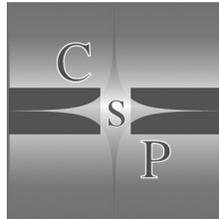


Movie Time

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By

James Combs



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To

Sara,
always

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INTRODUCTION

How do we understand the movies? This is a question which has exercised thought since the beginnings of movies over a century ago. Now that the movies have a history, we can see them in the larger context of social time. This context is what inspires the present inquiry: what do the movies tell us about time? Since movies are a major form of social learning, “telling time” is not only a matter of chronological time but also the social construction of time. Looking at American movies, the author began to ask some temporal questions. Why are so many movies set in the past era of the 1950’s? What is it about the Fifties that has made it the favorite period for retrospective films? Secondly, can we see evidence of the emergence of a new social present in movies? After the 1960’s, why did conservative themes began to appear in movies, and become a factor in the legitimation of conservatism down to the present? Finally, what do movies envision of the American future? Although people are always anxious about the future, why is it now so threatening? These are important questions, since they suggest a role for movies in society beyond mere amusement. Here we wish to study the temporal significance of popular films which tell imaginative stories about social time.

The movies have always been aware of the dynamics of time. The “age of the gods” in movie history was less a time of heroic nobility than the creation of a new carnival of amusement, a popular luxuriant available at storefronts and fairs for paying customers. The heroes of moviemaking were not creatures of sacred inspiration but rather figures of profane entertainment, quickly learning to use all the powers of the new medium to attract an audience. For all the ballyhoo, the persistence of the movies was dependent upon audiences: they liked them, had never seen anything quite like them, and could not get enough of them. Scholars of the early movies have noted the significant link between early films and magic shows.¹ Certainly, audiences thought themselves in the presence of some kind of magic, a new popular medium for the enjoyment of a transcendent yet recognizable world that seemed both strange and familiar. It was strange as a projected reality of an imaginative universe, but familiar by depicting the behavior of people in stories that were recognizable. The screen—sometimes merely a sheet hung in a tent—became a medium of transport, but also of import: the moving images offered audiences

psychic conveyance to a world beyond the tent, and also portrayed social significances with meanings viewers learned from the movie experience, and took with them when they left the tent.

Like every kind of dramatic experience, the movies communicated to audiences that they were witnessing things they couldn't do in everyday life, but also that they were witnessing things that had some relevance to what they did in mundane existence. The magic of the movies was not only in the stunning new techniques that violated the ordinary rules of space and time, but also that the movies moved audiences into the realm of social magic as no other dramatic medium was able to do. (When the movies were first introduced into China, they called it "shadow magic.") The movies were larger than life, and projected onto the big screen large images of life that people wished to see and understand and remember. The awesome base of film was, and is, in the visual imagery it conveys to us, imbuing us with the sense of being in the presence of something extraordinary and vivid beyond quotidian and sensory experience. But not, like a Borges story, unrecognizable to both personal and social life. In the American case, one of the first "clusters" of movies about a contemporary story of interest was films about the Spanish-American War. Enterprising moviemakers cobbled together both real and imaginary footage that depicted aspects of that "splendid little war." Since most people had no experience of war firsthand, these little movies offered visual (and often bogus) observation of something people previously could only imagine. Through the magical apparitions that danced before them like the conjured ghosts and dismembered bodies of a stage magician, audiences experienced war in new ways. The war acquired a dramatic status and visual magnitude denied to war correspondents and tabloid headlines. The magic show of the movies depended upon and appealed to the popular imagination, giving the imaginative desires and interests, at both irrational and rational levels, the larger view of things denied to the individual imagination. They gave larger life to inchoate imaginings and immediate concerns, in demonstration of the human impulse that when people can't quite figure out things by themselves, they find a medium that can.²

Movies as Cultural Play

From the outset, then, people attended the movies because they enjoyed them and learned things from them. Movies were a new form of cultural play, with new powers to depict motion and action. But they were not unique to the point of being unknowable, since they were clearly

descended from not only theatre, carnival, and magic shows, but also from technologies such as the magic lantern. They quickly became a recognizable form of narrative, in the tradition of dramatic conventions familiar to audiences, as well as the immediate context of imaginative stories about social life and events current at the time. There is an important sense in which the movies gave people what they wanted to see from the very beginning. But they also gave them what they wanted to see in a mediated form that in many ways superseded previous modes of representation. American audiences at the turn of the new twentieth century were familiar with the instantaneously created mythology of the frontier and the Wild West through dime novels, stage plays, and circus shows. But the movies gave the myth of the West great resonance and enduring salience. As all historians of the movies know, the medium's seemingly endless treatment of the Western demonstrates the enduring newness of the old, old story told over and over again. The mythemes of dramatic convention gave shape to the Western stories, and the movies gave it all visual power.³

And it was all great fun. The movies struggled to become a legitimate form of cultural play, a diversion that filled leisure time with entertaining fare. If the human penchant for some kind of play is to have fun, then the movies immediately became a major fun activity that no amount of censorial restraint or social condemnation could stop. The movies managed to muster enough popular appeal and eventually social power to survive as an industry and art, establishing not only its legitimacy as a cultural medium but also underscoring the principle of legitimate fun itself. In the United States, the Puritan legacy and business ethic of earnest work looked with suspicion on frivolity and fun, but like King Canute giving orders to the waves, found that resistance to popular play was difficult to sustain, and also bad for business in the new consumer economy. In the "Middletown" study of a midland American city during the 1920's, it was found that more people went to the movies on Sunday than to church. Hollywood and the stars became symbols for the enjoyment of the good life, and gave impetus to fame as a new kind of status and eventually to the cult of celebrity.⁴

Those who study play often make a distinction between varieties of learning: work learning and play-learning, explicit learning and collateral learning, digital and analogical communications, functional and ludenic activity, and so on. Since we are examining the vicarious play of a dramatic art form, perhaps the distinction we should draw is between the quotidian and the aesthetic. In the field of human experience, the aesthetic is distinguishable from the commonplace, the "rational" activities of daily

routine and schedule, ordinary discourse and functional transactions. Yet there is something fundamental about aesthetic experience that is denied our mundane existence. The Greek root *aesthesis*, “to perceive or apprehend through the senses,” points to the grounding of perception in elementary awareness of sensory stimulation and the experience of sensuous knowledge. Our analogical abilities are directed toward the understanding of what we sense, and transforming our sense experience into sensibilities and signification. At this level of primary knowledge, we use our wit in order to “make sense” of the world. If we are, as Kenneth Burke insists, “symbol-using animals,” then our progression from sensory signals to sensible signs to significant symbols is basically the acquisition of aesthetic habits of feeling. Although the senses are the foundation of thought and action, it is the aesthetic sense—feeling translated into perceptual concepts and symbolic action—that gives sensory experience its distinctive human aspect. It is through aesthetic play that we exercise our discovery of individual and cultural meanings. The most rudimentary child’s play is self-instruction in becoming human through learning how to use imagination. Imagination extends experience through the expanse of symbols that magnify life into imaginary worlds beyond our quotidian lives.⁵

Much aesthetic play is vicarious experience. Our aesthetic fancies are typically shared by others and acquire cultural status through symbolic enactments that invite group witness. The mimetic and mythic abilities of acting and storying became one of the defining characteristics of human life. The Neolithic caves may well have been not only the occasion for paintings but also for singing and acting, as a kind of sacral theatre suitable for the sonic resonance of voice and the mystery of torchlit ritual. People may have mimed before they acted and sang before they talked. The history is unclear, but certainly it could not have been long that the dramatic potential in language and action appeared, inviting the enactment of social dramas for the vicarious edification and entertainment of incipient audiences. David Cole has theorized about the nature of “the theatrical event” by pointing to its roots in ancient and tribal uses. The roots of theater are in ritual dramas enacted by actors who represent significant symbols that the group wishes to see acted out in what Cole calls “presenting rituals.” He traces dramatic enactment to ceremonial rites in which the primal actor either presents himself or herself to the gods through an ecstatic voyage to the *illud tempus* (the shaman) or is possessed by the gods in the here-and-now to dramatize the divine link to the group (the hungan). Such ritual plays may seem a long way from the glories of the Greek theater, but perhaps not. Theater, Cole says, exists in

“mythic space” wherein the conjunction of dramatic performance in a culturally sanctioned ritual story with an attendant audience caught in the spell of vicarious appreciation makes for the magic of play.⁶

The “leap of faith” for those who attend dramatic enactments likely involves a suspension of disbelief to the extent of the liberal exercise of what anthropologists named “magical thinking.” In quotidian life, belief in powers and qualities that transcend physical and psychic limitations are generally imprudent. But in the play world of human imagination, it is common for people to eschew prudent sense for the pleasures of sensibilities that defy the physical and social limitations and imperatives of real life. Humans exercising such thinking are seeking the larger view of things we term *aesthetic imagination*. Aesthetic imagining is not merely idle daydreaming, but rather helps our ability to deal with the brute realities of social discord and the relentless onrush of temporal process. And it also helps allay our existential anxieties and opens a fabulous world wherein things work out the way we can imagine because of the aesthetic powers we attribute to it. Ritual communication such as religious rites and theatrical dramas would be impossible if we could not wish to believe in imaginative realms wherein action proceeds on a different basis than ordinary existence. The conventions inherited from the long tradition of ritual drama remain central to both mythology and literature: love triumphs after much romantic travail, demons stalk the earth until slain by heroes, the gods intervene to aid those in need, fools are made proper fun of, mysteries are solved through inquiry and detection, sacred rites insure that we and all that we cherish will never die. The world of ritual drama frees us from the logic and inevitabilities of mundane life for that privileged moment of participation in ritual play. It is one of the paradoxes of social communication that such fleeting experiences are memorable precisely because they convey aesthetic qualities denied everyday life. (The composer Benjamin Boretz once wrote: “In music, as in everything, the disappearing moment of experience is the firmest reality.”⁷) Such extraordinary experiences are our contact with the world of transcendence, which only the shamans and hungans who act for us can go to seek and return to tell of what signs and wonders lie beyond the ordinary. Perhaps the social basis for aesthetic enactments of any kind is that people can’t figure out things for themselves, and thus need them to be acted out by actors. The immediate experience of expressive play becomes the crucial moment in which enduring images and ideas persist.

The popular arts are only one descendent of cultural play, but surely one of the most powerful. Every system of formal education is aware of the platonic warning that those who tell the stories also rule. Jacques

Barzun has written of “Demotica,” the “muse of popular culture” which has come to dominate contemporary imaginings to the extent that we are now a “modern demotic society” suffused with the cultural production and consumption of popular play.⁸ In any such account, the movies as a popular aesthetic experience must be a central interest. The conviction here is that the movies are the quintessential popular medium that gives dynamic and magnified shape to our imaginative life. So much so, that we approach the movies with a degree of awed and expectant delight that sometimes approaches reverence.

Movies as Cultural Ritual

If the movies may be regarded as a latter-day descendant of ancient ritual drama, both religious and secular, then we can understand the widespread attitude that makes movie going both a sacred and profane experience that inspires both quiet attentiveness and festive enjoyment. Moviegoers are familiar with the experience of intense involvement in a gripping movie that makes disturbances such as people talking or coming in late annoyingly irreverent, and the group experience of a movie audiences all bursting into applause, laughter, or tears fitting for the festive moment. Like all ritual representations, the movies mediate experience by connecting us to social myths and metaphors as they are manifest in a present. The movies give dynamic animation to social aesthetics, imaginary stories with visual power to communicate significant symbols as they are manifested and contended at the moment of their presenting ritual. The movies bring largeness to the celebration and commemoration of cultural life in time. Scholars have long distinguished between referential symbols and condensation symbols, since we all use digital signs to refer to things and analogical symbols to condense meanings.⁹ The unique power of the movies resides in the larger view offered on screen through the projection of magnification symbols, the spectacular imagery of sight and sound that gives larger than life vividness and magnitude to social objects and symbols of interest. As film theorists have often opined, film lets us look not only at things, as we might leafing through a photographic magazine, but also into things. The movies enlarge realities into a virtual and dynamic world of mythic enlargement wherein a face or a clock or movement across a landscape acquires metaphorical significance. Our make-believe world previously was represented in oral, written, or enacted stories of lesser scale, if on occasion (such as a state funeral or Shakespearean tragedy) with grandeur. But the movies offered popular access to the magnificence of cultural

stories, with significance projected into an imaginary vision of life on a grander scale and duration than hitherto experienced.

In the American case, this is best illustrated by the movie Western. The Western story was deeply rooted in American history and self-created myth, involving the westward movement of the new civilization, the conflict with Native-Americans, the emergent bipolarity of East and West, and the characteristics of cultural heroism. The conventions of the Western story—the creation of civilization out of savagery and chaos, the necessity of violent heroism, the cycle of revenge, the dynamic simplicity of frontier life—can be easily traced into the earliest recesses of storytelling and mythologizing. For the new American nation, the Western was a story with mythic adequacy: it brought to life a satisfying cultural meaning, dramatized the spread of democratic civilization, and showed government—the U.S. cavalry, the marshal, the schoolmarm—as part of the grand story of civilizing the New World. The Western was celebrated in various media such as the dime novel, but nothing gave it the scope and power as did the movies. The Western was, and is, a “secular scripture,” which sets romantic heroism and cultural conflict in an awesome natural setting. Its truth was more mythological than historical, since it gave history a narrative that was only incidentally factual but was certainly meaningful. The West was memorable as crucible and prologue, the place where the American experience was given mythic enactment, and the time wherein it gave us mythic precedent for subsequent life. The magnified power of the movies became central to a cultural mythology that was a major source of learning, and in some sense informed the demeanor of presidents and the actions of policymakers in their determination to insure whose mythology would prevail.¹⁰

Moving pictures give aesthetic life to cultural stories by imbuing them with largeness and force in an immediate and impressive medium. Stories that are accorded mythic signification develop into a genre, wherein dramatic conventions and variations interplay to propagate the features of the genre over time. Movie going became a cultural ritual because of the ability of films to convey the imaginary world of mythic signification as a visualized structure of meaning. The awesome outdoor vistas of Western settings gave the conflicts and resolutions an epic quality, and the heroism and villainy a larger-than-life aspect, as they were magnified into mythological struggles fraught with cultural meanings about the American identity. Ritual dramas become the social occasion for such meanings to become manifest. A movie narrative with powerful imagery becomes the framework for people to understand both personal and social experience. If rituals mediate experience, then movie-going serves as a collective way

to envision archetypal themes of power, status, and wealth in a ludenic place wherein symbolic actions of vicarious play unfold social identities and resolutions. The movies may be a “disappearing moment of experience,” but the transcendent experience out of obligatory time and into the symbolic play of imagination firms up our grip on a higher reality than quotidian existence.

If movies act as a ritual forum for a culture’s secular scripture, then they serve the ancient purpose of putting us in contact with “god-terms,” those larger mythemes of social order that are always in play and always in peril. Ritual drama not only creates and enacts them, it also over time re-creates and re-enacts them. The persistence of social genres such as the Western is not merely because they are entertaining, but because they are fulfilling. They fulfill the hunger for contact with symbols of good and evil, control and chaos, heroism and villainy, the sacred and the profane. Secular ceremonial occasions such as the movies give aesthetic form to questions of identifiable order for a culture as it confronts change in the dynamic of ongoing life. And identity, even in the most isolated and traditional cultures, is indeed always in question. Myth, literature, folklore, and popular culture are in a sense always set in the present, since it is in the present that they are enacted and appreciated. Such ritual expressions concern themselves with questions of temporal identity, such as cultural continuity and integrity, centrality and potency, destiny and mystery. The invocation of god-terms imbedded in stories opens and closes such questions, since identity in such tales is lost and regained, given and squandered, attained and taken away, and so on in endless permutations and combinations of storied conventions that are paradoxically always the same and always new.¹¹

Movies and Cultural Time

The experiential dialectic of interest here is the tension between the onrush of change and the imperative of order. Cultural order is arguably the core concern of all viable societies, and as Foucault and many others have pointed out, there is a strong desire to believe that social order is inherent in the nature of things. Theocentric or imperial orders relied on beliefs in divine blessing or right as the mystery on which rule was based. But notions of cycles of inevitable rise and fall, with inevitable eclipse by the vicissitudes or chaos of history, are hard to believe for the many who wish to sustain faith in the way things are and should be. Doubts emerge with changes in or threats to the habits of the interaction order in everyday life, and to the functional viability and continuity of the institutional order.

But those doubts can be allayed through the symbolic referentials of the aesthetic order, in which order is restored through the narration of old and important stories that speak to new and pressing times. (Aesthetic treatments also express the negation or transvaluation of values and practices, but even so they are pointing to the demonic or ironic alternative to the extant social order.) Relational and functional order may be rent with frustration and failure in the maelstrom of “the real world,” but aesthetic order sustains us through its penetration and celebration of the mystery of things. Social meaning, and the lack thereof, is the province of aesthetic rituals such as the movies. Time can best be dealt with in an experience out of time.

The expressions of the aesthetic order are of interest for many reasons, not the least of which is that in the United States and many other places the cultural consensus on the meaning of order and the complementary progression of right order through time has come apart. This view is not merely the province of those more radical postmodern critics who see historical time as devoid of structure and meaning, an anarchic cavalcade of random and even indistinguishable processes without chronological or narratological continuity or factuality. Looking widely at popular visions of the American past and the future, many observers are struck by the polysemic variety of what the past was like and what the future will be like. American popular narratives, both fictional and non-fictional, of (for instance) the Civil War are so diverse as to contribute to the view that the entire event cannot be ordered into a coherent narrative, so it might make as much sense to discuss what soldiers had for breakfast as to dwell on how the battle was won or lost. The seemingly endless accounts of that war range from explanation to mystification, but in all cases discordant voices and viewpoints contribute to the cacophony of historical accounts and the discordance of temporal ordering.

It is, however, likely that the popular mind, and the organs of popular expressions which attempt to appeal to it, are not content with the academic view that all accounts are created equal. Popular expression may be as contingent and “decentered” as the world in which it swims, but it must appeal to the aesthetic criterion of mythic adequacy. This does not mean that cultural consensus on the singular meaning of the Civil War will be recaptured (in fact, there never was consensus on the war); but it does mean that the purveyors of popular expression such as moviemakers construct stories which impose some sort of meaning on the event in question. (Even portraying war as meaningless imbues it with a kind of meaning.) It is worthwhile to remind ourselves that natural scientists have as much trouble with such questions as the humanities and social sciences.

Cosmologists, for example, now speak of “decoherence”, much aware that a coherent system often includes whatever fits into it, so they attempt to further inquiry by positing a universe which is “entangled” in “constant, tenuous interactions” and wherein constants vary and the “arrow of time” exists in a cyclic world of growth and collapse, with entropy and order both increasing and decreasingly locally. Such a temporal universe may well rely on a myth of preposterous unreliability of which it is easy to wonder how we can exist at all, or how the something of the world holds together at all.¹²

In portraying the past and the future, popular culture is in an important sense always portraying the present. It is the present which does not cohere, and what we know and care about the past and future emanates from that immediate perspective and concern. For every present brings tenuous entanglements which make situations problematic and outcomes uncertain. The great pragmatic philosopher George Herbert Mead, writing in the wake of relativity theory, even denied the reality of the past and the future: “We live always in a present whose past and whose future are the extensions of the field within which its undertakings may be carried out.” We may agree that the past and future are imaginary and are of interest because of their uses in the present. And their reality is indeed relative to present knowledge and perspective: looking backwards or forwards is ultimately an aesthetic enterprise, since what we know of time past and time future is paradoxically from the eternal now of the present. Perhaps for this reason philosophers and poets come to think of time as the basic category of existence, even if, like the scientists, they have good reason to believe it doesn’t exist. Epistemological doubt becomes a characteristic of times in which people have lost their confidence in their ability to understand time, much less control it. Whenever, the key question for both retrospection and prospection seems to be: what do we do with time past or time future?¹³

Popular mediums of expression such as the movies offer us images of pasts and futures that may be decoherent but are not necessarily incoherent. But the movies are too big and diverse to settle for singular coherence: the Civil War has been so variously envisioned that viewers can find whatever they want, or more accurately, that historical event in all its complexity becomes the setting for endless variations on present concerns by interweaving past and present in dramatic mythemes—narrative themes derived from mythic resources—which cohere as a story. The movie story evokes the past through the powerful visual imagery which transports us to the Civil War period, but which is made in and speaks to the perspective of a present. Perhaps more than any other

medium, the movies can overcome the existential limits of time and space, but cannot entirely free itself from the dynamic immediacy of cultural time. The etymological roots of the word “time” originated in “extending, or stretching out”; but time is always punctuated by extending from some time and place. The Civil War of D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* is interwoven into the racist politics of Progressivism and the southern reassertion of early twentieth-century America, couched in the mythic antinomy of romantic and cavalier society pitted against the brutal and exploitative realities of political and military figures with nefarious motives. *Gone with the Wind* portrays the destruction of the romantic Old South, but in the context of impending world war, highlighting the horrors and futility of war and the struggle of people to survive the aftermath. And so on: the dramatic conventions of storytelling are garnered to imbue the movie with mythic salience, that the “tale told”, no matter how far and wide it stretches out in time, can still be recognized as dealing with cultural identity as it is at issue in a present. The movies, like much of popular expression, are usually a poor guide to history, but they are an excellent guide to mythology. (The great French director Jean Renoir remarked that he had seen Paris, France and Paris, Paramount, and on the whole preferred the latter.) Didactic or partisan messages may be imbedded in a movie, but they are secondary and derivative from the mythic expression tacitly shared in the “roaring loom of time.” If cultural order is negotiated, then the dynamics of ordering things in a present gives a medium such as the movies the ability to punctuate the moment with powerful visual magnification. In this sense, both Kant and Bergson are right: we create time, and time creates us.¹⁴

Movie going, then, is a new and remarkable form of a very old enterprise: attempting to understand the present through what we can learn from the past and the future. In complex societies, cultural consensus may be impossible, but cultural continuity—a sense of imaginative and worthwhile relation to the past and the future—may be possible, at least in the popular imagination. Both the academic and popular mind is continually engaged in revisionism, attributing qualities to the past and future that relate those times to our present situation. Knowledge, the social psychologists tell us, has uses and gratifications, or to use the older language, instruction and delight (and newer: Wittgenstein’s “working” and “idling” languages). Aesthetic knowledge combines these in our transaction with time: time past and time future we can both enjoy and ponder as subjects of play that are fun and edifying, delicious and sententious. A discontinuous and decoherent universe is a feature of disorder in any present, so popular experience such as movies

set in a past and future becomes a source of temporal knowledge that helps us cope with the unfinished present.¹⁵

The mythical core of social life, then, is a quest for order, confronting the decoherent tension of any present by avoiding a descent into incoherence whereby temporal life is denied any chronological or narrative continuity or meaning, and seeking a state of affairs wherein a measure of understandable coherence is realized, or at least imputed. The contingencies of temporality and the quandaries of any present are given mythic coherence through the discourse and actions that give social life-in-time temporal significance. Since time must be ordered, the discordant and disordered are corrected through dramatic structures of mythic significance and sufficiency. At any temporal juncture, social life is a “life-world” of physical and habitual copings, made coherent by the process of cultural aesthetics, whereby discourse serves the larger purpose of constructing temporal and social significance. People not only have to make do; they also have to make sense. The aesthetic process of mythmaking is a major way of making sense, giving the world lived in qualities of recognizability and continuation, and indeed a degree of vivid elegance. By the mythic ordering of social time, the world acquires satisfactory sensibility. As the movies attest, at any time that order may be complex and incomplete, but at least the aesthetic sensibility of the movie myth lets us participate in the dynamics of now, wherein the past makes sense for the present, the present makes sense as it unfolds, and the future will make sense.

In the crucible of any such present, our transactions with time involve three concurrent and interwoven epistemic and social processes. The first of these is the primary and immediate presence and problem of the present, which requires definition of the situation and action that negotiates a semblance of order, what we may term *circumspection*. The uses of imagined pasts and futures extend our perspective from the present, and give our temporal experience an aesthetic dimension garnered from pasts which no longer exist and futures which have yet to exist. For historians, the past is episodic and likely chaotic, without inherent meaning or purpose; for philosophers of history, the past is part of a pattern of rise and fall, cycles and recurrences, or even progressions in stages to some teleological end; but for the popular mind, the past is an aesthetic reality with symbolic portent for the present. In all cases, this may be called *retrospection*, but for a medium like the movies, it is a look backwards with a view to our current dilemmas and tangles. Similarly, the future may be imagined as a threat or a promise, but in any event, it is a process of *prospection*, an imaginative forecast of what might happen in

the present that will make the future a garden or a desert. What were we? And what will we become? The movies help us to answer those abiding questions as we try to order our lives in what we fear is “the whirligig of time” and what we hope is the coherence of time.

Cultural Time in the American Present

The American present of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century certainly saw movie participation in the mythic characterization of that present. Here we will try to illuminate three important dimensions of that participation. First, we will examine the films made since the early 1970's which are set in the 1950s. A review of movies set in the past seems to indicate that the Fifties are the favorite past era for setting movies, even more than, for instance, the heroic time of World War II. So what is it about the 1950s that is so important for our time? By trying to make some sense of these Fifties movies, we gain some insight into the specific anxiety about self-definition that characterized America in this period, and more general understanding of the way popular culture set in the past informs the present. Secondly, it is also of interest in understanding our American present to trace the growth of conservatism in the late twentieth century, as given mythic treatment in the movies. The forensic ideology of conservatism was articulated in other forums; but circumspection—inspecting the emerging present for symbolic guidelines to order things properly—is a process which requires mythic representation of what was to become a political force. The movies became a mythic forum for the imagination of a conservative country, and eventually a state. And thirdly, the movies in this period were a major medium for the portrayal of future prospects, what we might expect in the world of tomorrow if certain present practices obtain then.

The movies are many things, including a major artistic and technical medium, an international network of organizations and something of a film culture shared by those connected to filmmaking, very big business, and a forum for a wide variety of significant messages, including propaganda, celebrity worship, and most of all, entertainment. Here the interest is confined to the social dimension of the movies, focusing on how the movies participate in the cultural life of a nation as it attempts to understand, and mediate, time. The movies are a “social magnifier,” with the power to make things look bigger and more important than they actually are. It is no small task to help give a culture that sense of mythic continuity that links the heritage of the past, the issues of the present, and the prospect of the future together in a coherent story that imbues time

with understandable meaning as part of the larger view of things. The philosophers tell us that hope and fear cannot alter the seasons, but human cultures nevertheless seek and find mediums of social magnification like the movies to entertain and enlighten our common feelings of coping with the great complex of time past, time present, and time future. Let us then look at how American movies revisit a time past, construct a time present, and project a time future.¹⁶

¹ Eric Barnouw, *The Magician and the Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); and Judith Willer, *The Social Determination of Knowledge* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971) discuss the concept of “magical knowledge” and the modern “technological-magical system,” that includes the movies as a form of popular knowledge communicated through a sophisticated system of technological means but propagating an extraordinary image of the world that attributes magical properties to what happens therein, including the ability to manipulate time in ways beyond the mundane progression and cycles of “real time.” Although based in somewhat different, although not antithetical intellectual roots, Rachel Moore notes that modernistic culture doesn’t allow for “some magical form of ritual healing, divination, or spirit possession. The camera is our one magical tool flush with animistic power to possess, enchant, travel through time and space, and bewitch.” , Rachel O. Moore, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 163.

² Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907*, vol. 1, *A History of American Cinema* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1990).

³ John Fell, *Film and the Narrative Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

⁴ Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

⁵ See Kenneth Burke, “Definition of Man,” in *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 3-24; Hugh Dalziel Duncan, *Symbols in Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968); and Debra Hawhee, “Language as Sensuous Action: Sir Richard Paget, Kenneth Burke, and Gesture-Speech Theory,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 92: 4 (November 2006), pp. 331-354.

⁶ David Cole, *The Theatrical Event: A Mythos, A Vocabulary, A Perspective* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1975), pp. 12-57; see also John Steven Paul, “The Actor in Three Movements: Possession, Humiliation, Service,” *The Cresset*, Michaelmas 2001), pp. 13-20.

⁷ Benjamin Boretz, quoted in Alex Ross, “The Record Effect,” *The New Yorker*, June 6, 2005, 100. In this connection, the great student of aesthetics, Rudolf Arnheim, reflected on the Second Law of Thermodynamics in his *Entropy and Art: An Essay on Order and Disorder* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

⁸ Jacques Barzun, "The Tenth Muse: Who Is Demotica, Who Is She?" *Harper's*, September 2001, 73-80.

⁹ This distinction is perhaps best utilized in Paul Watzlawick, *et. al.*, *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967). The idea of popular expression as rooted in the ancient tradition of ritual drama is implicit in the mythic approach to literature and popular culture in, for example, Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957; Kenneth Burke, "Ritual Drama as Hub," in S.E. Hyman (ed.), *Terms for Order* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), 21-39; C. Ronald Kimberling, *Kenneth Burke's Dramatism and Popular Arts* (Bowling Green, OH: Popular Press, 1982). For the movies, Vivian Sobchack, "Genre Film: Myth, Ritual, and Sociodrama," in Sari Thomas (ed.), *Film Culture* (Methuen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1982), 147-165; Dudley Andrew, "Film and Society: Public Rituals and Private Space," *East-West Film Journal*, vol. 1 (Winter 1986), 7-22; Jean Collet, "Cinema and the Sacrifice of Narcissus," *Cross Currents*, XXXVII, nos. 2-3 (Summer/Fall 1987), 159-167; Read Mercer Schuchardt, "Cinema—The New Cathedral of Hollywood," *Metaphilm*, metaphilm.com, posted November 9, 2001; Theodor H. Gaster, *Thespis, Ritual, Myth, and Drama in the Ancient Near East* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977).

¹⁰ Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976) the literature on the myth of the American West is vast, although the classic treatment, Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950) is still trenchant, and the more recent works by Richard Slotkin, particularly *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), are fully realized; an excellent study of the historical portability of the myth is John Hellmann, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). The resilience of the myth is astonishing: see Mark West and Chris Carey, "(Re)enacting Frontier Justice: The Bush Administration's Tactical Narration of the Old West Fantasy after September 11," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 92: 4 (November 2006), pp. 379-412.

¹¹ Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970). The Burkean concept of social order has not penetrated social science, as is evidenced in Arien Mack (ed.), "The Concept of Order in the Social Sciences," *Social Research*, Vol. 60: 2 (Summer 1993).

¹² The concept of decoherence, drawn from quantum physics, helps us conceive of a dynamic state of universal entanglement, somewhere between incoherence and coherence, which helps understanding of the conduct and problem of social life-in-time. At any particular time, the appearance of location is a function of a disturbance of the environment by the system of relationships salient and

problematic at the moment, and in human temporality, can have a paradoxical effect on not only the future but also the past as a function of the present. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde's famous quip, a central activity of any present—fragmented, contingent, and perilously decentered—is to rewrite the past, keep writing the present, and plan the writing of the future. As Dan Nimmo notes, “We witness objects in a single state, even though quantum theory argues that any object exists in multiple states, simultaneously here-and-there. Ignorance objectified can never be witnessed in one, coherent state. There is no answer to substance, as Kenneth Burke would say, because there is no coherence in the object (or the subject). Frenetic but insubstantial ignorance can never be observed, never measured, never identified. No lusion, illusion, delusion, or collusion—but a continualist collision of decoherent states” (private communication, undated). When we ask the Hobbesian question, How is society possible? the answer is, With great difficulty. The pragmatic philosophers anticipated such pregnant ideas, perhaps most adequately with the concept of “transaction” in John Dewey and Arthur Bentley, *Knowing and the Known* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949), which sees the process of social knowledge as both extensional and durational, and would insist that movies are not “texts” to be read but complex motional and emotional social events to be experienced. See Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), and “Aesthetic Experience: From Analysis to Eros,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 64: 2 (Spring 2006), pp. 219-229.

¹³ George Herbert Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present*, edited by Arthur E. Murphy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), including his concept of the “objective reality of perspectives”, which speaks to the problem of decoherence in social process. In a sense, decoherence is a relative of the familiar problem in the philosophy of science called “the three-body problem”, wherein every transaction in nature and society that multiplies beyond two actors or entities moves from explanation to explication.

¹⁴ The vast literature on myth was dominated by comparative anthropologists such as mythographer Joseph Campbell and literary philosophers such as Northrop Frye; both attempted to make mythic analysis accessible and universalizable: see, for instance, Campbell, *Myths to Live By* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), Robert A. Segal, *Joseph Campbell: An Introduction* (New York: Meridian, 1997), and Frye, “The Koine of Myth: Myth as a Universally Intelligible Language,” in Robert D. Denham (ed.), *Northrop Frye: Myth and Metaphor, Selected Essays, 1974-1988* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), pp. 3-17. A classic statement in the study of social myth is Jacques Ellul, “Modern Myths,” *Diogenes*, Vol. 23 (Fall 1958), pp. 23-40. The Burkean perspective has been treated in Laurence Coupe, *Kenneth Burke on Myth: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2005). The study of myth has become vast and complex, bringing it to the stage of theorizing about theorizing: see the various efforts of Peter G. Bietenholz, *Historia and Fabula: Myths and Legends in Historical Thought from Antiquity to the Modern Age* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994); Anthony Stevens, *Archetypes Revisited* (London: Brunner-Routledge, 2002); Marcel Detienne, *The Creation of Mythology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Robert A.

Segal, *Theorizing about Myth* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999); Andrew von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2002); Ivan Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987); Pierce Solie, *Myth Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). The author is much influenced by the brilliant heritage of mythic analysis of comparative and universal mythmaking, the structure of stories and literature, and theoretical vistas; but here the emphasis is on social myths as important forms of shared cultural expression which construct dramatic representations of temporal and decoherent processes affecting the norm of social order and the specific anxiety present at any time about chronological and narrative continuity. Myths are not foundational stories, transcendental truths, populist folklore, ideological constructs, or journalistic yarns; nor are they, as Patrick Gerster and Nicholas Cords, *Myth in American History* (Encino, CA: Glencoe Press, 1977), p. xiii, would have it, “false beliefs”; rather than the order of universal mythemes, the order of words, and the order of theories, we are here concerned with the order of society and how mythmaking as a social process of communication lets us look at the etiological and generic archetypes as given particular expression in an ongoing culture and specific times. Myth is a form of knowledge of recurrent and revised importance at every disappearing moment of cultural experience as people seek the firmest reality in symbolic narratives of order and disorder, the interplay of *historia* and *fabula*. See Dan Nimmo and James E. Combs, *Subliminal Politics: Myths and Mythmakers in America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970).

¹⁵ The hope here is to utilize a social aesthetics which can illuminate the interplay of a popular art form, the movies, and the time in which it was experienced. A “popular aesthetic” might sound self-contradictory or at least vulgarized, since it would examine popular art, including the movies, as important and consequential forms of expression and posit that an aesthetic sense is endemically and crucially human. Such an inclusive agenda would bring us nearer the original Greek meaning, *aesthesis*, in the realm of sense experience, apparently delimited to the elementary awareness of sensory stimulation and emotive feeling, but later expanded to sensibility and even signification although primarily focused on critical evaluation of art rather than to the fundamental human perceptive and appreciative abilities which constitute aesthetic experience. A popular aesthetics would examine the various forms of social and temporal expression which characterize a particular moment of cultural experience, with the conviction that the signs and significations which emerge as salient and important as evidence of dynamic and meaningful social patterns which obtain at the time in question. The work and legacy of Charles Sanders Peirce is important for this kind of inquiry. See John K. Sheriff, *The Fate of Meaning: Charles Peirce, Structuralism, and Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); Floyd Merrell, *Signs Becoming Signs* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) and *Sign, Textuality, World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Jacqueline Brunning and Paul Forster (eds.), *The Rule of Reason: The Philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); Eugene Rochberg-

Halton, *Meaning and Modernity: Social Theory in the Pragmatic Mode* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Jeffrey Barnouw, “‘Aesthetic’ for Schiller and Peirce: A Neglected Origin of Pragmatism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 49 (October-December 1988), pp. 607-632. The work of Ernest Becker is relevant here, especially *The Structure of Evil* (New York: The Free Press, 1968), in particular his concept of *homo poeta*. The aesthetic dimension in social theory is predominant in those influenced by Georg Simmel and Kenneth Burke. See, for example, George Simmel, *et al.*, *Essays on Sociology, Philosophy, and Aesthetics* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965); Hugh Dalziel Duncan, *Communication and Social Order* (New York: The Bedminster Press, 1962); Herbert W. Simons and Trevor Melia (eds.), *The Legacy of Kenneth Burke* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); James W. Chesebro (ed.), *Extensions of the Burkean System* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993); Bernard L. Brock (ed.), *Kenneth Burke and Contemporary European Thought* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995). On Wittgenstein, see James Guetti, *Wittgenstein and the Grammar of Literary Experience* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993). See too Anthony Barker (ed.), *Television, Aesthetics, and Reality* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006).

¹⁶ There are many scholarly and critical articles, too numerous to mention here although some will be cited subsequently, which allude to mythic analysis and mythemes in the movies, but relatively few books. The pioneering work of Parker Tyler is still of some use, in particular *The Hollywood Hallucination* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970) and *Magic and Myth in the Movies* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), originally published in 1944 and 1947, respectively. Two recent popular works in particular display familiarity with mythic analysis while avoiding special pleading and critical grading: Geoffrey Hill, *Illuminating Shadows: The Mythic Power of Film* (London: Shambhala, 1992), and Stuart Voytilla, *Myth and the Movies: Discovering the Myth Structure of 50 Unforgettable Films* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 1999). Voytilla's book was inspired by the work of Christopher Vogler, whose memorandum at Disney studios, “A Practical Guide to the Hero's Journey” made the rounds of Hollywood production offices, demonstrating that mythemes in the movies are not entirely ingenuous or unknown; this resulted in Vogler's *The Writer's Journey* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 1992). More scholarly, and in the long run more valuable, are such works as Joseph Andriano, *Immortal Monster: The Mythic Evolution of the Fantastic Beast in Modern Fiction and Film* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999); Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); William K. Ferrell, *Literature and Film as Modern Mythology* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000); Susan Mackey-Kallis, *The Hero and the Perennial Journey Home in American Film* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); Maureen Murdock, *The Heroine's Journey* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999); Yvette Biro, *Profane Mythology: The Savage Mind of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982; and my perennial favorite, Frank

McConnell, *Storytelling and Mythmaking: Images from Film and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

