

PART VI: CONCLUSION

SIXTEEN

Cinema Without Frontiers

Cinema celebrated its centenary in 1995. During its first century of existence cinema grew from a cottage industry to become a global business enterprise, established itself as a social institution throughout most of the world and legitimated itself as a popular art form. Cinema has the distinction of being the first truly mass medium: more widely disseminated than newspapers, preceding radio, television and the internet. For much of its first century the cinema was the pre-eminent form of popular entertainment for people throughout the Americas, Europe and Asia. Its appeal crosses boundaries of nation, gender, class, culture, language and religion. To that extent cinema is a social institution 'without frontiers'.

How does cinema, at the start of the twenty-first century, compare with cinema at the end of the nineteenth? To modern eyes, early cinema seems unfamiliar, primitive, remote, alien – proof that the past is indeed a foreign country where things are done differently. What do the *actualités* of the Lumière brothers have in common with the postmodern, special effects-driven comic-book fantasy of the Wachowski brothers (*The Matrix*)? And there would seem to be little in common between the nickelodeons of popular legend, with their wooden bench seating and primitive projection equipment, and the modern multiplex cinema with its surgically clean auditoria, comfortable seating and digital projection. The fact that films are now seen more widely on television, video and DVD than in the cinema itself, moreover, is indicative of a fundamental difference between 1900 and 2000.

Yet, on closer inspection, perhaps the differences between the past and the present are not so great as might first appear. For all the technological advances that have occurred since the

Lumières and other pioneers unveiled their films to the public, the medium of film is still essentially the same. It is posited on creating an illusion of reality. The techniques used to create the illusion have changed, but the illusion itself remains at the heart of the experience of watching a film. The pictures of workers leaving a factory and of a train entering a station that enthralled early spectators were just as much an illusion in their own right as the virtual reality world of *The Matrix* was to the science-fiction enthusiasts of 1999. And if, on one level, the Cinématographe Lumière represents the 'birth' of cinema as popular entertainment, on another level it also marks the beginning of cinema as a global institution. There is a quite striking similarity in the international marketing of the Cinématographe, as the Lumières sent operators around the world in 1896 to exploit its commercial value before the novelty waned, and the global release strategies of major blockbusters a century later.

The two most successful modes of film practice at the start of the twentieth-first century – the New Hollywood corporate blockbuster and the Bollywood song-and-dance spectacular – have both been described as a 'cinema of attractions'. They afford greater prominence to visual spectacle than to narrative coherence and they appeal to audiences of diverse national and cultural backgrounds. In the last decade or so the use of computer-generated imaging in blockbusters such as *Jurassic Park*, *Titanic* and *Gladiator* has led, perhaps for the first time since the trick films of Méliès, to the effects behind the illusion becoming as much of an attraction as the illusion itself. The inclusion of song and dance numbers in the Bollywood movie is reminiscent of early cinema exhibition when films were included in variety shows alongside other attractions including singers, dancers and other 'turns'.

As a social institution, moreover, cinema serves much the same purpose today as it did at the beginning. It is, first and foremost, a medium of entertainment. For all the artistic ambitions of some filmmakers, they are working in a popular medium. Cinema is popular not in the old-fashioned sense of a folk culture (what Raymond Williams has defined as 'made by the people for themselves') but rather in the modern sense of a

mass-produced culture (one that is 'setting out to win favour').¹ Cinema has a broader-based popular appeal than other forms of communal entertainment such as theatre or opera. What began as a novelty attraction for the bourgeoisie became entertainment for the masses. It is no coincidence that cinema's period of greatest popularity in the first half of the twentieth century coincided with the emergence of 'mass society': population growth, urbanization, industrialization, increasing levels of consumerism and leisure activity were all factors that helped to create the social conditions in which cinema could flourish. Cinema was to prove especially responsive to the needs of the masses. It was able to connect with the mass public, to respond to people's hopes and aspirations, their dreams and desires. It is significant that cinemas were often referred to as 'dream palaces'. That the appeal of cinema arises from its provision of escapism and entertainment is eloquently proved by the fact that around the world the preferences of cinema audiences have been for fictional drama and popular genres; only rarely have 'serious' films also become popular successes.

As soon as it became clear that film was more than a novelty attraction, the film industry was organized on a mass-production basis. The emergence of the narrative feature film within the first two decades of the medium's existence established the dominant form of filmmaking that has remained in place ever since. The fictional feature film is the staple product of all national cinemas; the classical narrative film, institutionalized in Hollywood by the late 1910s, became the dominant international film form. As Thompson and Bordwell observe: 'American studio directors standardized an approach to cinematic storytelling that became the basis of the commercial film style.'² It is this style of film that has the widest popular appeal and, therefore, the widest social acceptance. Many histories of cinema set up an opposition between Hollywood on the one hand (categorized as populist, formulaic, socially and aesthetically conservative) and 'alternatives' to Hollywood on the other (cinemas either of formal innovation or displaying a commitment to 'serious' filmmaking). Thus it is that certain national film movements have been privileged in the aesthetic history of cinema: German Expressionism, Soviet montage, Poetic

Realism, Italian Neo-Realism, the *Nouvelle Vague*, the Czech New Wave, New Iranian Cinema, New Chinese Cinema. It is a largely artificial distinction. All feature films are part of the social institution of cinema; the stylistic differences between them are considerable, but all are posited to a greater or a lesser degree on character-driven narratives, psychologically oriented motivation and verisimilitude (film characters behave and act like 'real' people).

Any history of world cinemas has to address the relationship between Hollywood and other film industries. Critics of globalization allege that American movies have imposed American cultural values on the rest of the world. Intellectuals outside America, Marxists especially, see Hollywood as being instrumental in what Eric Hobsbawm describes as 'the global triumph of the United States and its way of life'.³ It cannot be denied that the us film industry has been the most successful in building up its worldwide production, distribution and exhibition interests, or that the American style of filmmaking has proved remarkably durable throughout the world since the 1920s. American movies have the dominant market share in most European, Latin American and African countries; they have also made significant inroads into Southeast Asia. The increasingly rare instances of European films that perform well at the box-office are greeted with choruses of patriotic chauvinism regardless of their quality. It is a point of honour amongst French commentators, for example, that home-grown films such as *Les Visiteurs* and *Astérix et Obélix contre César* outperform Hollywood juggernauts like *Jurassic Park* and *The Phantom Menace* at the French box-office.

Why have American films been so successful? The Marxist view would be that they have triumphed by imposing a homogenized form of mass entertainment on audiences and by exploiting the weaknesses of other national film industries. An empiricist response would be that audiences have consciously chosen American movies in preference to others and that Hollywood is merely responding to market conditions rather than creating them. There is probably an element of truth in both arguments, but neither is entirely convincing by itself. The conditions that brought about the hegemony of the us film

industry were established during and after the First World War when other leading national film industries were fatally weakened by the reduction of resources and the disruption of international trade. Hollywood did not create these circumstances, but it certainly benefited from them. Having established its hegemony, moreover, the us film industry has naturally sought to maintain it. Recent research has demonstrated how the Motion Picture Export Association, the overseas branch of the us film industry's cartel formed at the end of the Second World War, has pursued an aggressive foreign policy both to protect its share of existing markets and to expand into new territories.⁴ At the same time, however, Hollywood's historical dominance of the world's screens needs to be nuanced. Two of the world's most populous countries have been resistant to American imports for cultural and political reasons. The us film industry has identified India and China as its two main growth markets for the twenty-first century, but the evidence of past experience is that it is unlikely to make much inroad into either without adapting to local conditions. And even in those territories where American movies have been in the ascendancy, their popularity does not mean that other films were necessarily unpopular. Film historians have only recently begun to realize the economic and cultural vitality of other national cinemas (beyond the traditions of art cinema associated with some countries). Popular genres such as musicals, comedies, romances and thrillers have been staples of most national cinemas, produced in the local idiom for domestic consumption. Yet these indigenous traditions of popular cinema have been written out of film history due to the continuing prevalence of aesthetic assumptions about 'art' and 'quality' and cultural prejudices against 'the popular'.

Relations between Hollywood and other national cinemas are better understood in terms of economic and cultural exchange rather than as straightforward economic and cultural imperialism. Thus, while American films have dominated cinema screens throughout much of the world, American investment has also supported production sectors in other countries. Most of the successful British films since the 1960s, including the James Bond series (which celebrated its fortieth

anniversary with the release of *Die Another Day* in 2002) have been made with financial support from Hollywood. The two worldwide blockbuster successes of 2001 arose from Hollywood investment in what were both distinctly 'non-American' projects. AOL Time Warner financed the production of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in Britain, the first in what looks set to be a highly lucrative franchise based on J. K. Rowling's indisputably British children's stories. And independent producer New Line Cinema risked financial ruin by bankrolling New Zealand director Peter Jackson's adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. These films blur the distinction between 'American' cinema on the one hand and 'British' and 'New Zealand' cinema on the other. Their worldwide success (the first *Harry Potter* film grossed over \$900 million worldwide; *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the first instalment of the Jackson/Tolkien trilogy, grossed some \$500 million) suggests that they are, perhaps, best described as 'international' films. Their success arises from a combination of the economic might of Hollywood and the cultural resources of the British and New Zealand film industries in terms of acting and writing talent as well as production facilities.

What for the future of cinema? Historians should always be wary of making predictions; knowledge of the past provides no special insight into the future. Yet there are a few general observations that are, perhaps, worth making. It would seem unlikely that either the global hegemony of Hollywood or its production strategy geared around the blockbuster is likely to change significantly in the immediate future. It would also seem unlikely that, in those countries where once-flourishing domestic production industries have been reduced to shadows of their former selves, there will be any significant revival. The decline of European film industries means that Asia has now become the centre of world production. The popular success of Indian cinema, both at home and abroad, is the most significant economic and cultural development in cinema over the last thirty years. At the turn of the millennium it looks to be on the verge of establishing itself as a major international presence alongside the US film industry. The increasing importance of the global marketplace – itself a consequence of escalating production

costs and diminishing audiences – would seem likely to make film, once again, the truly international medium that it was before the arrival of sound. The advent of new technologies whose potential is only just being realized (digitization, the internet) opens up exciting new possibilities for cinema. Some commentators predict that these new technologies will mean the end of cinema as we have known it: films such as *Toy Story* and *Final Fantasy* suggest that human actors may no longer be necessary, while the possibility of delivering movies over the Internet might fundamentally alter the nature of exhibition. I would expect that, on the evidence of its history to date, the film industry is more likely to assimilate these new technologies than be radically altered by them. Many commentators predicted that first television and then video would spell the end of cinema, but it survived both. Whatever the prognosis for its future, however, cinema has an exceptionally rich, varied and diverse past.

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