Cultural Criticism Applied to Vertigo and Die Hard

In the chapter “Film as Cultural Practice” in previous editions of Film, Form, and Culture, there was a comparison of Vertigo with the Bruce Willis action film Die Hard.

How do we combine a theory of cultural studies with an understanding of the formal structure of film and come up with a reading of cinematic texts that situates them within larger cultural practices and within the culture as a whole? Such a task would involve looking closely at a film and how it is put together—including its form, its narrative structure, the function of the actors and stardom in general. We would need to address the thematic structure of a film—what it is trying to say to us. We would want to place the film in the context of other films of its kind and examine its intertextual structure. We would then need to take all of this and look at the film through the eyes of the period in which it was made as well as the period in which it is being analyzed. In other words, we would try to see the film as its contemporaries did and then see it again as it looks to us now. We would have to place all this information in line with larger social issues: technology, politics, questions of gender, race, and class, of ideology and how the film in question fits or contradicts those general ideas and images we hold about ourselves and our place in the world. We would want to draw some value judgments about the film. This should not be done mechanically, because the best criticism is written in a comfortable, integrated style, in which ideas are set forth and analyzed, grounded by the film being studied. There will be digressions along the way, but they constitute part of the complex weave of a film and its cultural surround.

I would like to attempt such a criticism of two films that could not seem more different and distant from one another. They are Vertigo, a film made by Alfred Hitchcock in 1958, and
Die Hard, the Bruce Willis film directed by John McTiernan, 30 years later, in 1988, an important work in the popular action film genre. Vertigo is a film of great complexity and high seriousness made by one of the few filmmakers in America whose name is as recognizable as that of a movie star. Hitchcock’s popular television program, Alfred Hitchcock Presents, started airing in 1955 and made his name a household word. Combined with his cameo appearances in his own films, Hitchcock’s weekly introductions to the television show made him among the most recognized filmmakers in the world.

Vertigo appeared during Hitchcock’s most fertile filmmaking period, right after the popular films Rear Window (1954), To Catch a Thief (1955), The Man Who Knew Too Much (1956), the less popular, darker film The Wrong Man (1956), and just before North by Northwest (1959) and the enormously successful Psycho (1960). Vertigo bears every sign of a careful, deliberatively crafted film by a director who attended to every last detail of his films and his career. A self-conscious artist, Hitchcock tried to gauge public taste and his own imaginative needs, to make the commercial and the subjective work together.

Die Hard appears to have come out of nowhere, like most Hollywood films. But we know by now that “nowhere” really means the anonymity of studio production. Die Hard’s director, John McTiernan, came to film from television commercials, a major breeding ground—along with MTV videos and the University of Southern California film school—of new directors. He had made two feature films before Die Hard (Nomads, 1986, and Predator, 1987). After Die Hard, he made two more successful films—The Hunt for Red October (1990) and Die Hard’s third sequel in 1995. In a business in which “you are no better than your last movie,” McTiernan’s career tottered with the expensive flop Last Action Hero (1993). The success of Die Hard with a Vengeance (1995) gave him a boost, although he has never shown quite the
inventiveness that he did with the first *Die Hard* in this or any of his subsequent films. (A fourth sequel, *Live Free or Die Hard*, directed by Len Wiseman, appeared in 2007.) Hitchcock is an example of a filmmaker who worked and thrived within the Hollywood system, using it to his advantage, stamping his personal mark on the films he made. McTiernan is a figure of the new Hollywood. While not a contract director, as he might have been in the old studio days, he is still typical of a decent commercial director. A better-than-average craftsperson, working as part of a large group of collaborators who are experts in the action/special-effects movie, he is sometimes able to bring together a film that is ultimately greater than its parts. With *Die Hard* he succeeded once in making a film that was successful on all counts.

**The Cultural-Technological Mix: Film and Television**

Analyzing films in their cultural contexts leads us into interesting, sometimes unexpected byways: we need to think about the technologies of film and television, about actors and acting styles, about the size of the viewing screen itself, because they all speak to the cultural context of the works in question. Both *Die Hard* and *Vertigo* owe a great deal to television. Both Hitchcock’s and Bruce Willis’s fame had blossomed because of their respective television programs, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* in the 1950s and, for Willis, a series called *Moonlighting* in the 1980s. *Vertigo’s* debt to television, while playing on the audience’s recognition of Hitchcock, is more indirect, more technical, and driven by economics. It has to do, interestingly enough, with screen size, which, as I discussed in [Chapter 3](#), is an element of shot composition, becomes part of the film’s aesthetic. We need to revisit this.

Hollywood film is made to immerse us in the process of its narrative. Part of that immersion is the consequence of the sheer size of the image. Larger than life the image engulfs
the viewer, overwhelms his space. Television, on the contrary, is overwhelmed by the space around it: small, with poor resolution—though the advent of digital, high definition, wide screen TV has largely changed this. Its image was not comparable to the large, sharp image projected on the movie screen. So, during the 1950s, when audiences left theaters by the hundreds of thousands to stay at home and watch TV, Hollywood responded by making movie screens larger and wider. Hollywood pretended not to get what television was all about—namely, visual narratives delivered for free in the comfort of home—and thought their films could conquer the desire for TV by further overwhelming the viewer with the image. Of course, to hedge their bets, they also bought television stations and produced films and series for TV.

The various wide-screen processes that were developed, invented, and reinvented in the early 1950s brought few people back to the theaters, and, as we’ve seen, it has led to a lack of a coherent compositional frame for a filmmaker to use. Paramount Pictures, Hitchcock’s studio during much of the 1950s, developed its own wide-screen process called “VistaVision” and used it to compete with 20th Century Fox’s CinemaScope. All of Fox’s films from 1954 to the end of the decade were filmed in ‘scope. All of Paramount’s films during the same period were filmed in VistaVision, Vertigo included.

Hitchcock turned necessity to advantage. Vertigo is, in part, a film about a man wandering and searching. In the first part of the film, Scottie, the central character played by Jimmy Stewart, tails a friend’s wife. He falls in love with her, and when she dies, he searches for a replacement for her. Much of the first half of the film is taken up by shots of Scottie in his car, driving through San Francisco, following the woman, Madeleine, to a museum, a flower shop, Golden Gate Park. While these languid sequences of driving, looking, spying constitute a major narrative expression of Scottie’s deeply obsessive personality, they are also a kind of travelogue
of San Francisco, presented in VistaVision. Hitchcock was a studio director and paid his debt by filming in the studio’s proprietary format. At the same time, he made the wide screen part of the film’s mise-en-scène and narrative structure, using its horizontal frame to show Scottie’s wanderings and also his boundaries. The screen opens point of view and limits it as well.

**Bruce Willis, TV, and Movies**

By the 1980s, the screen-size wars were over. Films were, and continue to be, made in a variety of wide-screen formats. *Die Hard* is in Panavision (the ratio of 1:2.35). It makes excellent use of its broad horizontal scope especially by framing its characters in the corners of large architectural spaces so they seem overwhelmed and diminished by their surroundings. *Die Hard’s* connection to television is not via the technological route of screen size, but directly through its star, Bruce Willis, who came to the film with an enormous reputation as a character on the popular television series *Moonlighting*, in which he played a snickering, wise-cracking detective—a somewhat overgrown adolescent with some conventional characteristics of self-assurance and an ability not to take himself too seriously. *Die Hard* was only his second film (the first was *Blind Date* in 1987), and it launched the second phase of his career, which followed an unusual track through the culture of American entertainment.

There is, generally, a lack of exchange of actors from one medium to the other. Some movie stars, like Willis, start on television, move to film, and almost never go back. Most stay in one medium or the other. The reasons have partly to do with old antagonisms between the two forms, despite the fact that those antagonisms are now gone on the economic front as the ownership of the companies that make or distribute television programs and movies has converged. One reason has to do with salary: movies pay more. But mostly it has to do with
status. Movies, even though they are seen by fewer and fewer people in theaters, retain a higher status than television. Willis has often returned to television in small roles or guest appearances. He seems more in the British tradition, where crossing over between the two media carries no stigma.

The Actor’s Persona: Bruce Willis and James Stewart

As we discussed in the book, the personality of movie stars is constructed by a combination of their films and their publicity. Big stars become part of the culture, recognized, identified with, gossiped about in the tabloids, their private lives becoming public affairs. Bruce Willis and James Stewart shared these qualities of stardom, but in very different ways.

As a television star, Bruce Willis was able in Die Hard to expand characterizations already familiar to millions of people. He has since gone on to try various roles, serious and comic, but keeps returning to the tongue-in-cheek adventure figure he does so well, but an aging action figure needs other outlets—despite the fact that the fourth Die Hard appeared in 2007. His usual range is quite limited, his expressions restricted mostly to sneer and smirk with a small amount of vulnerability or deadpan seriousness as in The Sixth Sense (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999). His is a very physical presence: he uses his body as an expression of effort and turmoil, violence and revenge. Through physical stamina and wiliness, he transmits a sense of smartness, an engaging quality at a time when many people—men in particular—are uncertain how to express themselves in the world and are liable to choose dumb rather than smart.

James Stewart, the star of Vertigo, was also familiar to millions, but as a movie actor who had been in films since the 1930s. Stewart’s acting range was also limited but his was a limitation that allowed him, in the course of a very long career, to become something of a
cultural barometer. Stewart’s on-screen persona embodied, until the 1950s, variations of a passive, sweet, vaguely embarrassed and self-effacing character. His public persona was as quiet and reserved as the roles he played. That very passivity and self-effacement seemed to make him into a kind of rubber stamp, onto which could be impressed not only the characterizations demanded by a particular role but the responses of the audience as well. The illusion of simplicity and gentleness made him something of a mirror for everyone’s best intentions. Until the 1950s, he specialized in comedy roles, often assuming a foot-shuffling, head-down, aw-shucks characterization, whose simplicity was irresistible. His characters were nonthreatening; a viewer could feel both kindly and superior to him.

The role of George Bailey in Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946) simultaneously summed up and altered this persona that Stewart, his various directors and the audience had so carefully nurtured. Stewart and Capra added a measure of anxiety and despair to the character of George Bailey. The film’s narrative is driven by George’s attempt to get out of Bedford Falls and his continual frustrations in realizing this dream. The frustrations and anxieties reflect the lack of clarity about how an individual of ordinary means would make it in the new, unfamiliar world that had formed at the end of World War II, a world where old institutions and accepted ways of life were changing. *It’s a Wonderful Life* is a rare Hollywood film that refuses to give its hero his life’s dream and forces him instead to accept another role—almost literally forced upon him by the film. Indeed, the frustration George feels at the way his story refuses to come out the way he wants it to leads him to attempt suicide. Only through angelic intervention does he understand that, without him, the town he wants so desperately to leave would be a dark, violent, corrupt place. With this understanding, he takes the more “responsible” path and becomes a family man, a banker, and a protector of his town’s interests.
It’s a Wonderful Life is one of the great post-war narratives of uncertainty about the present and the future, a statement of the culture’s discomfort and yearning for fantasies of simpler times. It still strikes a chord and remains, along with the World War II film Casablanca (Michael Curtiz, 1942), one of the favorites of old, black and white movies. It launched Stewart’s career in a different acting direction. His roles became more serious, and that aspect of despair and moral confusion that he manifests in It’s a Wonderful Life is played out through a succession of roles, most notably in the films he made for Hitchcock and in a series of Westerns he made for Anthony Mann, such as Bend of the River (1952) and The Naked Spur (1953).

Hitchcock began playing on the changes in Stewart’s acting persona in Rope (1948), Rear Window (1954), and The Man Who Knew Too Much (1956). In Rear Window, a serio-comic film about the unpleasant consequences of being a voyeur, Hitchcock began to elicit from Stewart a worried, somewhat obsessive performance. A photographer confined to a wheelchair because of an accident, the character spies on his neighbors and forces his girlfriend to investigate a murder he believes occurred in an apartment across the way. Beneath its jokey surface, the film raises serious points about the gaze, about the morality of looking and seeing what you are not supposed to see. It is a virtuoso riff on the technique of shot/reverse shot. In Vertigo, Hitchcock plays up further the obsessive characteristics he gave Stewart in Rear Window, and the two of them create one of the best portrayals of near-psychosis in contemporary film.

**Vertigo and the Culture of the 1950s**

To understand Vertigo and Die Hard, we have to understand what happened in the late 1940s and 1950s to bring about the despair in Hitchcock’s film and, ultimately, the various questions about heroism we will find raised in Die Hard. The end of World War II did not bring a feeling
of victory and power to American culture. Instead it created a churning discomfort, an
uncertainty about the future and a lack of clarity about the past. The revelations of Germany’s
extermination of the Jews and the explosion of two atomic bombs over Japan that ended the war
shook the culture and confirmed how easily our myths of civility and order could fall. The
Communist revolution in China, the expansion of the U.S.S.R. into Eastern Europe and the
testing of a Russian A-bomb in the late 1940s further upset a society that had thought the second
great war of the century might settle things down overseas.

At home, major changes in the economy, in race, gender, and class relations began in
earnest in the early 1940s, continued throughout the war years, and generated anxiety for years
after. Labor expressed its discontent through a number of strikes during the war. A migration of
the African American population to the north responded to economic opportunities for those who
had not experienced them before, while disturbing the majority white population. Meanwhile,
African American soldiers fought bravely in a segregated army overseas. Attacks against
Hispanics resulted in the “zoot suit riots” that spread from southern California to Detroit,
Philadelphia, and New York. The outbreaks of violence not only signified the willingness of
minorities to express and defend themselves but set the stage for the creation of the myth of the
juvenile delinquent after the war.

By the early 1950s, the culture was wracked with change and dislocation it could barely
understand: suburbanization and the flight from the central cities, the formation and
institutionalization of the multinational corporation, the slow painful progress of civil rights, the
continued redefinition of gender roles. However, the United States sublimated these and many
other pressing issues into a struggle against a mostly mythologized external enemy (and then a
wholly mythical internal one), the “Communist threat.” Almost every issue was absorbed into the Cold War discourse of anticommunism.

Beginning in the late 1940s and continuing through the 1950s, the House Un-American Activities Committee, the committees run by Joseph McCarthy, newspapers, magazines, and much of the language of political and popular culture condemned as Communist almost anyone who had once held or continued to hold liberal or left-wing views. People informed on friends and colleagues. Government workers, teachers, screen and television writers, directors and actors lost jobs. Intellectuals were discredited. The blacklist thrived. American culture and politics underwent a purge. Women were, in an analogous way, also purged from the culture. Their roles changed dramatically during the years of World War II. With most young men fighting abroad, women came flooding into the workforce, did quite well, and enjoyed financial power, many of them for the first time. While few women rose to executive positions, they kept factories and shops operating and discovered a welcome liberation from old domestic routines. The liberation was such that, when the war was over, a massive ideological retooling had to be put into place. Men were returning from battle and wanted their jobs back. Women had to be reinserted into their former passive routines. Movies, magazines, and newspapers once again extolled the importance of motherhood and family, the submissive role of women, the nuclear family in which mother was anchored to home while father was free to move like a satellite out of the home, into the office and back.

Discussions about gender got caught up in the absurd momentum of the anticommunist discourse. The political and the personal, the power of the state, the workplace, the family, the sexual all became confused and self-contradictory. The larger fears of subversion and conformity, of being taken over and changed by enemies from within and without were filtered
down into the more immediate concerns of the role of men and women in the culture and the way gender determined the structure of power. 1950s culture was as much obsessed with sexuality and gender roles as our own. It tried to assuage obsession through control. The decade’s most conservative desire was to maintain a perfect imbalance of male domination and female subservience, male mobility at work and female stability in the domestic space. Fear of women, fear of difference, fear of Communism, and fear of conformity marked this age of anxiety.

People seemed to find security in sameness, while fearing that too much conformity would be dangerous. For example, while the growth of corporate culture was recognized as the source of secure jobs for men and a secure consumer economy for the country, it was also seen as something that interfered with the image of the free, unfettered male, who should be making his own way in the world. Voices were raised and books were written about men being unmanned by their new subservience to the corporation and the family.

Some popular literature was quite direct about this anguish over conformity, the apparent diminishing of male potency, the growth of corporate culture, and also Communism. Articles in the popular Look magazine, gathered in a 1958 book called The Decline of the American Male, claimed that women control male behavior, from the early formation of men’s psyches, to the kinds of jobs they take, to their competitiveness. Because women now demanded satisfaction that was equal to or greater than the male’s, they were beginning to control his sexuality. The subjugation to women and the pressures brought by the culture had produced a broken shell of a man, without individuality, without power, overworked, stressed-out, unable “to love and to make moral decisions as an individual.” Men were weakened and regimented, made impotent and recessive. “In the free and democratic United States of America, he had been subtly robbed
of a heritage that the Communist countries deny by force.” As males went, so went the country.
Communism by female control.

The Kinsey Reports

Sexuality, control, anticommunism: the triad of 1950s cultural obsessions. The gender problem was further aggravated by the publication of two scientific reports that became, next to anticommunism, among the most influential and disquieting cultural events of the 1950s. The Kinsey Reports on male and female sexuality (published in the late 1940s and mid-1950s, respectively) were works of scientific analysis, presenting themselves as objective, methodical surveys. They frightened almost everyone by claiming that there was no normative sexual behavior, no controllable, conventional way of defining what people do in the bedroom. In a world where moral, cultural, and political safe harbor was becoming increasingly harder to locate the more it was demanded, the Kinsey Reports seemed to remove yet another anchor. What the reports seemed to be saying about sex became part of the general concern about subversion—cultural, political, and gender. Nothing seemed secure.

The Vulnerable Male in Film

Many films of the decade examined questions of gender (as they did with racial issues) with some delicacy and complexity. They were able to put aside the anticommunist hysteria. Many of them created interesting narrative combinations out of the culture’s fears of conformity, out of juvenile delinquency (which the culture invented as one more way to scare itself about what was happening to masculinity, while at the same time creating another fear which it could blame on the mass media), out of notions about gender that somewhat altered the old stereotypes of the
rugged male hero. Some of these films, such as *A Place in the Sun* (George Stevens, 1951) and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (Nunnally Johnson, 1956), presented male characters who in their passivity, sensitivity, and vulnerability took on characteristics and attributes not usually associated with male characters.

A number of postwar film actors—Montgomery Clift, James Dean, Marlon Brando, and Paul Newman, in films such as *A Place in the Sun, Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955), *The Wild One* (Laslo Benedek, 1953), and *The Left-Handed Gun* (Arthur Penn, 1958)—expressed a search for new ways of expression under the guise of a withdrawn sensitivity. Their acting styles were a major break with prewar movie conventions; their roles spoke to the repressed anger and sexuality of the culture at large. In *The Wild One*, Marlon Brando plays a biker with a very sensitive soul, who, in one scene, alone with his motorcycle in the night, weeps. Early in the film, a girl asks him, “What are you rebelling against?”: “Whaddya got?” he asks. This film, along with *Rebel Without a Cause*, spoke to many people’s feelings about the constraints and confusions of the 1950s. *The Wild One* was considered subversive enough to be banned in England for many years, but its interest is really not in the rebelliousness of the male character but in his ambiguous expression of anger and passivity. Despite the gang brawling, the film’s representation of masculinity plays against conventions of heroism and strength; it is, finally, the feminizing of the male that makes this and other films of its kind attractive and curious.

*Vertigo* is not a film about youthful rebellion. Nor is it on any explicit level about fears of conformity or Communist subversion. Quite the contrary, it is about a middle-aged man who implodes under the weight of sexual repression and despair, bringing about the death of other people in his wake. It is more closely related to the 1950s films of constricted and destroyed
businessmen, films like *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and Nicholas Ray’s *Bigger Than Life* (1956), than to the same director’s *Rebel Without a Cause* or to *The Wild One*. But it is of a piece with the decade’s concerns with change and betrayal, with power and passivity, domination and servitude, and sexual panic. It quietly addresses all of these concerns and the culture’s general sense of incompleteness, its feeling of unfinished, perhaps unfinishable personal business, its pervasive anxiety. It touches, in an oblique way, on the Cold War obsessions of containment. The political culture of the 1950s was obsessed with containment of the “Communist threat.” *Vertigo* personalizes the political by creating a deeply repressed man, contained by his fears and driven by his obsessions.

*Die Hard* would seem to be *Vertigo*’s opposite. It is a film about getting things done, and its hero is uncontained. The film has evil villains who are taken care of by a strong and resourceful man. *Die Hard*, unlike *Vertigo*, is about male strength and heroism, about action that is not questioned. Yet resourceful and heroic as he is, Bruce Willis’s John McClane bears a relationship to the sensitive men who began appearing during the 1950s. He carries pain with him. Not the vague cultural anxieties that afflicted characters 30 years earlier, John’s is a much more contemporary pain—though its roots lie deep in 1950s gender ideology as well as conservative 1980s notions about individual initiative. John’s wife has left him, and *Die Hard*’s narrative is set into motion by his traveling from New York to Los Angeles to attempt a reconciliation. John’s responses to his wife’s newfound independence bear traces of the same sexual anxieties that marked his predecessors. There is even a touch of the 1950s fear of corporate strength mixed in. But John McClane is a man of the late 1980s. His insecurity is marked by the cultural discourse of women’s independence, not male dependence, by the fact that his wife left him to take a corporate job, even to reclaim her last name. Such an event in a
1950s movie would be the cause of derision, not anxiety. More accurately perhaps, it would be anxiety turned into derision. We noted the reaction in Ida Lupino’s *The Bigamist* in Chapter 7.

*Die Hard*’s John and *Vertigo*’s Scottie do have a common lineage. Both characters are policemen. John comes from a long line of movie cops, those tough New York Irishmen with soft hearts, figures unique to film, yet reassuring in their mythic qualities. Scottie’s lineage is more local—he is a San Francisco cop—and more engaged with 1950s film images and narratives of damaged men. He cannot live up to the expectations of his job. While John McClane is sick at heart over his separation from his wife and sets out to prove his masculinity, Scottie is sick in soul and mind, a sickness that manifests itself as vertigo, a paralytic response to heights and his own moral and emotional destruction. This results in the death of a colleague at the very beginning of the film, when a rooftop chase leaves Scottie dangling, paralyzed, unable to save one of his men. Scottie leaves the force and is made vulnerable to a monstrous plot by a businessman who plays upon his sincerity, insecurity, and self-doubt, and destroys his life and that of a woman with whom Scottie thinks he’s fallen in love. Scottie is left at the film’s end alive but reduced, staring into the void. John McClane, through a series of explosively adventurous acts, saves his wife, develops a profound emotional attachment to an African American policeman, and emerges from a series of apocalyptic events alive, triumphant, but a somewhat conflicted supercop.

Scottie’s despair and John’s conflicted state are partly the result of gender confusions we spoke of earlier and are specific to the times of their stories. Scottie Ferguson is the timid 1950s male, reduced in stature, capability, and agency in the world. There is little he can do. He is, in his small fictional container, a metaphor of all the 1950s middle-class, middle-aged men, undone
by forces over which he has lost control. John McClane is a collective fantasy of exactly the opposite response. By the late 1980s, fear of loss of control had turned into the reality of lost control. The succession of blows to the culture’s self-esteem and to the power of the individual over anything in the world had taken their toll. While there were some major victories in the 1960s and 1970s—gains in minority and women’s rights, effective mass protests against the Vietnam War—there were greater, more profound defeats. A lingering unhappiness was the result of the Kennedy and King assassinations, the frustrations caused by Vietnam experienced by those who supported it, opposed it, and fought in it. The corruption of the Nixon administration, culminating in Watergate, the stagnation of real income, and a more subtle, yet farther-reaching realization that America had little power in an increasingly complex and fragmented world, that an individual’s power over everything had diminished, overtook the culture. 1950s anxiety became the helplessness of the 1980s, figured in its quest for suitable heroes, reflected in the election of Ronald Reagan, the movie star hero/president.

The role of the hero, intimately tied to issues of masculinity in any cultural period, is always under question. It was being questioned in the 1950s, and it was again in the late 1980s. The notion of the strong, moral, righteous, and courageous man of action, who would cleanse the entire culture of corrupt and violent forces—by means of greater violence—has never held up very well when tested in reality. After World War II, the premise of heroism was examined in film across the board. The great Western director John Ford was exploring the corruption of the Western hero as far back as *Fort Apache* in 1948. In *The Searchers* (1956), Ford was pressing his and America’s favorite heroic figure, John Wayne, to give a performance in a film that explored the proximity of heroism to psychopathic obsession.
This examination and debunking continued, particularly in the Western, through the early 1970s and resumed in the late 1980s in other genres. *Die Hard* thinks a lot about the old movie hero, and John Wayne in particular. I pointed out that the Bruce Willis character is related to the movie stereotype of the Irish cop. But there is more. His character is named John McClane. In 1952, John Wayne played the title character in an anticomunist cop film called *Big Jim McLain*. John Wayne as Jim McLain becomes Bruce Willis as John McClane. But this is not a simple substitution or even a complicated reference to the great film hero. It is an attempt to embrace and deny heroism, all at the same time. At one point in *Die Hard*, the terrorist Hans, frustrated by John’s clever and heroic efforts to outsmart him, calls to him in desperation, “Who are you, just another American who’s seen too many movies . . .? Do you think you are Rambo or John Wayne?”

Sylvester Stallone’s *Rambo* was, just three years before *Die Hard*, one of the last action-adventure films to take its central character with deadly seriousness. Rambo became a right-wing icon. It was not until *The Terminator*, in 1984, that the action film hero began to take on some of the reflective qualities that the Western hero had in the 1950s. Arnold Schwarzenegger moved his career forward by not taking his characters too seriously. There was always something safe and nonthreatening in Schwarzenegger’s posturing, and it became even safer after *The Terminator*, when he began actively poking fun at his earlier characters and went on to play comic roles. His presence is invoked by John in *Die Hard*, who says, at one point, “There’s enough explosives in here to blow up Arnold Schwarzenegger.” And, if that’s not enough, at one point, he dresses up to look like Rambo.

John McClane is a hero and would be directly in the John Wayne Rambo tradition if he would take himself more seriously. He fights manfully; he gets bloody (or “blooded” as some
die-hard believers in trial by violence would say); and he demonstrates uncanny recuperative powers, so uncanny that they became a model for action-adventure films that follow. He finally becomes John Wayne and Rambo and a parody of both. *Die Hard* begins a new phase of movie violence that is now called cartoon violence. The damage being done to human bodies in film is so enormous that “real” people would never survive it. These films—which include the *Die Hard* and *Lethal Weapon* series and Bruce Willis’s film *Hudson Hawk* (Michael Lehmann, 1991), as well as the Stallone vehicles *Demolition Man* and *Cliffhanger* (both 1993, directed by Marco Brambilla and Renny Harlin, respectively) and have spawned films based on comic books, from another Stallone vehicle, *Judge Dredd* (Danny Cannon, 1995), to *X-Men* (Bryan Singer, 2000, 2003) through *Spider-Man* (2002, 2004) and *The Hulk* (2003)—are some of the contemporary popular movies that begin to reveal the fact that the image and the narratives made from them are not of the world but of film and other forms of popular art, and that film violence is a visual trick—a digital visual trick. The films can, of course, go only so far. Audiences do not seem to want a full-scale revelation of artifice and self-reflection. *Hudson Hawk* and the Arnold Schwarzenegger film *Last Action Hero* (1993, directed by *Die Hard’s* John McTiernan) failed partly because they did not take themselves seriously enough and revealed a sense of play that went beyond some viewers’ desire for a necessary illusion. We want heroes to be self-mocking, but we don’t want them mocking us.

Heroically antiheroic might best describe John McClane. He is the confused late twentieth-century man turned into a courageous, resourceful, and indestructible defender of his wife and her fellow workers. He is always a little befuddled, but always ready for action.

In order to understand more clearly where these two films and their heroes diverge and converge, we need to consider for a moment their narrative approaches, which determine the way
they speak to their contemporary experience. *Vertigo*, with its dark, ironic structure, is a modernist narrative. Modernity—the movement of technological advancement, increased urbanization, rapid fragmentation of dependable, cohesive structures such as the family, religion, dominant race or ethnicity, and government, along with the falling away of individual agency and power—climaxed in the 1970s and 1980s. The responses to modernity are represented in various ways, including the stories the culture tells itself. Movies and television bring our fears to our attention, sometimes confirming them, sometimes attempting to assuage them with narratives about mastering our destiny, overcoming great odds, and recuperating our emotional losses. In the 1950s, science fiction films spoke to our terrors of vulnerability to alien forces (allegories of the “Communist threat” back then)—stories that are being retold today, only with different enemies. Melodrama tended to confirm the loss of individual power by insisting that the family, the married couple with children rather than the individual, was the best bulwark against modernity—all the while confirming the fragility of the family. *Vertigo* is an unusual affirmation of the disintegration of both the family and the self in modernity. It has romantic elements and touches of fantasy. But it is concerned mainly with the coming apart of the modern male.

Scottie is lost, unable to act or to love. His female friend, Midge, has been unable to get him to respond to her sexually. Her simplicity and directness frighten him. So does her sense of humor. She is a designer, currently working on a brassiere (“You know those things. You’re a big boy now,” she tells him). The brassiere she’s designing has “revolutionary uplift,” based on the principle of the cantilever bridge, and it parodies the 1950s fetishism of the female breast, the formulating of women’s bodies into preconceived male fantasies.

Scottie’s own fantasies are so powerfully conceived that women are unattainable for him, and he suffers from either impotence or sexual incompetence or complete gender panic.
Immediately following the banter about the brassiere, Scottie and Midge talk about a moment, years ago, when they were engaged for three weeks. Scottie insists that Midge called it off. She doesn’t respond. But Hitchcock does. He cuts twice to a close-up of her, very tight, and high enough to knock the balance of the frame off center. She simply frowns a bit and looks slightly off into the distance. It’s a very typical Hitchcockian gesture, exploiting the standard grammar of the reaction shot to expand the viewer’s comprehension of the situation. In this case, the reaction shot of Midge indicates to us that Scottie not only is in trouble sexually but is unaware of it. He is unaware of who he is and what he is capable or incapable of doing.

Scottie is an emotional void, into which a rich businessman pours an incredible plot about his wife, who, he says, thinks she is inhabited by the spirit of a nineteenth-century woman who committed suicide. (A major best-seller in the early 1950s was The Search for Bridey Murphy, about a woman who, under hypnosis, revealed a past life. In 1956, Paramount, the studio that produced Vertigo, made a VistaVision film of the book. Hitchcock may be consciously parodying the Bridey Murphy story in Vertigo.) The businessman asks Scottie to follow a woman he identifies as his wife, who is actually someone pretending to be her, and report on her actions. She becomes the obsessive core of Scottie’s life, which is so lacking a strong center that it barely survives. Scottie is the man of the postwar age, without power, without a sense of self and able only to re-create his desires in other people, who are not who he thinks they are.

Everything is false, a huge ruse created by the businessman—and by Hitchcock, who gives nothing away until much later in the film—to cover up the murder of his wife. But the ruse itself, as is typical in a Hitchcock narrative, is less important than its effects on the characters and the viewer. We are privy to the decay of Scottie Ferguson from someone who is already weak and afflicted to an obsessive-compulsive, to a sadomasochist, to a shell of a man gazing down at
the abyss, having finally caused the death of the woman he has tried to re-create into another’s image. If this sounds melodramatic, it is. Vertigo is in the tradition of 1950s melodramas about repressed desires exploding and then imploding back onto the central character—who is usually a woman. Vertigo makes its figure of melodramatic suffering a man. It is unusual too because its narrative plays ironically with Scottie’s perception and the viewers’. We must disentangle ourselves from Scottie. In the first part of the film, we tend to identify with him; in the second, we are asked to pull away and judge. There is no comfortable closure. Neither the character nor his world is redeemed at the end of the film. Scottie is left utterly, unrecuperably alone and in despair, in short, Vertigo has aspects of tragedy about it.

Modernity, and its narrative expression, modernism, speak to the loss of a center through an ironic voice with a whisper of tragedy. Postmodernity sees the center—the binding stories and beliefs of culture—as already lost and decides to get on with it through many voices, many images, spoken and shown with irony and cynicism. Die Hard builds its structures by borrowing from wherever it can and using or alluding to whatever fits—or doesn’t. It is a ping-pong game of pop-cultural memory and contemporary cynicism. It plays havoc with any serious moral structures other than the sentimental affirmation of individual heroism. Like the postmodern in general, Die Hard is a roller coaster of images, a feast of the intertextual, the junk food of the indecisive and confused.

As a postmodern work, Die Hard tries, and largely succeeds, in being everything to almost everyone: an action-adventure movie, a political thriller, a buddy cop film, a discussion of race, an ironic commentary on movie heroism and a study of gender conflict in the late 1980s. Vertigo is a movie conscious of its seriousness, a slow, thoughtful, and formally acute meditation on gender and male anxiety. Die Hard is a big, loud, explosive ball of fire that is built out of one
of the oldest narrative structures in cinema, the alternation of scenes of pursuers and pursued, an alternation of action and reaction. It is a captivity narrative, entranced with violent action and a hero who doesn’t take himself too seriously and can’t be killed, who is compared to John Wayne and Rambo but thinks of himself as Roy Rogers.

**Postmodern Villains**

Scottie is an almost tragic figure; John McClane is confused as a hero. The villains they fight are confused even more. Scottie’s enemy is none other than himself, his own weakness and insecurity. Gavin Elster, the businessman who makes up the huge lie that kills a woman and destroys Scottie’s spirit, is, in a way, a reflection of Scottie himself. In *Die Hard*, the villains are clearly present and mean in the way villains of action films always are. But remember, in this film nothing is as it seems. John has flown into Los Angeles from New York to see his estranged wife Holly, who works for a rich Japanese company, the Takagi Corporation. He visits her in the middle of the company’s Christmas party, which is attacked by a group of terrorists, who kill the boss and take the rest hostage.

The 1980s were a decade of swiftly changing attitudes toward foreigners as well as women. The latter had found their voice, and men were uncomfortable with what that voice was saying. The former were creating other kinds of confusion. The Japanese were particularly frustrating to Americans. We had been victorious over them in World War II. Now their economy was booming and their products, from VCRs to automobiles, were used by almost everyone. They seemed to be buying up everything in the U.S. from movie studios (Columbia is still owned by Sony) to golf courses to major tracts of real estate in large cities. They were held up as a model of productivity, yet demonized as a strange, alien culture. Though it was never
quite spoken, they remained in memory as our dark-skinned enemies. There were other enemies as well, and *Die Hard* seems to acknowledge them all. If the Japanese seemed to be threatening us with economic takeover, then Europe and the Middle East were threatening us with terrorists: people with less than comprehensible political goals that they attempted to achieve by the most appalling violence. In all cases, we responded, and respond still, with fear and loathing to the cultures that scare and threaten us, that we did not and do not understand, or that provide diversion from the complex economic and social processes occurring at home.

*Die Hard* plays with these complexities and confusions and turns them inside out. Holly’s Japanese company is apparently quite benevolent, and her boss, Mr. Takagi, is a kindly and paternal man. He talks gently and has the rare quality of dignified self-mockery. “Pearl Harbor didn’t work out,” he jokes with John, “so we got you with tape decks.” In fact, the villain in the company is not the foreign boss but another paper tiger of the 1980s, the yuppie Ellis. The yuppie was the 1980s version of an old cultural stereotype once called “nouveau riche,” and yuppies became figures of resentment and ridicule to the working- and lower-middle-class people who were not part of the 1980s and 1990s boom. They were the subject of a number of “yuppies in hell” movies—such as *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987) and *Pacific Heights* (John Schlesinger, 1990)—in which yuppie characters had to go through humiliating, often violent events in order to redeem themselves.

*Die Hard’s* yuppie is a coke-snorting, sniveling fool, who shows off his Rolex, comes on to John’s wife, and betrays both her and John to the terrorists. In return, the terrorists shoot him dead—much to everyone’s delight. Mr. Takagi is also brutally murdered by the terrorists, much to everyone’s horror. This kindly, civil man stood in contrast to everyone else but John and
Holly, and his murder clearly marks the ruthlessness of the terrorists—who turn out not to be terrorists.

Midway through the film, Hans, their leader, is discovered to be not the politically driven terrorist he pretends to be but just a thug whose gang is out to steal from Takagi’s safe. Suddenly the film is stripped of the problematically political and becomes simply a struggle between good and bad guys. Even when depoliticized, Hans’s gang is a strange model of cross-cultural diversity: there are a violent Russian, a number of Asians, and an African American who is both a computer wizard and a heartless murderer. This is an international cross section of the bad, and it mirrors the film’s unusual treatment of race.

**Ethnicity in Die Hard**

The major reference to ethnicity in *Vertigo* is in Gavin Elster’s fantastic story about his wife, who, he says, is possessed by the spirit of a nineteenth-century Hispanic woman, stereotypically marked as sensual and exotic. Scottie becomes fascinated with “the mad Carlotta” as he becomes more obsessed with her supposed reincarnation, Madeleine. Although there were a number of films throughout the 1950s that did deal with racial issues, usually in very positive, liberal ways (films like Joseph Mankiewicz’s *No Way Out*, 1950, and Martin Ritt’s *Edge of the City*, 1957, to name only two), there existed another kind of segregation. In most cases, if race was not a central subject of the film it was not considered at all. Therefore, in most films, people of color either did not exist or were treated as servants or, as in *Vertigo*, as another reflection of the character’s vulnerable imagination. By the 1980s, race was a consciously pursued issue in popular culture, almost always present though treated with various degrees of sincerity and enlightenment. In good postmodern fashion, *Die Hard* plays its race card in an indecisive and noncommittal way,
giving and taking, leaving us in a quandary. John is picked up at the airport by Mr. Takagi’s driver, a young black man named Argyle (one might well ask why a man is given the name of a sock) who, throughout the film, sits in his limousine, listening to music, seemingly oblivious to the mayhem going on in the skyscraper above him. He threatens to be another in the long, ugly history of stereotypes of the dopey black man—until he becomes a hero by driving his limo into the van of the escaping gang.

Early in the film, as John is cornered by the gang in the unfinished floors of the skyscraper, another African American makes an appearance. This is Al the cop. He is introduced as a bumbling, good-hearted soul, buying junk food for his pregnant wife, driving his car into a ditch when he learns what’s going on in the building. However, he quickly emerges as the only representative of authority who has any sense. When the police arrive in force, their leader proves to be a dope. Two FBI men, Johnson and Johnson (one of whom is black), arrive and are pompous fools. A representative of the media turns out to be a self-serving, dangerous man, whom John’s wife, Holly, finally punches in the mouth. But Al quietly endures, out on the street, in phone contact with John, remaining calm amidst the growing chaos, supporting John in his isolation, providing our point of view from the outside. The cross cutting between the two of them creates their bond and assures us that John will be saved, no matter how perilous his situation seems. Al becomes more than a black cop, and this transcendence is important, because it leaves the race issue unresolved. He becomes—after Takagi is killed—a paternal figure, John’s surrogate father. He also becomes John’s surrogate wife and mother, falling into the stereotype of the protective black mammy.

The Buddy Film
Vertigo is one of the most potent investigations of heterosexual panic undertaken in 1950s film. Hitchcock visits the problem again in Psycho, where he solves it in an especially perverse way, indicating that the male personality can be entirely absorbed by the maternal female. By the 1970s, Hollywood found other ways to deal with the crushing difficulties of men living up to the image of themselves produced by the culture. One was the buddy film, in which two men—most often cops—are paired in a loving union of support and good humor in which everything is possible but sex. Buddy movies always insist that the two male figures are heterosexual. They have wives or girlfriends. But the women are peripheral; true nonsexual love and unfettered pleasure are derived from the relationship between the men. It is a narrative construct that avoids the painful introspections of the 1950s films of male despair, skirts issues of race by having one buddy white and the other black—providing a weak pretense of racial equality—and avoids more complex investigations of male–female or same-sex relationships.

Die Hard is a great riff on the buddy film. Al and John are given a multifaceted relationship. They are father and son, mother and child; they embrace almost like lovers. Near the end of the film, most of the villains having been killed off, John emerges from the skyscraper; he and Al recognize each other through a rapturous exchange of point-of-view shots. Al, once afraid to shoot his gun, redeems his manhood by shooting the last of the bad guys. John walks away from Holly and embraces Al passionately. Holly is marginalized on the edge of the frame as the two friends express their love.

The sequence echoes one early in the film when John has his first reconciliation with Holly in Takagi’s office. Holly enters the male space where John is talking to Takagi and Ellis. There is an exchange of glances between John and Holly; they walk over to each other and embrace. In the sequence at the end of the film, the same pattern occurs, but the genders are
reversed. John and Holly meet again, but now the exchange of glances and the final embrace are between two men. The bond between the buddies is sealed. Were the film to end here, interesting questions would be raised and the line between buddies and lovers might be confused. But remember, this is a film that will not allow any statement or idea to stand without presenting its opposite. And, as postmodern as it may be, it must also, finally, conform to the master narrative of domestic, heterosexual love. Al soon yields his embrace. He tells Holly to take good care of John, and the husband and wife are sent out of the picture arm in arm. John is saved, his marriage is saved, Al is redeemed, and the love between the two men is strong and protected from a tantalizing suggestion that it might be something more. Al changes from potential lover to protective mother. The domestic, nuclear family is preserved. After all, the premise that begins the film is John’s coming to Los Angeles to see his estranged wife and save his marriage. After so many trials, he may now assume his place as the heroic head of the family. He has proved himself. But, in the process, he has made a strong male bond with Al, the kind of bond, movies keep telling us, men need to be comfortable and free; to be protected, finally, from those domestic bonds that always seem to be so difficult for men to maintain. They keep telling us. There is something so attractive and comforting about the buddy fantasy that it remains a mainstay of film and television to this day.

The End of Redemption

Scottie is not saved or protected by anyone. He wants to be the hero who saves the heroine in distress, except that the heroine is not in distress; he is. First he pursues the lie that Elster manufactures for him, then he attempts to recreate the lie by searching for a woman who never existed. In the second part of the film, Scottie discovers Judy—who was the woman who
“played” Madeleine in Gavin Elster’s hoax. Scottie forces her to remake herself as Madeleine. He denies her personality and tries to suck her into his. They return to the Spanish mission, and she falls to her death from the roof of the bell tower. There is no triumph over evil here, or even the triumph of good, because, unlike Die Hard, Vertigo does not externalize its moral structure into stereotyped characters. Everything, finally, is a manifestation of Scottie’s lack of moral center, a lack shared by the decade of the 1950s itself. Where love and friendship are offered to John McClane, Scottie is left with only his own narcissism and madness. Vertigo, like its title, is about an unbreakable, downward spiral.

There is much falling in both Die Hard and Vertigo. Hans falls from the skyscraper. John falls down an elevator shaft and swings out of a window supported only by a fire hose. But these falls solidify his heroic stature, even as he downplays it. He returns from the struggle bloodied but unharmed, saves the captives, and appears reunited with his wife. The film quietly admits it’s all too fantastic, as fantastic as Scottie’s obsessive attachment to Madeleine/Judy. But Die Hard asks us to join in the joke. Vertigo asks us to observe Scottie with pity, fear, and even tragic awe as he destroys his life. The relationship between viewer and Vertigo is as serious as Hollywood ever demands such a relationship to be. We are asked to read this film carefully, to understand its subtleties, to stay with it as it reveals to us the secrets that aren’t revealed to its central character. There are no secrets in Die Hard, only spectacle. Its internal confusions about gender, race, nationality, politics, and authority are meant to be taken only as passing jokes, as momentary bits of relevance, irreverence, and irrelevance.

We could conclude from this that the Frankfurt school and the 1950s media critics were correct, that there is an unalterable breach between high and low culture and that, at its best, Vertigo barely escapes from Dwight MacDonald’s category of Midcult and, at its worst, Die
*Hard* is irredeemably Masscult. *Vertigo* attempts to be tragedy, though, at bottom, it is a strong romantic melodrama, well constructed, dark and complex. *Die Hard* makes no such reach and comfortably accepts its Masscult status as a simple entertainment, acceptable as straightforward action film or as a sarcastic, cynical, even ironic, play on serious issues. Its refusal to take seriously any of the issues it raises only emphasizes its lack of commitment to serious intellectual inquiry.

But our reading suggests another path. By noting the different directions the films take—and recognizing that despite their different intentions, they are very serious about using film form expressively—we discover a common base. Then, analyzing their proximity to their cultural contexts and the ways, consciously or not, in which they address those contexts, we see that it is possible to understand both films as serious, imaginative statements that come out of commercial intent. We could argue that *Vertigo* is a less cynical film than *Die Hard* because it is structurally and thematically more complex and makes more demands upon the attention and the intellectual and emotional responses of the viewer. Ultimately, this is a difference in address, in the way the filmmakers and their films decide to talk to us. The address requires a difference in response, the ways in which we choose to react to the film.

This brings us back to the cultural studies position. The imagination operates in many different ways and for many different reasons, none of them completely pure or completely corrupt. The imagination of a viewer responds in different ways to different films. I find the racial and gender ambiguities of *Die Hard* extremely interesting and revealing, and the overall structure of the film irresistible in its confidence and engaging in its mixture of humor, action, and absurdity. *Vertigo* impresses me with the fine care and detail of its structure and moves me
tremendously with the depth of its insight into male vulnerability. Both films are impressive in the ways they deal, subtly but pointedly, with the culture from which they emerge.

On another level, both films, fascinating as they are in their differences and similarities, clarify the ways in which all films tell their stories, sometimes the same or strangely similar stories in various guises, various forms. Even two such different films as the ones we have analyzed here converge at sometimes unexpected points. One reason for this is that stories are a limited resource. Another is that what we seem to want our stories to tell us is limited as well; we demand convergence and repetition. We find security by having the same stories told over and over again. Even more important, all stories can be connected, and when we look beyond the old split between high and low culture, we find that we can learn, respond to, and understand films that seem, on their surface, to be as different as Bruce Willis and Jimmy Stewart.