adopts his position. If we just look at this scene, there is no problem. He, after all, is Asian and she is white, so it makes perfect sense that he would recognize the ugly racism of the film they are watching and she would adopt his insights. This, however, is not an isolated incident. *Dragon* constantly reinforces traditional gender roles by marginalizing her role and limiting her to comparatively brief scenes in which she is seen primarily as a girlfriend or wife/mother. She is narratively subordinate to the central male character in a manner that, like most contemporary Hollywood films, *Dragon* never questions or challenges. At every level, *Dragon* asks us to unquestioningly accept current stereotypes of women in film that are equivalent to the racial stereotypes in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* that so anger Lee. Yet, how many people watching *Dragon* are equally angered by its treatment of women as passive, marginalized characters who are beautiful to look at and whose primary function is to support important men?

People respond differently to films depending upon their gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and personal background. In *Dragon*, Lee's race and American experience make him respond to *Breakfast at Tiffany's* differently from the rest of the audience. In actuality, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* received many different responses at the time of its release. A brief survey of them complements the fictionalized Lee's response in *Dragon* and points to many central issues we will be exploring in the following chapters. In 1961, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* was dominantly perceived as a sophisticated romantic comedy. It was also seen as a star vehicle for Audrey Hepburn. Holly Golightly, the character that she plays, was, by early 1960s' standards, a free-wheeling, daringly sexual woman (figure 1.6). This image departed significantly from Hepburn's previous roles. During production of the film she was concerned that her character should not be too shocking for her fans. She wanted, in other words, to change her image but not to change it too drastically. But Audrey Hepburn was not the only famous name associated with this film. It was based on Truman Capote's well-known novella of the same name. As always happens in such cases, many people focus attention on similarities and differences between the novel and the film: how "faithful" is the movie to the novel; what changes have been made?

Within the industry, and increasingly for the public, another famous name associated with the film was that of its director, Blake Edwards. He had his first major box-office success with the immensely popular service comedy, *Operation Petticoat* (1959), which starred Cary Grant and Tony Curtis, two hugely successful stars of the time. But Edwards had never directed a sophisticated comedy. For some, this film was seen as marking a shift within the career of a director

Fig. 1.6

not unlike the manner in which *Schindler's List* is currently seen within Spielberg's career. Yet, another film director, Radley Metzger, primarily saw the film at the time of its release as opening the door to treating disturbing sexual topics and themes in a manner that would not offend audiences. Based upon his perception of *Tiffany's* as a sexually daring and groundbreaking film, Metzger made a series of successful and critically acclaimed films such as *Carmen, Baby* (1967) with much more overt and graphic sexuality than that in *Tiffany's*. Perhaps related to this, *Tiffany's* has remained an immensely popular film within the gay male community, where it still receives theatrical screenings.

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

Outline of the Book

The following chapters employ the structure of this one, with the first half introducing the chapter's basic critical focus and the second half illustrating it with close readings of individual films. The second half of this chapter uses *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and *Scarface* (1932) to introduce approaches that later chapters will develop more fully. The book's underlying premise remains constant: that there are many productive ways to think about movies; that we must never think we know everything about a movie; and that the more we learn about movies, the more that knowledge will help us to understand not

only those films but also important aspects of our culture. Far from destroying our pleasure from movies, this process enhances our appreciation of the complexities of this popular, influential art form.

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

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

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

The first of these issues, discussed in chapter 4, is **authorship**. One traditional way of relating artworks to larger issues is by raising the issue of authorship. This is a complicated issue since film is a collaborative form, but we show why the director is commonly considered the author of a film and then examine two films by quite different American directors from different decades, *The Searchers* (1956) by John Ford and *Jungle Fever* (1991) by Spike Lee. We show how placing these films within the perspectives of their directors' other works can give us valuable insights.

An entirely different context into which film can fruitfully be placed is **genre**, the subject of chapter 5. Genre study relates films not to other works by the same author but to other works of the same type, such as Westerns, musicals, or horror films. It shows us how different eras have treated similar material in different ways and helps us to understand the role of both formula and creativity in genre films. We discuss *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) in relation to both

the detective genre and *film noir*, and *Gunfight at the OK Corral* (1956) in relation to the Western.

Chapter 6 looks at a major phenomenon of the past twenty years: **series**, **sequels**, and **remakes**. This approach explores individual films within the context of films that are either sources for them or other films to which they are related by sharing common characters or continuing stories. We examine as examples the classic 1960 horror film, *Psycho*, and the 1998 remake of it, as well as *Goldfinger* (1964) from the popular James Bond series, which has continued over decades.

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

Up to this point, this book explores ways in which film can be understood by either examining internal aspects of the films themselves or by relating them to patterns within the world of cinema, but that world does not account for much of the significance that film has or what we can learn from it. To understand this, we have to consider wider areas. The first context, explored in chapter 8, is audiences and **reception**. The same film can mean different things at different times and even different things at the same time to different spectators and audiences. Much of this depends on the reception context in which the film is viewed. Reception contexts include how a movie is advertised and publicized as well as such things as public outcries and protests. This chapter will look at the initial reception of Charles Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris* (1923) within the context of the popular comedian's career at that time and how its meanings shifted at different points in his career, and at *The Crying Game* (1992), a controversial film whose initial reception context included a highly successful advertising campaign with which popular reviewers initially played along, creating a reception context that was soon to be altered.

Another way in which we can learn about film by stepping outside its world is to look at its relation to other art forms, the subject of chapter 9. We will look at areas of similarity and difference with art forms to which film is often compared: theater (a performance art) and fiction (a narrative form). We will illustrate these relations by means of two movies based upon novels, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1932), one of the many movies based upon Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (and influenced by plays based upon the same novel), and *Nosferatu* (1922), a German film from the silent era based upon Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*.

As well as being an art form, film is part of the mass media, and chapter 10 examines film's relation to the other mass media of radio and television. While all three use narrative, the formal properties and industrial practices of each

make of them very different things with different capabilities and traditions. Blake Edwards has had a long, successful career that includes work in radio and television narrative series and many Hollywood feature films. We will illustrate the differences and similarities among these media using one of his works from each medium: the radio show *Richard Diamond, Private Detective*, the television show *Peter Gunn*, and the movie *Victor/Victoria* (1982).

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

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

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

Chapter 13 similarly examines representations of race and ethnicity in film. To do so, we raise questions about what stereotypes are, how they function, and whether they affect all people in the same manner. We also consider the related issue of role models and show how seemingly progressive films with positive role models may nevertheless be racially troubling. Close readings of *LA Confidential* (1997) and *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), films which both engage and challenge traditional racial representations from profoundly different perspectives, conclude the chapter.

Chapter 14 explores class in a comparable way. Characters are stereotyped by **economic class** much as they are by race and gender. Frequently these issues intertwine, as in the common representation of certain minorities as

belonging almost exclusively to a servant class. Our culture also promulgates class myths such as the ones that rich people are miserable and that we are all better off being middle class or that class injustices exist only in other societies, not in the contemporary United States. We then analyze two Hollywood films, one of which, *Pretty Woman* (1990), simply affirms common notions of class; the other, *The People Under the Stairs* (1991), challenges those notions.

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

The ways in which movies are made, distributed, and understood are currently changing radically and will continue to do so in the coming decades. Chapter 16 surveys digital technology and its impact on 35 mm filmmaking as well as the emergence of digital video features that use no film at all in the shooting, editing, and projection process. We will also relate new digital technologies to "realism" and the **pro-filmic event** (see chapter 11). The emergence of home theaters with large, high-definition digital projection systems with Dolby surround sound and of DVDs (digital video disks) is also an important part of the digital revolution. Our primary film examples are *The Matrix* (1999) and *Timecode* (2000).

Our approach to understanding movies will take us on a quite different path from the one we are used to from reading movie reviews in newspapers and magazines or watching reviews on television. The purpose of reviews is to tell the reader whether or not the reviewer likes the movie and thinks people should see it. Accordingly, most people read reviews to help decide which films they should see; they commonly have a favorite reviewer with whom they frequently agree. The purpose of this book is quite different. Our primary purpose is not to tell students which films to see or which films are good or bad but, rather, to help students understand all the films they see and to learn ways of thoughtfully evaluating and talking about them. This process may lead some students to change their previous opinions about some movies and to become more responsive to others than they have been in the past.

We offer a close analysis of two films at the end of most chapters not because we think our interpretation is correct or the best one but, rather, because we want to demonstrate how a particular critical method or approach can be applied to specific films. As such we encourage students to think critically about our interpretations, questioning our readings and formulating their own. A textbook such as this is not just a presentation of factual information to be memorized. We offer our readings of films not to tell students what those films mean for all viewers at all times but, rather, to show what they mean to us within a particular critical framework. As such, we have chosen the films for their illustrative value, not because we think they are all good or favorites of ours. We have drawn heavily on popular Hollywood films and recent films

since many students will have seen them. But one of the purposes of a text-book such as this is to broaden students' viewing habits and introduce them to films with which they are not familiar. Thus, we have selected films from different national cinemas and older, classical Hollywood films to augment those with which most students will already be familiar. There is nothing privileged about the list of films except that they work for us and supply a balance between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

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

Fatal Attraction (1987)

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

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

Reception

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

Perhaps the best place to begin is with the film's unexpected and widespread popularity, not only in the United States but also in Europe. This came despite the fact that many critics did not consider the film particularly good, tending

Fig. 1.7

Fig. 1.8

to describe it as overly manipulative. Its popularity can be seen not only in the film's box-office success but also in the number of newspaper and magazine articles written about it, widespread reports of intense and vocal responses in theaters, talk-show discussions in which the term "Fatal Attraction Syndrome" was used as a pop psychological term to describe ruinous erotic attractions, a *Saturday Night Live* parody, and the widespread use of the title to characterize and popularize situations like the Joey Buttafuoco and Carolyn Warmus cases. Much of the talk-show interest focused in particular on women who were characterized as resembling the Glenn Close character, successful single women frustrated by the lack of a traditional husband and family.

The movie is about a brief affair (figure 1.7) between a married man (Dan, played by Michael Douglas) and a single woman (Alex, played by Glenn Close). When the man tries to end it, she refuses and, after first attempting suicide to gain his sympathy, she begins to menace him and his family. She finally invades his house brandishing a knife and is shot dead by his wife (Beth, played by Anne Archer).

While Alex, who has a traditionally masculine name, is established as an independent career woman, her independence is shown to be a veneer hiding her desperate envy of Dan's close relationship with his wife and daughter. In a key scene, she stands outside his house and secretly watches as he gives his daughter a pet rabbit while the whole family sits cozily beside a fireplace (figure 1.8). The domestic serenity of the scene is so disturbing to Alex that she staggers away to vomit uncontrollably (figure 1.9). Her frustration, which she first turned suicidally against herself, she then turns against the family. She kills the child's rabbit and later tries to kill the wife.

Different reviews described the film as "about" many things: a warning about the dangers of casual sexual relationships, even a masked warning about the dangers of sex in the age of AIDS; a melodrama about the importance of and dangers to family life; a condemnation of independent career women who express sexual desire; a half-horror film that turns such a woman into a monster; or even a feminist slant on a triangular relationship, since it is the woman who initiates the affair, the man who is weak, and the wife who kills the threatening Alex.

Its story was considered particularly appropriate for its times, the late 1980s,

Fig. 1.9

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

In the 1970s and early 1980s, many films such as *The Turning Point* (1977), *An Unmarried Woman* (1978), *Norma Rae* (1979), and *Private Benjamin* (1980) showed single women living productive lives without the necessity of marriage to be happy. This film depicts such a lifestyle as a cover-up for desperate unhappiness and a yearning to belong to a family unit. Many feminists argued that the film was part of a brutal backlash against feminism that removed the option of a happy, single life for women and, in fact, represented single women with sexual desires as monstrous threats to society. Others countered that, although the film undoubtedly strove to that end, it nevertheless created a strong point of identification and sympathy with the "monstrous" woman and made the "normal" family appear smug and repulsive. Rather than accept the film's family values and condemnation of the independent career woman at face value, such a response rejects those very values and opinions. We will see in chapter 12 that such gender issues comprise an important aspect of film criticism.

Fig. 1.10

The Film as a Construct rather than Reality

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

Fig. 1.11

Alex appears to be killed twice, by two people. When she attacks Beth, Dan comes to Beth's rescue and pushes Alex into the bathtub, attempting to drown her (figure 1.10). A number of close-ups show her apparently dead – under water, eyes open, the water no longer rippling from the struggle; everything is still and quiet (figure 1.11). Suddenly, she rises from the water, brandishing the knife, as if returning from the dead to kill Dan (figure 1.12). Beth enters the room and shoots her through the heart (figure 1.13). Such an ending strongly mimics endings in horror films like *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) in which the monster is apparently killed only to rise again and, in some cases, to be killed yet again. Since *Fatal Attraction*, such endings have appeared in a number of mainstream films such as *The Jackal* (1997) in which Bruce Willis's character, a brutal international assassin, is apparently killed by his nemesis,

Fig. 1.12

Fig. 1.13

played by Richard Gere, only to rise again and then be shot dead by another character. In fact, what was once an exciting plot surprise in thrillers can become, over time, an expected one. After John Travolta's villain appears to be blown up before the audience's eyes in *Swordfish* (2001), and even after his scorched body is graphically displayed on an autopsy table, some opening-day audience members said aloud, "He's coming back," and he does.

Norms for Judging the Film

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

The DVD of *Fatal Attraction* includes two endings shot for the film, the one in the **release print** and the original one. The release ending probably accounted for most of the excitement in theaters during the movie's release. It did so by turning Alex into a homicidal monster, and then by letting the audience revel in her brutal destruction. It is not only the fact of her demonization and obliteration that contributed to the film's success with audiences, but also the formal, technical skill with which Adrian Lyne shot and edited it. A look at some of the shots in the sequence preceding the attack will illustrate this and point not only to the role of a director in making a film but also to the value of close formal analysis of the films we see.

The Style of the Ending

Fig. 1.14

The sequence opens with a shot of water swirling into a bathtub drain. The bright light makes the porcelain ominously white, recalling a similar shot of water in a drain during the famous shower murder scene in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (see chapter 6). Here, Beth, dressed in white, is filling the bathtub. During the following scene, the bathroom is brightly white, with the light becoming more and more diffused by steam (figure 1.14).

The bathroom shots are **intercut** with shots of Dan downstairs as he goes about the house checking the locks, so the sense of danger from Alex outside builds. He puts a kettle of water on the stove. The lighting downstairs is a warm amber, which contrasts sharply between cuts with the bright white of the bathroom. In the bathroom, Beth looks vulnerable with her black eyes from an auto accident (figure 1.15). When she wipes steam from a mirror, she, and we, are shocked to see Alex in the room. We then get a full shot of Alex holding a large knife (figure 1.16).

Fig. 1.15

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

Fig. 1.16

The original ending

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

In the original ending, Dan and Beth are quietly raking leaves when the police arrest Dan for murder. Alex has been found with her throat cut and his fingerprints on the knife. When Beth searches for their lawyer's telephone number, she comes across a menacing audiotape that Alex had sent Dan in which she threatens suicide. Alex has killed herself in a way that implicates Dan who has been arrested, and it seems as if the tape will exonerate Dan. In the final shot we see a flashback of Alex in her bathroom. As *Madam Butterfly* plays loudly, she slowly begins to cut her throat.

This ending is much quieter than that of the release version. It makes Alex less of a monster and gives Dan no chance to partially redeem himself by coming to his wife's rescue. The test audiences specifically objected to the fact that Alex's fate was not punishment enough for her behavior.

Unity

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

The two endings point to an important aspect of movies: they are shaped by a multitude of forces, from screenwriters to directors to producers to actors to audiences. Even when "finished," a film isn't necessarily finished. Movies are often changed extensively as a result of audience testing.

Even when "finished" again, films are not necessarily finished. They are often cut or cropped or even colorized for television viewing; footage is often added for European or video or DVD release; and, years after a movie's release, a "director's cut" is sometimes assembled from material never shown in theaters (as is the case with the DVD version of *Fatal Attraction*). It is useful, then, to question what a film is or if a film is ever a single thing. Not only is it possible to interpret a film from a number of perspectives, but it is also possible to develop a number of perspectives about what the film itself actually is.

The Development of the Movie

Fatal Attraction is based upon a story that became the basis for a 45-minute short film, *Diversion*, by screenwriter James Dearden. Producer Sherry Lansing originally supported the development of the film as a big studio feature because she felt it was important to develop sympathy for the single woman and show the guilt and responsibility of the man. By the time the script had gone through several stages of development, the final film did exactly the opposite. It soft-pedaled the man's guilt and made a monster out of the woman. The

original developers of the script – Dearden, Lansing, and her partner Stanley Jaffe – were involved with the project until the end. They got screen credit and did not claim that the project was taken away from them. They participated in the complex process of developing an idea into a commercial film, even though basic aspects of its meaning changed along the way.

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

Glenn Close's Star Image

Fatal Attraction involved another transformation of an entirely different kind – that of a **star's image**. Glenn Close changed her image entirely with *Fatal Attraction*. Previously, after success as a stage actress, she was largely known for playing "good," largely asexual, women in movies like *The World According to Garp* (1982) and *The Big Chill* (1983). No one considered her for this role and, unusual for an important actress, she campaigned and tested for it. Her success with it turned her into a major star and has affected the kind of roles in which she has subsequently been cast, such as the ruthless and sexual manipulator in *Dangerous Liaisons* (1989) and, in a role directly reminiscent of *Fatal Attraction*, the ruthless, independent, sexually active career woman in *The Paper* (1994), as well as the crazed, jaded movie star in Andrew Lloyd Webber's stage musical, *Sunset Boulevard*, the greedy heiress in *Cookie's Fortune* (1999), and the sinister Cruella de Vil in Disney's *101 Dalmatians* (1996) and *102 Dalmatians* (2000). As we will see in chapter 7, a star's image is a carefully constructed entity, often an enormous financial asset, and something that helps create a film's meaning in basic ways.

Scarface (1932)

When Paul Muni appeared in the title role in *Scarface*, he had no star image. A successful stage actor, associated with the Jewish art theater in the 1920s, he had appeared in a few undistinguished and virtually unknown films. The

success of *Scarface* led to his becoming one of the most prestigious star actors of the 1930s, but one with a profile very different from that of Glenn Close. As we discuss in chapter 7, there is a major difference in films between stars and star actors. Stars like Clint Eastwood, Marilyn Monroe, and John Wayne establish charismatic star images that follow them throughout their careers. Audiences tend to perceive all of their roles as variations upon their dominant image, such as sexpot or rugged cowboy. Many such stars often play a greater variety of roles than they are given credit for, but their fans' perception of them returns to the dominant star image. Star actors, to the contrary, often have no dominant image and often pride themselves on the diversity of roles they play: examples are Marlon Brando, Meryl Streep, Tom Hanks, and Laurence Olivier.

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

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

The Gangster Genre

Along with *Little Caesar* (1930) and *The Public Enemy* (1931), *Scarface* helped establish the urban gangster **genre**, one which began in the early sound era and generally involved the meteoric rise and violent end of a young male criminal. His rise frequently involves the murder of the previous mob boss and

his frenzied acquisition of extravagant consumer goods (clothes, automobiles, apartments) as well as women. The genre has often been seen as a critique of consumer capitalism of the 1920s, with the gangster as stand-in for the successful businessman.

Each of the three films mentioned launched the career of a major actor (Edward G. Robinson in *Little Caesar*, James Cagney in *The Public Enemy*, and Muni) and the genre became a male action genre. The films generated much controversy since they were accused of glorifying crime and reveling in violence. The stars created by the genre soon distanced themselves from it for more law-abiding roles and the genre itself, for a number of reasons, soon became marginalized as a "B" genre, seen as unsavory, overly formulaic and repetitive, receiving little critical attention and seldom drawing established stars or major studio financing. As we see in chapter 5, however, the components and industry profile of genres change over time, and by the 1970s the genre would achieve a new respectability with films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The Godfather* (1972), and the 1983 remake of *Scarface* starring Al Pacino.

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

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

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

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

Social Context

Scarface was as controversial a film in its day as *Fatal Attraction* was in 1987. In 1932 there was widespread concern that gangster films glorified violence and might corrupt the young. This tapped into the extensive publicity of the era given to actual gangsters like "Scarface" Al Capone and anxiety that a wave of violence was overtaking the country. Many films in the genre were marketed as coming "from the headlines," or directly representing contemporary urban reality. Studio attempts to avoid censorship led to a number of significant changes in *Scarface* before its release and, even when it was released, it appeared in different versions in different states (many of which had different censorship boards). What we now accept as the standard release version of *Scarface* opens with a written prologue directly asking the viewer what should be done about violence in society. The prologue, along with a scene of a newspaper editor meeting concerned citizens, was added after censors objected to the film's violence. The studio responded by claiming that the film was centrally concerned with violence as a real social problem. Yet nothing in the film hints either at the causes of its characters' violence or at what might be done to eliminate such behavior. In fact, *Scarface* is notable for its lack of any real social context. The film represents gangsterism as a form of male bonding and contrasts it with the family sphere and the home, which is the traditional place for women. This narrative structure gives central importance to Tony's obsessive concern with keeping his sister at home with their mother and thus far removed from his world of male violence. He fails in this mission: Cesca (Ann Dvorak), his sister, ends up dying in a hail of police fire.

Such thematic observations contribute to the important awareness that film is never an unmediated reality but always a construction. *Scarface* might have had its inspiration from "the headlines" but is not equivalent to them, just as the headlines themselves are mediations of the events they report. *Scarface* has a rigorous formal structure.

Fig. 1.17

Fig. 1.18

Fig. 1.19

The X Motif and Male Violence

Howard Hawks, the director, structures the film around a visual **motif** of Xs (see chapter 3 on formal analysis). Initially, the X motif is associated exclusively with male violence but it later becomes complexly interwoven with the world of women and romance. Indeed, this is already hinted at in an early use of the X motif. An X-shaped scar on a close-up of Tony's face in a barbershop identifies him as the title character (figure 1.17). Shortly after, a woman

Fig. 1.20

Fig. 1.21

asks him how he got the scar and he replies, "In the war." Another gangster cynically interjects, "Yeah, some war with a blonde in a Brooklyn speakeasy." Scars resulting from wars are traditional signs of masculinity that show that a man has been tested in violence and survived. The scars imply that he is tough, not weak. Tony's scar, however, implies an inability to control women.

Scarface begins with Tony killing a gangster. At the moment that he fires the shot, we see his shadow fall directly upon the shadow of a large cross or upright X (figure 1.18). From this moment on, all the killings will be marked by the presence of the X motif. During a montage of violence, for example, we see a body lying directly over a shadow of an X on the ground and, in a high angle, we see the X shape of street signs above the body (figure 1.19). We see a wounded gangster lying in a hospital bed with an X behind the bed (figure 1.20); moments later, he is shot dead. Another gangster, hiding in a dark room, sits beneath and then stands in front of a large white X on the wall (figure 1.21). He leaves to go bowling and, in a comic variation of the motif, we see him bowl a strike and die while the X is marked on the scoring sheet (figure 1.22). A mass murder of gangsters in a garage takes place beneath a rafter lined with Xs (figure 1.23) and, after the shooting, we see a bright X shape on their bodies (figure 1.24).

Fig. 1.22

Fig. 1.23

The X Motif and Male–Female Relationships

In all of these instances, the X motif characterizes the world of male violence. As in the old cliché, X does, indeed, mark the spot. It even functions as a form of foreshadowing, marking some who will soon be dead. Somewhat ominously, then, the X appears in the first scene between Cesca and Guino Rinaldo (George Raft), one of Tony's comrades. Cesca looks down at Guino, who stands on the street below her balcony. The shape of an X appears in the grill-work of the balcony railing (figure 1.25) and is visible in shots

Fig. 1.24

Fig. 1.25

Fig. 1.26

representing both his and her points of view. From the start, their relationship is doomed and they are marked for death. Later, we see Cesca at a party and Tony flies into a rage at her sexual behavior. After Tony confronts her, she turns around and the straps of her sleeveless dress form a large X across her bare back (figure 1.26). She leaves the party and we see a midshot of the X on her back as she stands looking out of her bedroom window, from which she first saw Guino. Although Tony has been obsessed with keeping Cesca out of his world, the X motif of male violence has now literally migrated on to her body.

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

Fig. 1.27

married. Tony, enraged at Cesca's presumed immoral behavior, approaches their apartment. As he rings at the door, we see the Roman numeral X, indicating apartment number ten (figure 1.27). When Guino opens the door, he stands directly in front of a huge, white X on the wall behind him (figure 1.28). Seconds later, Tony shoots him.

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

Fig. 1.28

Incest Theme

The film ends ironically with Cesca being killed not only with Tony, but in the very sanctuary that he built to protect himself. He

virtually imprisons himself in a fortress and yet Cesca enters it. Just as he fails to keep her home with his mother and fails to keep her from entering into a relationship with Guino, he fails to keep her out of his inner sanctuary and then fails to protect her after she enters it. Once again, both death and the failure to separate the two worlds are marked by the X. We see an X on the wall of Tony's room as he carries his mortally wounded sister to a sofa. That and other Xs are now at the very center of his private sanctuary.

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

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

The 1983 Remake of *Scarface*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ethnicity and Class

Issues of class and ethnicity figure prominently in each film. Neither of the central characters conforms to the cultural ideal of white, middle-class male but, rather, they come from marginalized immigrant classes in the United States and seek elevation through violent crime. Marked by their accented English, clothes, and social deportment, their behavior engages contemporary **stereotypes** about "those" types of people being "inherently" criminal. The immigrant class for each film is different – Italian Americans in the 1930s as opposed to Cuban Americans in the 1980s – as is the outlawed business they enter – liquor during Prohibition as opposed to illegal drugs in the 1980s – but both films engage contemporary prejudices against immigrant classes. A very real question for us is whether or not the films promote or deflate ethnic stereotypes. And if they promote stereotypes, what significance does that have? We will return to racial and ethnic stereotyping in chapter 13. A related issue emerges in the fact that the working-class gangsters of both films desire to leapfrog the middle class and rise directly into the wealthy, upper class. As we will see in chapter 14 on class, this simply places them in comparably untenable positions.

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

SELECTED READINGS

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