FOREWORD

Maximum Movies—Pulp Fictions describes two improbably imbricated worlds and the piece of cultural history their intersections provoked.

One of those worlds was occupied by a clutch of noisy, garish pulp movies pumped out for the grind houses at the end of the urban exhibition chain by the studios' B-divisions and the fly-by-night independent production companies that replaced them—Globe Enterprises, Parklane Pictures, Pajemer Productions, Associates and Aldrich. These were the disposable products of a postwar mass culture that packaged sex, violence, and “True Action” to working-class American men in magazines like *Inside Detective*, *Crime Confessions*, *Wildcat Adventures*, and *Rage for Men* and in paperbacks with titles like *Homicide Johnny* and *The Wayward Ones* (with minor abridgments). Constructed from a toolbox of interchangeable generic parts, these expendable objects delivered their maximum impact when they were consumed in “a fit of excitement” and immediately discarded, to be replaced by a new sensation as soon as the program changed. They fed a subterranean male culture in inarticulate revolt against the enervating, feminized middlebrow world of conspicuous domestic suburban consumption. And despite their contradictory promise that their readers and viewers could escape consumer culture by consuming fantasy, some of these objects were occasionally salvaged from aesthetic contempt by critics on a parallel mission to find what Manny Farber called “a bit of male truth” in the activity of filmgoing. Like Otis Ferguson and Robert Warshow, Farber emphasized the immediacy of the movie experience, insisting that its ephemerality had nothing to do with the contemplative consumption of art. These critics found this experience at its most intense in the fast, functional, faceless action movies that played movement against space and shone in the vitality of their grace notes, their exact defining of male action, their “hard combat with low, common-place ideas.” Of course Farber was slumming, but his dialogue with the class accents of pulp culture engaged both the kinetic energies and the unrefined complexities of serially produced industrial culture.

The other world of *Maximum Movies* is the Britain of the long 1960s, where for a moment a group of “unruly and truant” critics put pulp movies at the center of an emergent film culture. Lawrence Alloway, in particular, extended

Farber's critical insights by calling for a film criticism that acknowledged both the industrial processes of popular cinema's production in runs, sets, and cycles and the specific kind of communication—"high impact, strong participation, hard to remember"—it provided. For most of the twentieth century much of what appealed to European intellectuals about American popular culture was its machine aesthetic: Hollywood made movies and movie stars like Detroit made automobiles, with no deference to tradition or hierarchies of taste. Little of the American class conflicts coded in these products survived the Atlantic crossing, and at disembarkation they were uniformly reclassified and usually condemned as mass culture. This transplanted "American" pulp culture—George Orwell famously called it "ballast"—arrived on European docks decontextualized, apparently unencumbered by autonomous meaning, and thus available for critical invention and validation as unselfconscious, underdetermined, spontaneous, authentic, primitive.

While surrealists and pop artists celebrated mechanistic production processes and elevated individual objects to iconic status, a more earnest group of critics sought a methodology for evaluating and discriminating *within*, rather than *against*, commercial popular culture. Their method had to address the class politics not of the objects themselves but of their consumption. For the cinephiles of *New Left Review*, asking themselves how they could love Hollywood's products and hate the repressive capitalism that produced them, the mystery and fascination of American cinema lay as much in their own condition of "Americanitis" as it did in their self-appointed task of accounting for the popularity of mass culture among the working classes. Contradictory elements of their position played out in the adoption of auteurism as the dominant critical position taken by British cinephiles in the 1960s and early 1970s. Combining a Leavisite commitment to moral seriousness with an analysis of style and *mise-en-scène* derived from *Cahiers du cinéma*, early auteurism's ambition to validate the serious study of American film unselfconsciously celebrated a masculine cinema.

As both Pierre Bourdieu and Michael Denning have observed, the project of "elevating the junior branch" of cultural expression belongs to a bourgeois critical underclass seeking to overturn cultural hierarchies by legitimizing the aesthetically illegitimate and, in the process, achieving the best return on its speculative investment of cultural capital. Critical rebels against the class hierarchies of culture celebrated Hollywood mavericks as dime-store Dostoyevskys and American heretics in acts of critical discrimination that disregarded the surface politics and the crude sensationalism of their movies. The cinephiles' contradictory relations with Hollywood temporarily resolved themselves in an explication of the subversive subtexts of an antibourgeois *art brut* that offered a radical critique of capitalism, consumerism, and eventually even patriarchy. Great energies were poured into validating Sam Fuller's, Nicholas Ray's, and

Roger Corman's exploitation cinema as subversive instruments of an oppositional culture, and with varying degrees of success, these reinterpretations were re-exported back to the colonizers as civilized explanations of what their savage cultural products were really about. What was largely lost on this detour from pulp through F. R. Leavis to structuralism were some of the most significant critical insights that emerged from Alloway's extension of Farber, Ferguson, et al.: the attempt to abandon an elitist contemplation of the individual movie and focus on the complexities of Hollywood's serial production of industrial goods.

Then, in the mid-1970s, this wave of critical engagement died almost as suddenly as it had begun. The little books that had made an American cinema of authors and genres legible just stopped, as if a girl in the audience had suddenly shouted out that the emperor had no clothes. What had happened was Theory: the appropriation of screen culture by literary dissidents in search of greenfield intellectual real estate on which to develop their grand theories of signification, ideology, and the subject. Theory turned movies into text and, in the process, emasculated the action movies that had energized an earlier agenda. This critical history can be traced in the booklets published as part of the Edinburgh Film Festivals of the 1970s, as homage turned into suffocation while a not-quite-yet academic criticism preoccupied itself with issues of reading and representation and the authenticity of its own aesthetico-political vanguardism. In a critical arena preoccupied with the politics of identity, angry white men were yesterday's cultural capital. Reinscribed within an oppressive ideological apparatus driven by a sexualized gaze, Hollywood resumed its position as the enemy to be combated. It was, as I found out, a bad time to start a PhD on the postwar American Cinema of Dissent.

In some respects the balance of our understanding of classical Hollywood has not yet recovered from this disjuncture. The critical trajectory that elevated a masculine cinema to cultural prominence also set it up for critique, particularly from an emergent feminism in search of a different form of subversion, one that succeeded, ironically, in finding Brechtian rereadings of the dominant middlebrow products of classical Hollywood's address to its middlebrow, female consumers. The ironies of this critical history abound, but they are of little use in helping us understand what Hollywood was or what its audiences did with its products.

Writing about the cultural capital of Jim Thompson, Peter Stanfield traces an arc from lowbrow entertainment to a highbrow's *objet trouvé* to the middlebrow art-house fare of the neo-noir revival, a three-phase process that James Naremore has encapsulated as popularization, appropriation, and recycling. Many of the subjects of *Maximum Movies* have traveled this journey from trash to art to collectability, returning to consumer culture when the Criterion Collection adds another of Hollywood's "most underrated film directors" to its

canon of American film. This book's achievement lies not just in its energetic description of this history but also in its exploration of the symbiotic relationship between the avant-garde and the industries of cultural production. Just as the avant-garde's transgressions operate as a form of research and development for commercial culture, *Maximum Movies* explores how pulp has refreshed and reinvigorated the avant-garde. At least as importantly, Stanfield's engagement with Farber's and Alloway's understanding of movies points us to still unexplored ways of examining the contradictions and aesthetic tensions of cinema as industrialized culture and new opportunities to consider the life of films in the social world.

Richard Maltby