PART III

CULTURAL EXPRESSION
7 Picture this

Nena, ‘99 Luftballons’

[...] Then I’ll sing a song for you About 99 toy balloons And that, back then, who’d picture this?¹

7.1 Introduction

‘Vision,’ said Jonathan Swift, ‘is the art of seeing things invisible.’ This part of the thesis, comprising the present chapter and the next, is an experiment in the art of seeing things, visible and not. It discusses a selection of mainstream films from the 1990s, which relate in a positive sense to left-of-centre politics. My chief motive, in singling out particular films for comment here, is to bring out connections between cinema and the matters discussed in chapter six. My concern is therefore with films that are relevant to leftists’ handling of centrist rule, and their handing of the pull toward political cynicism.

The present chapter grew, in part, from my experience in presenting my research to a few audiences, lay and scholarly. I was often asked something like this: ‘What are the reasons for choosing the arts as the line of entry into the question of how the active left dealt with political cynicism, instead of following a social science discipline?’ I found that, in many cases, it took a lot of talking to convince people that a mass art – in this case, mainstream cinema – and the facts of politics feed into each other in ways that merit close attention.

First, the arts consist in creating, and creatively evaluating, works that are rival pretenders to thrones of truth. The result is a play of forces, and of the will to power, where the forces and the will are influenced by tradition, but can overcome its strictures. It is a messier play of forces than one finds in science, but the arts have an immanent discipline.

The discipline is an ethic of holding things responsible in their throes of transformation. Artists and their works, and that includes works of criticism, are responsible to what they could have become, and to what they may yet become. To work as an artist, or to be artful in

¹ Nena’s 1983 hit song, ‘99 Luftballons,’ is a pop ballad on themes that weave in and out of each other: innocence and experience; naivete and cynicism; paranoia; and that the personal is political. In the song, facts/‘facts’ have a life of their own, a bizarre yet all too ordinary life of facts. (Translated literally, und daß sowas von sowas kommt is ‘and that such a thing comes from such a thing!’ Other possible translations are ‘and that this leads to that,’ or, to make it scan correctly in the line from the song, ‘and that one thing leads to the next.’ My free contextual translation – ‘and that, back then, who’d picture this?’ – plays into the song’s themes.)
any line of work, is to be keenly aware of living in a space of future contingencies of the present. The present hangs on its passage into a future, a sooner-or-later sideways shift that will form the present, not as the present now is (the datum), but as a past that is not yet given (a ‘mutad’, so to speak). That is why art does not pretend to mirror things as they ‘are,’ and why it queers the divide between nonfictions and fictions. Art confers a freedom to create, with a matching responsibility to create. Section 7.2 expands on the above apologia for my search for evidence in the arts.

Section 7.3 outlines why I have singled out cinema, when I could have chosen literature, or music, or drama, or another art form. It also indicates where my handling of cinema fits in relation to established approaches to the study of film and politics.

Section 7.4 begins with some sobering observations on trends in the film industry from the 1950s on. Those trends brought about major changes in the aesthetics of mainstream cinema, as far as the Western world is concerned. Writing about film and politics, from within the glare of ‘new Hollywood,’ is a gamble. I explain, toward the end of the section, the approach I take to that gamble.

Sections 7.5 through 7.7 present my observations on one notable cycle of films, from the mainstream cinema of the second half of last century. The films that belong in the cycle, most of which are thrillers, fit within a frame narrative of a certain corrupt power system with an insidious growth habit. I relate the cycle to the argument in chapter six, on the way the active left escaped the pull toward political cynicism in the nineties. Section 7.8 concludes the chapter.

### 7.2 The sciences and the arts: ways of connecting the dots

Dating at least back to Nietzsche’s critique of science, thinkers who share a commitment to immanent critique have had certain misgivings about science. The root of the concern is that science is monist: science insists that, at any given time, and in a given field of inquiry, there is just one realm of truth fit to be spoken of and to be explored. Pity the world known to science. Teased by science’s willing practitioners, it lies spreadeagled under a gaze sent by a reigning paradigm: the paradigm of its time.

The sexual imagery, viewed as a return of the repressed, is not far off the mark. The sciences’ devotion to one-at-a-time realms of truth is a kind of piety. It comes from the ascetic ideal of the Judaean-Christian religion. Thus, science is a product of a morality that vindicates reactive forces (forces that separate power from what it can do) and self-negation.

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2 The term ‘new Hollywood’ is widely used in film studies. I explain the term in the discussion of film industry matters later in the chapter.
Thomas Kuhn caused a stir in the philosophy of science, with his thesis that normal science is punctuated by periods of scientific revolution. Kuhn gave persuasive accounts of normal science, and of the ‘abnormal science’ (his term) that from time to time upsets the reigning scientific paradigm, replacing it with a new one. Kuhn’s legacy is science as a serial monist, which is arguably still a product of the ascetic ideal. But the abnormal science imparts a hybrid vigour to the venture, over time.3

The arts are not monist. They welcome immanent truth, and therefore welcome thinkers who work with ambiguous truths even though it is awkward to do so. The arts’ forte is the evaluating, in a spirit of reciprocity, of works that are rival pretenders to thrones of truth. The pretenders enter into a tussle over the evaluating of each other. What the arts do can be better appreciated with concepts that Deleuze explains in chapter two of Nietzsche and Philosophy.4 The arts consist in acts of assertion by powers of the false (pretenders, dealers in images and illusions), giving rise to encounters of active and/or reactive forces. At the same time, by way of those encounters, affirmative or negative qualities devolve to the forces.

The arts offer an untidy tussle between powers of the false. But the arts have an immanent discipline. What matters about the arts is the quality of power that can be expressed in art. There is a kind of chaos in the arts, but it is not the chaos of pure licence (licence to pretend, to fabricate, and to dupe, no matter what). No doubt, in the arts, there is freedom to go punching holes in the code of practice that normal science espouses – the code that distances observer from observed, researcher from subject of study. It is okay even to cock a snook at Kuhn’s code of one-at-a-time-truths. The point is that in tasting those freedoms, one has to look out, because one is thrown into a position of responsibility.

In the arts, you, the doer, and the works that bear your name, take the rap. You take the rap because you and your works do not submit to any rules but the rules you give to each other. Possessed of that self-mastery, you have the power to make promises – you have the power to keep and to break your promises. You are capable of accepting responsibility for what may come of your action. You cut yourself off from shifting blame to some outside authority (a commanding code-giver), in that you see, and own up to seeing, there is freedom

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3 Kuhn exploded the myth of science as an objective search for transcendent truth. He replaced it with the myth of progress achieved by means of science, a revving engine of one-at-a-time-truths ((Kuhn, 1962); also (Kuhn, 2000)).

There is a school of thought on the fringe of science, which does not subscribe to the Kuhnian view. It is inspired by Nietzsche’s critique, and goes by the name of Science and Technology Studies (‘STS’). The ‘science wars’ of the 1990s comprised efforts by proponents of dominant science to drum STS scholars out of research and teaching institutions, and to malign them in the larger public sphere. The science wars – including the academic hoax carried out by the physicist Alan Sokal – were mentioned, as part of the recent history of the left, in ch 4 above (note 37). Arguably, the Sokal hoax is an own goal, since it is an artful piece of non-science.

4 (Deleuze, 1983 /1962). Deleuze, in the second chapter, clarifies ‘active and reactive’, and the affirmative and negative qualities of the will to power. He also comments on how qualities of the will to power devolve to forces, as they happen upon other forces.
to go outside any such authority. You therefore operate under the inverted code, or counter-code, that Slavoj Žižek calls the ‘Scilicet’ (‘You are allowed’).

The Scilicet is an ethic of holding things responsible to what they could have become, and to what they may yet become. The ethic is joined to the special kind of freedom, viz critical freedom, that is experienced in Lacanian separation (see section 6.5 above). If, within the Scilicet, there lurks a paradigm, it is the following precept or tenet. The precept is that each of us, each body and partbody, is never sure what it truly desires, and more generally, it is never sure what may be ‘true’, since truths and falsehoods are, in part, artefacts of narration and language. There is nothing in creation that knows for certain even the kind of being that it is, much less which individual being. In the submerged cliffs of time, different connectings of the dots – incompossibles – jostle one another to get traction and reach caves of refuge.

Think what follows from that. To be capable of accepting the ethic, or the self-mastery, that is the Scilicet, we must consciously become a body and partbody that dwell in a space of rival incompossibles. In more familiar language, it is a space of contingencies, and above all, a space of future contingencies of the present. The present hangs on its passage into a future, which will rewrite the present as a past. The rewriting is both creative and destructive. In such a space, artlessness invites ruin. ‘We’ are not yet a given; ‘we’ are-on-hold, and the task is to face up to that. ‘We’ are ‘pure seeming, pure appearing-to-be, pure maybeing.’

I am using two nonce words, ‘to be-on-hold’ and ‘maybeing,’ which stand in contradistinction to the verb ‘to be’ and the gerund ‘being.’ The nonce words are part of an experiment in – and here I borrow a passage from William E Connolly –

[…] negotiat[ing] that uncanny line between thought and the unthought. Not the unthought as implicit idea not yet rendered explicit. […] But the unthought as surprising events yet to be interpreted, as mute energies not yet organized into thought, as dark impulses or undefined suffering. These are becomings that do not yet take the form of thought because the language to articulate and change them has yet to be invented. To cross this boundary between thought and the unthought is to usher new ideas and possibilities into the world. It is to change

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5 (Žižek, 1999: p 392). Žižek notes that Scilicet is the title of a yearbook edited by Lacan, which was published in the early 1970s. In expounding the Scilicet, Žižek writes: ‘Lacan’s maxim “Do not compromise your desire!” fully endorses the pragmatic paradox of ordering you to be free: it exhorts you to dare’ (idem.). The Scilicet is another name for – or a reinvention of – Spinoza’s principle stating that right is coextensive with power, or, ‘If you can, you may.’

6 The synthetic nature of truths and falsehoods is an aspect of grammar in motion, as discussed in ch 3 above (section 3.5). It hardly needs saying, but their synthetic nature does not mean that they are freely interchangeable, nor does it mean that they all have equal worth in terms of affirming life.

7 Deleuze explains Leibniz’s concept of incompossible worlds, and shows how incompossible worlds relate to freedom, in ch 5 of The Fold (Deleuze, 1993/1988 Fr).

8 In emphasising future contingencies of the present, I am distancing myself from the influential ‘history of the present’ school in sociology. That school specialises in documenting the historical contingency of the present.

9 The phrase in quotation marks come from Thomas C Wall’s discussion of the character Judy-Madeleine in Alfred Hitchcock’s Vertigo ((Wall, 2004), italics in original). Wall invents the gerund ‘maybeing,’ which I furnish with a verb, viz the verb ‘to be-on-hold.’ ‘To maybe’ can be used as a synonym for ‘to be-on-hold.’
that which precedes thought by bringing it into thought. This is the most creative and inaudible moment in thought, theory, dissent and the politics of becoming.\textsuperscript{10}

So, in the arts, we bear full responsibility for the repeated wagering of our being, as we sway about, with everything else, forming a constituent mass. We are-on-hold, and we become, in the thick of it all. An inkling leaks out now and then as to what abstract machines are up to. That is the type of machine discussed in the closing stages of chapter three; abstract machines are diagrams that work in particle-sign-ness, putting form in signs and in things. They are banks of abstract conduit lines, whose role is to mete out consequentiality and eventfulness, and to effect incorporeal transformations. By some feat involving abstract machines, there are swervings through a chaosmos, and each thing senses some small part of it. It is an immense, submerged hanging garden-cum-forest, a world of truths-and/or-lies that are expressed in squirited ink, garbled sonar, and dappled light. It is a world of maybeings (virtual beings), from which emerge becomings.

7.3 Of film and politics

Notes for a genealogy of cinema\textsuperscript{11}

When researching the active left in the nineties, I pursued cinema, to the neglect of other subdivisions of the arts. I now outline what led to that decision.

Cinema is an art form that reaches a mass public. In terms of audience reach, mainstream cinema is in the same league as pop music. It is readily accessible not only on the big screen but also through releases on DVD and video, and through broadcast and pay television. Because of the wide accessibility, and the many non-verbal and verbal tropes that are spread by ‘the movies,’ cinema works as a vernacular language.

In that regard, cinema (and radio, television and video) keep alive today a line in Western culture that goes back through variety, music hall and vaudeville, pantomime, and the vernacular drama of the baroque age (commedia dell’arte, also known as commedia a soggetto), all the way back to the vernacular drama of thirteenth-century Europe.\textsuperscript{12} Each of the precursor forms to cinema, in its day, was the production- and exhibition-house of shows that reach all-comers. They assumed neither a well-heeled public, nor an audience with any special training in art appreciation, in the three Rs, or in the speaking of any master tongue;

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\textsuperscript{10} (Connolly, 2000).
\textsuperscript{11} I offer the notes for a genealogy in a puckish spirit. In the comedie of tracing genealogies, I am one of the zanni (low-born clowns). Of course, there are earnest genealogies of cinema. I do not challenge them. I am entranced by the genealogy that Sean Cubitt sketches, in ch 1 of The Cinema Effect (Cubitt, 2004: especially pp 5-6). I shudder at the doom-ridden one that Paul Virilio presents in War and Cinema (Virilio, 1989).
\textsuperscript{12} Early cinema found ready-made audiences, accustomed to attending variety, music hall and vaudeville shows. Those forms of spectacle, in turn, were progeny of pantomime and commedia dell’arte. On the connection between commedia dell’arte and medieval secular and religious drama, see (Nicoll, 1963: Part III ‘The Fate of the Mimes in the Dark Ages,’ (ii)-(iii), and Part IV ‘The Commedia dell’Arte,’ (i)).
and they blithely went ahead with no official stamp of approval. The hallmark of protocinema was this: the show was an open circle, with no telling who may be seen and heard at the performance and in it.

Hence, if we bracket five present-day vehicles for spectacle together – the movies, radio, television, video/DVD, and street performance – we have a force that renews, for our times, a public with staying power. Vernacular drama brought this public into being, two hundred years before Gutenberg built the first printing press. It was a public to the travelling artists of Europe, producer-performers who carted with them floats made of wood (called ‘pageants’), on which to stage their – none too reverent – mystery, morality, and miracle plays.

Vernacular drama’s audience of all-comers, in its original and regenerate lives, is a public for spectacle, and a public that is attracted to a mix of tropes. There are tropes of gesture; of ‘faciality’ and mask; of casting; of song, music and sound; of mise en scène; of lighting. There are tropes of special effects, which in cinema initially had to do with items such as the film stock, camera placement and movement, duration and rhythm of shots, lens and projection technology, and editing – since the late 1980s, special effects have been narrowly associated with digital imaging. There are also, of course, tropes of words, chiefly spoken words.

The audience of all-comers down the years is a free public, in the following sense. The open circle, by its genesis, owes nothing to the regimes that use spectacle, gesture, and words to uphold order. The open circle is not coopted into organised religion, royal courts, high society, or the state.

Therefore, when scholars draw a parallel between the early cinema palaces and Gothic cathedrals,¹³ the point of the parallel needs to be carefully stated. A cinema palace mimics cathedral architecture’s trope, which is structurally expressed through spatial array, through majestic play of shadow and light, and through an acoustic that is walled off from the mundane. The mimicry by cinema palaces has nothing to do with tribute or reverence. It is a sign of genesis through rupture in cathedral architecture’s work. The cinema palace belongs to a sustained line of flight from the moulding of habits in bodies for the transcendent – and hence parasitic – order of Christian religion. Cinema’s genius is that it’s a spectacle where the unwashed populace mingles as a public without the imprimatur of a transcendent order. That congregating for the spectacle, where the public is unwashed anew, is an outlandish rite of baptism. It’s a godless miracle. (It evinces nontheistic gratitude, or nontheistic reverence, to borrow a form of words from Connolly.¹⁴)

All of that would be by the by, except that the genesis (through rupture) is still in progress right now. Cathedrals and royal thrones have segued into their successor forms: these include corporate annual meetings; parliamentary debating chambers; cabinet rooms; law courts; dwellings on the debt-collectors’ rounds; schools, barracks, factories, offices, and

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¹³ Scott McQuire writes of the cinema-cathedral parallel, which he attributes to Paul Virilio; see (McQuire, 1998: pp 216-217.

¹⁴ (Connolly, 2004: pp 73, 78, 102, 104, and 197).
prisons; high- and low-tech systems of surveillance and control. Regarding present control systems, ‘rooms around couches’ is a useful category, taking in three kinds of couch. First, there are psychotherapists’ consulting room couches. Second, there are living-room couches as emblems of the kind of interior design that striates society. Third, there are couches that perform as quasi-sockets, connecting bodies-at-leisure to home TV monitors.

The subverting of rooms around couches can be tasted in Todd Solondz’s wry portrait of two characters taking part in a psychotherapy session, in a scene near the beginning of his movie Happiness (1998). Consider also the angst hovering around a living-room couch, in two scenes of thwarted sex between wife and husband: the couch scene in Sam Mendes’s American Beauty (1999), and the one in Todd Haynes’s Far From Heaven (2002). A living-room couch also marks the onset of the mystery illness that pervades the city, the home, the woman, and the new age retreat, in Haynes’s Safe (1995).

The charged couch scenes in those four movies invite the building of a myth of renewal of popular cinema, to echo the myth of pioneer cinema that Sean Cubitt has posited. (Cubitt, weaving his myth of pioneer cinema from the famous Louis and Auguste Lumière film La Sortie des usines Lumière (1895), makes some points about the setting where the film’s first screenings took place, and about the film’s subject matter. The Lumières’ film is addressed to an audience of petits-bourgeois workers and flaneurs, and it shows them their peers, walking and cycling away from the gates of a factory, exiting for a while the site of their oppression.)

Where a public lives up to cinema’s genesis, any project for a total ‘aestheticisation of politics’ will fail. The public that is worthy of cinema will sustain cinema’s genesis through rupture in the parasitic order’s system-architecture. That sustained genesis is the drawing of a line of flight that the order cannot seal off.

Cinema palaces, then, at their best, are part of a cure, which breaks its public of the ‘fear thy master and love him’ habit. Cinema halls, salons, open-air screenings – and even multiplexes, and TV and video/DVD monitors – are likewise, when taken at their best, part of the said cure. Perhaps it should be called the ‘seeing’ cure, giving it a name that would pair it with the ‘talking’ cure, which is a staple of Freudian therapy. The two arrived in the world at the same time. The ‘seeing’ cure exposes as humbug all norm-ridden processes; hence it works as an antidote to the ‘talking’ cure.

The trade-off

Today’s cinema, at its best, still shows signs of its inherent genius. ‘At its best’ is the operative phrase! There is a trade-off, in searching for that best of cinema. On the one hand, there is mainstream cinema’s renewal of the subversive magic that was once seen at work in

15 (Cubitt, 2004: ch 2).
16 Walter Benjamin wrote about the aestheticisation of politics as an aspect of fascism (Benjamin, 1992 /1936 Ger: pp 234-235). German cinema in the Third Reich is an obvious case in point.
vernacular drama, in *commedia dell’arte*, in pantomime, and in music hall, vaudeville and variety. On the other, there is the huge stake that capital has in the control of cinema in order to trap, harness and exploit that magic, taking out the subversion.

The trade-off I have just sketched has been a subject of debate for at least sixty years. Much of the debate has been waged over assertions that one or other pole of the trade-off contains ‘the’ truth of the matter, giving the lie to the other pole.

On one side are scholars of a pessimistic bent, who view with deep despair the pleasures of mass culture, including cinema. That ‘puritan’ camp dates back to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s critique of the culture industry. It includes not only scholars who subscribe to that critique, but also some of the scholars from the sixties and seventies who applied Louis Althusser’s and Jacques Lacan’s thinking to film, in what has come to be known as screen theory.

On the other side of the debate, in a motley non-puritan camp, are scholars who see somewhere in mainstream cinema a ray of hope. They are loath to condemn pleasure, even when a deeply flawed system of production supplies the pleasure. The writings of Walter Benjamin continue to be important to this camp.

In the 1980s and nineties, there was a major backlash against screen theory. The detractors censured screen theory for its alleged disregard for human agency. The backlash has all but wiped out the puritan camp, turning what was once a debate between puritans and non-puritans into a cakewalk for the non-puritans. The assault on screen theory was in large measure the work of cognitivist scholars; they included David Bordwell, who became a leading figure in film scholarship. (It could be that today, in certain circles, Bordwell’s work eclipses Benjamin’s.)

There are some scholars now working in a diaspora of screen theory, but they do not subscribe to the puritan ethos that was associated with the theory in its prime. Slavoj Žižek is the most prolific writer in the screen theory diaspora. In addition, there is the field of cultural studies, which started up in Britain in the sixties. Cultural studies takes popular culture, including film, as its object of study. It is not prescriptive of the types of study allowed.

Against that background, *my handling of the trade-off over cinema ‘at its best’ is a gamble. My response is to look for the best in middlebrow film. That is to say, I look for the best in mainstream cinema, as opposed to art-house and experimental film, and I do not pay much attention to the lowbrow or schlock component of mainstream cinema. Going for middlebrow film (as opposed to art-house and experimental) puts me in the non-puritan camp of film scholarship.*

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17 The main source setting out the critique is a collection of essays, *(Adorno and Horkheimer, 1972/1944Ger).*
Method adopted, or, Why I am not an auteurist

On the non-puritan side of debates about cinema and politics, there are some scholars who are influenced by Deleuze and whose approach to discussing film is auteurist, which is to say, they work within the branch of film theory known as auteur theory. Two of those scholars are William E Connolly and Michael Shapiro.

One of auteur theory’s points of emphasis is the fact that there are skilled and creative filmmakers, who offer spectators unsettling and valuable experiences through film technique, also known as film style. Connolly, drawing on Deleuze’s writings, supplies the following list of relevant aspects of film technique: ‘closed frames, irrational cuts, experimental lighting, dissonance between sound and image, depth-of-field shots, high- and low-angle shots, and recomposition of the conventional rules of distance between characters.’ At any given moment in the spectator’s viewing of a film d’auteur, the unsettling experience induced by film technique may complement, or it may be at odds with, the storyline(s) of the film. And the momentary experience is liable to be at odds with the sales pitch that got the film over the line with a production company’s finance department and lured a large audience to see the film.

In fact, the idea at the heart of early auteur theory was this: as a filmmaker (a film director) one ‘writes’ films in one’s own voice, just as an author does in literature. The camera is to the director, in cinema, as the pen is to the author in the writing of novels or essays. A filmmaker is a master of mise en scène, not a mere metteur en scène who gets hired by a film production company to bring to the screen an established work from the literary tradition.

That idea was wiped out in the 1960s by the incoming tide of structuralist thought (as the expression ‘the death of the author,’ from the 1968 essay by Roland Barthes, suggests). But post-structuralist thought allowed the idea of director as auteur to make a modest comeback. The auteur theory of the period since 1980 – in so far as it engages with mainstream films – leads auteurists to reserve their attention and their praise for films that show conflict within the agency of narration. Auteurists seek out the work of directors who ‘write’ as a divided author – an author whose speech fractures language in an attempt to recompose language. In other words, auteur theory now pinpoints a filmic equivalent of stuttering, which it suggests is to be valued as an active seam in expression. (There is a parallel with Deleuze’s telling remarks on verbal stuttering, in Essays Critical and Clinical.)

18 Robert Stam’s Film Theory: An Introduction provides a brief – but meaty – sketch of auteur theory (Stam, 2000: pp 83-92). Stam sets out the particular historical setting, as well as the political and cultural factors, that gave birth to auteur theory. To make sense of auteur theory, it needs to be seen in the context of the post-war cinéastes’ fervour in France for a change from the traditionalist French cinema of the 1930s, and the part that Franco-US relations played at the time in kindling that fervour.

19 See (Shapiro, 1999); (Connolly, 2002); and (Connolly, 2004: passim).

20 (Connolly, 2004: p 96). The relevant works by Deleuze are (Deleuze, 1992 /1983Fr) and (Deleuze, 1989 /1985Fr). For a lucid exegesis of those two difficult works, see (Bogue, 2003a).

21 See (Deleuze, 1998).
auteurists dealing with mainstream cinema thus notice most the moments when film technique breaks with the conventions of film language. That explains the weight that the auteurists place on irrational cuts, on dissonance between soundtrack and the images on the screen, on unexpected camera angles, weird tempi and rhythms in the filmed action, and other jarring matter in film.

From the outset of the present project, I suspected that filmic stuttering was not the only way, and perhaps not the most effective way, in which film could convey to a mass audience the fact of the divided author. Hence, I have not used auteur theory to channel my work, though I respect the Deleuze-influenced scholars who do use auteur theory in their work on cinema and politics.

I adopted instead a more open approach. I did my best to set aside preconceptions as to which filmmakers might somehow have touched on the theme of the active left, democracy and an escape from the pull of political cynicism in the nineties. In setting out to find films for discussion, I did need a working definition of a mainstream film from the nineties. To meet that need, I consulted the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). I defined a mainstream nineties film as any movie released in the period 1991 to 2000 inclusive, which made the IMDb list of the ‘top one hundred’ films for its year of release. The system of ranking is based on levels of input to IMDb, by rank-and-file users of the IMDb, for each film. The measure of input is the number of user ratings of the film that are submitted to the IMDb.²²

From the list of a thousand movies – on which I sought the views of a dedicated filmgoer of my acquaintance (not having that background myself) – I short-listed the films that we thought could conceivably say something relevant to my theme. There were 130 films on the short-list. What followed will always conjure up for me a passage from the radio serial of the late 1970s, The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, where the wanderers are strapped into Vogon Poetry Appreciation chairs. I watched on video the 130 films, over a period of some six months. Of course, I compiled notes as I went, and consulted reviews, critical essays, and writings in film theory, in narratology, on film art, and in film studies (the film branch of cultural studies). I finished up with my own database of facts and commentary on the films that had looked as if they might bear out (or not) my observations on the active left and the handling of political cynicism. My database is rich in the working of cinema as a vernacular language. I could not have achieved that richness if I had confined my search to films that an auteurist would study.

The writing of this part of the thesis, if it taught me nothing else, did teach me something about the word ‘film’ (or ‘movie’), in the context of mainstream cinema. At a certain point, I realised that films, in the sense I had been attempting to watch them and write about them, had ceased to exist in the mid 1970s. New Hollywood had taken the mainstream cinema that was, and had turned it into something from another planet. I began to think and write, in part,

²² IMDb’s present owner is amazon.com, a large online retailer and advertiser of apparel and leisure goods; amazon.com acquired IMDb in the late nineties. IMDb’s URL is http://www.imdb.com/.
I downloaded the master list of films for my project, comprising 1,000 movies from the nineties, in February 2001.
as a creature of that planet. And, with my head partly in planet Hollywood, I found, as discussed below, that film cycles eclipsed individual films in saying something that was relevant to the thesis’s theme of the active left and political cynicism and democracy. I also found that allegory, not film technique, was the key to what was being said. New Hollywood rapidly appropriates and commodifies subversive film technique, as noted in my comments below on ‘planet Jarmusch.’

7.4 New Hollywood

Industry matters

In the three decades beginning 1945, the transition occurred from classical Hollywood, with its system of studios owning cinema chains, to new Hollywood. Regulatory divestment of cinemas from the studios, which happened in the fifties, was bad news for the businesses of filmmaking and of owning cinema halls in the US. Coupled with the growth of television, it put the studios into financial difficulty in the late fifties and on into the sixties. In the same stretch of years, the legendary founders of the studios had grown old and were fading from the scene. The upshot was that huge diversified business corporations came in, and bought up the major Hollywood studios in the 1960s. There were two further waves of mergers and acquisitions in the eighties and the nineties, which left mainstream cinema largely run by giant media conglomerates.

Films that were independently conceived and financed had some conspicuous success between the mid eighties and the mid nineties. US-produced indie film has been called ‘planet Jarmusch’ – its rise began with Jim Jarmusch’s Stranger than Paradise (1984), and it received a huge boost with Steven Soderbergh’s sex, lies, and videotape (1989). Toward the mid nineties, however, indie film began to function largely as a trawling ground for the major film financing and distribution companies. The ‘culture of the deal’ had arrived, and it swamped indie filmmaking. That outcome was welcomed by some of the filmmakers involved, and appalled others. Miramax, which had been a champion of indie film, changed its way of doing business in 1993 when it became a division of the Disney entertainment empire. Likewise, New Line Cinema and Castle Rock changed their character after they were acquired by Turner Broadcasting, also in 1993.

From its inception in 1975, new Hollywood organised to get mammoth financial returns from its films. That includes returns from screenings in cinemas and home box office (video rentals, and of late, DVD sales). Also included are returns from film deals, which cover intellectual property, all merchandise that spins off from the film, and product placement in the film. Adding to the pressure for mammoth returns, were new distribution technologies.

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A concise history, covering both the thirty-year transition and the first two decades of new Hollywood, is given in (Schatz, 2002). The movie that set the new Hollywood industry pattern was Jaws (1975), a Steven Spielberg film.
and the relaxed business and media law that prevailed from the 1980s on. Those developments led to mainstream cinema creating for itself a public that was content to watch US product most of the time. In the words of Franco Moretti, that public is a ‘planet Hollywood.’

Planet Hollywood is fed a diet of calculated blockbusters. The people who count in the movie business are there to produce films that get record or near-record takings in the opening weekend, so that word of mouth regarding a film’s merit matters little. Each film is made according to a general formula for hit films, and it is tested and tweaked using focus groups. It is then craftily marketed by means of its preview (trailer), and by mounting a lavish sales pitch to entertainment columnists from the radio, television and print media. Added to that is a hugely expensive swath of paid pre-release television advertising. After the publicity blitz for the film comes the opening weekend, which is a saturation affair, the film being released that weekend on thousands of screens.

It is found that the publicity works best – and by the end of the 1980s this is a prerequisite for getting major studio financing for a film – if the film’s ‘concept’ is simple. Preferably, anybody at all who saunters off the street into a multiplex or a video store will be able to grasp the concept from the film’s one- or two-word title. *Top Gun. Toy Story. Armageddon. Antz. Hook. Speed. Runaway Bride. Lethal Weapon. Home Alone. Charlie’s Angels. Twister. Titanic. Alien. Terminator. Die Hard. Scream.* Simple-concept films are conceived and crafted with the primary purpose of making a large ‘footprint’ on screens, on shelves in shopping strips and malls, and on neural tissue. The filmmaking bears the Spielberg/Lucas stamp, regardless of who is making the film.

The leaning toward films with simple concepts is embedded in the planet Hollywood effect. In the eighties, the media conglomerates had formed business alliances to boost Europe’s number of cinema screens per head of population. At that time, Europeans had about one-third as many cinema screens per person as did folks on the other side of the Atlantic; therefore (as capital saw it), Europeans were ‘under-screened.’ Through the conglomerates’ interest in cinemas, and parallel investments in television and video chains,
US films began to earn large revenues in Europe.28 The trans-Atlantic success entailed a change in film aesthetic. Since the mid nineties, the dominant film aesthetic has been that of a montage of action tableaux, something like the stages in a video game. The dominant aesthetic relies very much on pace and rhythm of gesture, and on novel special effects. It relies hardly at all on dialogue, and in most cases voice-over is dispensed with too. The slant away from verbiage makes the new film artistry readily accessible across language groups.

To its admirers, the nineties’ dominant film aesthetic makes ‘more formally classical structures, such as […] shot-reverse-shot dialogue scenes […], seem flat, talky, and crude.’29

**Commercial intertext film**

In looking for mainstream films that have a bearing on a particular theme – in the present case, the active left and escaping the pull of political cynicism – one needs to keep in mind that there is a needle-threading art involved, on the part of filmmakers. The art concerns how any given theme can insinuate itself into mainstream cinema, in new Hollywood. There is a finely honed test as to whether a film proposal is worth financing. I have already mentioned the rule about giving films ultra-pithy titles. Well, there is a rider to that rule. A film gets the green light only if it has a ‘concept,’ stated in twenty-five words, which makes a mass audience want to see it. If a dozen words can be lopped off that, so much the better. This is planet Hollywood, and the title/tag-line is king. It is a daunting hurdle facing filmmakers who have something to say.

It has become standard practice, in dealing with that hurdle, to devise a *commercial intertext* film.30 A film qualifies as commercial intertext if it is made with an eye to a huge public that will read it through its links with some reference material, which the public has stored in its shared memory. The reference text, or texts, may come from recent cinema hits, or they may come from popular video or DVD fare. Equally, they may come from a source outside the sphere of feature-length film, such as the realms of the novel, memoir, comic book, music video, television sitcom, or journalistic exposé.

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28 By 1994, annual revenue in the US film industry from film rentals outside the US had overtaken revenue from film rentals in the US. This was reported in *Variety*, in 1995, under the gloating headline, ‘Earth to H’wood: you win’ (*idem.*, and Balio’s note 16 on p 216). Balio adds that, ‘Spending lavishly on advertising, the majors were able to bolster their ultra-high-budget pictures in theatrical and in ancillary markets and overwhelm smaller, indigenous films that could not compete in such a high-stakes environment’.

My focus is the late twentieth century, but there were two earlier phases of the US film industry’s penetration of Europe. In the twenties, the era of silent film, there was a short-lived attempt to coordinate a Europe-wide industry response to US film exports (Higson and Maltby, 1999). In the sixties, a number of French and British cinéphiles actively developed a counter-cinema, in the hope of warding off the US behemoth. Jean-Luc Godard was one of many filmmakers of the counter-cinema. Two of his films – *Le mépris* (1963) and *Pierrot le fou* (1965) – speak in a double mode. Each is a narrative film in its own right, and also works as an essay film about European cinema being overrun by the US industry.

29 Cubitt analyses the currently dominant film aesthetic, neobaroque film, in *The Cinema Effect* (Cubitt, 2004: ch 9). Cubitt’s assessment of the aesthetic is positive. (The fragment of it that I have quoted comes from p 224.)

30 (Meehan, 1991). In the nineties, making commercial intertext films was standard practice for mainstream cinema.
Commercial intertext films include: adaptations; sequels (and ‘prequels’), in some cases forming what is known as a ‘franchise’ (see below); remakes, and their poor cousins known as retreads; and send-ups. Besides those, there are two other categories of commercial intertext film. To explain what the two other categories are, I use X, Y, as algebraic symbols, each denoting some film that has recently grossed large sums of money, or some film that is instantly recognisable though from the more distant past. Screenwriters are taught, or soon learn by experience, to develop film proposals that can be pitched with the producers’ accountants in mind. The practice that stems from that is to come up with a film proposal which pitches as an ‘alike yet different’ take on X; or one that pitches as ‘X meets Y.’

For instance, since 1975, every disaster movie in the mainstream pitches as an ‘alike yet different’ take on Jaws. Chicken Run (2000) pitches as an ‘alike yet different’ take on Antz (1998); and Spartan (2000) as an ‘alike yet different’ take on In the Line of Fire (1993). In some cases, there is a sizable interval between the earlier film and its progeny. Thus, Forrest Gump (1994) is a twist on Being There (1980). (Gump takes the 1980 film with its story of a blank-page character called Chance; uproots the story from the soil of a perplexed seventies; and pots it up in the container of a centrist – ‘Don’t worry, be happy’ – memory of the seventies.)


There is more to the game than adaptations, remakes, sequels/prequels, send-ups, and the two indispensable algorithms. Analysts, trained in market research, extract patterns from the data on box office returns and video hirings (and DVD sales) for commercial intertext films. Flacks use those patterns to help target campaigns, in which hit films’ signature visual and audio styles, and their signature images and key quotes, move branded merchandise. The range of merchandise moved includes fast food and grocery lines, drinks, patented drugs, recorded music, videogames, cars, mobile phones, apparel, and children’s books and toys. (The doing of deals for ‘product placement’ of branded merchandise in the intertext films is just a tiny part of what is going on here.) The plots and the visual and audio style of the hit

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31 The two algorithms are spelt out in (Kosberg, 1991: ch titled ‘The Bottom Line of High Concept’). Using the algorithms, or running with adaptations, remakes, et cetera, is the order of the day, but of course it does not guarantee that a film proposal will get the green light; nor does it guarantee that, if the film is made, it will live up to the expectations about its revenue stream.
films, and the matching style of commercials and print/billboard ads for the merchandise, are fine-tuned with the help of focus groups.\textsuperscript{32}

Thus, films turn out to be greater or lesser nodes, in a web of cultural expression that is deeply penetrated by merchandising. As I have already hinted, the busiest nodes, or hubs, in the film intertext world are not so much films as franchises, and that is what they are called in the industry. The list of franchises includes \textit{Star Wars}, \textit{Rambo}, \textit{Terminator}, \textit{Alien}, \textit{Batman}, \textit{Die Hard}, \textit{Lethal Weapon}, \textit{Back to the Future}, \textit{Charlie’s Angels}, and \textit{Shrek}. Thomas Schatz sums up the position as follows:

On the one hand, the seemingly infinite capacity for multimedia reiteration of a movie hit redefines textual boundaries, creates a dynamic commercial intertext that is more process than product, and involves the audience(s) in the creative process – not only as multimarket consumers but also as mediators in the play of narrative signification. On the other hand, the actual movie ‘itself,’ if indeed it can be isolated and understood as such (which is questionable at best), often has been reduced and stylized to a point where, for some observers, it scarcely even qualifies as a narrative.\textsuperscript{33}

\textit{The Player} (1992), a Robert Altman film, brings to life in a spectacular manner the statement I have just quoted from Schatz. Altman deftly paints and repaints the screen with dabs of black humour. And he is all the while fastidiously filmmaking to the rule book – that is, making his film by the numbers to turn a huge profit. Working by the numbers is what the industry’s production executives demand, both in the \textit{The Player}’s story-world of film within film and in the real new Hollywood. \textit{The Player} is a rude yet playful poke in the ribs to its mass audience. It wakes us to new Hollywood, and to our place as an accomplice to new Hollywood; we are co-factored into the designs of new Hollywood’s accountants and marketing supremos.

\textbf{After The Player}

Anyone who sets out to make a mainstream film – or sets out just to watch a selection of them – will be caught up in the process of commercial intertext filmmaking, as sketched above. The process latches onto flows of energy between filmmakers and audiences. Executive producers working in the media conglomerates form part of the process, and they are its guardians. They insist that a share of the flow of energy be routed through the busier intertext nodes, in an ongoing game that is designed to keep the numbers on track. Those numbers culminate in profit streams.

\textsuperscript{32} (Wyatt, 2002), and (Schatz, 2002). Schatz says that, arguably, ‘new Hollywood’s calculated blockbusters are themselves massive advertisements for their product lines – a notion that places a very different value on their one-dimensional characters, mechanical plots and high-gloss style’ (p 201). He also comments that the type of film Steven Spielberg thinks is deserving of the green-light is ‘a feature-length plug for any number of multimedia reiterations’ (\textit{idem.}).

\textsuperscript{33} (Schatz, 2002: pp 201-202). For contrast, see Cubitt’s upbeat account of film aesthetics in new Hollywood (mentioned in note 29 above).
Filmmakers rifle through the intertext database and amass pieces of earlier intertext, from which to build more intertext. But it is a mistake to think of the intertext database as a passive repository. In the scenario I am presenting, the intertext database has connected to filmmakers and audiences and moulded them into an organ. The database will grow, and will keep the organ alive, as the organ slices and dices the database and kneads the pieces into fodder for the database. The rapid proliferation of video decks in the early eighties helped to entrench that organic processing pattern. Video/DVD is an open-access platform for the intertext database, in that it puts the archive of mainstream films in easy reach of filmgoers and filmmakers. The rapid networking of desktop and larger computers through the Internet has also helped to cement the intertext database’s key role in the scheme of things.

The intertext database is a vast and nebulous thing, much larger than any movie database. It is a distributed installation, spread out around and inside the human body – like the system and subsystems in Connolly’s neuropolitics, or those in Marshall McLuhan’s vision of the media and the labyrinth of human tissue (or the media and ‘man’). The intertext database contains countless analogue (print, tape, and celluloid) and digitally encoded data collections, which pertain to the written word and/or to the still and the moving image, with soundtrack.

7.5 Body paranoia as cultural and social critique, through allegory

By the mid nineties, new Hollywood was entering its third decade. Commercial intertext film was mature and entrenched. New Hollywood was so secure that it straight away co-opted Altman’s artful movie critique of it (The Player).

Fortunately (as I see it), new Hollywood had been subjected from the outset to a different and more extensive critique. That critique was conducted through allegory, in the genre of horror film and, less often, in action thrillers, mystery thrillers, or drama thrillers. It was a critique expressing acute anxiety about the plumbing, as it were, of the intertext database in the age of commercial intertext film. The critique persisted throughout the nineties. It was stating (through allegory) a point that cut as deep as Altman’s film, and at times deeper.

The critique through allegory consists in certain horror films – and a sprinkling of thrillers that are not in the horror genre – showing a predator that is a living part of its victims’ bodies. The predator is of a kind that takes shape in the victim’s grey matter or other tissue, and/or in the bodily fluids. Thus, the films conjure up a subjectivity that fits with the

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34 Cubitt points out that films from new Hollywood often adhere to a style in which the film is a montage of affects conjured up with the help of references to other films (viewed as primarily non-verbal texts). By the same token, such narrative as there is in a film, typically takes the form of a ‘database narrative’ – plot-helpers are picked up from narratives in other films, and strung together like beads in a new pattern (Cubitt, op. cit., pp 238-243). For an aspiring new-Hollywood screenwriter, the most useful writing tool is a movie database that is computerised and searchable by plot keyword (such as IMDb). The art lies in the channelling of the pattern-making impulse, picking fragments from the database and arranging them.

35 See Richard Smith’s review of Connolly’s Neuropolitics, (Smith, 2004). The first works to bring such visions to a mass audience were (McLuhan, 1962) and (McLuhan, 1967).
production and viewing of commercial intertext film: the victim is in the grip of a body that organises to get sliced and diced, or divided against itself, and grows by devouring its own processed parts. The horror is in the fading of the line between self and non-self, in a setting that is deeply hostile, and is marked by both helpful pretence and betrayal.

Quite apart from fitting in with the rise of commercial intertext film, the long run of movies that frighten audiences about the fading of the line between self and non-self, with an accent on the body, may stem from several other causes. Peter Knight, in the book *Conspiracy Culture*, lists five additional causes for an observed actual outbreak of ‘body paranoia’. One of the five causes is the HIV/AIDS epidemic; and there was a concurrent shift in the scientific approach to immunology, with the scientific rhetoric starting to draw on the language of espionage and civil war (Knight lists copious references). Another suggested cause, or perhaps it is a linked symptom, is the rise of a work-out culture, in which there is always a key body part that has to be toned and struggled with because it is letting down the side. Knight observes that the work-out culture may reflect people’s anxiety about their bodily strength, as employment in the post-fordist US economy veered away from activities that called for, and vouched for, the worker’s bodily strength. The rise in popularity of action films, with their beefcake stars and ‘kick-ass’ values, may stem, in part, from the same anxiety in the sphere of work. Added to that, baby-boomers’ anxiety about aging could be a factor in the work-out culture.

What are we to make of the fact that we have a surfeit of explanations for the outbreak of body paranoia? The true cause, or triggering event, remains an enigma, as in the literary works known as *Novellen*. The *Novelle* (plural, *Novellen*) is a major form in modern German literature. In this context, a *Novelle* – which translates into English as ‘novella’ – is not simply a work that is longer than a short story and shorter than a novel. In a novella, as I am using the term, there is bound to be, either in the story or lurking at the story’s edge, an occurrence that is disturbing or bizarre. Further, the novella’s central character(s) and the reader will be uncertain, or of many minds, as to the meaning of the disturbing event. There is a tradition, stretching back to the late medieval period, of *novella cycles*. The cycle is a set of stories told by characters within a frame story; for instance, in the *Decameron* of Boccaccio the frame story tells of a group of characters fleeing the plague, while in Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* the frame story tells of a pilgrimage to the shrine of Thomas à Becket in Canterbury Cathedral.

Getting back to the outbreak of body paranoia in our time, the first film to mark the outbreak was David Cronenberg’s *They Came From Within* (1975), also known as *Shivers* and *The Parasite Murders*. In that film, the blood in victims’ veins drives them into a monstrous sexual frenzy, and their coupling transmits the plague to others. After that came other horror films, each finding some means of pitting the body repugnantly against itself.

36 (Knight, 2000: pp 181-185).
The leading examples are Cronenberg films: *The Brood* (1979); *Scanners* (1981); the fantasy sci-fi horror thriller *Videodrome* (1983); and *The Fly* (1986). Sam Raimi’s *Evil Dead II* (1987), which opened the horror film genre to the nineties taste for pastiche, is another film of the body divided against itself. In the genre of mystery and detective thrillers, there is a sharp inward turn of mistrust or disgust in several films from the nineties. I write about those thrillers below, but for now, it will suffice to give one example: the detective thriller and horror film *Seven* (David Fincher, 1995). *Seven* ends with a decent man’s wrath taking control of his body, so that in a blind rage, he unlawfully kills a prisoner. Through that act, the decent man’s wrath recruits him as a scribe for the film’s villain. The ‘decent man’ writes, on the villain’s behalf, the final chapter of a text that is composed not in words, but in the mutilated bodies of seven victims of serial murder.38

A variant of the critique of new Hollywood through allegory is found in the stalker subgenre of horror cinema. Stalker films have certain established conventions of *mise en scène*, performance and filming, which lead the audience to identify as a split subject, part stalker and part victim. The audience expects the film to play with it, tossing it disturbingly between those two role identifications. As it happens, the stalker film conventions39 make it appropriate to call stalker film a cinema that works from the scenario: *a cinema a soggetto*. In respect of the conventions, the stalker genre parallels *commedia dell’arte* (*commedia a soggetto*). (To detect the parallel, one has to look past the specific kinds of physicality, to see a generic accent on the body in both stalker and *commedia*; and one has to allow for the updating of the stock characters, and likewise the prankster turns (*lazzi*).)

Stalker films began with *Black Christmas* (Bob Clark, 1975), and they have been consistently popular since the release of the hit films *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) and *Friday the 13th* (Sean S Cunningham, 1980). Recent hit stalker films include Wes Craven’s *Scream* series of stalker parodies (1996, 1997, 2000), and the series *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997, 1998) directed by Jim Gillespie.

I contend, further, that the films providing a veiled critique of new Hollywood – in the manner of Cronenberg’s work, the relevant mystery or detective thrillers, and stalker films –
are at the same time engaging in a broader critical enterprise. They are hinting at the nature of human labour power as it is actualised in social machine three, the civilised capitalist machine. Each of us, when conscious of being a subject in social machine three, is prone to feel that a faction has formed among our body parts. The faction contrives to slice and dice our body into pieces, in the following sense: we function as morsels of a hometime-body; morsels of a worktime-body; morsels of a playtime-body. The pieces go in through the mouths of machines, which run the gamut from rooms in our homes, to batteries of workstations, to shops, gyms, beauty parlours, surgery trolleys, multiplexes, and our personal monitors (the tube, the home computer, the cellphone, the headset). The time-share morsels of our body go through the mouths of those machines, to churn about with other purloined material and, a while later, come out as fodder – or rather, to come out as a kind of humus, a flow of consumable affects. Then, as per the rules, the humus is meted out to the members of society, and our body is sharing in the marvel of our epoch and its flesh, to wit, economic growth – the rite of economic growth. Hideous-amusing stuff.

Summing up, within new Hollywood, and going right back to new Hollywood’s inception in 1975, certain horror films and thrillers have provided an allegorical critique of new Hollywood. Also, those films work equally well as an immanent and allegorical critique of social machine three. The connecting link would seem to be that new Hollywood is analogous to social machine three. And indeed it is analogous. In each case, there is a vital corpus of material – in one case it is the intertext database in the age of commercial intertext film, and in the other, the living bodies in society – and that corpus has an organic, self-mutilating and self-consuming growth habit. In each case the growth habit of the corpus sustains a systemic order; there are those who say in public that the habit is a disorder, that the systemic order is parasitic, but they cannot get a serious hearing. ‘Allegory’ traces its origin to the word ‘agora’ (public meeting place). Allegory has always been the figure, in rhetoric, that meets situations where a thing needs to be said, and some protocol, such as ‘good sense; does not let it be said openly in the agora.

7.6 A post-WWII frame story, and the films that tell stories within it

There is something more to be teased out from the knot of horror films and other thrillers, which I have brought into focus above. Clearly, the films have diverse authors. It may be that some of the writers, screenwriters, and directors involved are barely aware, or quite unaware, of each other’s work. Yet, from a spectator’s point of view, the films form a composite work, which is a narrative cycle. Bringing to mind the form of a cycle of novellas, the movies fit together in that the movie-making belongs, as does the viewing, in a surrounding narrative, the frame story.

\[\text{40 To make myself clear: I am treating the relevant films as writerly texts. My observation on them is that they work as allegory, with the latent part being brought out through an interpretive process. It is a separate question – not addressed here – whether the filmmakers were working with the intent of producing immanent critique, through allegory.}\]
The frame story, in the case of these movies, is a blend of fact and fiction. The first author to write it down in book form was a noted US weapons system engineer and administrator, Vannevar Bush. His *Modern Arms and Free Men* (1949) tells of a factual development posing a threat to democracy and freedom in the US. The book points to the military-industrial complex as a menacing presence in the free world, with the complex threatening to take control of the people. Seven years later, the US sociologist, C Wright Mills, retold the story of the military-industrial complex, writing it from a Marxist standpoint. The story attracted wide interest during the fifties, and at that time it patently had nonfiction status. Attesting to that is no less a figure than the late President Eisenhower, who deemed the threat from the military-industrial complex to be real, and warned the people of it in his 1960 farewell speech.41

The frame narrative played out in the sixties and later, in ways that some observers took to be a massive vindication of the original warnings. Actual events42 in the frame narrative, during the sixties, include a series of assassinations of US politicians: among them were JFK and Senator Robert Kennedy; Martin Luther King; Malcolm X; and some other leaders in the Black Nationalist movement. Also in the sixties there was Cointelpro, a covert program in which the FBI used infiltration, surveillance, and a panoply of ‘dirty tricks’ to bring down certain organised labour and activist groups, or cause their grave decline.43 Then came the Watergate scandal; the 1975 disappearance of the labour organiser, Jimmy Hoffa; the October Surprise and the Iran-Contra affair; and the crack cocaine epidemic in US black neighbourhoods. Added to all of the above was clandestine intervention by US agents in the rest of the world, with some of it leading to mass political murders – notably in Indonesia, Vietnam, Chile, Central America, and the Middle East.

The narrative of the military-industrial complex is a story of conspiracy, and it goes down well with an audience of a paranoid bent. When the story of the complex first surfaced in the fifties, however, the Hollywood Production Code ensured that movies did not bring the story to the screen. In the world as portrayed in Hollywood movies of the fifties, there was no evil power in high places. The menace was the communists, or in retrospect it was the Nazis, or else it was gangsterism, or then again, it could be a metaphor for those evils – a thing from outer space, or a thing from a murky lagoon, standing in for the enemies of the state. Evildoers were hunted down, and they got their just deserts, before the credits rolled. So, paranoia in the US, to the extent that it was aired at the movies, was directed at threats outside the central institutions of state and US-owned big business. The Production Code did not allow thrillers to be explicitly set in the frame narrative of the threat from the military-industrial complex.

The Production Code came under strain in the sixties, and broke down completely in '66. It was replaced two years later by the Motion Picture Association of America ratings system.

41 (Bush, 1949); (Mills, 1956). The warning conveyed in President Eisenhower’s farewell speech is mentioned in (Ramsay, 1996).

42 The events I list here, as simple facts, are matters of public record. Peter Knight has written a useful account of the reception of those facts by conspiracy-minded members of the public in the US (Knight, op. cit.).

43 (Longstaffe, 2002) and references therein.
a more permissive instrument. Coupled with the regulatory untying of US cinemas from the
film studios, the waning of the Production Code meant that evil could be portrayed more
freely in mainstream movies. In the anti-Bond spy films – The Spy Who Came in from the
Cold, The Ipcress File, Funeral in Berlin, The Defector, and The Quiller Memorandum, to
name some from 1965 and 1966 – the protagonists had no one who deserved their trust. Even
the heads of the state agencies that gave them their jobs could plot against the agents.

A door was gradually opening in mainstream cinema, for films that would show
subversive scenes of horror. Thus, the early seventies saw the arrival of revisionist thrillers
and horror films. These were films taking up the theme of oppression permeating the system
of the family and piety, and/or spreading out into society through the affairs of business
barons. Such films include: the conspiracy-horror movies Rosemary’s Baby (Roman
Polanski, 1968) and The Stepford Wives (Bryan Forbes, 1975); the spate of demon-child
horror films beginning with The Exorcist (William Friedkin, 1973); and Polanski’s
revisionist detective thriller, Chinatown (1974).

In most of the subversive thrillers from the seventies, though, the rot does not have at its
core domesticity, the family and the raising of children. The core of the rot is instead the
military-industrial and surveillance complex. The threat posed by surveillance had irrupted in
the frame narrative during the sixties. Bearing out the fear of surveillance, a group of political
activists who broke into an FBI office in 1971 found papers relating to Cointelpro, which the
group had then leaked to sympathisers in the media and in Congress. The Watergate affair
added to the unease about surveillance.

The first cycle of conspiracy thrillers – these are films that tell a set of stories within the
frame narrative of the military-industrial and surveillance complex – includes nine major
films. The first six of them are: a speculative drama about the assassination of JFK,
Executive Action (David Miller, 1973); Alan J Pakula’s The Parallax View (1974), and
Pakula’s docudrama on the uncovering of the Watergate affair, All the President’s Men
(1976); The Conversation (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974); Three Days of the Condor (Sydney
Pollack, 1975); and The China Syndrome (James Bridges, 1979). A couple of conspiracy
thrillers from late in the cycle engage in self-critique, by means of parody with a serious edge.
They are Winter Kills (William Richert, 1979), and Blow Out (Brian De Palma, 1981). The
cycle ends, or so it would seem, with the thriller docudrama, Silkwood (Mike Nichols, 1983).

To appreciate the setting in which the cycle of conspiracy thrillers peters out, or gets put
on hold, consider the Iran-Contra scandal. The hearings of late 1986 deliver a new instalment
of the frame narrative. A segment of the public that would previously have baulked at
believing in such political conspiracy theories, no longer feels the same need to hold back.
There is now a strong case against dismissing conspiracy theorists, across the board, as pot-
heads, acid-droppers or kooks. But, alongside the good news that cover-ups can and do fall

44 I do not wish to overdraw the distinction. Stories of family horror, family abuse, and so forth can be an allegory:
a means of saying what the system does not permit to be said forthrightly about society, business, and
government.

45 (Longstaffe, op. cit.).
apart, there is the bad news that the collapse of cover-ups changes nothing of substance. The corrupt forces in high places, ranged against the people, have the power to get away with their stuff in plain sight, if need be.\textsuperscript{46}

Moreover, one can fear what is going on – fearing it is fine – provided one knows that one’s fear too is taken into account as part of the plan. The ‘foe’ is perfectly capable of packaging people’s fear as a commodity and selling it to them. (The Fox media network actually achieve that, in due course, with the mass-audience television series, \textit{The X-Files}. I bracket with that the 1997 mystery romance movie \textit{Conspiracy Theory} and the comedic \textit{Men in Black} movie cum videogame franchise.) Alternatively, the foe would sell the anxious some vaguely therapeutic item, to calm them and put them on the path of good sense. It could be a New Age pursuit; it could be Prozac; and it could be simply shopping – say, to furnish one’s living-room with a new couch (as in Haynes’s film \textit{Safe} (1995), which is set in 1987). In the eighties, paranoia is headed toward being just another hobby, claiming its place in pop culture. Not quite arrived as a hobby, it is a mild compulsive disorder. It is also a reminder of the pot- and acid-dazed sixties, and is spurned by those who seek immersion in eighties culture. What’s hip in the eighties is using ecstasy or cocaine. (Friends would be polite enough to view each other’s bouts of retro paranoia in a fashion sense. It would be just another way of accessorising a cynical outlook on the workings of power.)

As it happens, though, the cycle of conspiracy thriller movies, set in the frame story of the military-industrial and surveillance complex, merely got put on hold in the eighties; it did not die out. It re-emerged, with a difference, in the nineties.

\subsection*{7.7 The frame story, and films within it, in the nineties}

The difference is a turning inward of paranoia, as conveyed in \textit{Safe}, where shopping for a couch has an anything but soothing effect. The movie’s protagonist, a housewife who had been a regular at gym and beauty parlour, ends up in such a state that she can only live as a recluse in a ceramic igloo at a New Age retreat. The igloo is her final bastion against the menace of ‘EI’ (environmental illness); and, as the audience has realised, it is as vain as the series of earlier attempts to become well, because the menace is in fact an organic part of the woman’s body.

I have previously cited two more films from the nineties in which fear or disgust turn inward. These are films where paranoia feels awkward, or hyper-insecure, because there is no stable borderline between self and non-self, between prey and predator. One of the previously cited films is Altman’s \textit{The Player}, which came up in the discussion of the intertext database in the age of commercial intertext film. The other is Fincher’s \textit{Seven}, mentioned in the discussion of body paranoia as cultural and social critique. Some more thrillers that turn

\textsuperscript{46} I have drawn on the discussion of eighties retro paranoia in the first chapter of (Knight, \textit{op. cit.}), and the discussion of forgetting conspiracy in (McClure, 2002). Both sources refer to the bestselling (in the US) novels of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, especially Pynchon’s \textit{Vineland} (1990) and DeLillo’s \textit{White Noise} (1985).
paranoia inward are: *Shattered* (Wolfgang Petersen, 1991); *Twelve Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam, 1995); *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995); and four films from 1999 – Fincher’s *Fight Club*, Mark Pellington’s *Arlington Road*, Cronenberg’s *eXistenZ*, and *The Sixth Sense* by M Night Shyalaman. Rounding off the set is an eleventh film, the capstone: Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* (2000).

The nineties phase of the cycle of films set within the frame story of the menacing complex has more in it than the films stained with body paranoia. The cycle includes some other thrillers; and it includes a few films that play to anxiety about the complex via comedy and/or drama, with – or without – thrilleresque moments somewhere in them.

Among the thrillers, several point to the infotainment arm of the complex, while remaining innocent of body paranoia. The prime examples are *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994); *Mad City* (Costa-Gavras, 1997); and *Wag the Dog* (Barry Levinson, 1997). Also, two sci-fi thrillers arguably belong in that group: they are *Dark City* (Alex Proyas, 1998) and *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999). Other thrillers of the cycle barely acknowledge that the frame story has acquired the new twist having to do with infotainment. Among the films that fit within the older and simpler frame story are three thriller docudramas: Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (1991); the biopic *Malcolm X* (Spike Lee, 1992); and Michael Mann’s *The Insider* (1999). Three fiction thrillers, all from 1993, also fit within the older and simpler version of the frame story: they are *The Firm*, by Sydney Pollack; *Falling Down*, by Joel Schumacher, which is a hybrid of a social comment drama film and an action thriller; and another Petersen film, *In the Line of Fire*, which taps into the political assassination plot-line in the frame story. (Given that the last three films are set in the nineties, the menacing complex’s fourth arm works its way into them indirectly, though it is not being purposely depicted. Thus, *Falling Down*’s structure mimics that of mass marketed videogames, which form part of the same business franchises as fantasy action movies. The Michael Douglas character, the subject of the film’s manhunt, moves through a sequence of spaces as the film plays out, with stronger firepower in each space, as well as a series of soft-emotion motifs. The weapons prove decisive. First it is the baseball bat, then the knife, then the machineguns, then the rocket launcher. And then it’s the water pistol, which, when the chance presents itself, can be a lethal weapon too.)

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48 Two more films have almost as sound a case as *Falling Down* to be listed at this point: they are the social comment drama film and thriller hybrids, *Kalifornia* (Dominic Sena, 1993) and *American History X* (Tony Kaye, 1998). *Kalifornia* purposely plays to unease about the process of depicting events, whether for use in the media or as an artistic endeavour.
That brings us to films from the nineties that play to (some aspect of) the anxiety about the menacing complex, but proceed via comedy or comedy-drama instead of taking the thriller path. One such film is a box office hit from 1998, Peter Weir’s *The Truman Show*. Weir’s film strikes, through comedy and drama, a note of unease about the inciting of voyeurism by third parties to feed their craving for power and/or profit. Three other comedy or comedy-drama films that belong in the nineties phase of the film cycle on the menacing complex are *Dave* (Ivan Reitman, 1993); Warren Beatty’s *Bulworth* (1998); and *Primary Colors* (Mike Nichols, 1998). Each of those three films primarily explores the doubt that engulfed left-liberals in the Clinton years, as to what values remained, if any (besides egoism), that one might expect leading politicians to uphold in an age of spin-doctoring.\(^{49}\) It is a doubt that also makes its presence felt in one of the previously mentioned thrillers, *In the Line of Fire*.

The anxiety about the menacing complex has yet another facet, which deserves mention here. In nineties mainstream cinema, one finds a foil to the distaff (feminist-inspired) horror films of the seventies. There is a sprinkling of comedy and/or drama films, in which the menacing complex is now driving the new economy at full tilt, and is out to get men and boys. It seizes them, to usher them into a new social arrangement that severs the bond between penis and virility.

A film playing to that particular anxiety may seek to repress the anxiety, or to allay it, or cathartically to release it, or there may be a mixture of those treatments. The results can be seen in a half dozen films. *Mrs Doubtfire* (Chris Columbus, 1993) takes the twofold problem of job insecurity and family separation and the related angst that are explored in *Falling Down*, and attempts to gut them of their politics – it displaces the political onto the purely personal and tries to produce catharsis through humour. Two British playwrights’ debut films – Sam Mendes’s *American Beauty* (1998) and Stephen Daldry’s *Billy Elliott* – make rather wishy-washy statements about the new economy and its impact on manhood. As to men’s anxiety films that I find telling and affecting, two are British-made comedy drama films: *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman, 1996) and *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997). A third is Neil LaBute’s character study of two male friends, *In the Company of Men* (1997), a film I value for its pungency and for its timely provocation to think about qualities of the will to power.

Almost every film mentioned in this section has a life outside the narrative cycle of the menacing complex. I have no wish to diminish those extramural lives, but there is space in the structure of the thesis only to tell about their lives in the cycle – and not even enough space to tell very much about that. I should have liked to write more about *The Firm, Falling Down*, and *The Full Monty*, to name but three that cry out for discussion and for evaluating the play of forces shown in them. In red-pencilling mode, the one exception I make is *Memento*, giving it a generous allocation of space. I devote the next chapter to that film.

\(^{49}\) In *Primary Colors*, the ‘President Bill Clinton’ character is called Bill Stanton – punning on Satan.
7.8 Conclusion

This chapter is an experiment, which involves hinting at the shortcomings of the scientific view of the world, and explaining how a relay between the sciences and the arts can address those shortcomings. The chapter looked at the sciences’ overarching principle of order, the diktat of one-at-a-time realms of truth. By way of contrast, the arts consist in creating, and creatively evaluating, works that are rival pretenders to thrones of truth. The result is a play of forces, and of the will to power, exceeding the strictures of any peculiar tradition. It is a messier play of forces than is found in science, but the arts have an immanent discipline.

In brief, the discipline is an ethic of holding things responsible in their throes of transformation. Artists and their works (including works of criticism) are responsible to what they could have become, and to what they may yet become. To work as an artist, to be artful, is to be keenly aware of living in a space of future contingencies of the present. The present hangs on its passage into a future, a sooner-or-later sideways shift that will form the present, not as the present now is, but as a past that is not yet given. That is why art does not pretend to mirror things as they ‘are,’ and why it queers the divide between nonfictions and fictions. Art confers a freedom to create, with a matching responsibility to create.

Within the arts, I turn to cinema in the present project because cinema reaches a mass audience. Its blend of non-verbal and verbal tropes therefore works as a vernacular language. A genealogy of cinema shows that it belongs to a line that begins as a rupture in Gothic cathedral architecture. To the question of what is cinema, I answer that it depends. If an era’s public is worthy of cinema, then cinema will be, for that era, a means of sloughing off its parasitic order, or at least holding the parasites at bay. Medieval vernacular drama, which was a means of loosening the church’s hold in those days on people’s lives, can be regarded now as protocinema.

Taking that view of cinema puts me on the ‘non-puritan’ side of the debate that has now raged for at least sixty years, over whether a form of mass art such as cinema can have subversive effects. ‘Puritans’ view the pleasures that cinema offers as nothing but the poisoned fruit of a system for money to beget money. I think the toxin can be handled, and cinema offers its public useful practice in the art of seeing and hiding things. One way of labelling cinema is as the ‘seeing’ cure. It is up to us to get from it what positive effect we can.

The chapter homes in on a cycle of films, in mainstream cinema, which relates to the active left’s escape from the pull of political cynicism in the nineties. The cycle of films contains many thrillers of a subversive bent, in a period going back to the breakdown of the Hollywood Production Code in 1966. In brief, the main current in subversive thrillers consists of thrillers on a theme of conspiracy and paranoia. In the films from the 1970s, the rot centres on the military-industrial and surveillance complex, which lurks as a fiend in the shadows. The cycle wanes in the eighties, and then re-emerges with a difference in the nineties. The difference is that the rot now centres on a new fiend, viz the military-industrial, surveillance and infotainment complex. With the addition of the fourth tentacle –
infotainment – to the body of the fiend, the menace has become a living part of its victims’ bodies. The discussion of the film *Memento*, in the next chapter, brings out some clues as to the means of handling such inner treachery.