2015

Understanding Tony Scott: Authorship and Post-Classical Hollywood

Robert Arnett

Old Dominion University, rarnett@odu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/communication_fac_pubs

Part of the Film Production Commons

Repository Citation
https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/communication_fac_pubs/20

Original Publication Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Communication & Theatre Arts at ODU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication & Theatre Arts Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ODU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@odu.edu.
Few directors represent post-classical Hollywood cinema better than Tony Scott. His Hollywood career arcs from the 1980s and the iconic Top Gun (1984) to 2010, with the underrated Unstoppable. Scott’s films innovated the fragmentation and excessiveness of the post-classical Hollywood films, including the ability to overwhelm to an extent that negates for many critics and academics the possibility of any substance. Of Tony Scott, David Thomson, in his massive The New Biographical Dictionary of Film (2003), managed about 100—dismissive—words, issuing, in effect, a challenge: those that see something in Tony Scott have “the advantage over me” (794). What Thomson and others fail to see in Tony Scott’s all-too-short career is a Hollywood director with a distinct authorship in the post-classical context. Scott negotiated David Bordwell’s notion of “belatedness” in post-classical Hollywood and eventually established authorial identity. The key to Tony Scott’s authorial identity is the relationship with his older brother, Ridley Scott, who acted as mentor to Tony. The mentor-student becomes the dominant metaphor of Tony Scott’s authorship, along with a technology-as-film metaphor that provides the conflict in the relationship (e.g., the older and younger engineers
on the train in *Unstoppable*). Unlike his brother, who joined a group of directors who re-assemble B-movies into prestige A-movies, Tony Scott recreated the B-movie and the B-movie experience in the post-classical Hollywood context. In understanding Tony Scott, we find a director smuggling a personal expression, identifying with the heroes in many of his films, who, like his audience, wander a fragmented and difficult to comprehend physical and digital world looking for purpose.

**Post-Post and New-New**

Post-classical Hollywood filmmaking, especially as practiced by Tony Scott, would not be possible if the European Art Cinema and New Hollywood had not preceded it. Critics (e.g., Jenkins, 1995; Elsaesser, 1998; Smith, 1998; Kramer, 2000; Langford, 2010) acknowledge an emerging “New Hollywood” profoundly influenced by the directors of the European Art cinema as the classical studio system drew to an end in the 1970s. Whereas an oligopoly of studios enacted variations on a mode of production that characterized the classical, in the post-classical too many producers enact too many variations for too many audiences. In the language of the poststructuralists, changing modes of production destabilized Hollywood cinema. Much of the writing on post-classical Hollywood cinema attempts to stabilize the destabilized. Elsaesser, for example, corralled the post-classical Hollywood into “elements,” one being “New Media Ownership and Management Styles” (191). Langford’s *The Post-Classical Cinema* lays out the industrial/business history, pre- and post-1970s, in great detail, and Dixon (2001) surveys some of the same developments, but focuses on the 1990s and technology development with a title that suggests a common attitude: “Twenty-five Reasons Why It’s All Over.” Covering much of the same ownership/industry ground, David Denby asks in the title of his book, *Do the Movies Have a Future?* (2012). Academic industry watchers fret over direction and try to discern a grand meaning (e.g., “it” apparently is all over), but only a few, such Thomas Elsaesser’s essay on Coppola’s *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* and Kramer’s post-classical chapter in *American Cinema and Hollywood*, push beyond the industry ruptures to find meaning in the films, either in genre, authorship, or cultural concerns. Similarly, little has been written of Tony Scott—no books and only three significant academic essays (Huber and Paranson, 2007; Anderson, 2008; and Knapp, 2008), and one dissertation from Australia (Taylor, 2006).
Elsaesser also suggests the element of “A New Generation of Directors.” By that, he returns to the oft-covered New Hollywood of the 1970s. And while Martin Scorsese and Steven Spielberg were new in the 1970s, such is no longer the case. Beginning in the late 1970s, many waves of New directors flowed into and out of Hollywood. Tony Scott belongs to a second wave of British directors. Second, that is, to the directors of the British New Wave of the 1960s (e.g., Tony Richardson, Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz), who experienced some success in Hollywood but faded during the 1970s. The mega-producers of the late 1970s and early 1980s, such as Jerry Bruckheimer and Don Simpson and Joel Silver, had little interest in auteur-oriented American directors of the New Hollywood, because by the late 1970s, New Hollywood had produced an array of expensive flops: Scorsese’s *New York, New York* (1977), William Friedkin’s *Sorcerer* (1977) and *The Brink’s Job* (1978), Spielberg’s *1941* (1979), Michael Cimino’s *Heaven’s Gate* (1980), and Francis Ford Coppola’s *One From the Heart* (1982). Young directors from England, who came to prominence by directing television commercial, and who had recently completed a first feature film, filled the bill.

The core of the British Second Wave consists of Hugh Hudson, Ridley Scott, Adrian Lyne, Tony Scott, and Alan Parker. Their education during the 1960s included art and film training, and all landed jobs in advertising that lead to directing commercials. The Second Wave grew up with an awareness of Classical Hollywood in transition. As students in the 1960s, the Second Wave directors developed passions for the art cinema of the late 1950s and 1960s. Tony Scott attended the Sunderland Art School, where “[I] ran the Film Society there—I was the projectionist, . . . Roman Polanski was my man. I suppose the darkness of Polanski attracted me” (Figgis 128). Later Scott claimed, “My first movie, *The Hunger*, was a direct knock-off of [Nicolas Roeg’s] movie *Performance*” (Morgan). Like their American counterparts, the Second Wave came to their careers in feature films with a keen awareness of their position in film history.

Ridley Scott developed a prominent advertising company (RSA or Ridley Scott Associates). After directing *Alien* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982), Ridley Scott directed the famous Apple Macintosh commercial that first aired during the 1984 Super Bowl and is widely considered one of the all-time best commercials (Parrill 23). Ridley Scott offered Tony the opportunity to direct commercials once Tony had completed film school. According to Tony Scott:
I shot commercials for ten years . . . I cornered the market in fashion commercials. It was the best training I could have gotten, you know. I’d shoot a hundred days a year. I turned more film than most feature directors turn in a year, you know. It was fun, and very lucrative.

I won lots of awards, but, most of all, I got to understand my craft. I got to understand how to communicate with a crew and how to get non-actors to perform for you. (Emery, *Four* 22-23)

Directing commercials became, in effect, an education that included not only learning the technical matters of the craft, but also learning to sell with images.³

The first film from each director did little box office, yet achieved an important goal in helping land a second feature with a powerful Hollywood producer. Alan Parker led off with *Bugsy Malone* (1976), which begat the more commercially and critically successful *Midnight Express* (1978), produced by Peter Guber, and Alan Marshall, David Putnam. Ridley Scott followed *The Duellists* (1977) with *Alien*, produced by David Giler, Walter Hill, and Gordon Carroll. For Adrian Lyne, first *Foxes* (1980) then *Flashdance* (1983), Bruckheimer and Simpson, producers. For Tony Scott, *The Hunger* (1983) preceded *Top Gun*, also produced by Bruckheimer and Simpson. Producers like Bruckheimer and Simpson saw the combination of a feature film and the advertising experience as the necessary training for their directors. Not surprisingly, Jerry Bruckheimer started in advertising (Pollack 2006). He and Simpson became mega-producers not only in the amount of money their films made, but also in establishing more authorial control for the producer (most of their films reaffirm the ideology of Ronald Reagan’s conservative America of the 1980s). In Peter Biskind’s words, “The megaproducers didn’t want to use New Hollywood veterans like Friedkin because these directors were too powerful, independent, and costly. Simpson and Joel Silver preferred novices they could hire for a song and push around, like Adrian Lyne or Tony Scott” (414). What Biskind reads as “pushed around” may have been experienced professionals delivering a product for a major client. The British Second Wave, then, is one of many “generation of directors” fragments to spin out from the 1980s. They followed the New Hollywood directors of the 1970s and paralleled the 2.0 phase of
the surviving New Hollywood directors, like Spielberg, Scorsese, and De Palma. They also ran parallel to a wave of Australian directors in Hollywood (e.g., Peter Weir, both George Millers, Bruce Beresford) and preceded the Indie Directors emerging in the late 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Sam Raimi, the Coen Brothers, Quentin Tarantino, Atom Egoyan, Steven Soderbergh).

Elsaesser also lists “New Marketing Strategies” as an element. *Fame* (1980) and *Flashdance* packaged the MTV aesthetic and used the feature film as a marketing vehicle in conjunction with other products (both films produced hit soundtrack albums, music videos, and ancillary merchandise). *Top Gun* would set a new standard for Hollywood film as advertising. Not only did it spawn multiple hit songs from a soundtrack album (with Scott directing Kenny Loggins’ “Danger Zone” music video), but the Navy also saw a 500% increase in enlistment (Robb 182). Pauline Kael, perhaps sensing Scott’s background in advertising, railed in her review of *Top Gun*, “What is this commercial selling?” (119).

Clearly, “Hollywood” is not over. Equally clear, fragmentation and excessiveness dominate the post-classical. As Larry Knapp (2008) points out, “critics confronted with the fragmentation of the postclassical, with its embrace of ‘montage by attraction’ . . . reject it as a distracting exercise in excess” (2.html). Interestingly, and perhaps not coincidentally, the schism between structuralism and poststructuralism coincides with the transition from classical to post-classical (late 1960s and 1970s). Robert Stam summarized, “If structuralism assumed stable, homeostatic structures, poststructuralism looked for moments of rupture and change” (p. 180). Stam describes the poststructuralist lexicon with many postclassical notions: “a vocabulary that undermines any sense of grounded stability: words like ‘fluidity,’ ‘hybridity,’ ‘trace,’ ‘slippage,’ and ‘dissemination’” (180). Embracing the hybridity and slippage in post-classical films, like the films of Tony Scott, means embracing what Knapp details in his analyses of Scott’s *Man on Fire* (2004) and *Domino* (2005) as a “concentrated subjectivity” in his film style. But deconstructing Scott’s editing style remains only a part of the picture. As Kramer suggests, the post-classical also includes “the introduction of aimless protagonists, the loosening of causal connections between narrative events, the foregrounding of stylistic devices in their own right, which serves to demonstrate the filmmaker’s artistic presence and intentions,
and the refusal of unambiguous narrative closure, which invites audiences to speculate about the film’s significance” (80). Amidst all the fragmentation and excess of industry ownership and production shifts, marketing, and new generations of directors—and they must be listed, charted, and tallied—understanding the “post” in post-classical remains incomplete, destabilized, and insufficiently argued.

The significance of Tony Scott’s films lies in exemplifying Kramer’s definitions while also demonstrating a personal authorship within post-classical Hollywood. In considering the post-classical Hollywood through the prism of the director, authorship as a theoretical perspective clarifies types of directors and types of post-classical operations. Authorship remains valid because it aids in organizing the fragments and excess in filmic style, themes, and motifs, and it illuminates something we did not expect to find, “artistic presence and intentions,” in the films of Tony Scott, a director most critics and academics have ignored.

Tony Scott in the Post-Classical Hollywood -- Apprenticeship and Assimilation

A sense of film awareness and history permeates the work of most post-classical directors, American and British. Bordwell laid out what this means for a Hollywood director: “With your career wholly in your own hands, facing the competition of the past and the present, how could you achieve something distinct? Call this the problem of belatedness” (23). For the American post-classical directors in the 1970s, as Bordwell points out, the belatedness resides in their desire to “recycle” and “update” the “conventions of the classic era” (23). Spielberg, Lucas, and Brian De Palma, for example, manifest their movie education in the 1970s and 1980s with postmodern films that remixed Classic Hollywood B-movie genres into A-movie blockbusters full of visual and narrative referencing to the classical films from which they sampled, as seen in *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *The Untouchables* (1987), and many more. An American belatedness grounds itself in a postmodern self-referentiality and ongoing discussion between director and audience concerning, predominantly, American cinema. Critics, for their part, decode the referencing and guide audiences. For example, in 1979 Stuart Byron’s “‘The Searchers’: Cult Movie of the New Hollywood” mapped out the references to John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956) in films
like *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976), *Hardcore* (Paul Schrader, 1979), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg, 1979), *Dillinger* (John Milius, 1973), *Mean Streets* (Martin Scorsese, 1973), *Big Wednesday* (John Milius, 1978), and *Star Wars*. Few write about Brian De Palma without mentioning Alfred Hitchcock. The referencing moves to another level of detail in the DVD era with directors like Scorsese pointing out the referencing in their films (e.g., Scorsese’s commentary on *Taxi Driver*). For the British Second Wave, referencing classic films, such as *The Searchers* or Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958), bears little significance, because a different education drives British Second Wave filmmaking—making television commercials.

For the British Second Wave, television commercial work informed the films of their Hollywood apprenticeship. *Top Gun* and *Beverly Hills Cop II* sold music as well as tickets. Tony Scott, most would agree, is not the author of *Top Gun*, *Beverly Hills Cop II*, or *Days of Thunder* (1990) due to the mitigating influence of the mega-producers Bruckheimer and Simpson. The look of all three films bears a distinctive stamp of glamorous diffusion and magic hour shots we attribute to Tony Scott, the precedent of which is in his television commercial work. Scott admitted, “based on my commercial work, they offered me *Top Gun*” (Emery, *Four*, 25). The “commercial look” dominates the first phase of Scott’s Hollywood career, including his first three films with Bruckheimer and Simpson, *Revenge* for Kevin Costner, Jim Wilson, and Hunt Lowery, and *The Last Boy Scout* for Scott Rudin.

Control of the narrative marks the key difference in the next phase of films directed by Tony Scott. The first film in this phase, *True Romance*, came about because Scott bought the screenplay from Tarantino (Scott has displayed a knack for finding new talent). At the same time, he also tried to buy *Reservoir Dogs* (Emery 31). Scott shot *True Romance* in continuity (i.e., scene one was shot first, then scene two), re-ordered Tarantino’s Elmore Leonard-like non-linear structure to a linear form, and had Clarence, the hero, live in the end (Emery *Four* 31). In working with Bruckheimer on *Crimson Tide* and *Enemy of the State*, (1998) Scott no longer delivered the pre-determined Bruckheimer project of reaffirming the neo-conservative idea of the individual being the problem, not the system. With *Crimson Tide*, Scott so disliked the screenplay he brought in Tarantino to rewrite (Figgis 130). Scott’s commercial look dominates these two films,
and his control of narrative and theme may be in the ability to turn it over to Tarantino, but he no longer acts as the apprentice. The most interesting of these second phase, transitional films, like *Enemy of the State* and *Spy Games* (2001), preview the films to come in his final phase. Even the least successful film of this group, *The Fan* (1996), contains thematic elements that dominate his later work. Perhaps, the undistinguished quality of the second phase transitional films reflects Scott's still-developing authorial voice and vision, or, in Bordwell's terms of the post-classical, in considering the past and the present, Tony Scott had yet to achieve something distinct.

Especially with *Crimson Tide*, *Enemy of the State*, and *Spy Game*, Tony Scott demonstrates an alternate authorship possible in post-classical Hollywood. He avoids prestige, Oscar-baiting projects—the very path his brother would go down. Ridley Scott, who, after his British Second Wave work, joined the camp of the New Hollywood directors in the 2.0 phase of their careers and developed a branded cinema, what Corrigan (2003) calls the “commerce of auteurism,” featuring easily recognized themes and visual styles.7 The New Hollywood directors still working today and the New-New Hollywood directors, like Ridley Scott, Ron Howard, and David Fincher, define a Hollywood authorship that continues to emphasize the persistence of the classical during the post-classical Hollywood period. Their films may exploit the modern innovations of CGI effects and digital filmmaking, the more lenient culture context concerning the portrayal of sex and violence, and, to a slight degree, the excessiveness of the post-classical bemoaned by critics such as Wheeler Winston Dixon and David Denby, but we also recognize the continuation of the Classical Hollywood style with their adherence to the hegemony of continuity editing, conventional narrative structure, and a middle-of-the-road ideology. As the New-New Hollywood directors, like Spielberg, Howard, and Fincher, found franchise films and popular novels for their projects, they also found their authorship becoming branded. For Ridley Scott, this meant a return to *Alien* with *Prometheus* (2012), deploying marketing that confirmed it as “From the director of *Alien* and *Gladiator*.” And the marketing of *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014) assures us it is “From the Director of *Gladiator*.” After *Gladiator*, Ridley Scott directed *Hannibal* (2001) and *Blackhawk Down* (2001), the former a sequel to *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and the second a bestseller. This aggregate of New-New Hollywood films features
stunted or diminished examples of Kramer’s markers of the post-classical Hollywood—the hero is rarely aimless, CGI special effects are foregrounded above all other stylistic devices, and the ending is rarely ambiguous.

Another type of director tied to branding that Tony Scott did not become was one of unique indie film authorship (e.g., Woody Allen, Wes Anderson, the Coen brothers, or Tarantino), which Hollywood incorporated in the 1990s. The indie film director follows a branded authorship concerned with distinctive motifs, themes, and film style, usually at a budget much below the Hollywood blockbuster and, for a while, independent of the Hollywood mode of production. Additionally, most of the indie film authorship directors write the screenplays of their films and, for the most part, emphasize original works that often foreground Kramer’s concepts of technique and artistic intention, the aimless hero, and the lack of closure.

Tony Scott found another path, one dependent upon Hollywood but not directing a prestige picture, nor a franchise, nor adaptations of bestsellers. Although he exerts much authorial control, he does not write original screenplays. Scott’s Hollywood films cost too much to qualify as B-movies. A more accurate definition would be a B+movie. Tony Scott recreates the Hollywood B-movie and the B-movie experience (marketing emphasis on the movie’s stars and the action concept, budget below that of prestige A-movies, clear demarcation of genre). As opposed to sampling and referencing classic B-movies, Tony Scott’s films are B-movies created in the post-classical Hollywood business and aesthetic context. Though some “referencing” finds its way into his transitional films, much of that comes from the input of others with whom Tony Scott shares the screen. For example, in True Romance and Crimson Tide much Tarantino pop culture referencing appears (e.g., arguing over the preferred Silver Surfer in Crimson Tide), or casting Gene Hackman in Enemy of the State in a role that references his part in Coppola’s The Conversation (1974) and similar use of Robert Redford in Spy Game. With Man on Fire in 2004, Tony Scott makes a clear shift away from the referencing.

In carving out this B+movie space within the post-classical Hollywood, Tony Scott sets a precedent for others to adopt. For example, Michael Bay begins by working with Bruckheimer on projects that seem intended for Tony Scott (Bad Boys, The Rock), and then moves into projects wherein he possesses more authorial control,
the most renown/notorious being *The Transformers* franchise. Bay’s films recreate, rather than re-assemble, B-movies of the classical era (sci-fi films with dominant robot characters, like the Fleischer Studio’s *The Mechanical Monsters* [1941] Superman cartoon, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* [1951], or *Tobor the Great* [1954]) while acquiescing to the post-classical Hollywood franchise. Directors working in a B+movie vein similar to Tony Scott’s latter films include Antoine Fuqua (*Training Day* [2001], *King Arthur* [2004], *The Equalizer* [2014]), Doug Liman (*Bourne Identity* [2002]—the first, not the franchise installments, *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* [2005], *Edge of Tomorrow* [2014]), and Joe Carnahan (*Narc* [2002], *Smokin’ Aces* [2006], *The Grey* [2011]). These films recreate B-movies, such as crime films/noirs (*Training Day, Narc, The Equalizer*), the amnesiac mystery (*Bourne Identity*), historical adventure (*King Arthur*), and outdoor adventure (*The Grey*). Tony Scott, like these directors and unlike his brother, has more in common with the great B-movie directors like Don Siegel, Robert Wise, Sam Fuller, Robert Aldrich, and the early films of Anthony Mann, Edward Dymtryk, and, especially, Budd Boetticher.

Like Boetticher’s seven films with Randolph Scott, Scott has worked five times with Denzel Washington. And similar to the Boetticher/Scott films, the Scott/Washington films owe more to Washington’s brand than to any brand Tony Scott may have developed. The films with Tony Scott may be the closest thing to a franchise Washington will achieve, as he has no franchise or sequel to his credit (as most of his age contemporaries, Tom Hanks, for example, do). And their films together defy any notion of what would appeal to the young audience (i.e., men isolated in a submarine, a suicidal mercenary, or retiring train motorman). In all their films together, Washington’s name dominates Tony Scott’s name in the marketing—in a fashion similar to Randolph Scott and Budd Boetticher. The similarities between Scott/Washington and Boetticher/Scott mark another belated quality in the idea of a post-classical B+movie—that it is new and old simultaneously.

Thomas Elsaesser acknowledges the dual nature of the post-classical and belatedness with “Specularity and Engulfment: Francis Ford Coppola and *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* [1992].” He sees *Dracula* as a “supremely self-reflexive piece of filmmaking, fully aware that it stands at the crossroads of major changes in the art and industry of Hollywood: looking back as well as looking forward, while staking
out a ground all its own" (191). Elsaesser notes that many critics have noted the dual nature of post-classical Hollywood:

Noel Carroll has proposed the term ‘allusionism’, basing his thesis on the premise that filmmakers and audiences grew up together, sharing common film experience which shaped their social experience. Robert Ray offers a differently angled picture, [. . .] For him, success has to do with a double inscription of audience, where the viewer is simultaneously addressed as a naïve and ironic spectator, as an innocent and a knowing one. (193)

The emphasis on the dual nature, or “split mode of address” (Elsaesser 197), becomes a crucial point in articulating Tony Scott, or any post-classical work. Watching the films in the final phase of his career, the post-classical viewer engages with a post-classical mode and connects the elements of the films’ dual natures, finding the recreated B+movie smuggling, as classical B-movie directors did, a distinct authorship within a commercial product.

Post-Classical Authorship

Even to Spy Game in 2001, something had been missing in Tony Scott’s films that had stunted his self-articulation and style connecting the viewer to the film experience. With Man on Fire in 2004, Scott found the missing element in a “split mode of address.” In Scott’s words, “With Man on Fire I had a rule of thumb—if Denzel thought it, I would see it . . . And I would articulate it with the different techniques from a hand crank camera to the flashbacks” (Morgan). Scott strategically places the viewer within the narrative experience through what Knapp labels “concentrated subjectivity.” As with the more aggressive post-classical Hollywood cinema, the audience must organize fragments and make connections—not in a sense of complete abandonment of the Classical Hollywood’s reliance on continuity editing, but relying on the contemporary audience’s educated sense of film style and narrative and thereby expanding the time and space of continuity editing to find new time and new spaces. As Jenkins explains:

It’s not so much that these viewers have a short attention span, as critics protest, but rather that
they know all the stories already and they are ready to shift their attention to other levels of the film presentation, to glossy colour schemes, rapid-fire editing, or dizzying camera movements which challenge their comprehension and intensify their emotional engagement. (116)

The split mode of address, then, connects the viewers, the hero, and the director with a film jargon taught through their cultural media context. Scott authors films with a distinct voice and simultaneously generates Hollywood films.

The mode of production in this phase also changed in that Scott often acted as a producer of the films, which are:

- *Man on Fire* (2004) also a producer
- *Domino* (2005) also a producer
- *The Taking of Pelham 1 2 3* (2009) also a producer
- *Unstoppable* (2010) also a producer

Once free of his British Second Wave apprenticeship in Hollywood, Scott’s dominant metaphors found early articulation: the mentor and student in conflict at the center of the narrative and the technology over which they fight. As Tony Scott says of his brother, “Ridley’s a father figure. He’s always coaxed and guided me through trials and tribulations in my life and I’ve always looked to him” (Morgan).

The metaphor becomes much more personal, and darker, in *Man on Fire*. Washington’s Creasy, the post-classical aimless hero, a wandering mercenary (like young Tony Scott, traveling the world making commercials), drifts to Mexico for final communion with his mentor, Rayburn (Christopher Walken) before attempting suicide. The metaphor suggests Scott acknowledging the differences in the films of his brother’s career and his own. The technology they fight to control involves the equipment necessary for being a body guard (mostly weapons)—to control people. Scott’s film surrogate, Creasy, lacks the legitimacy obtained by the mentor, just as Tony Scott’s films lack the legitimacy awarded Ridley Scott’s films. But Tony Scott also uses visual and narrative technique to connect the viewer to Creasy’s mental state.

For example, *Man on Fire* builds a subjective, fragmented narrative wherein the act of watching the film bears similarities to
the experiences of the character. The viewer, like Scott and Creasy, connects bursts of images to find meaning. The technique is most explicit in the action scenes, as in the kidnapping sequence at the middle of the film. As Creasy waits for Pita (Dakota Fanning), he notices the cars forming for the kidnap. New angles on Creasy appear, such as overhead shots and lateral movements inverse to the moving cars. Pita appears moving in slow motion, breaking temporal continuity, and when Creasy shoots his pistol to warn Pita, the images of Creasy, Pita, and the cars repeat. As Creasy looks for the assailants, the camera searches the scene, offering flash cuts and repetitions (we see the second bullet hitting Creasy five times). The scene builds to an intense subjectivity of distorted images and concludes with Creasy losing consciousness and the screen going black. As the sequence unfolds, the audience pieces together the narrative logic from Scott’s bursts of images and movement. Granted, most narrative film forces viewers to construct time and space, but the hegemony of continuity editing and its near-invisibility dominated Classical Hollywood, and few viewers ever notice the work they must do. In the post-classical Hollywood, continuity editing loses its hegemony. Continuity remains, but with expanded, more participatory, possibilities. Scott works with a knowledge of the medium and the audience’s experience: we recognize a major movie star in a contemporary take on a familiar genre (film noir or crime film), we intuit *Man on Fire* as more of a B-movie than an A-moving prestige picture (it’s neither historical, nor epic, nor based on a major/popular literary work—it is not a Ridley Scott film), and like the 1940s and 1950s B-movies it evokes, *Man on Fire* offers a recognizable hero. Creasy, like Kramer’s aimless hero and like us and Tony Scott, wanders a fragmented, excessive, incomprehensibly large world of loosely connected networks, experiencing angst in his inability to make sense of time and place. Consistently, films labeled as post-classical Hollywood concern a central character not just aimless, but searching for (typically) his or her place in an increasingly fragmented world, as in *Collateral* (2004, Michael Mann), *Taken* (2008, Pierre Morel), *Inception* (2010, Christopher Nolan), *Bridesmaids* (2011, Paul Feig), *To The Wonder* (2012, Terrence Malick), and *Nebraska* (2013, Alexander Payne). In the end, Creasy finds his place in sacrificing himself to save Pita, and in this, as the mentor, Rayburn, explains, Creasy will “paint his masterpiece.”
Constructing a subjective film experience around a searching hero becomes the centerpiece in Scott’s next film, Domino. For Knapp, it is Scott’s masterwork, but Knapp focuses primarily on visual technique. The variation I offer is Domino as Scott’s most fragmented, and therefore most challenging, film. Fragments build upon fragments, with Scott asking much of the viewer—so much that many reject the film (e.g., 18% on RottomTomatoes.com). Building upon the ideas in Man on Fire, Domino expands that Venn diagram common area of director/character/audience, and the fragments of Domino’s life become the fragments of the film’s experience. Domino, like Scott and Creasy, wandered like the post-classical hero, until she found a place and a mentor. However, the life of Domino Harvey—bounty hunter and daughter of movie star Lawrence Harvey—adds a notion of “reality” to the construct, because the movie, as the title card reads, is, “Based on a true story—sort of.” Jenkins’ discerning viewer would recognize most of Domino as fiction, but also the fragments of truth, hence, the narrative experience, which involves constructing a “reality” from the fragments (just as the characters in the film do). Part of the reality construct involves two actors from Beverley Hills 90210, Brian Austin Greene and Ian Ziering, appearing as themselves and as hosts of a fictional, though plausible, reality TV show (Shultz). To further fragment the reality, fictional Lateesha (Mo’Nique) appears on the real The Jerry Springer Show to sell her notion of fragmented ethnicity (e.g., Chinegro, Hispasian, Blacktino). For Domino, making sense of the fragmented world comes in the form of bounty hunting, yet another profession combining sophisticated technology and controlling people—an apt metaphor for filmmaking.

For Knapp, Domino “embraces the post-classical as an irreconcilable clash with everything that once defined Classical Hollywood Cinema” (3). Domino’s life becomes the means of reflecting the fragmentation and excess, and rejecting the more elite class (like Ridley Scott and the postmodern directors) in favor of a more street-level world (Tony Scott and the B+movies). Appropriately, Ed, Domino, and Choco take pleasure in the discomfort of the 90210 actors out in the “real” world, mirroring for many the audience watching the film.

Man on Fire and Domino form a sub-set within Tony Scott’s Post-Classical Authorship Phase of two films aggressively post-
classical. With his remaining films, *Déjà vu, The Taking of Pelham 123*, and *Unstoppable*, he pulls back on testing of the limits of post-classical filmmaking and works more closely with continuity editing, clarifies his relationship with the B-movie, and continues to connect the viewer to the experience of the main character. *Domino* failed at the box office, perhaps motivating the pullback from an aggressively post-classical style, and the remaining films feature Denzel Washington to further insure commercial success. In *Déjà vu*, the time machine becomes the filmmaking metaphor (they watch multiple screens at their headquarters). After the bombing of a New Orleans passenger ferry, Carlin (Washington) goes back about four days in time to stop the bomber (Jim Caviezel). Washington, Scott, and the audience come together in a character trying to find his place and purpose among the fragments—especially in a chase sequence in which Carlin’s headset becomes how the time machine agents and the audience see the past. While Scott directs with much style, the overall film acquiesces to the hegemony of continuity editing and the narrative becomes the place where the characters and audience unite, in that Carlin, like the audience, re-structures time to comprehend the story in which he is involved. Anderson (2008) touched on similar territory of Scott connecting audience and character:

> Scott signifies Carlin’s romantic desire rather directly, while inviting his spectator to share in this economy of desire. He has made her “matter” to us in the same manner her father attempted to make her matter to Carlin—by supplying pictures of the beautiful, deceased woman. Our desire to see her alive again, and with the film’s star, leads to our affirmation of Carlin’s “ontological confusion.” (17)

In Carlin, Scott again follows a character like himself, who engages with a mentor and fights over control of the technology. Interestingly, Carlin dies through sacrifice at the end, but also survives in the form of his time-travelling self.

In Scott’s *The Taking of Pelham 123* remake, the train system becomes the filmmaking metaphor, with two men fighting for control over positions within a complicated network. The mentor becomes the Transit superior, who has Denzel Washington’s character, Garber, under suspension. Garber, like Tony Scott, has to legitimize himself to his (Ridley Scott-like) superior. The central conflict concerns the control of *Pelham 123*’s train, a metaphor of post-classical Hollywood
film. Garber fights to maintain his control against a doppelganger, John Travolta as Ryder, who hijacks the train and its passengers/audience for a personal payoff. The original 1974 film, itself a post-classical B-movie, provides material for Scott not only to re-create it as a B+movie, but also to expand his film/technology metaphor and contemplate what others might be doing with post-classical film.

Scott’s last film, Unstoppable, finds an apt filmmaking metaphor in the runaway train. Frank (Washington), the experienced motorman, and Will (Chris Pine), the new engineer, find themselves battling each other and the fast-moving technology of the train and its network systems. Along the way, the Ridley Scott-like Frank imparts upon the Tony Scott-like Will the knowledge and experience to do the job and tame the machinery, despite interference and misguidance, symbolically representing in this reading, critics and earlier producers. Unlike Man on Fire and Domino, which emphasize the kinetic concentrated subjectivity to make watching the film much like the experiences of the characters in the film, Unstoppable relies on a more subtle approach and takes place in close to real time. For an audience willing to look further than the genre typically requires, as with B-movies of the 1940s and 1950s, they will find a film connecting character, narrative, and the viewing experience. With Unstoppable, Scott seems to admit that his B+Movie may be a thing of the past, the train is anything but modern, and for both of the main characters it is barely controllable. If left to the status quo (the company, the safety experts), the runaway train, like modern film, would create disaster. Unstoppable becomes Scott’s contemplation, articulated in post-classical technique, of the classical cinema’s B-movie. Hollywood is not over so much as it is misunderstood by the modern critical community, just as B-movies of the 1940s and 1950s were under-appreciated in their time. The runaway train analogizes Tony Scott and his place in the film world and for the audience living in the contemporary world where so much of the physical and digital space seems beyond control and headed for disaster.

Conclusion

Sadly, Tony Scott took his own life after Unstoppable. In the five films of his Authorship phase, the hero dies in three of them (although resurrected in Déjà vu) and retires from his job in the other two. I am not suggesting these films constitute a suicide note, but rather
reflect the nature of the director’s inner turmoil. I would describe them as the opposite of a suicide note, more like therapy, the testament of an artist dealing with his inner demons in metaphor through a medium he had mastered. In achieving Bordwell’s “something distinct” in post-classical Hollywood with *Man on Fire*, Tony Scott transcended apprenticeship and assimilation phases, created films driven by his dominant metaphors of the mentor-student and technology, and melded the film-viewing experience with the character’s narrative experience, which combined to resonate with living in the fragmented physical and digital culture of the contemporary world.

Tony Scott’s films also demonstrate that critics may find post-classical Hollywood films infused with a personal authorship. The notion of authorial identity continues to exist, not as an *a priori* premise, but as one of the fragments in a theoretical mosaic that may render meaning. In Tony Scott, we found the mentor-student metaphor reveals a personal connection to the relationship with his brother, Ridley, who often represented experience and legitimacy while Tony Scott’s surrogate was impulsive, intuitive, and seeking legitimacy. In the technology metaphor, we found an ongoing consideration of filmmaking. The technology metaphor contrasts the status quo and the new order. Herein, I limited analysis to his feature films. His short films, television work, and commercials should add to our understanding, and that work remains to be done. The handful of academic essays on Tony Scott’s films remains insufficient.

In understanding Tony Scott, we find a director of Hollywood films embracing the post-classical and recontextualizing the B-movie and the film-viewing experience to reflect our efforts to construct both meaning and identity from image, sound, and information fragments. Being lost on the grid and trying to find one’s place on it has become a universal experience. Post-classical Hollywood films, like Tony Scott’s films, acknowledge that experience, and in Scott’s case analogize the experience in a way, for example, that Ridley Scott’s films do not. Tony Scott’s films, like the best post-classical films, resonate with an audience inclined to the fragmentary nature of their contemporary world, who intuit the classical notions of editing and design at a fundamental level, allowing for, perhaps demanding, an expanding visual and narrative mosaic that creates new, or manipulates anew, filmic time and space. For some, these demands require too much work. But for others, post-classical technique releases new possibilities of identification with the filmic experience.
Notes

1 In the 2013 edition, Thomson added comments to take in to account Tony Scott’s suicide.

2 Other directors in this group, making much less significant contributions, include Julian Temple and Marek Kaniewska.

3 Ridley Scott’s RSA maintains an active web site at rsafilms.com, where many of Tony Scott’s commercials are still available.


5 To see ad, go to:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PM3woO0AbCw#t=81

6 Tarantino told Charlie Rose in 1994: “to me True Romance is basically like an Elmore Leonard movie . . . that he didn’t write.”

7 Perhaps, these directors stand as the postmodern with commonality of referencing classic Hollywood.

8 Knapp lays out in technical detail how Tony Scott achieves the effects in Man on Fire and Domino. Knapp’s essay is required reading for understanding Tony Scott as well as post-classical cinema.

9 Similar relationships exist in some of the films of Scott’s British Second Wave, but the relationships are one-dimensional (e.g., Maverick and Viper in Top Gun or Cochran [Kevin Costner] and Tibey [Anthony Quinn] in Revenge) and, more importantly, do not make up the center of the narrative. A love story narrative dominates Scott’s Second Wave films.

Works Cited


Copyright of Film Criticism is the property of Film Criticism and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.