CHAPTER ONE

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Introduction:
The New Genre Cinema

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One of the peculiar characteristics of American genre filmmaking in the 1990s is its apparent facelessness, its desire to subsume itself into the larger framework of genre cinema, and not to identify each film as a unique exemplar.

This is particularly true in the case of George Lucas's *The Phantom Menace* (1999), the "first" episode in the *Star Wars* series, a film that seeks to continue the concerns of the three earlier films in the *Star Wars* canon, while simultaneously ensuring audiences of a return to the generic "past" of cinema. Though laden with high-tech digital effects, *The Phantom Menace* is curiously devoid of an authentic human presence, and despite it's juggernaut performance at the box office, even its most ardent adherents must find the film a trifle lackluster. After all, the *Star Wars* films are directly indebted to the *Flash Gordon* series of the 1930s, from their opening crawl titles onward, and now, with *The Phantom Menace*, the series seems poised to replicate *itself* over two additional episodes (both to be shot entirely with digital technology) in the next few years. Yet as films, the *Star Wars* series run together in a curiously unsatisfying fashion: where do they truly begin or end?

This in direct contrast to the genre cinema of nearly every other decade in cinema history, where individual genre films, even in long-run-

ning series, typically strive to establish an individual identity while still retaining their grand name status. Looking at a film like Roger Corman's *The Trip* (1967), one is struck by the fact that the film, while ostensibly belonging to the "teen youth rebellion" market, is also very much a personal statement on the part of its actors and technicians. More ambitious genre films of that era, such as Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969) and Michaelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970), also adhere to the "outlaw youth" genre yardstick, while simultaneously seeking to establish themselves as individual works of art. All of these films sought not only to entertain then-contemporary audiences they also hoped to add to the ongoing discussion on matters of race, sexual freedom, political rights, women's rights, and other social concerns of the day.

Similarly, many genre films of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, while fulfilling the unspoken requirements for audience satisfaction of a genre musical, western, horror film or suspense thriller, often also sought to extend beyond the boundaries circumscribed by economic concerns, and thus serve as sites for discussion for audiences and critics alike. In this, they were often strikingly direct in their address to the audience; films such as Wesley E. Barry's *Creation of the Humanoids* (1962), Philip Ford's *The Mysterious Mr. Valentine* (1946), Howard Hawks's *To Have and Have Not* (1944), Charles Chaplin's *Shoulder Arms* (1918), Ernst Lubitsch's *So This Is Paris* (1926), Delbert Mann's *That Touch of Mink* (1962), Lubitsch's *To Be or Not to Be* (1942), Mervyn LeRoy's *Tugboat Annie* (1933), Harry Essex's *Mad at the World* (1955), William A. Seiter's *Make Haste to Live* (1954), John Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), Herbert Ross's *Funny Lady* (1975), Normam Taurog's *G.I. Blues* (1960), Wallace Fox's *The Avenging Rider* (1928), Lew Landers's *Back in the Saddle* (1941) and numerous other films from a wide variety of genres, including film noir, horror, jungle, romance, western, science fiction, war, and romance films, often served up a message with their "stations of the cross" adherence to audience expectations. This was never allowed to impinge upon the central concern of the film: to provide escapist entertainment for mass audiences.

Horror films must, of course, have monsters, mad scientists, and Gothic castles; westerns need dusty towns, posses, and a climactic shootout; musicals need dance numbers, exotic locations, and lavish sets; and romance films require (for the most part) a heterotopic dance of the hours; this much we know, and collectively take for granted. But along with the exterior surface of the film, many genre films of previous decades

contained a subtext that could be appreciated by those who cared to delve below the glossy surface of the work. *Creation of the Humanoids* deals convincingly with a post-apocalyptic nuclear future, and the resultant dehumanization of the surviving members of the human race, as do the *Mad Max* films, made between 1979 and 1985; *The Mysterious Mr. Valentine* considers the mutability of human experience in a postwar social landscape where nothing is reliably what it seems; *To Have and Have Not* concerns itself with issues of individual social responsibility during World War II in the fight against the Nazis; *To Be or Not To Be* also spoofs the Nazis, within the framework of a deliciously contrived knockabout farce. The list goes on and on.

By contrast, such recent films as Michael Bay's *Armageddon*, Bobby and Peter Farrelly's hugely successful *There's Something about Mary*, John Dahl's *Rounders*, Rob Bowman's *The X Files*, Mimi Leder's *Deep Impact*, Tsui Hark's *Knock Off*, Vincent Ward's *What Dreams May Come* (all 1998), and other contemporary films seem concerned exclusively with surface presentation, aided and abetted by the proliferation of digital special effects and postproduction doctoring that makes the impossible seem ordinary, and the everyday seem, paradoxically, airbrush perfect. *Armageddon* and *Deep Impact* suggest that it is a very bad thing for a meteor to threaten the destruction of the Earth, and that all possible means should be used to prevent the coming conflagration. But that seems about all that both films are willing to commit to. *Rounders* is a rather tame rehash of Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973) and Robert Rossen's *The Hustler* (1961), lacking the resonance of John Dahl's earlier films, *Red Rock West* (1992) and *The Last Seduction* (1994), both of which were made at the margins of cinematic discourse, where the most interesting work continues to thrive, until the writers and directors of these phantom films are inevitably co-opted by Hollywood. *The X Files* thrives on rampant paranoia, but little else; *Knock Off* showcases Jean-Claude Van Damme's acrobatic skills, does nothing with its potential promising concept of counterfeit name-brand merchandise sold on an international scale; and *What Dreams May Come* is yet another reworking of Cocteau's *Orpheus* (1949), in which a profusion of digital special effects replace both poetry and imagination. But is this really the case?

Richard Donner, for example, crowds the visual backgrounds on his series of *Lethal Weapon* films (1987–1998) with posters advocating animal rights and an end to apartheid in South Africa (when this social doctrine was still in force), and Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996)

mixes equal parts of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, Byron Haskin's *War of the Worlds* (1953), and Fred F. Sears's *Earth vs. The Flying Saucers* (1956) to serve up a contemporary morality tale that is one part science-fiction film, one part social criticism tract, one part political harangue, and one part sitcom, which seeks to give audiences a sense of hope against seemingly overwhelming odds. One could argue that contemporary genre films also have a stake in shaping current political and social discourse, in such films as Barry Levinson's *Wag The Dog* (1998) and Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). That these are both genre films there can be no doubt (political satire and war film, respectively), and that in each case, the director sought to make an individuated statement can also be beyond question.

Yet compared to the political satires of another era (such as Theodore J. Flicker's *The President's Analyst* [1967], Norman Taurog's *The Phantom President* [1932], and Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove, Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* [1964], to name only a few of many possible candidates), *Wag the Dog* seems both timid and poorly constructed; similarly, *Saving Private Ryan* works best during the opening forty-minute action sequence, in which the soldiers storm the beach on D day despite nearly insurmountable odds. When the action dwindles, Spielberg falls back on war-film genre clichés so numerous as to almost defy enumeration. In the end, *Saving Private Ryan* is nothing so much as a deftly mounted and brutally graphic Jimmy Stewart war film, starring the 1990s version of Stewart, everyman Tom Hanks.

Both films wear their thematic concerns on their respective sleeves. *Wag the Dog* tells us that politics is merely a dog-and-pony-show; *Saving Private Ryan* informs us that war is hell. These are certainly reasonable assumptions, yet behind these surface statements, each film seeks to conform more to generic requirements than to create a singular impression. Because of this, most audiences will be content to contemplate the surface text presented in both films, while being momentarily thrown off guard by the lavish scale of execution, or the supposed freshness of the film's concept. What truly lurks beneath the surface of each genre entertainment remains more difficult to discern, when these films are stripped of pyrotechnics, stepped-up gore, or chic political cynicism.

In direct contrast to the economical style of their predecessors, the 1990s genre film is everywhere a creature of excess—excess running time, excess budgeting, excess spectacle. It is not enough that every frame of the 1990s genre film be absolutely perfect, "tweaked" through the magic of

computer image generation or digital clean-up processes; the soundtrack of the film must resonate with appropriate volume and intensity so as to literally shake spectators from their seats. William Castle tried much the same thing with his minimally budgeted horror film *The Tingler* (1959); during key sequences of the film, Castle saw to it that certain, prewired audience seats received jolts of electricity on cue from the projection booth, to further hype audience participation for the film. Roland Emmerich's recent remake of *Godzilla* (1998) was, in much the same fashion, mostly a construct of noise and spectacle, presented in thunderous digital sound, in a desperate attempt to mask the lack of content in the film, which in no way matched the thematic resonance or pictorial authority of Inoshira Honda and Terry O. Morse's 1954 original.

Coupled with deafening soundtracks, there is also the issue of length; where genre films in the teens through the early seventies reliably clocked in at 70 to 80 minutes, by the late seventies, with the release of George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977), genre films began their inexorable rise in running time. The 1998 *Godzilla*, for example, takes a full 140 minutes to unreel, in sharp contrast to the 81-minute running time of the Japanese/U.S. 1954 original. *Saving Private Ryan* lasts 170 minutes; *Independence Day* (1996) has a running time of 142 minutes. (All of these running times vary slightly from country to country; figures given are the U.S. running times in all cases). It seems that sheer, massive bulk is what is required more than any other consideration in today's genre filmmaking. The contemporary audience has succumbed to the dictum that "more is more," and seems to demand epic length as a requirement for generic satisfaction.

Although characterization has never been the strong point of the genre film, in which most characters are sketched in with a few "back story" details rather than fully rendered, today's genre protagonists are more "instant read" iconic glyphs than ever before, presented to the audience as a series of costumes, hairstyles, and lighting strategies. Similarly, filming locations are now rendered as caricatures of actual physical surroundings. When a film is shot on location, as with Mike Figgis's *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995), it attempts to hype the actual location with either unusual camera angles, or hand-held filming (*Leaving Las Vegas* was, in fact, shot in Super 16 mm, so that the cameras could be moved with a minimum of difficulty from setup to setup). This in itself echoes such films as Billy Wilder's *The Lost Weekend* (1945), another film about self-destructive alcoholism, which was also shot, for the most part, on loca-

tion, in an attempt to anchor protagonist Don Birnam's struggle against the bottle to a specific time and place: New York in the 1940s. It can tangentially be argued that neither *Leaving Las Vegas* nor *The Lost Weekend* is a genre film, with some justification, but unless a contemporary film is manifestly a personal project, it will remain (for the most part, at the studio's behest) a back-lot construct.

In the late 1990s, gone is any attempt at even ersatz neorealism that marked such genre thrillers as *The House on 92nd Street* (1945) or *Naked City* (1945); now, all is done in the studio, for both safety and economy. There are exceptions, such as Mike Figgis's shot-on-location *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995), but these are aberrations, rather than the norm. A trench coat makes this person a tough guy; a kitchen window bursting with yellow sunlight becomes the hallmark of a happy home. Despite the length of the contemporary genre film, there is little attempt to develop any humanist connection with the audience. It is seemingly enough to present one chase after another, one explosion to follow yet another cataclysmic maelstrom of violence, and supposedly, the audience will be satisfied. Even if audiences find a film too formulaic, the sheer visual bombast of the piece will carry them along for a few hours, in which they may forget the exigencies of their everyday existence, and find vicarious escape through the medium of the cinema. Costumes, sets, and properties in the late-1990s genre cinema are always perfect, in direct contrast to the sometimes thrown-together look of such earlier genre films as *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (1958) or *The Baron of Arizona* (1950).

As with genre films as a general rule, remakes abound. But contemporary remakes of genre classics seek to obscure their humble, or perhaps more accurately, populist origins with a panoply of expensive sets and cameo performances by fleetingly popular television stars, all to justify the price of an increasingly expensive admission ticket. Hal Roach's series of two-reel comedies, *The Little Rascals*, went through its first modernization when MGM bought the rights to series. MGM immediately reduced the films to ten minutes apiece instead of the original twenty-minute length, while simultaneously smoothing off the rough edges of the original, often transcendantly anarchic films, and transforming the comedies into a series of brief instructional films, designed to inculcate dominant social values in their audiences, rather than encourage the spirit of free play and discourse. When the series returned to the big screen in Penelope Spheeris's *The Little Rascals* (1994), plots from the original two-reel films were recycled and stitched together to form an uneasy pastiche of sight gags and

pratfalls, spiced up with cameo appearances by Donald Trump, Mel Brooks, Whoopi Goldberg, George Wendt, and Reba McEntire. While the feature film has a certain easy charm to its ramshackle construction, and a socially disruptive message that is director Spheeris's alone, it is nevertheless a spectacle rather than a series of intimate human interchanges that we are presented with, and that is what audiences in the 1990s have come to expect above all other considerations.

Similarly, when Vincente Minnelli's *Father of the Bride* (1950) was remade in 1991 by Charles Shyer, and its sequel, Minnelli's *Father's Little Dividend* (1951), was remade by Shyer as *Father of the Bride II* (1995), the new versions took place in locations so opulent as to be beyond the reach of all but the most affluent viewers; it is this conspicuous display of privilege that is the hallmark of the contemporary genre film in most of its manifestations. David Swift's 1961 *Parent Trap* was remade in 1998 by Nancy Meyers as a film that seemed more interested in the sets than in the characters that inhabited them. In contrast, the original film, though set in a distinctly upper-income household, did not inhabit the phantom zone of consumer culture so resolutely occupied by the 1990s remake. What is happening here is a return to the past, but with a new series of values imposed on source material that was once upon a time more in tune with average audience/consumer expectations. Thus, the new versions of these films are triumphs of style over substance, in which even the most minor physical detail is given all the weight of a major stylistic makeover.

This surface presence enthralls contemporary cinemagoers, and for the most part, late-1990s audiences fail to look beneath the surface of a given film's exterior narrative, and concern themselves solely with issues of star power, box-office grosses (the weekly, or even daily ranking of film revenues has now become a national spectator sport), and the pyrotechnics inherent in today's overproduced megaspectacles. What cost $1–3 million to produce in the 1960s and 1970s, for example, the *Planet of the Apes* films (1968–1973), now costs many millions to bring to the screen; even the most modest drama, requiring neither extensive sets nor special effects, still manages to cost between $50 and $60 million, due to a combination of rising star salaries, union wages, saturation distribution requirements, and other exigencies. (With a new *Planet of the Apes* film announced for production in 1999, we will have a chance to see how much these modest program films of a quarter century ago now cost to produce.) The day of the modestly budgeted genre film is a memory;

genre films are now beholden more to banks and stockholders than to any other entity, and even the slightest deviation from preconceived design is a matter of grave concern to a film's production entity. It has always been thus, but today, the stakes are considerably higher. Several poor marketing decisions may well put a studio in serious financial peril; why takes risks when you can play it safe, recycle the past, and reap presold rewards in the present-day marketplace?

What this book argues, among other things, is that the implicit message in contemporary genre films is rarely that which is signified by film's external or even internal narrative structure. What drives the thematic and structural concerns of genre filmmaking in the 1990s is the recovery of initial investment, made all the more pressing by the fact that each film released theatrically now represents an investment of many millions of dollars. Gone are the days when one could make a film for several hundred thousand dollars, open it nationally with a minimal campaign (no television ads necessary), and hope to have it compete with major studio fare.

Genre films today are no longer "B" films ("B," or bottom-half-of-the-double-bill films, vanished in the late 1960s to early 1970s), nor are they cheap knock-offs in a series of predictable entertainments, even if they sometimes look and sound that way. The *Andy Hardy* series, the *Whistler* series, and the *Bowery Boys* films have long since been replaced by regular television series programming. Shows such as *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *Frazier* have drained off the theatrical market for low-key domestic farce, while Fox brings forth a new crop of "racy" shows each season to keep teens glued to the television. Modestly produced films will no longer suffice to lure in the average theatrical film patron, and yet originality is not the issue here.

What audiences today desire more than ever before is "more of the same," and studios, scared to death by rising production and distribution costs, are equally loathe to strike out in new generic directions. Keep audiences satisfied, strive to maintain narrative closure at all costs, and keep within the bounds of heterotopic romance, no matter what genre one is ostensibly working in. Yet, at the same time, the studios must present these old fables in seductive new clothing, with huge budgets, major stars, lavish sets, and (if the genre demands it) unremitting action to disguise the secondhand nature of the contemporary genre film. These are just some of the unwritten rules that define and delimit American genre filmmaking in the 1990s, and some of the concerns we hope to explore in this work.

Another structural factor driving the creation of this text was to locate its cultural and critical concerns almost exclusively in American genre cinema of the 1990s. While there are numerous excellent film-genre texts available on the market today, most of these texts, while thoughtful and well-constructed, deal with classic genre films of the 1930s through the 1970s, with very little commentary on the genre films of the 1990s— precisely those films that contemporary audiences are most familiar with. To remedy this situation, I asked a group of colleagues to create a series of essays that examine the postmodern condition of film genre in the American cinema, examining, for the most part, recent examples of filmic genre enterprise. The approaches in this volume vary widely; some of the authors chose to create survey pieces, while others offer meditations on the nature of specific genres, demonstrating how these particular forms of filmic entertainment and expression have changed and developed over the past hundred years of cinema.

While American genre cinema in the 1990s seems, in many respects, more formulaic than ever, even if it is presented with a fine sheen thanks to digital special effects, there is nevertheless a core of meaning imbedded in even the most desultory entertainments. There is, indeed, "more than meets the eye" in such films as *The Rock* (1996), *Starship Troopers* (1997), *Pocahontas* (1995), and other commercial films. But often, the most interesting subtext in a contemporary genre film is not that which the filmmaker, or producer, may have intended. In addition to their avowed thematic concerns, *The Rock* implicitly posits a world where only violence serves because violence rules; *Starship Troopers* parodies Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda films to make a futuristic case for consenting fascism; and *Pocahontas* homogenizes racial difference in the name of celebrating individual social and racial identity. None of these films can be transparently *seen* to pursue these goals, but their structure, execution, and dissemination as part of the Hollywood movie machine leaves little doubt as to their true cultural signification. For better or worse, American genre cinema dominates the globe. The Hollywood genre film has become one of America's most prolific and profitable social exports. These contemporary genre films all seek to further the values of their nation of origin as they journey throughout the world on film, videotape, DVDs and on television; it is the pervasive influence, and the numerous subtexts, of these films that we seek to analyze here.

Thus, in this volume, I sought to bring together some of the most accessible and direct writing on these films, essays that can be appreci-

ated by the scholar and the general reader alike. And yet, as the genre film in the 1990s remains much indebted to its predecessors of the previous decades, a fundamental shift in image production and reception is beginning to gain ground at cineplexes all over the world. It is entirely appropriate that this volume should be published during the final days of the twentieth century, for we may now be seeing a complete change in that which we traditionally call a film; in the future, films may well undergo a radical technical metamorphosis that plug viewers in more directly to the spectacle they are witnessing, either through the use of responsive "hand gear" (as in point-and-shoot video arcade games), or perhaps through the implementation of laser equipment that will present vast, three-dimensional holographic spectacles to an auditorium of rapt observers. No matter what changes the coming decades bring, it is important to remember that 1990s genre filmmaking draws on the genre filmmaking of the past for many of its plots and formulas, as well as for the basic thematic structures it so successfully employs again and again (as genres will).

In creating this volume, I wish to thank not only the individual contributors themselves, who worked so hard to create the essays contained within this text, but also my many students over the years, who have repeatedly expressed a desire for such a book. They required a text that would demonstrate to them, using films they were familiar with, exactly how the process of genre signification operated. They required a text that was accessible, dealing with films they were familiar with, and above all, a text that demonstrated the precedence of the classics; exactly *where* these films of the 1990s that they knew so well came from, and how the genre classics have shaped contemporary cinematic practice.

We have not attempted to deal with every possible genre, but rather to highlight those genres that are most active as the 1990s draw to a close. Thus the new Black cinema is represented here, as well as horror films, science-fiction films, films for children, romances, teen films, political films, westerns, musicals, and other dominant genres, all in discussions that ground themselves in contemporary texts with which even the most casual filmgoer should be familiar. This was not an easy task, and so to all the contributors who labored so hard and so diligently to create these texts, I again extend my sincere thanks and admiration. Despite the enormous amount of work involved, this text has been a pleasure to create.

If film genre in the late 1990s is in many ways an entirely new sort of construct, then it is vitally important that we understand just how it

operates, in contrast to the generic films that satisfied audiences of an earlier era. The history of cinema is one of repetition, in which ideas and stories are constantly recycled and revamped with new sets, new costumes, and updated physical execution. There is nothing new in this process, which has informed the backbone of the Hollywood genre cinema since the inception of the studio system. What is different, however, is that now, so much depends upon the financial success of each individual film. The studios, no longer the factories they once were in their glory days, are now merely production and distribution facilities that traffic in essentially independent productions, in which stars, directors, producers, composers, and even some technical personnel are corporate entities that exist to be packaged by conglomerate agencies such as ICM, CAA, and William Morris.

With genre filmmaking, as always, constituting the bulk of film production, and with the pervasiveness of mainstream cinema at an all-time intensity (current releases are now opened routinely in from fifteen hundred to three thousand theaters simultaneously, for maximum saturation), more than ever it behooves us to understand precisely how contemporary genre cinema shapes and mirrors our collective dreams and desires. What transformations of the basic cinematographic apparatus the coming century will bring we cannot accurately foretell, but one thing is certain: genre cinema will continue to be the dominant force in American cinema, if only because it is a tried and tested commodity that can reliably be called upon to entertain and satisfy an audience.

But there is much more going on than simply audience satiation, and it is this series of subtextual and metatextual concerns that occupies the essayists collected here. The American genre cinema will always be with us; but what genre films will we see in the coming century? Will the films of the 1990s give us some sense of what is to come, or will the concerns of the new century bring us a new set of generic requirements? Will digital imaging replace almost entirely the signification of the real, offering us wholly synthetic characters, locations, and voices that once again are called into play to satisfy our need for narratives that are both easy to follow, and yet unexpectedly complex? Will the cinematograph itself cease to exist in the coming century, to be replaced by something altogether beyond our collective experience? These are some of the questions we attempt to examine in this volume, and we hope that our meditations on genre are both useful and enlightening for the reader.

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