

Spectacular Narratives: *Twister*, *Independence Day*, and frontier mythology in contemporary Hollywood

By Geoff King

Big-screen spectacle has become increasingly important to Hollywood in recent decades. It formed a central part of a post-war strategy aimed at tempting lost audiences back to the cinema in the face of demographic changes and the development of television and other domestic leisure activities. More recently, in an age in which the big Hollywood studios have become parts of giant conglomerates, the prevalence of spectacle and special effects has been boosted by a demand to engineer products that can be further exploited in multimedia forms such as computer games and theme-park rides, secondary outlets that can sometimes generate more profits than the films on which they are based. These and other developments have led some commentators to announce, or predict, the imminent demise of narrative as a central component of Hollywood cinema. But the case has been considerably overstated. Narrative is far from being eclipsed, even in the most spectacular and effects-oriented of today's blockbuster attractions. These films still tend to tell reasonably coherent stories, even if they may sometimes be looser and less well integrated than classical models. More important for my argument, contemporary spectaculars also continue to manifest the kinds of underlying thematic oppositions and reconciliations associated with a broadly 'structuralist' analysis of narrative. This very important dimension of narrative has been largely ignored by those who identify, celebrate or more often bemoan a weakening of plot or character development in many spectacular features.

Strong evidence for the continued existence of such underlying narrative structures is found in the continued saliency of elements of the myth or ideology of the American frontier to many contemporary

Hollywood films. Arguably the archetypal American narrative, the myth of the frontier offers a series of thematic oppositions that continue to underpin films, or even entire genres, whatever the state of their surface plots. The traditional generic Western may be in a state of near-terminal decline, but the mythic or ideological narrative that animated it remains alive and well in Hollywood. Focusing on two of the summer blockbusters of 1996, *Twister* and *Independence Day*, this paper will aim to demonstrate the part it plays in structuring many films, particularly in terms of an opposition between the ‘frontier’—or its contemporary analogues—and a version of technological modernity.

To assert the importance of narrative structures such as these need not be to disregard the role of spectacle. Narrative and spectacle can work together in a variety of changing relationships and there is no single, all-embracing answer to the question of how the two are related. One of the reasons for the hasty dismissal of the importance of narrative in contemporary Hollywood may be the overstatement by influential theorists such as David Bordwell of the degree of its coherence in, and dominance of, the ‘classical’ Hollywood of the studio era. Narrative coherence was important to ‘classical’ Hollywood, but only as one of a number of competing dynamics. Other attractions—such as distracting star performances or other spectacles—might be thrown in at almost any time.¹ The connotations of the term ‘classical’ are part of the problem, including as it does in Bordwell’s account an emphasis on ‘decorum, proportion, formal harmony’ (4)—characteristics that were not always given priority. Numerous commentators on contemporary, ‘New’ or ‘post-classical’ Hollywood seem to rely at least in part on such implicit assumptions about the cinema that went before.² The point is not to doubt that there have been changes in the precise relations between narrative and spectacle from one period to another, but to question any suggestion that there was a point of departure at which ‘classical’ narrative existed in anything like a ‘pure’ state, uncontaminated by various kinds of evasions and distractions. From the very start, throughout the ‘classical’ era, and

today, narrative and spectacle have existed in a series of shifting relationships in which neither has ever been entirely absent. And the relative absence of coherent plot or character development in some effects-led productions today does not entail an evacuation of underlying narrative themes and oppositions of a structural kind.

Spectacle may disrupt narrative. Spectacular elements that seem to exist purely for their own sake, rather than being integrated into the film as a whole, may take on the character of 'cinematic excess', as Kristin Thompson puts it. But this view, again, is premised on an assumption, drawn in this instance from the work of Stephen Heath, that the mission of cinema is to produce homogeneity. If some of the products of Classical Hollywood do seem unified, balanced, coherent and 'well-made', it is doubtful that this was ever an overriding imperative. Profitability has usually been more important than unity or homogeneity. The desire to appeal to a mass market is as likely to result in a degree of built-in *incoherence* and conflicting demands. Spectacle is often just as much a core aspect of Hollywood cinema as coherent narrative and should not necessarily be seen as a disruptive intrusion from some place outside. The coherence—or drive towards coherence—often ascribed to classical Hollywood films can be a product of a particular kind of critical reading rather than a quality of the text itself.

In some cases, including *Twister* and *Independence Day*, spectacle can be seen to reinforce as much as to interfere with the work of narrative. Moments of spectacle are often associated with the moving forward of narrative considered in terms of plot development. They can also play an important part in the play of underlying narrative structures. In terms of narrative themes, I will be arguing, the frontier is offered as a spectacular intrusion into (or escape from) everyday life. Many contemporary Hollywood productions can also be understood as promising a kind of surrogate 'frontier' experience for the viewer at the level of audio-visual spectacle. The films themselves are presented as

spectacular intrusions into the daily life of the viewer. Hollywood spectacle is offered as an alternative to the domestic routine. It claims—however dubiously or paradoxically—to impinge directly on the spectator, to offer an authentic experience, filled with a vivid sense of large scale *presence*, that is contrasted to both everyday life and domestic media such as television. The spectacular experience offered to the viewer is in a sense presented as a vicarious equivalent of the frontier experience celebrated thematically at the level of narrative.

These issues need to be interrogated at a number of levels. This paper will begin by considering at some length the thematic oppositions that underpin the texts, situating them in their mythological, ideological and political contexts. *Twister* and *Independence Day* will also be considered within the industrial and aesthetic contexts of Hollywood in the so-called 'post-studio' era (something of a misnomer, given the continued dominance of the Hollywood majors). This will require an examination of the contemporary social and cultural position of Hollywood cinema and its formal strategies, particularly the relationship between narrative and spectacle. Consideration will also be given to the place contemporary Hollywood occupies within the historical context of the mythology of the frontier.

Narrative oppositions and resolutions: frontier zone vs. technological modernity

The hero of *Twister* (1996) sniffs the air, picks up a handful of dirt and lets it fall slowly through his fingers before looking up into the sky, instinctively reading the natural signs that tell him when and where a tornado is brewing. His arch-rival has little time for such niceties, relying not on his own senses but on vanloads of expensive computerized technology paid for by corporate funds. The hero Bill Harding (Bill

Paxton), in his jeans, is marked clearly as heir to the frontier tradition. His opponent Jonas Miller (Cary Elwes), in vaguely military-looking cap and fatigues, is a representative of corporate-sector technological might and accorded a far less sympathetic hearing. *Twister's* engagement with these terms appears to be simplistic and entirely in favour of frontier nostalgia. The dramatic clash between the central characters is loaded, to an almost comic-book extent. Harding is the good-guy, Miller the bad, and their personal fates are predetermined accordingly. The underlying issues, however, are not so easily contained and certain ambiguities remain, both in the film and the broader cultural context. A distinction needs to be made here between value judgements about the quality of 'surface' narrative found in this kind of film—usually declared wanting in terms of complexity and subtlety, particularly when measured against critically more favoured Hollywood products such as those associated with the 'Hollywood Renaissance' of the late 1960s and early 1970s—and the importance of underlying narrative structures that might be engaged in a more subtle process of narrative, cultural, mythic or ideological work. A similar structure of oppositions is implicit in *Independence Day*—the other big effects-led blockbuster of the summer of 1996—in which alien attack provides the catalyst for the juxtaposition of frontier and technological realms. The fact that these themes continue to underpin such popular films underlines their centrality to the strains within American mythology in the last decade of the twentieth century—and demonstrates an essential continuity in the underlying narrative preoccupations of many products of contemporary Hollywood, however overblown the spectacular dimension might have become.

Elemental force in *Twister* and *Independence Day* is presented as both lethal danger and potential source of redemption, precisely the role played by the wilderness and its occupants in the classic American frontier tradition. To those lacking the requisite knowledge and attitude, the wild—manifested by prodigious tornado or alien—is a hazardous

enemy to be tamed or destroyed. But to certain privileged individuals it offers the possibility of a special kind of supposedly authentic experience. This is offered as valuable both in itself and as providing a more widely applicable cure to a range of social ills. The frontier also becomes a domain in which such individuals can make a difference, where immediate human agency is freed from social constraint.

Chasing the tornados of *Twister* offers an opportunity for excitement, adventure and an engagement with undomesticated natural extremity. The space within and immediately around the tornado becomes a mobile frontier zone in which such possibilities are unleashed amid otherwise mundane existence. The heart of the tornado is a place of carnivalized disruption. Normal rules do not apply. The frontier is often seen as a place where the usual weight of social norms is lessened or removed. Within the force-fields of the tornado the metaphor is literalized. The laws of gravity are rescinded, at least temporarily. Heavy vehicles and entire buildings are freed from their bounds. The result is chaotic and hazardous, but also liberating and exhilarating. Harding and his partner Jo (Helen Hunt) are portrayed as characters who have what it takes to inhabit this privileged space, to get close enough even to penetrate to the heart of the tornado, and to survive the experience. Miller remains alienated from such possibility. His dependence on technology leads him astray. He usually misses the target and his one direct engagement with the tornado leads to his death.

Engagement with the alien invaders of *Independence Day* offers similar possibility of escape from the mess, tedium and corruption of daily life in late-twentieth-century America—it is into such terms, avoiding any real or more substantial causal factors, that the fruits of contemporary capitalism tend to be rendered. Abandoning the metropolis for a showdown launched from the New Mexico desert, the central characters move from an alienated state to a form of elemental combat that enables them to prove themselves in a complete break from dull or oppressive

routine. The frontier experience produces the appearance of enemies that are unambiguously defined and against which a clear definition of virtuous self can be articulated. The contrast between desert and cityscape is starkly drawn in *Independence Day*, the original westward frontier movement echoed in the image of a caravan of motor-homes moving across the empty expanses of Nevada. The personification of wilderness force seems particularly to relish assaults on what might be seen as decadent forms of entertainment, such as the tornado bringing real terror to the drive-in performance of *The Shining* (1980) in *Twister*, in a pattern of retributive violence that echoes Puritan strictures on the dangers of moral 'backsliding.' The point is made more generally and forcefully in *Independence Day* when the aliens destroy the heart of the metropolis, bringing fiery vengeance like some latter-day Old Testament god. The fact that one of these films is set on the date celebrated for the signing of the Declaration of Independence reinforces the potential of their events both to question—and to provide opportunity to revive—hallowed American values. Shadows are cast, literally, on Washington's monumental embodiments of these values in *Independence Day*, metaphorically to be lifted in the victorious climax. The foolish attempt to engage tornado or alien spacecraft without adequate protection, preparation, or knowledge. The heroes are qualified to move into the frontier territory, to take on the deadly force.

These films imply that the frontier experience offers more than just hedonistic thrills for the individuals involved. There is also the possibility of redemption, at both the individual and social levels. The terms of redemption in *Twister* are crude and simplistic. Harding rejoins his old tornado-chasing team at the moment that he is about to end his marriage to Jo, who is rhetorically asserted to be the 'right woman' for him, however much they argue. He is engaged instead to marry Melissa (Jami Gertz), a sex-therapist cheaply caricatured as incompetent on the frontier terrain, a whining metropolitan creature tied permanently by mobile phone to the sexual inadequacies of life in the city. It goes without saying that

the return to tornado-frontier experience brings Harding back to his senses and the renewal of his relationship with Jo, with whom he can share the straightforward and conventional heterosexual passions of a literal whirlwind romance—the sequences in which they experience the inside of the tornado together have an increasingly orgasmic quality—in which he remains for the most part the dominant patriarchal figure. The worthy social agenda is provided by a plot mechanism in which the aim of the enterprise is to release into the tornado a recording device capable of giving new information to help in the future plotting and prediction of tornado outbreaks.

Twister also implies that the personal redemption gained by Harding is more generally available to those who regulate their lives according to an honest and instinctive rhythm, redolent of what the frontier stands for in the mythology, rather than becoming mired in the ‘decadent’ tendencies of life in the metropolis. His new life with Jo, we are led to assume, will be a healthy and wholesome relationship, sharing the open and hospitable values signified by scenes at the home of Jo’s eccentric but adored Aunt Meg (Lois Smith) and the pastoral landscape in which the couple are left at the film’s conclusion after the final tornado has passed. The tornado leaves a rambling old farmhouse homestead miraculously intact in its path, an enormously resonant and compacted symbol of the kind of lifestyle they will presumably adopt.³ Their domestic future is prefigured in the image of a farming couple and their three young children emerging unscathed from an underground storm shelter, a sequence whose significance is emphasized by its placement *before* we are shown the dishevelled figures of the two principal survivors. The redemption offered by the displaced frontier is a celebration of the nuclear family, particularly the restoration of the father-figure so dramatically plucked from the scene in the prologue, in which Jo as a young girl saw her father carried to his death by a giant tornado. *Twister* starts and finishes with a family group seeking shelter from the ultimate ‘force five’ tornado—which appears nowhere else in the film. In the first case, the father dies. In the second, the family survives intact and the potential of a

new family is restored. In the elliptical logic so typical of Hollywood cinema, the future fruits of the successful tornado-monitoring experiment are reaped immediately, by implication, in the emotional pay-off delivered by this re-writing of the tragic prologue. Miller is left dead, and along with him, it seems, the underlying threat posed by the identification between his character and the anonymous corporate forces for which he stands and which have so often been counterposed to the supposedly true American values of the frontier. This theme is not greatly elaborated but does not need to be: the broad implications are implicit and sufficiently familiar in American mythology to stand as shorthand for a whole complex of negative associations. Any more substantial analysis of the relations between corporate capitalism and the realities of daily life in America is neatly short-circuited.

Individual redemption is offered to the leading characters of *Independence Day*. The reluctant genius David Levinson (Jeff Goldblum) is freed from meaningless work for a cable television company, enabled instead to put his intellect to the ultimate in worthwhile ends—saving the world. President Thomas Whitmore (Bill Pullman), a former Gulf War fighter pilot, abandons the manipulations of electoral politics to lead a global fight-back and, eventually, takes to the skies himself in the final conflict. Captain Steven Hiller (Will Smith), a black USAF pilot turned down by NASA—presumably on the grounds of his colour, given the displays we are given of his prowess—manages to fly a captured alien craft to deliver the crucial blow, while Vietnam veteran Russell Casse (Randy Quaid) recovers from alcoholic haze to die in redemptive kamikaze glory. The crisis also leads to revived romance between Levinson and his ex-wife and impels Hiller and his girlfriend to cement their affair in marriage. For all its transgressive potential, the frontier remains in Hollywood a place more often for the restoration of sexual conformity. On the broader canvas, redemption comes not just in the saving of the world but through the global unity demonstrated by a world shaking off petty quarrels to come together against the threat of annihilation. At the political level, the President is able to regain power

from conspiratorial federal forces that have concealed the truth about alien remains recovered in the notorious Roswell incident of the 1950s, one of the icons of contemporary American domestic paranoia.

Key elements of frontier mythology are central, then, to the dynamics of *Twister* and *Independence Day*. Underlying the confrontations enacted by these films is an opposition between two of the most powerful components of dominant American ideology: the myth of the frontier and the alternative myth of technological modernity, according to which America is taken as a model of modernizing progress, whether industrial or post-industrial. The two mythologies are in some respects mutually exclusive. More significant, perhaps, for its ideological resonance in contemporary American culture, is the extent to which the contradictions between the two can be resolved, or at least displaced. This was a central mythic function of the traditional generic Western. Advanced technology is associated with areas of culture—as opposed to the ‘nature’ experienced on the frontier—which at the very least shade dangerously into corruption and decadence. Technology also has a positive role to play, however, as might be expected of a culture in which the imperatives of the frontier have always existed in a state of tension with celebrations of modernity and progress. From early colonial times to the present, America has often been seen as a place of enlightenment, of new beginnings freed from the inheritances of old cultural baggage and superstitions. In certain manifestations this outlook is entirely consistent with frontier mythology, particularly conceptions of the frontier as a place of fresh starts, new worlds and escape from the past. If the frontier is viewed as something that played an essential part in the development of a distinctive ‘American Way’ but that had to pass with the coming of a new ‘civilization’, then there is no fundamental contradiction: the frontier experience might be seen as having cleared the way for the establishment of a society founded on the enlightened use of technology, for the benefit of all rather than that of encrusted privilege.

Nostalgia for the 'lost' frontier often takes a stronger form, however, in which the rosy glow of past reflection is outshone by the desire actively (and often violently) to re-create something of the frontier experience in modern life, if only as a substitute for the reality whose existence—in the terms promoted by the myth—was always in doubt. The tension is manifested at the end of *Twister* in the form of the competing imperatives represented by pastoral landscape—civilized, not wilderness but not decadent either—and frontier vortex. The dangers of the frontier have to be tamed if the pastoral idyll is to be secured. But the continued proximity or possibility of the frontier remains necessary if the pastoral is to maintain its ideal middle position, between two poles, and not to be left open only to the corrupting sway of the metropolis.⁴ The freedom and vitality of the 'wind' is reconciled with the solidity and settled existence of the 'earth'. That this is all rooted in myth—the shape of the 'original' American frontier often having been structured and organized by events in the metropolis rather than being in any way primal or originary⁵—does little to reduce its ideological impact.

The problem identified by the main narrative movement of *Twister* is not the use of technology itself but an excessive reliance upon technology. Miller goes to his death as a consequence of his arrogant refusal to take advice from Harding, whose instinctive feel for the movements of tornados has on several occasions been shown to be superior to Miller's technological and military-style operation. 'The days of sniffing the dirt are over,' Miller asserts, although it is made clear that even Miller knows, really, that he is wrong and that Harding's instincts are reliable. It is through sheer arrogance and disavowal, in the end, that he is driven to ignore any signals other than those coming from the banks of technology and is led to his doom. Harding's team also uses computerized technology to track the tornados, but it is kept in its place. This is underlined by the fact that it is not Harding himself but other members of the team who are glued to their electronic monitors. Harding prefers to keep his senses alerted to the real world, unmediated.

Technology is important, but not transcendent. It is also subject to the kind of hands-on improvisation associated with frontier life, where pioneers are supposed to do everything for themselves, to be directly involved in all aspects of life, rather than the narrow specialization of technocratic society (how closely any of this accords with the harsh rigours of manual labour on the frontier remains questionable). The device that is to be released into the tornado is presented with the full cinematic rhetoric of 'masterful technology', floods of what is assumed to be 'vital data' filling computer screens as it flies into action. It is unlikely to work at all, however, until modified in a moment of last-minute inspiration in which fragments of Pepsi cans are used to construct makeshift wings (Jo requests the collection of 'every aluminium can you can find', but only Pepsi seems to exist). Product placement here becomes a source of salvation, the ultimate in positive-vibe positioning for the product involved. Pepsi glitters in the limelight for significant moments, but the placement is firmly integrated into central narrative themes of the movie. It does not 'work against' the narrative, the impact of product placement suggested by Mark Crispin Miller, but gains its resonance precisely from the extent to which it is positioned at a narrative crux. If the wilderness itself is figured sexually as feminine, the dominant trope in a range of American cultural products, *Twister* proffers its own vivid image in the shape of the vaginal vortex of the tornado, at once hazardous and fascinating, seething and—initially, at least—unknowable. The phallic imagery is also unmistakable, the device ejaculating a multitude of sperm-like silver balls that penetrate to the centre of the tornado. The tornado becomes knowable, predictable and at least partially domesticated. As does Jo, whose leadership role in the tornado-chasing team is often supplanted by Harding's return and whose more obsessive attitude toward the tornado—however much rationalized by her childhood experience—seems to associate her with its irrationality.

The most insistent visual signal of the contrasting approaches of the Harding and Miller teams in *Twister* are the convoys of vehicles in

which they chase across the countryside. The villains occupy an almost obligatory fleet of anonymous and sinister black vans, signifying the evil forces of centralized regimentation. The good guys are in a motley collection including a battered old motor-home—that modern version of the covered wagon, again—blaring out rock music and generally emanating a spirit of eccentric pioneer individuality.

Despite the simplistic mechanics of the character-oppositions, *Twister* offers some resolution of the competing demands of frontier and technology, although frontier values remain privileged. A similar dynamic is found in *Independence Day*, in which technology is presented as necessary to survival, but again far from sufficient. A high state of technological readiness is necessary if the aliens are to be defeated, a point that is clearly central to the film's conservative and militaristic stand. As in *War of the Worlds* (1953), on which the film is partly based, and many other science fictions, it is made quite clear that the aliens are creatures as feeble physiologically as humans and are daunting enemies only by virtue of technological might. But technology-as-system, purely as part of a giant military-industrial complex, does not work. The full might of jet fighters and nuclear weapons fails initially to make any dent in the alien armour. To break through, the film suggests, something more quirky, human and inventive is required; namely, the computer virus introduced by the maverick genius of David Levinson with a little inspirational help from his father Julius (Judd Hirsch), plus the unconventional aerobatics of Hiller and Casse and the leadership qualities of Whitmore. The jet pilot is privileged (as most obviously elsewhere in *Top Gun* (1986)) as a figure able to maintain heroic qualities of active agency, in control of—rather than determined by—his technology. The heroic elements essential to success are divided here among several characters. Levinson is hardly a traditional frontiersman, but he is a character of environmentalist credentials, hostile to the wasteful ways of modern technological existence. Hiller, Casse and Whitmore (especially once the latter exchanges presidential robes for

fighter-pilot outfit) have more conventional frontier traits, as transplanted into the domain of aerial warfare.

A dynamic of progress is ultimately endorsed, as in the classic Western narrative in which the frontier, however much sanctified and privileged, is usually viewed as a state that has to pass with the inevitable coming of modern 'civilization'. This is the impression given by the closing images of heterosexual bliss and pastoral tranquillity in *Twister*, the point at which the tornado-wilderness is about to come under greater control. If one of the frontier-types has to be sacrificed in *Independence Day* it is not surprising that it is Casse, a relatively marginal figure and not accidentally the one associated with the traumatic Vietnam war rather than the overwhelming success of high-tech weaponry in the Persian Gulf. The audience is left with the impression that sometimes initially reluctant saviours remain available to come to the rescue should the occasion be repeated. The final effect is equivocal, seeking to square the values of frontier nostalgia with the hope for future progress—an ambivalence that has always been present in frontier mythology. The function of popular mythology, expertly achieved by many Hollywood films, is precisely to effect such reconciliations, however contradictory their components might appear on closer examination. Resolution is provided on an imaginary level for oppositions that cannot be overcome in reality. Issues that raise substantial difficulties for a particular culture—as the inherent contradictions of frontier discourse and modernity do for America—are displaced onto a plane where mythic sleight of hand can offer at least a semblance of reconciliation.

Independence Day is more crude and specific—and ideologically loaded—in its points of reference. *Independence Day* is voracious in its effort to gobble up everything around it in a broad inclusiveness of reference of which Steven Spielberg is a principal target. The film makes explicit and implicit reference to the mushy liberalism of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). A hippyish group of individuals gather on the roof of a skyscraper hoping for some kind of loving communion with the

aliens—and promptly get vaporized, as does a helicopter sent up to communicate by playing music and flashing coloured lights. The denizens of the rooftop are presented as a fake, metropolitan and decadent version of the kind of redemption that is only really available to those strong enough to engage more violently with the alien. The entire sentimental project of *Close Encounters* is dismissed as firmly here as in the direct reference, in which Hiller punches out a crash-landed alien, quipping ‘Now that’s what I call a Close Encounter.’ The joke is guaranteed a laugh, but the politics is more serious in a film which presents the being from another world as a cold, absolutely alien ‘Other’ for whom all humanity can usefully do is ‘die’. This justifies a response of unmitigated violence on the American part that is central to the film’s reactionary politics.

The evil alien of science fiction that once stood potentially as a metaphor for the Soviet Union is revived in the post Cold War era as its ideologically much-required replacement—the Other against which internal unity can be asserted. Complicating factors are removed at a stroke. The effect is much the same as the dismissal of conspiracy theory to which I referred earlier. If one gesture removes the obligations denoted by the benevolent aliens of Spielberg, the other unwinds the entanglements—of form and narrative—woven by the conspiracy-movie subgenre of the Vietnam/Watergate-infected early 1970s. Conspiracy theory is taken on board but only to be disavowed. The threats of both sentimentality and corruption are shuffled off. A nod to the HAL computer of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)—its sinister red eye and a ‘Good Morning, Dave’ greet Levinson on his computer when he enters the alien spacecraft for the climactic engagement—seems sufficient to dismiss the burden of Kubrick’s tale of the eclipse of human agency by technology. The film embraces ethnic and racial diversity among the central characters, disavowing the existence of internal ruptures along these lines. What is left is a reassuringly simple, binary opposition between Good and Evil, unitary collective Self and absolute Other. The cleansing of American society and the darkening of the Other permit a return to the

terms of the pre-revisionist Western—and the Cold War— at their most ideologically pure, and a realm in which there is no question other than to kill the alien-Other or be killed.

The version of frontier and technology given in *Twister* and *Independence Day* is more unambiguously celebratory than that found in many earlier explorations of the same mythological landscape. A good point of comparison might be *Jaws* (1975), which negotiates similar oppositions in a more tentative and questioning manner, befitting an era in which the confident assertions of frontier mythology were confronted by the immediate fallout of the Vietnam war and other social and economic upheavals in the United States of the early-to-mid 1970s. The greater stridency of films like *Twister* and *Independence Day* can be seen at some level as part of a concerted effort in the past 25 years to rehabilitate the myth of the frontier. Frontier rhetoric was mobilized widely during the Vietnam war, but as also seriously damaged by its association with Vietnam. The post-Vietnam era has seen numerous efforts to reassert the myth, not the least being movies about the war and the boom in science fiction from the late 1970s.

To suggest a project of rehabilitating frontier mythology in this period is not to assume any active conspiracy on the part of those who might benefit from its ideological impact. The mythic or ideological work carried out by appeals to the frontier is essentially pleasing and flattering to the audience. These films offer large measures of reassurance. They confront difficult issues, but in a superficial manner. Real underlying contradictions remain, but the rhetoric of movies such as *Twister* and *Independence Day* gives the impression of resolution. Issues are raised just far enough to open up the gap that can then quickly be filled. This might not always work perfectly, but in general it is likely to offer sufficient pleasure to most audiences for any explanation based on conspiracy theory to be superfluous. Hollywood's commitment to providing

pleasure—its primary route to profit—is itself enough to account a move towards the reassertion of frontier mythology.

Twister and *Independence Day* appeared at a time when frontier values again came up against some awkward realities, however, despite the generally conservative flavour of the political context. The antics of extreme anti-state right-wing militias and bombers have forced some Americans at least to confront the darker side of the mythology of frontier violence, redemption and virulent suspicion of state and corporate power. By taking the logical implications of frontier mythology to their violent extremes, these groups have made elements of the mythology less comfortable in the hands of those situated at the more liberal end of the spectrum. They have also been greeted with applause in some circles, however, even if the means are often condemned. The fervent opposition to the heritage of industrialism and technology expressed by the Unabomber from his *Walden*-esque cabin in the Montana backwoods has wider resonances in contemporary American culture, as is suggested by the iconic adoption of his photofit image (the hooded figure in dark glasses) and by the suspicion of bureaucratic technological dependence expressed in these highly popular movies.

Both *Twister* and *Independence Day* play into a context in which they can indulge and offer fantastic resolution to reactionary paranoia about the secret machinations of state or corporate power. This right-wing version of the anti-state/corporate critique serves also to divert attention from what I would suggest are far more pertinent questions raised by the left, the alien-conspiracy version safely channelling such inquiry into the realms of fantasy. A film like *Twister* provides a legitimate and sanitized way of identifying with frontier experience, safely contained by the rationalization that it is all in the name of beneficent progress and that there are no victims other than of accident or their own folly. Its setting unambiguously reasserts the mythical 'heartland' resonance of an Oklahoma landscape that was so traumatized by the Oklahoma City

bombing—not to mention its gestures towards the fantasy of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), whose Dorothy gives her name and homely tone to the makeshift technology used to monitor the tornado (it is notable that the bad-guy Miller version has become D.O.T., the coldly rational Digital Orthographic Telemeter rather than the warm and comforting Dorothy). *Independence Day* yokes the frontier theme to a barely disguised call for military retrenchment and an implicit celebration of the Gulf war that would not have looked out of place at the height of the Reagan era

None of the above should be taken to suggest that Hollywood films can be read unproblematically as simple reflectors of American culture, even when they attract large audiences. Hollywood cinema remains the product of highly specific industrial and institutional mediations. The popularity of any film can be shaped by relatively arbitrary factors such as promotional expenditure and the presence or absence of competition at the moment of release. Much of the work of distribution today is around the organization of this process. Such manipulations mean that we cannot read directly from the hit status of texts to argue that they plug immediately into contemporary cultural concerns.

It would be equally implausible to suggest that there was *no* connection between movies that attract large audiences and wider cultural or ideological currents. Some kind of mediated relationship can be asserted, especially in cases such as popular genres or otherwise repeatedly successful frameworks. Successful genres are industrially and critically fabricated structures which—for all their mediations—seem to demonstrate a sustained popularity sufficient to enable us to speculate with some conviction about their connections to the level of mythology or ideology. It seems significant, for instance, that the conflicting imperatives of frontier and civilization that are repeatedly offered mythological resolution in the Western and the films examined here are also structured into seemingly very different settings such as the musical and numerous forms of Hollywood comedy.⁶ A threshold of ubiquity is reached at which stronger arguments can be made about the relations of such highly

mediated, industrial products to the broader cultural landscape in which they are situated, even if 'scientific' standards of provable connection remain absent—as they usually are in any debates about the 'meaning' of cultural products.

The mythic role of Hollywood may have been undermined to some extent in the postwar period. Genres such as the Western underwent an increasingly radical process of deconstruction and have been sustained in traditional form rather more in television than the cinema. Contemporary blockbusters seem to have regained some of this ground, however, re-establishing mythic oppositions in the narrative, attracting huge audiences and achieving the resonance of broader cultural events. Social changes dating back to the 1950s have made the cinema audience more specialized and far less general in character. Much of the traditional mass audience was lost in the postwar consumer boom, the move to the suburbs and the rapid expansion of other forms of leisure activity, including television. What was left, or reconstructed, was a more segmented audience with a range of more specific demands: the 'youth' audience, for example, or those seeking more 'adult' and challenging fare. The blockbuster strategy is based precisely on seeking to mobilize a more general audience, akin to the mythic 'family' audience at which Hollywood aimed its movies for decades during the 'classical' era from the 1920s until the late 1940s. Cultural resonances which might tap into the concerns of potential moviegoers are taken explicitly into account by market researchers employed by Hollywood.⁷ Advertising and promotional strategies are often based around attempts to sell these movies as special events that *have* to be seen, that *everybody* is going to; to miss them, therefore, is to miss out, not to be included, just as many consumer products are advertised on their basis of creating consumption communities of one kind or another.

Narrative vs. Spectacle

Closures at the formal and narrative levels play an important part in the assertion of imaginary reconciliations in *Twister* and *Independence Day*. In this sense, they fit into the broad category of what have become known as 'classical Hollywood' texts: tightly plotted cause-and-effect narratives that leave little room for questioning or doubts that might undermine the mythic resolution. They go out of their way to offer closures in the formal, narrative and ideological dimensions. Strong identifications are provided with hero-figures who carry us through the narrative and across any fissures. Our confidence in the abilities of the hero of *Twister* is absolute, whatever setbacks might be faced. Questions and uncertainties are evoked by some of the central characters in *Independence Day*, but only in order to highlight the absolute nature of the final triumph. Formal closures at the level of *mise-en-scene* and editing are more or less absolute, tightly 'suturing' the viewer into driving, linear narratives which offer big emotional pay-offs as reward.

The mythic/ideological assertions of these films demonstrate that narrative is far from being surrendered to spectacle in even the more spectacular aspects of contemporary Hollywood. Yet these films do function importantly as spectacle. They trade heavily on the appeal of ever more grand special-effects sequences that sometimes seem motivated by little more than their own spectacular presence and box-office appeal. Sitting back and simply 'taking in' the spectacle, the impact of 'big' special effects, seems to be as important a source of pleasure in these films as the joys of narrative—perhaps more so, or at least more obviously so. According to one view, the history of cinema—American cinema in particular, but also cinema more generally—can be seen in terms of a gradual move from spectacle to narrative. Early cinema, around the turn of the century, is characterized in Tom Gunning's influential account as a 'cinema of attractions', its appeal based on the direct confrontation and stimulation of viewers rather than their integration or passive absorption into sustained narratives. A variety of attractions were displayed on the screen, presented as objects of wonder to be

looked at for their own sake, rather than only for their value as elements in an ongoing narrative. By the 1910s at the latest, narrative became increasingly important, for a variety of commercial and aesthetic reasons around which debate continues.⁸ For some commentators, classical Hollywood cinema came to be defined by the centrality of linear narratives, to which all other elements are subordinated. An element of narrative was never entirely absent, however; not even from the earliest Lumiere 'actualities' before the turn of the century. And, as Gunning suggests, attractions retained their place even when narrative became more sustained and central to the experience. He cites the particular cases of genres such as comedy and the musical. The question is whether spectacular disruptions are merely localized, generically motivated or pulled into line by the melodramatics of plot—or whether they are more central to the dynamics of Hollywood cinema. Moments of spectacle or 'excess' can be seen as intruding into an essentially coherent narrative fabric, a phenomenon often celebrated for what might then appear to be its radical potential. But the fabric may itself be a close weave of both narrative *and* spectacle.

The latter certainly seems to be the experience provided by films such as *Twister* and *Independence Day*. It may always have been the case in Hollywood. Any suggestion that narrative has largely been abandoned to spectacle seems a serious overstatement—both of the alleged lack of spectacle in 'classical' Hollywood and of the absence of narrative structure in the 'post-classical' era. This is not to say that the situation is unchanged or unchanging. The balance between narrative and spectacle is dynamic and may shift from film to film or from one period to another. Good arguments can be made for emphasising one tendency or the other at particular moments. Spectacle tends to be foregrounded especially during periods of innovation such as the initial use of sound, colour or widescreen technology. The first sound films tended to be musicals; early colour and widescreen processes were associated with spectacle far more than realism. There is no shortage of

material grounding for suggesting the importance of spectacle in the specific case of Hollywood cinema in the latter part of the twentieth century. One of Hollywood's key strategies in response to the move of populations to the suburbs, and to competition from television and other forms of leisure activity, has been to use spectacular attraction as the basis of its effort to tempt audiences back into the cinema, playing on the particular characteristics of the big-screen experience. This phenomenon began in the 1950s and included experiments such as Cinerama and 3D, both of which originated outside the major studios. The development of CinemaScope by Twentieth Century-Fox (first used in the historical spectacle *The Robe*, 1953) marked the movement of spectacular new widescreen formats into the mainstream, where they proved popular and helped at least temporarily to stem the postwar loss of audiences.⁹ Spectacular cinema underwent something of a decline in the later 1960s, as the studios ran into serious financial difficulties exacerbated by the failure of a few notorious spectacular features, but it returned as an increasingly dominant strategy through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

And what has been offered by Hollywood spectacular in some cases is the promise of an experience claimed to have at least something in common with that conventionally associated with the frontier. Spectacle could be seen as the 'moment' of the frontier offered directly to the viewer, visceral thrills that stand in for the frontier experience celebrated thematically in the narrative. The two levels—narrative and spectacle—operate together in a complex pattern of interaction that, in these films at least, seem to reinforce the inscription of frontier dynamics in the texts. Moments of spectacle often occur on the frontier terrains that are visited. In *Twister* the spectacle, in the shape of the tornado, actually creates the frontier vortex amid more cultivated open spaces. *Independence Day* offers moments of spectacular engagement set in the landscape farther west, including an exhilarating chase that winds through the iconographic terrain of the Grand Canyon. It is in such a place that the alien can be taken on—on a one-to-one basis—and defeated by the skills of a pilot like

Hiller. The alternative form of spectacle in *Independence Day*, the destruction of the decadent metropolis, also serves to underpin the work of the narrative. The enjoyment of these scenes may include a simple wallowing in the spectacle of destruction, the safely bounded thrill of seeing hallowed monuments blasted to rubble, but this form of pleasure is integrated into the work of the narrative rather than offering merely arbitrary thrills. In these films spectacle seems often to work *with* narrative, rather than being disruptive.

Spectacle is used here the way comic moments or musical numbers are used in the more 'integrated' forms of comedy or the musical. Much work on the relationship between narrative and disruptive or spectacular elements has focused on the genres of comedy and the musical, two cases in which narrative seems most obviously to be subject to institutionalized disruption. Comic gags or self-standing comedian performances and musical numbers can disrupt narrative, particularly at the surface level of plot movement (although this does not guarantee any politically or ideologically disruptive effect¹⁰). But these moments can be a good deal more integrated. Comic or musical performances can be used to convey important story information and to drive the narrative forward. They can also work to underpin narrative oppositions and resolutions. In many comedian comedies, for example, the comic interruption may appear to disrupt story development but fits closely into underlying thematic oppositions such as those between childishness and maturity.¹¹ The big production number of the classical Hollywood musical might seem to intrude into plot development but often plays a key narrative role in asserting the reconciliation of opposites.¹² Spectacle and narrative can work closely together. This is by no means always the case, and even where it is the degree of integration is variable. My argument is that a significant degree of interaction between the two is a characteristic of many popular products of contemporary Hollywood. To say this is not to revive a conception of the seamlessly coherent Hollywood text. The fact that spectacle and narrative act in concert in some ways does not prevent them continuing to obey their own logics and appeals in others. Neither

dimension necessarily 'contains' or 'disrupts' the other. They operate together in a pattern that displays variable degrees of coherence from one example to another, or from one moment to another in the same film.

Spectacular cinema is sold largely on the basis of its sheer size and impact, its physical scale of image and multi-channel stereo sound—its function specifically as 'attraction'. Gunning's use of the term is taken from the early writings of the Soviet filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein. For Eisenstein, attractions are 'calculated to produce specific emotional shocks in the spectator' (34). They are designed to impact directly onto the viewer, physiologically and mentally. In Eisenstein's case the aim is make the viewer emotionally receptive to a propaganda message. In Hollywood, the ideological results may be equally potent, but are strictly secondary to the main intention, which is offer audiences a scale of audio-visual experience that will bring them back into the cinema. Spectacular cinema from the mid-1950s onwards has to be seen in the context of its contrast with television and other entertainments within the home. The low-level audio-visual impact of television and video is, literally, domesticated by both its small scale and its location among the routines of everyday life.

Cinematic spectacle claims to provide something marked as distinct from this quotidian environment, something special, more intense and more filled with the large-scale illusion of *presence*. Big widescreen cinema claims to fill the viewer's vision. Multichannel hi-fi stereo sound—taken up rather more slowly and reluctantly by exhibitors—adds significantly to the impression of immersion in a three-dimensional experience. Viewers are assaulted by a brand of spectacle that might come down simply to sheer pace and kinetics; to loudness that can be felt bodily as vibration and brightness that makes the eyes contract. Special effects sometimes become little more than sequences of abstract audio-visual 'impact', the specific or detailed motivated realism of which may be largely coincidental. The viewer is sold the illusion of being transported

into the world on-screen, of *experiencing* more directly the moments which, in the films under consideration here, are those of the frontier or its analogues, moments of direct engagement for characters within the fiction. The point was made explicitly in advertisements of the 1950s which repeatedly depicted the widescreen spectator as inhabiting the same space as the on-screen action.¹³ As Mark Crispin Miller puts it: ‘Just as the theme park promises to take us right “into the movies” the movies now fake our integration with the spectacle [...]’ (235). For Miller, this ‘series of visceral jolts’ is offered ‘instead of narrative’. But, in these films at least, the visceral jolts offered to the viewer can also be read as a way of reinforcing narrative dynamics. The experience of watching such movies is sold as an stimulating intrusion into the everyday world of the viewer in a (perhaps rather pale) reflection of the way that the frontier experience on screen intrudes into the lives of the fictional characters.

If the audience of *Twister* is comprised of thrill seekers, in search of better and more exciting spectacular effects, then so are its characters. For all the worthy alibi—the attempt to increase scientific understanding—the chasing of tornados is presented largely in terms of the whooping and the hollering and getting a buzz out of an exhilarating engagement with one of nature’s spectacles. There is a distinct parallel between the on-screen relationship of chaser and tornado and that between viewer and cinematic spectacle. The response of the fictional characters to the ever-increasing spectacle of their real-world twisters is akin to that of the audience to the special effects version. In a similar way the giant alien spacecraft of *Independence Day* are as spectacular to those inside the movie as they are to the viewer in the theatre. Much is made of the awesome spectacle *within* the frame. The mere sight of the spacecraft reduces characters, both major and minor, to a state of gobsmacked, eye-popping and jaw-dropping daze, a state in which the experiences of the everyday world—such as driving a vehicle without crashing into the one in front—are eclipsed. A similar dynamic underlies the selling of the spectacle *of* the frame, the movie itself, which is

promoted largely on the basis of effects designed to reduce the spectator to a similar state of awe and wonder in which ordinary life is left behind. The spectator is assaulted and at times overwhelmed. For Peter Biskind, this kind of filmmaking amounts to rendering the viewer passive and child-like, a tendency of some of the films of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg especially. Whether the filmgoer is entirely disarmed remains open to question (and extremely difficult to ascertain), but Biskind's point remains an important one, particularly when the political or ideological implications of cinematic spectacle are concerned. Pounding forms of spectacle certainly seem to have a tendency to impose themselves forcefully on the viewer, to leave less space for contemplation or questioning. In this respect, spectacle can have an impact similar to that of driving linear narrative: it can in some cases reinforce, almost physiologically, whatever the narrative asserts.

The formal strategies of *Twister* chiefly involve an alternation between two kinds of photography, each of which seems designed to stress a different aspect of the frontier-type experience. In one movement, the film uses airy and exhilarating shots taken from a helicopter—combined with an upbeat score—to underline the freedom, mobility and space within which the heroes move as they race around the countryside, on and off-road, almost unbounded by any restraints. Alternatively, *Twister* turns to very tightly-framed action sequences, cut and panned rapidly and often using an unsteady camera to create the impression of being right there, in the action and participating in the sense of urgency and excitement. What all of this is supposed to offer is an illusion, of course, at both levels, in and outside the space of the narrative. As an experience analogous to that for which the frontier is made to stand, the experience of spectacular cinema may seem pitifully attenuated, and the comparison somewhat stretched. But it is questionable whether this promise of immediacy, intensity and presence is much more false and second-hand than any other mobilization of the myth, in contemporary Hollywood or elsewhere. Cinematic spectacle is

clearly not the same as anything that the frontier might once have been. But it is sold on the promise of a similar structural relationship, supposedly offering an illusion of authenticity and sheer presence that can be opposed to the heavily mediated and circumscribed experiences of daily life.

If narrative offers order and coherence, moments of spectacle or excess may offer an alternative, the illusion of a more direct emotional and experiential impact. In the terms of the mythology, perhaps, narrative is the domain of 'civilization' (organization, structure, routine) and spectacle that of the frontier (uncluttered engagement, presence). Like the mythology of the frontier, Hollywood cinema tends to offer a dialectical interchange between the two, an attempt to play on the appeal of each and to resolve some of their contradictory imperatives. To return to the level of Hollywood institutions, there may also be some approximate kind of match between two more or less historically paralleled pairs: the 'classical' version of frontier mythology and the 'classical' studio system, on the one hand, and new reassertions of frontier mythology and elements of the 'new Hollywood' of the 'post-studio' era, on the other. The heyday of the studio system was a time when cinema was an institution central to American life, which would be expected to be more or less centrally located in terms of the materials of its movies, largely tending to reflect or help to mobilize dominant ideologies—although not without the ambiguities likely to result from any attempt to produce popular cultural products that draw on a potentially disparate and sometimes contradictory range of popular discourses. The post-studio era began as one of change, of challenge to old industrial practices and values. It opened up new possibilities, in terms of both content and formal strategies, largely as a result of the loss of cinema's previously central role as a cultural institution. Frontier mythology came under question, as did the way Hollywood operated as an industry. New voices were allowed to some extent—from counterculture to 'blaxploitation' and the influence of European art cinema—in an attempt

to find new audiences, especially under the threat of financial collapse that hit many of the major studios in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Classical Hollywood narrative style was among the practices to be questioned by some innovators.

Older practices seem to have been asserted, however, at more than one level. The mythology of the frontier has been reasserted, along with classical narrative form. So has the dominance of the majors. The legally-enforced removal of the major studios from the sphere of exhibition merely demonstrated the centrality of distribution, a sphere they continue to dominate. The central place of cinema itself has also been reasserted, to a significant extent, in relation to rival media such as television (in its expanding forms) and video. Television and video may be becoming more important in terms of the ultimate revenue earnings of movies, but cinematic exhibition remains the key marketplace, the location at which future values tend to be set for circulation in subsidiary channels. The centrality of spectacle or a narrative based on loud rhetoric has played an important part in something of a rebirth of the specifically *cinematic* experience in the 1980s and 1990s, in a move away from the more dismal shoe-box sized multiplex screen to a renewed emphasis on the quality of the audio-visual experience. This is the ideal, at least; it may not account for the less than fabulous quality of the experience still found in many theatres.

Some contradictory imperatives appear to be in play here. Products designed for the big screen and influenced by thoughts of suitability for exploitation as computer games or theme-park rides may not appear to sit so happily on the television screen (via broadcast or cassette). What kind of aesthetic most effectively bridges the gap? Mark Crispin Miller's answer is that Hollywood movies have come to look and sound like television commercials. The source of such a change, he suggests, can be found in the influence of product placement strategies and reciprocal movements of creative personnel between cinema and advertising. Contemporary Hollywood movies work 'without, or against,

the potential depth and latitude of cinema, in favour of that systematic overemphasis deployed in advertising (and all other propaganda). Each shot presents a content closed and unified, like a fist, and makes the point right in your face: big gun, big car, nice ass, full moon, a chase (great shoes!), big crash (blood, glass), a lobby (doorman), sarcasm, drinks, a tonguey, pugilistic kiss (nice sheets!), and so on.' (205) This may be true of many films, but not all. It does not account very well for the more expansive visual style of *Twister* and *Independence Day*, even if they tend not to take advantage of the full potential of the widescreen frame. Contemporary spectacles tend to be framed in such a way that they can be reframed or scanned without causing damage noticeable to many viewers. (There can still be significant losses, however. The introductory shots of Bill and Melissa in *Twister*—a head-on view through the windscreen of their pickup—keeps them in separate shots, indicating subliminally the gap between them that the narrative will assert. The first time Bill and Jo occupy the cab they are included together in a single shot, underlining their essential kinship. A panned/scanned and re-edited version of the film erases this distinction entirely, breaking the latter shot into two and leaving no basis for assuming that the first shot is not *also* merely the result of changes made in the transition to small screen). It might be argued that some movies are designed for big-screen blockbuster appeal and others for smoother transition to television and video—if it was not for the well-established fact that the biggest hits on both television and video are usually those which made a big splash in the cinema. The effects-led cinema blockbusters are the films that tend more than others to fill whole walls with copies in video rental outlets. Peter Kramer offers one of the more lucid explanations of this phenomenon:

Big screen spectacles rely for their revenues on small screen media, and these in turn rely for their appeal on movies which, when replayed on domestic small screen media, carry with them the grandeur and mystique of cinema. The theatrical presentation

of expensively-made movies to paying audiences who willingly and wholeheartedly submit themselves to the power and excesses of big screen spectacles remains an important cultural experience which is able to infuse the more mundane and casual use of domestic technologies with special meaning. (12-13)

New developments in domestic television and video technology may go some way towards narrowing the gap between the cinematic and small screen experience. Widescreen high-definition digital television and surround-sound systems including a version of the THX sound developed by George Lucas are sold with the promise of creating a 'home cinema' effect. How widely these will be taken up remains to be seen. As primarily domestic media, television and video are consumed in ways often very different from the experience of cinema, allowing all sorts of distractions and other simultaneous activities. The difference is considerably more than one of technological fidelity, and the market for more 'cinematic' home systems may be limited to certain niches only. The driving force behind such developments, anyway, has far less to do with questions of cinematic or television aesthetics than economic motivations—the creation of new opportunities to sell into what have become relatively saturated hardware markets.

It is no small irony that the financial success of movies like *Twister* and *Independence Day* is due largely to the kind of dependence on 'state-of-the-art' technology that is questioned by the dominant strain of the narrative. The experience that stands in for that of the frontier is a product of the very system from which the narrative asserts the possibility of escape: technology, giant business oligopoly, and so on. This is not an accident. Large-scale spectacular effects can be seen as an important part of the system that enables the Hollywood majors to retain oligopolistic control of the industry. At a time when new media technologies could potentially reduce some costs and increase access to filmmaking, they seem often to be used instead as part of Hollywood's

traditional strategy of maintaining or raising ‘barriers to entry’. Despite periodic calls for cost-cutting and savings, it has generally suited the majors for the costs of production, distribution and marketing to remain high because this prevents anyone else from getting a foot in the door. The high salaries paid to stars since the ‘golden age’ of the studio system perform much the same function. The sheer scale of investment required means that the only way to compete effectively in the long term is to own one of the existing majors. Once a certain level of special effects technology has been deployed by the majors it creates a demand that other films match the same expensive standard. Issues of ‘quality’ and ‘standards’ such as this have long acted as a cover for the enshrining of just one—expensive, Hollywood—way of operating, when others, which do not have access to the same promotional resources, might be equally valid.¹⁴ Competitors are often led to attempt to emulate Hollywood spectacle, without having the resources to do it properly, thereby seemingly proving the maxim that ‘nobody does it like Hollywood’—a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Based to a significant extent on the success of a large number of small, independent houses, the state-of-the-art computer digital effects business might be held up as exemplifying a move in ‘post-studio-era’ Hollywood towards a decentralized or ‘post-Fordist’ production system. There has been a very clear move away from the Fordist mass production-line system that characterized the heyday of the studio era. This is another change that can easily be over-stated, however. For one thing, as Asu Askoy and Kevin Robins make clear, moves towards what post-Fordists term ‘flexible specialization’ in the production process—the general shift to an environment in which film packages are assembled on something closer to a one-off basis and in which the different elements of each package might be supplied by a large number of small providers—has not been matched by any such decentralization at the crucial levels of finance and distribution.¹⁵ There have also been moves towards some re-centralization at the production and post-production

level. As far as digital effects is concerned, the majors have begun to take over: 'To date, the studios have chosen either to buy established entities outright (Sony with Imageworks, Disney with Dream Quest); take substantial stakes (Fox with VI Effects, DreamWorks with PDI [Pacific Data Images]; or form their own in-house divisions (Warner Bros.).'¹⁶ As ever, the majors are happy to leave the risks of innovation to outsiders (the same pattern was seen in the case of the development of sound in the 1920s and of widescreen processes in the 1950s), moving in to reap the benefits at a later stage when potential profitability has been demonstrated.

Back to the frontier

The films considered here demonstrate the continued saliency of the particular narrative associated with frontier mythology—complete with its various complications and resolutions, its thematic concerns and blend of narrative and spectacle—in contemporary Hollywood cinema. The ideology of the Western was always riven by tensions—most notably those between the rival values of wilderness and civilization—which became increasingly explicit in the postwar period. The subsequent wholesale revisionism of Westerns of the Vietnam and immediate post-Vietnam eras made sufficient inroads into the classical mythology substantially to reduce its acceptability to both industry and audiences. The Westerns of the last decades of the twentieth century tend to be one-off affairs, often marketed as special or 'event' movies, and frequently posing as 'alternative' in ideological stance, rather than a central thread in the familiar Hollywood fabric.¹⁷ This is in keeping with a broad trend in the commercial American cinema since the break up of the vertically-integrated studio system in the 1950s, but seems particularly clear in the case of the Western. The frontier mythology that animated the Western has been transposed to a number of alternative domains. The frontier lost to immediate cinematic experience has been reinscribed in a number of other generic frameworks and as an important point of reference in 'non-genre' cinema.

A parallel might be drawn between the status of the Western at the end of the twentieth century and that of the frontier itself in the late nineteenth century. The apparent closing of the historical frontier, announced in 1893, was greeted with fear and dismay, just as the demise of the generic Western—with its ideological effects—might be mourned by some today. But substitutions were quickly found in both cases. The loss of the actual historical referent in the nineteenth century has been seen by some commentators as reducing the importance of frontier themes to the American imagination.¹⁸ If anything, the opposite is the case. The loss of the actual frontier has been no bar to the maintenance of the mythology. It has left the mythology all the more free to be expanded and developed. The traditional concept of the frontier always was rooted in myth more than reality—although it was capable also of *creating* reality through the acting out of the myth. The passing of the historical experience from which frontier mythology was extrapolated has merely helped to remove from view some of the contradictions it contained from the start. Mythology tends to be strengthened rather than weakened as its immediate—or, rather, always *imagined*—relation to experience is reduced. The loss of the actual generic Western today has been equally little bar to the maintenance of frontier mythology in Hollywood cinema. It has, once more, enabled the mythology to be expanded, developed and reinforced, in some cases imposed with a force that would not be possible within the original generic confines. To adopt Rick Altman's terminology, certain of the 'semantic' elements of frontier mythology—the basic units of meaning—may have changed (as in the case of the Native American 'Other' replaced in *Independence Day* by the alien) while others have been retained (open western landscapes, for example, as signifiers of frontier virtues). More significantly, the basic 'syntax'—the underlying structure of oppositions—remains intact. This is not to suggest an a-historical reading of structured oppositions but to provide a framework within which both change and continuity can be charted within the mythic/ideological landscape. Continuity is more the

outcome of active ideological projections and interventions with their own specific histories than a reduction to any timeless realm of universal myth.

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¹ For a very useful account see Richard Maltby and Ian Craven, *Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (1995); also Elizabeth Cowie, 'Storytelling: Classical Hollywood cinema and classical narrative', in Neale and Smith, eds. *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*

² See, for example, Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam* (1991); Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (1994); Mark Crispin Miller, 'Advertising: End of Story', in Mark Crispin Miller (ed), *Seeing Through Movies* (1990). I am not suggesting that works such as these do not make useful points about the state of Hollywood today, merely that there is a tendency to take for granted a previous Hollywood norm in which narrative was fundamentally more coherent.

³ For a very different treatment of such images, emphasising their unattainable, mythic and illusory nature, see *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), directed by Gus Van Sant

⁴ For the classic account of role of pastoral in American mythology see Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (1964)

⁵ See, for example, William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1991)

⁶ See, for example, Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (1987-89) and Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (ed.) *Classical Hollywood Comedy* (1995)

⁷ See, for example, Olen J. Earnest, 'Star Wars: A Case Study of Motion Picture Marketing', *Current Research in Film*, Volume 1, 1985

⁸ See, for example, the various contributions to Elsaesser.

⁹ See John Belton, *Widescreen Cinema* (1992)

¹⁰ See Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (1992), 14

¹¹ See, for example, Frank Krutnik, 'The Clown-Prints of Comedy', *Screen* 25, 4-5, 1984

¹² Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (1987/89); Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (1982)

¹³ For illustrations, see Belton: 189-194

¹⁴ For an earlier example of this kind of strategy see Brian Winston, *Technologies of Seeing* (1996) on the establishment of 35mm film as the industry standard

¹⁵ For the kind of account of which Askoy and Robins are critical see Susan Christopherson and Michael Storper, 'The Effects of Flexible Specialization on Industrial Politics and the Labor Market: The Motion Picture Industry', *Industrial and Labour Relations Review*, 42, 3 (April 1989)

¹⁶ Benedict Carver, 'Illusions of Grandeur', *Screen International*, 27-9-96

¹⁷ For an excellent account of the fate of the Western see Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (1992). For a recent brief survey see Douglas Pye, 'Criticism and the Western', Introduction to Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye, eds, *The Movie Book of the Western* (1996)

¹⁸ Notably Edwin Fussell, *Frontier: American Literature and the American West* (1965)