What about the soundtrack? Packed with prints of *Die Hard* projectionists found a letter signed by the producers and the director. It included this notice:

> *Die Hard* is an action picture and it begins loud. The first two shots of Reel 1 contain the Fox Logo as well as loud airplane sounds, and it is intended to be loud. DO NOT adjust the volume level during this scene. This feature is supposed to play loud.

Die Hard's urge to galvanize its audience by the sheer force of its soundtrack was typical of the megapicture. The newly built multiplexes boasted multiple-track sound systems for both 35mm and 70mm, and these minimized surface noise and expanded the frequency range. Thunderous low tones could rumble through the theater with an immersive power that recalled Cinerama and other roadshow systems of the 1950s (p. 302). Thanks to digital reproduction, systems developed by Thomas Dolby and modified by others, the enveloping sound field available in *Star Wars* (1977) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) could be created by every movie and reproduced in small-town venues.

Sound could now be strongly directional, so that offscreen noises like footsteps or traffic gained a presence they had not had before. In a party scene, a surround track could put a buzz of chatter behind the audience. The audience was encircled by six channels, some carrying dialogue, some with music or ambient noise, one delivering super-low frequencies. Spatialized sound could be immersive, suggesting a wraparound environment or slight variations in point of view. In *Batman Forever* (1995), when the screen position of the Batmobile changed, different engine sounds were assigned to different channels. "It gives you a sense that the car is more complex by varying the sound as you move around," noted the sound editor.[10] The new technology could also be used unrealistically, as when in Gus Van Sant's *Paranoid Park* (2007) the skateboarding protagonist is haunted by voices that float around the right and left channels.

In cutting and mixing the track, sound editors added reverberation and overtones, building layers of texture out of disparate sources. For *Jurassic Park*, the Tyrannosaurus Rex's inhalations were blended from the sounds of lions, seals, and dolphins, while its exhalations came from elephants and the blow-holes of whales. To amp up horror and suspense, filmmakers began to create quite unrealistic noises—sourceless throbs, whooshes, and shrieks—that functioned somewhat as a musical score but also grabbed the audience on a visceral level. Even ordinary noises became detailed beyond

the needs of realism. Audiences heard the tiny creaks of a leather jacket, fingers rubbing a martini glass, even crumbs of tobacco catching fire in a cigarette.

It wasn't, then, only about playing loud. Even *Die Hard* modulated its sound levels and thinned its textures, cutting from whining power tools to string quartet music and highlighting a shower of broken glass. Nonetheless, part of the point of digital reproduction was sheer shock and awe. Older viewers complained, huddling in the back, but young ones sought the sweet spot, those central seats that would be blasted from all sides—what sound mixers called the "firehose" effect. If intensified continuity gave the screen the visual flutter and wow of a light show, the new sound systems made movies akin to rock concerts.

Directors: Midrange Options and Megapicture Obligations

Opportunities for New Directors   Now that the Majors, their "specialty divisions," the Mini-Majors, and the independents were turning out so many movies, fresh opportunities opened for new directors. Screenwriters could start directing, as did Barry Levinson (*Diner*, 1982; *Rain Man*), Lawrence Kasdan (*The Big Chill*, 1983; *Silverado*, 1985), and Oliver Stone. Such actors as Barbra Streisand, Robert Redford, Danny De Vito, Mel Gibson, Ron Howard, Jodie Foster, and Kevin Spacey also turned to directing, reflecting the stars' bargaining power.

The expansion of production helped marginal filmmakers gain some power in Hollywood. For almost the first time since the silent era, major films were directed by women. Amy Heckerling (*Fast Times at Ridgemont High*; *Look Who's Talking*, 1990), Martha Coolidge (*Valley Girl*, 1983), Susan Seidelman (*Desperately Seeking Susan*, 1985), Penny Marshall (*Big*, 1988; *A League of Their Own*, 1992), Katherine Bigelow (*Blue Steel*, 1990), Penelope Spheeris (*Wayne's World*, 1992), and Nora Ephron (*Sleepless in Seattle*, 1993) established careers in the "New New Hollywood." With few exceptions, however, female directors were restricted to romantic comedies and family films, while the more lucrative genres of science-fiction, action-adventure, and fantasy were reserved for men.

During the 1990s, several African American directors were creating wide-release pictures, such as John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), the Hughes brothers' *Menace II Society* (1993), and Forest Whitaker's *Waiting to Exhale* (1996). Black women became studio
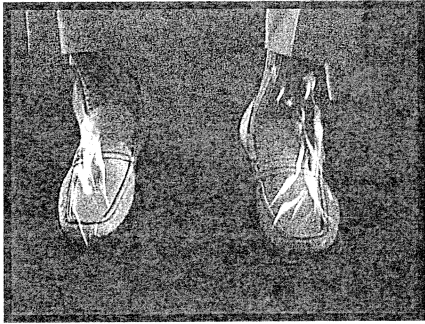
28.10 The opening hallucinatory imagery of *To Sleep with Anger* suggests the demonic world that will invade the comfortable black family's lives.

directors with *A Dry White Season* (1989, Euzhan Palcy), *I Like It Like That* (1994, Darnell Martin), and *Love & Basketball* (2000, Gina Prince-Bythewood). Charles Burnett, whose *Killer of Sheep* (1977) was a major forerunner of independent cinema, brought an off-Hollywood sensibility to his fable *To Sleep with Anger* (1990; 28.10) and his cop drama *The Glass Shield* (1990). The rapper Ice Cube built a reliable brand as both actor and producer in *Friday* (1995), *Barbershop* (2002), and *Are We There Yet?* (2005). No less entrepreneurial was playwright Tyler Perry, whose directorial debut, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005), cost only $5 million but grossed over $50 million. By speaking to the African American community's tastes and pretesting material in touring stage shows, Perry's films succeeded in initial release and on DVD. His delight in theatricality—he played his major character, Madea, in drag—was central to his appeal. Despite the success of several black-themed films, however, the biggest money still lay in genres like teen comedy. The top-grossing film by any African American director was Keenan Ivory Wayans' *Scary Movie* (2000).

Other sources of new talent lay in adjacent media. From Ridley Scott to Michael Bay, a great many A-list directors began in commercials. Brett Ratner, McG, and Tarsem Singh proved their mettle on MTV. In addition, the Majors brought in talent from overseas—mostly from English-speaking countries but also from Germany, France, Spain, and Hong Kong. After a string of commercial and critical successes in the late 2000s, the Mexicans Alfonso Cuarón, Guillermo Del Toro, and Alejandro Gonzáles Iñárritu combined forces to sign up with Universal for a multi-picture deal (p. 618).

Most of these directors made their marks with middle-range projects that allowed them to define a distinct personality. Oliver Stone is a vivid instance. Gifted with a flair for promoting both his films and himself, he pulled top stars to controversial topics: America's new business climate (*Wall Street*, 1987), the legacy of the Vietnam War (*Born on the Fourth of July*, 1988), presidential history (*JFK*, 1991; *Nixon*, 1995; *W.*, 2008), the power of the media (*Natural Born Killers*, 1994). Working the talk-show circuit, Stone made his name synonymous with passionate social-problem filmmaking. His films became flamboyant and jarring. Rapidly cut, full of jolting camera movements, they mixed color with black-and-white footage, 35mm with super 8mm, naturalistic shooting with outrageous special effects (**Color Plate 28.7**). For *Natural Born Killers*, the actors sometimes filmed scenes themselves. Yet Stone also worked pragmatically, building stadium signs to allow product placement in the football drama *Any Given Sunday* (2000). Stone's venture into tentpole territory, the European production *Alexander* (2004), failed but his return to emotion-charged social commentary in *World Trade Center* (2006) kept him in the U.S. studios' game.

Less flamboyantly political than Stone was David Fincher, who created distinctive high-end genre films, released by major companies and built around bankable stars. His debut, the franchise entry *Alien*[3] (1992), was generally viewed as a failure, so Fincher downshifted. *Se7en* (1995) was a neo-noir set in a rainy, grimy, unidentifiable city, while *Fight Club* (1999) turned a cult novel into a cult film. The serial-killer film *Zodiac* (2007) refused some of the elementary appeals of the genre, avoiding car chases and gunfights to concentrate on the glum monotony and frustration of a long investigation. Shooting on uncompressed high-definition video, Fincher gave the film a muted color palette evocative of the 1970s (**Color Plate 28.8**).

Another director working in prominent midrange pictures was Spike Lee. Race, Lee remarked, was "America's biggest problem, always has been (since we got off the boat), always will be."[11] He often addressed his films to black audiences, using "Wake up!" as a signature line to emphasize the need to take the initiative in solving African Americans' problems. *School Daze* (1988) is a drama-musical about life in a traditionally black college. *Mo' Better Blues* (1990) centers on the development of jazz as a business and a way of life, and *Jungle Fever* (1991) deals with interracial romance. *Malcolm X* (1992), a biography of the Black Muslim leader, was scaled as an event movie and required complicated historical re-creations. *Do The Right Thing* (1989), which many regard as Lee's masterpiece, offers a panoramic portrayal of racial and sexual tensions in a Harlem neighborhood in a single day. He constantly experimented with color schemes (**Color Plate 28.9**),

camerawork (distorting lenses in *Crooklyn*, 1994), and sound; the hip-hop track of *Do The Right Thing* was a major ingredient in its success.

Faced with shrinking budgets, Lee was undaunted, turning out films, TV episodes, music videos, and commercials at a brisk clip. His features alternated mainstream crime films with low-budget personal projects. Psychologically slanted urban thrillers such as *Clockers* (1995) and *Inside Man* (2006) did not put African American subject matter in the foreground, but the intimate *Girl 6* (1996) and the satire *Bamboozled* (2000) did. Over the same years, Lee became an important documentarist, with his study of a church bombing (*4 Little Girls*, 1997), his tribute to black entertainers (*The Original Kings of Comedy*, 2000), and his epic cable TV documentary on the flooding of New Orleans, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006). Lee, like Stone, Fincher, and some other major directors, managed to flourish within the studio system without signing on to megapictures.

Coming to Terms with Blockbusters   Steven Spielberg and George Lucas were the only directors to make top-ten films in each decade from the 1970s to the 2000s. Nearly all the major 1970s directors, from Woody Allen and Robert Altman to Brian De Palma and Clint Eastwood, were outstripped at the box office by newer names willing to turn out megapics. Leaving risk-taking to the independent sector, Hollywood wanted movies to be dominated by stars, special effects, and recognizable narrative conventions. Ambitious filmmakers were obliged to find inspiration in genre exercises, sequels, or remakes. Still, some directors blended distinctive personal styles with the demands of event films.

James Cameron was perfectly suited to the new demand for megapics. Beginning in special-effects jobs, he became adept at every phase of the filmmaking process, from scriptwriting to editing and sound. Science fiction and fantasy came naturally to him, as did the sort of striking, powerful ideas that succeeded in the high-concept 1980s. Above all, Cameron realized that a successful film could be built around nonstop physical action. His breakthrough, *The Terminator* (1984), displayed ingenious chases and gunplay, sketching in its time-travel premise without halting the breathless pace. *The Terminator* proved that Cameron could squeeze high quality out of a small budget while yielding catchphrase dialogue ("I'll be back," "Come with me if you want to live") and a career-making performance from robotic Arnold Schwarzenegger. *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), with even more grandiose action set-pieces, pushed computer-generated visual effects to new levels in the presentation of a liquefying Terminator (**Color Plate 28.10**). Cameron was comfortable with sequels and spinoffs, injecting adrenaline into every plot. *Aliens* (1986) gave *Alien* (1979) a military twist, emphasizing firepower and squad camaraderie. *The Abyss* (1989) inserted into a *Close Encounters* premise more thrills than Spielberg had felt necessary, and *True Lies* (1994), a tongue-in-cheek spy piece, sought to out-Bond the Bonds.

With *Titanic*, Cameron produced the ideal date movie: doomed love between a spunky heroine and a boyish hero, a long prologue featuring high-tech gadgetry, and a climax packed with action, suspense, and spectacular visual effects (**28.11**). *Titanic* was scheduled as a summer blockbuster, but production delays pushed it to December, where it gained an aura of Oscar-level prestige. Opening on nearly 2,700 screens, it played for months, sometimes increasing its audience from week to week. Although the production had cost $200 million, one of the studios backing it profited by at least $500 million. *Titanic* won audiences in all demographics, including older viewers who had given up
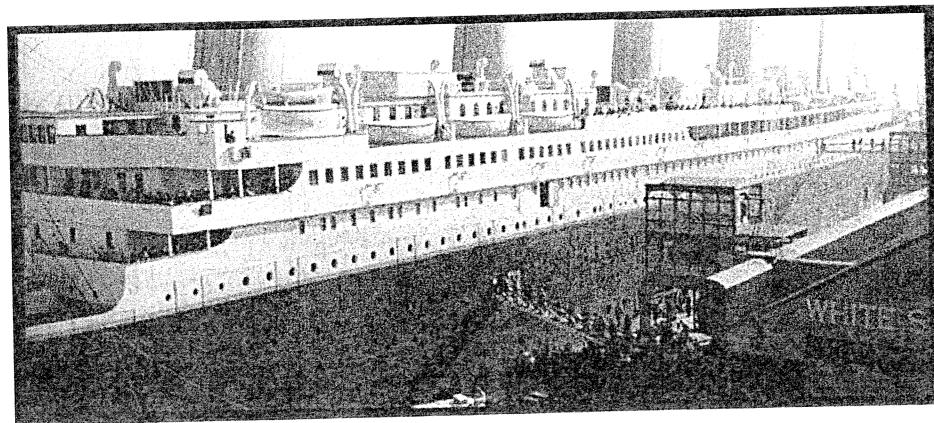
28.11 Digital special effects create the ill-fated *Titanic* at dockside.

28.12   Digital compositing inserts Forrest Gump into a Kennedy photo opportunity.

on modern movies. It reconfirmed Hollywood's faith in megapictures.

Over the next dozen years, Cameron pursued further cutting-edge technology, making a 3-D documentary for Imax as preparation for a feature, *Avatar* (2009). Cameron's faith in high-tech filmmaking was paralleled in the career of Robert Zemeckis, who mounted blockbusters that blended live action with animation (*Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, 1988; Color Plate 22.6), inserted contemporary actors into historical footage (*Forrest Gump*, **28.12**), and created 3-D warriors (*Beowulf*, 2007). Peter Jackson (the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy; *King Kong*, 2006), Andy and Larry Wachowski (the *Matrix* trilogy; *Speed Racer*), Zack Snyder (*300*), and other younger directors utilized digital technology to give action-adventure pictures a new scale and impact.

"One for them, one for me" was a slogan sometimes heard in the megapicture era. A recognized director could tackle a big-budget project, and if it was successful a more personal project could find funding. This was the strategy pursued by Steven Soderbergh, who, like Charles Burnett and Spike Lee, first found success in the independent sector (p. 677). After a string of small-scale films failed to find an audience, Soderbergh moved to the mainstream with *Out of Sight* (1998), a breezy crime caper starring George Clooney and Jennifer Lopez. This gave Soderbergh the opportunity to direct *Erin Brockovich* and *Traffic* (both 2000), both of which were garlanded with Academy Awards. Soderbergh was now a reliable commercial director, a status he cemented with *Ocean's Eleven* (2001) and its sequels. "I was in my apprenticeship for some time and I guess I'm now finally open for business."[12]

Yet Soderbergh alternated mainstream hits with offbeat projects. *Full Frontal* (2002) was a time-warping satire of the movie industry, while *Solaris* (2002) offered a somber remake of Tarkovsky's 1972 classic. *Bubble* (2005), shot entirely with nonactors on digital video, was a small-town drama that pioneered simultaneous release on film, pay-per-view, and DVD. For *The Good German* (2006), Soderbergh sought to replicate the look of 1940s film noir. Soderbergh used his position to spread the wealth. He helped with many risky projects, executive producing *Syriana* (2005), *Michael Clayton* (2007), *I'm Not There* (2007), and films directed by his sometime business partner Clooney. Acting as his own cinematographer and editor, fraternizing with the Hollywood glitterati but still eager to pursue movies with very narrow appeal, Soderbergh displayed a unique mixture of energy, business sense, and artistic ambition.

Also steering a course between big-budget and lower-priced projects was Tim Burton. Of all the Hollywood talents of the 1980s and 1990s, Burton created the most distinctive visual world. He filled familiar American landscapes with grotesque, absurdist imagery. The New England town in *Beetlejuice* (1988), a haven for yuppies and bored New York gentry, harbors a clownish but dangerous "bio-exorcist" (**28.13**). The suburbia of *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) is invaded by an awkward young monster resembling a Goth rocker. The trailer parks and Las Vegas streets of *Mars Attacks!* (1996) fall prey to ruthless, brainy aliens (**Color Plate 28.11**) who can be stopped only by the yodeling of Slim Whitman. The films' ominous playfulness was enhanced by Danny Elfman's scores.

28.13   Tim Burton makes Beetlejuice (aka Betelgeuse) a cross between a ghoul and a circus clown.

Burton started as an animator, and he never stopped seeing human beings as cartoon characters or puppets, so the rise of special-effects driven movies played directly into his talents. He was drawn to perverse exercises such as *Ed Wood* (1994), a celebration of "the world's worst director," and he wrote and produced *The Nightmare before Christmas* (1993, Henry Selick), full of astringent songs and unsettling gags (a little boy finds a python under his Christmas tree). But Burton was careful to establish himself as bankable with megapics like the top-grossing *Batman* (1989) and *Planet of the Apes* (2001).

Refusing to woo the teen audience, Michael Mann created traditional films of unusual purity: the crime pieces *Thief* (1981), *Manhunter* (1986), and *Heat* (1995); the romantic historical adventure *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992); the social-problem exposé *The Insider* (1999). Mann's brilliant cinematographer Dante Spinotti helped him cultivate a spare, cool style, turning characters' surroundings into abstract color designs (**Color Plate 28.12**). Fascinated by the group dynamics of planning a heist or investigating a cover-up, Mann became one of the most detached directors since Otto Preminger. But any tendency to coldness was modified by his daring scores (perhaps a vestige of the music montages of *Miami Vice*, the television series Mann created). The rhythmically cut climax of *Mohicans* compared a clifftop fight to a Scottish dance, while *Heat*'s eclectic sound track, ranging from Moby to the Kronos Quartet, deepened the melancholy tale

of two loners bent on self-destruction. Mann integrated his brand of stylized realism with new digital technology—mini-DV cameras for the fight scenes of *Ali* (2001), high-definition video for the neo-noirs *Collateral* (2004) and *Miami Vice* (2006). The latter two films were big-budget items released in blockbuster season, but they minimized spectacle in favor of slow-building drama. Mann showed that even in the megapicture era, traditions could be soberly and sensitively updated.

A NEW AGE OF INDEPENDENT CINEMA

Video income allowed low-budget companies such as Troma to continue turning out the sort of gross comedies and exploitation horror (*The Toxic Avenger*, 1985) that had surfaced in the 1970s. More and more, however, there emerged independent productions that behaved like upscale Hollywood films. How many people who saw *Platoon* (1986), *Dirty Dancing* (1987), *Mystic Pizza* (1988), *The Player* (1992), *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995), *Pleasantville* (1998), and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) realized that these were, in financing and distribution, independent movies? To fill all those multiplex screens, exhibitors were willing to show unusual films from distributors outside the Majors.

At the same time, some independent films pushed the boundaries of style and subject matter. *Stranger than Paradise* (1984) and *Blue Velvet* (1986) presented off-center, avant-garde visions. By the mid-1990s, "independent film" took on an outlaw aura, with *Pulp Fiction* marketed as the last word in hipness. Part of the buzz around *The Brothers McMullen* (1995), *Big Night* (1996), *The Tao of Steve* (2000), and other fairly conventional work came from the sense that they were indie movies. The Hollywood conglomerates realized that they could diversify their output and reach young audiences by teaming up with independent filmmakers in one way or another. The Majors bought independent distribution companies or created their own; they hired successful indie producers, writers, directors, and stars, sometimes for blockbusters. The twists and turns of independent U.S. cinema of the last three decades involve not only films but also institutions—notably, film festivals, professional associations, and companies involved in production and distribution. (See chronology.)