

Contemporary Hollywood Cinema

By Steve Neale and Murray Smith (eds.)

London and New York: Routledge, 1998. ISBN 0415170109. xii + 338 pp., 12 illustrations, £14.99

A review by Thomas Austin, University of Sussex, UK

For many commentators, both academic and journalistic, contemporary Hollywood's mega-budget films appear as little more than spectacular adverts for their own licensed merchandising and "toyetic applications". From this perspective, the studios seem more concerned with shifting huge quantities of lunch boxes, action figures and video games sporting the same logo as that attached to the latest loud and juvenile summer blockbuster, than with fashioning "quality" entertainment. The challenge for scholars is to achieve a more nuanced picture of the complex set of interlocking phenomena which fall under the rubric of contemporary Hollywood. Critical commonplaces about the sacrifice of substance for spectacle and the elevation of business plans above artistic ambition need to be countered with rigorous research which renders visible commercial logics and their impact upon film form, without losing sight of either the pleasures and uses which Hollywood offers its diverse audiences as a site of the imaginary, or of its continuing cultural significance and power as a system of representation.

This impressive and authoritative collection takes up the challenge. It constitutes both an important intervention in the ongoing project of exploring and understanding Hollywood, and an indispensable teaching resource. Taken together, the nineteen essays gathered here offer a multi-perspectival investigation of the "heavy industry of dreams", mapping changes and continuities in political economy and textual aesthetics from the classical era to the mid-1990s. There is some inevitable unevenness in quality, but in general the book is superior to its nearest competitor, Duke University Press' *The New American Cinema* (ed. Jon Lewis). It spans both formal analyses, such as feminist readings of the *Terminator* films and *Fargo*, and contextual examinations of the majors' economic procedures since their consolidation into tightly diversified transnational entertainment conglomerates selling film brands across multi-media product lines. The anthology originated in the conference, "Hollywood Since the Fifties", held at the University of Kent in 1995. Its chapters are arranged in four parts: Hollywood historiography; Economics, industry and institutions; Aesthetics and technology; and Audience, address and ideology -- although several of the best contributions defy this compartmentalisation.

One of the key questions facing a book such as this is the relationship between the old and the new -- between classical Hollywood of the studio era and the present landscape, where, in Martin Dale's phrase, "feature films provide the key to [a] magic kingdom" of television spin-offs, Darth Maul rucksacks, soundtracks, books, and theme parks. What are the salient industrial and formal changes which have taken place over the past five decades, and how do they interrelate? What are the significant differences between then and now -- and what continuities can be traced across these moments? In the opening chapter, Murray Smith assesses a number of explanatory paradigms which propose either absolute breaks or degrees

of continuity. He points out disagreements about the timing of the end of the classical era, and in the process highlights some similarities between critical characterisations of "new" Hollywood as far back as the 1950s and laments about post-*Star Wars* output. Diagnoses of a crisis in storytelling, and the emergence of an "inauthentic", self-conscious and baroque cinema have occurred with increasing frequency across these periods. Smith then examines claims that Hollywood entered a "post-Fordist" stage of flexible specialisation and vertical disintegration after the enforced divestment of the majors' theatre chains. He concludes that "the US film industry is an example not of post-Fordism but of industrial dualism, in which independent production companies act as shock absorbers and research arms ("pilot fish") for the majors" (9). The increasingly hit-driven nature of the indie sector and the studios' interest in acquiring "independent" product through "partnerships" and finance and distribution deals is plotted in subsequent chapters by James Schamus, co-founder of Good Machine, and Justin Wyatt on the "major-independents" Miramax and New Line.

The continuity of the Hollywood system into the post-divorcement decades is addressed somewhat indirectly in Elizabeth Cowie's chapter. Her assessment of narrative and textual assembly in classical Hollywood offers a potentially significant corrective to accounts which overplay historical difference, even if these implications remain underdeveloped. Cowie mobilises a persuasive, if by now familiar, critique of Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's blockbusting work *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*. Of course, that book makes its own argument for "the persistence of a mode of film practice" by stressing the dominance of a formal classicism. But Cowie's thesis centres on "unhooking classical narrative and Hollywood as equivalent" (178). She complicates *CHC*'s proposition that profit maximisation was best served by the primacy of the well-made story, and suggests that stars, genre attractions, spectacle and special effects were not always subordinated to, or supportive of, story-telling in the "cinema of narrative integration": "the story is part of the package, but the studios wanted multiple guarantees" (182). In other words, films were assembled as composite goods even in the classical era. This reconceptualisation of old Hollywood raises interesting points of comparison with the "modular aesthetic" which Justin Wyatt has located in contemporary Hollywood film, even if they remain tacit here.

Cowie's account is reminiscent of the model of Hollywood film as "an assembly of component parts" expounded in Richard Maltby's book *Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction*. There, he suggests that Hollywood's "commercial aesthetic is too opportunistic to prize coherence, organic unity or even the absence of contradiction among its primary virtues" (35). For Maltby, this aesthetic provides a continuity between classical and later Hollywood - the difference between the two is thus one of intensification rather than an absolute break. In his chapter here, Maltby makes the point that contemporary Hollywood's "increasingly commodified" films cannot be analysed as discrete texts detached from their intertextual settings. The extension of the "entertainment experience" via the dispersibility of textual components across multiple associated products is privileged over and above narrative coherence. This poses a problem for orthodox textual analysis: "the phenomena of multiple formats, repeat viewings and modularity question the centrality of narrative and the concept of a "univocal reading" solicited by the classical film [...] an alternative account should not eliminate questions of form, but will place them differently, constructing them in terms of [the] commercial aesthetic" (27).

Instances of the contextualised formal analysis for which Maltby calls are provided by K.J. Donnelly's investigation of the use of music in the first two Batman films, and Warren Buckland's chapter on *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The latter is a welcome attempt to counter the

neglect of Hollywood blockbusters' formal structuring by academics who either shun these films entirely or characterise them as narratively inept. Drawing on David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's work in "historical poetics", Buckland examines the compositional norms available to filmmakers in early 1980s Hollywood, and the particular choices made from these norms in Spielberg's *Raiders*. He locates formal devices derived from television aesthetics, comic books and B-movie adventures and serials. Focusing in particular on narrative and narration, Buckland explores the pleasurable production of suspense, surprise and emotional engagement throughout the film, including Spielberg's construction of an off-screen presence -- a device employed repeatedly from *Jaws* to *Saving Private Ryan*. Buckland's careful analysis brackets off for the time being the thematic concerns which take precedence over formal structures in more interpretative film studies. As he observes, a next step would be to incorporate questions of theme and representation into this impressive formalist study.

Plenty of affirmative narratives were produced under the classical system, but, as Maltby notes, highly selective critical canons have tended to elevate "transgressive" films of that period -- a move which emphasises the apparent conservatism of films of the last two decades. This book, however, offers relatively few instances of the trenchant political critique found in, say, Michael Rogin's BFI Modern Classic on *Independence Day*. Ideological concerns take centre stage in survey chapters by Pam Cook, on feminist approaches to "women's pictures" in new and old Hollywood, and Tommy L. Lott, on critical responses to independent black cinema and its relations with mainstream Hollywood -- from opposition to accommodation to co-optation. Other contributors, who focus on fewer films in more depth, are often more concerned with situating them according to institutional contexts and / or rescuing them from the assaults of the likes of Robin Wood and Andrew Britton.

Just such a defence is offered by Peter Kramer. In a considered account of the often lamented "juvenilisation" of Hollywood's audience, he traces the confluence of two production trends, the children's / family film and the action adventure film, into what he terms the "family-adventure movie". This cycle combines spectacular special effects with sentimental and emotionally charged investigations of familial relationships, and includes such huge box office hits as *E.T.*, *Jurassic Park*, *Forrest Gump*, *Star Wars*, and *The Lion King*. Drawing productively on a mix of personal experience (cinemagoing pleasures and memories), discussions with students, industry data, and close attention to textual structures, Kramer assembles a persuasive account of the "cultural and social work" of these films. He shows how they enact on screen a reaffirmation of emotional bonds and family unity which is by implication mirrored among their target audiences of parents and children, who experience together the thrill of adventure and the reconciliation of their filmic surrogates. Kramer also takes the opportunity to respond to Wood's ideological critique of the "dominant tendencies" of 1980s Hollywood -- the construction of the (male) spectator as a "childish adult" invited to evade responsibility, enjoy mindless pleasures, and applaud the assertion of patriarchal values through the "Restoration of the Father". According to Kramer, far from offering an easy regression to childish fantasy, these films provoke adults to reflect upon their status *as* adults, and their memories of childhood and relations with parents. Both children and adults are confronted with self-reflexive narratives of separation and loss, of the lure and dangers of wish fulfilment, and of the need to accept responsibility and -- like Elliot, Simba, and Luke Skywalker -- to face up to "reality" by becoming re-integrated into both the family and the wider community. While this kind of (male) maturation narrative can clearly be read as an Oedipal trajectory, Kramer robustly counters the "deterministic" view of gender's influence on audience response which underpins psychoanalytically grounded critiques such as Wood's.

Kramer argues that *E.T.*, for instance, is enjoyed by females as much as males, and that the film works not so much to privilege surrogate father-son pairings as to "feminise" both Elliot and male audience members by opening them up to emotional expressivity. However, he seems slightly too keen to discount the relevance of gender here. Granted, gender is not always the prime determinant in audience response, and any influence it may have needs to be proven through careful argument rather than being taken for granted. I also take the point that Elliot does in some ways stand for childhood in general. Nevertheless, it is surely the case that the film is indeed also "a symptom of a male-oriented culture unwilling to grant heroic status to women" (Sue Zschoche as paraphrased at 299). Why does any cross-gender investment required in these films almost always run from female spectator to male character? Does reversing this process cause problems? For example, it would be worth pursuing the reasons for the relative failure of Warner Bros' *The Magic Sword*, which replicates the narrative template of a protagonist's wish for adventure fulfilled at the cost of bereavement, but centres on a female. Is there a reluctance among male children to watch the adventures of a "mere girl", or was the film's poor performance due instead to Warner's lack of expertise and public profile in animated features?

This excellent collection does not present itself as a comprehensive survey. I will, however, briefly highlight three areas which are worthy of more attention. Firstly, the role of stars in recent Hollywood remains relatively underexamined. What do we know about developments in star contracts since the 1950s; what are the differences and similarities between current multimedia stars such as Will Smith and earlier examples such as Frank Sinatra, Doris Day or Elvis Presley; how are deals negotiated for stars to appear as "voice only" in animated films such as *Aladdin* and *Antz*, with consequently no claim over licensing royalties for character-based merchandising? Secondly, the book could have paid closer attention to special effects, by supplementing Michael Allen's useful overview of technological developments with a more detailed film-centred analysis of technology, special effects and their relationship with narrative. Finally, there is a notable absence of any substantive audience studies here. Research into patterns of audience response to and use of Hollywood film is by now a significant (if still rather slow to develop) critical tradition in film studies, some examples of which have recently appeared in two collections published by the BFI.

Contemporary Spanish Cinema

By Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas

Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998. ISBN 0719044138. viii + 216pp. 28 illustrations. £9.99 (pbk)

A review by Sarah Jones, Anglia Polytechnic University, UK

The apparently straightforward title chosen for this book belies a complex and ambitious project which states a clear aim to update and complement studies already undertaken by a number of writers (e.g. Kinder, Hopewell, Besas, Higginbotham) on the historical development of Spain's national film industry. Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas focus their analysis firmly on the post-Franco period of transition and democracy, and trace developments both on and off-screen during those twenty years from 1975. Although not the main intention, what stands out most clearly from this study is the way in which a national film industry and the products of its filmmakers are inextricably linked to the political, social, economic and artistic developments of the country concerned. The writers succeed in exploring this general contextual theme through a well-informed and balanced discussion of a vast range of films and filmmakers themselves. "Meaning and representation need to be considered in relation to the specific conditions of production and consumption pertaining to particular historic moments." (10)

The binding thread of the book is an exploration of the representation of individual, social and cultural identities by both established Spanish filmmakers such as Saura, Erice, Almodovar and Bigas Luna, and rising stars of a new generation such as Medem, de la Iglesia and Bollain. Frank acknowledgement is given of the problematic nature of this task, and the writers are clear that it is impossible to speak of either a single national identity or a uniform national cinema in Spain. Instead, they embrace the heterogeneity of both identity and cinema, and link these to the decentralising tendency of the nation over the last two decades, and the gradual but determined move away from a traditional, hegemonic, centralist Spanish/Castilian culture.

This important discussion is achieved through the division of the issues into four main chapters: firstly, the writers afford themselves the opportunity to glance back in time through an account of the apparent obsession of Spanish filmmakers with the past. The second chapter looks at the breadth and diversity of the popular genre film in Spain during this period, and in particular the use of the comedy, thriller and musical as a means of communicating with the home crowd, drawing on the popularity of these genres within other art forms such as literature and music hall theatre. The discussion then moves to broadly address the various representations of gender and sexuality on screen, the subject itself of a number of previous studies (e.g. by Smith and Evans). Space is given here to an account of the development of the careers of women filmmakers of the 1990s whose popular and critical success is only starting to be fully acknowledged nationally, let alone internationally. Finally, a chapter is fittingly devoted to the main regional cinemas of Spain, significantly those of

Catalonia and the Basque Country. It is thus striking that the very structure of this work emphasises underlying political concerns of the country as a whole, not only its film industry.

The book is written in a clear, informative manner which renders it accessible for the broad readership it sets as its target, i.e. teachers, students and fans of Spanish cinema. As well as offering invaluable context surrounding the production and release of Spanish films generally, it covers an enormous range of titles and filmmakers, carefully selecting within each chapter those which best fit the topic under discussion. The result is that many directors and their work are mentioned several times in what the writers term a "multi-pronged" treatment. For example, the unique work of Bigas Luna is mentioned in the introduction, and is discussed in further detail in chapter two (generally, as an example of "bizarre comedy"), in chapter three (*Jamon Jamon* as an example of an original representation of male sexuality), and in chapter four (Catalan cinema through *La Teta y La Luna*). Similarly, established director Victor Erice, whose work spans pre and post-Franco decades, is discussed in chapter one (*El Sur* as literary adaptation and representation of the past), in chapter three (sexual repression through the eyes of a child protagonist in *El Espirit de la Colmena*), and in chapter four as an acknowledgement of the way in which Erice's work in general covers a range of issues related to Spanish identity. These references are all helpfully detailed in the index according both to film title and director. Hence the book is issue-led but with a clear and helpful emphasis on how the filmmakers explore those issues through their work, and offers the chance for a strategy of compare and contrast which in turn enables the reader to fit together pieces of the complex jigsaw which makes up a national film industry. As such, it certainly goes "beyond a chronological survey or overview" (13) deftly integrating close textual analysis with broad themes, and carefully linking films, directors and issues. Essential reading for all those interested in Spanish cinema in particular, as well as providing a useful framework for further work on national cinemas.

French National Cinema

By Susan Hayward

London and New York: Routledge, 1993. ISBN 0415057280/0415057299. xiii + 325pp. 34 Illustrations. £45.00 (hbk); £14.99 (pbk)

A review by Sachiko Shikoda, University of Nottingham, UK

Hayward argues that existing work on French National Cinema has tended to dwell on "great" filmmakers or on specific movements such as Impressionism or Poetic Realism. In other words, these books often discuss "exceptional moments" in film history at the expense of the "global picture". In contrast, Hayward gives an account of French National Cinema which not only discusses the familiar directors and movements, but also places them within the context of various movements and directors that historically have been marginalised. In the process, she also locates them in their political, social, and cultural contexts. Drawing on cultural studies and film history as conceptual frameworks, she analyses cinema as "a national cultural institution". To put it another way, she examines the ways in which cinema "articulates" the nation's myth and explores traditions and cultural values with cinema. Furthermore, instead of simply associating French National Cinema with the "avant-garde" or art-cinema as is the case in many studies, she discusses a range of cinematic forms including the popular traditions of French filmmaking.

In her introduction, "national cinema" is defined as a problematic concept. She makes her point that "national cinema" is a "historically fluctuating concept". By this remark she means that "just as a nation's specificity changes according to political, social and economic pressures and mutations ... a nation's cinema will change according to a nation's ideology" (302). With a view to illustrating this point, she firstly provides a brief ecohistory of France's cinema industry from 1895 to 1992. The rest of the book is divided further into three periods; the Classical Age 1895-1929; the Age of Modernism 1930-1958; and the Age of Post-modernism 1958-1991. Each chapter consists of a chronicle of the political, social and economic events and accounts of various cinemas and movements. This book can be encompassing in that it covers a long period of time as well as a wide range of topics. Nevertheless, illustrating the relationship between the French State and culture in this way serves to keep her argument focussed through the book.

As mentioned earlier, Hayward remarks that some works on French National Cinema "suffer from a somewhat narrow focus (of their concerns) and inconsistencies of the approaches by the writers" (xi). Thus "almost invariably their representations (of French National Cinema) have been the province of high art rather than popular culture" (xi). In contrast, Hayward highlights popular genres such as comedy and crime films. Against "the conventional image of French cinema" which is "centred on dramatic trends such as Poetic Realism and auteur cinema" (Ginnette Vincendeau, *Companion to French Cinema*), it must be recalled that these genre films have been significant in their high consumption rates within the domestic market. Hayward frequently gives inspiring insights on these two genres. For instance, she not only identifies the characteristic features of French film comedy; its predominant maleness and its

taste for mocking social and regional types, but she also locates this very domestic genre within the international context. It is pointed out that comedy is the most specifically French genre, yet this particular genre was "openly admired and readily imitated by the United States" (91), and thus "of all genres, then, comedy was the one that had the most visible cross-fertilisation effect" (91). Also she expands her interpretation of the conservative aspect of comedy. In its process of stereotyping characters, she claims, comedy has a deep-rooted propensity for targeting the "otherness" of things. Therefore, for example, one could observe a "nervous racism and nationalism bent on the exclusion of the other" in the forms of "Jewish or Black" in André Hugon's comic series *Lévy et cie* and the comedian Martin in Mathot's *Bouboule Ier roi des nègres* (153). With all these virtues, one cannot say that Hayward has covered the whole generations of filmmakers and films in this popular genre entirely. It is only very briefly that the phenomenon of the cafe theatre as an alternative form of comedy in the 1970s is mentioned. Also she still appears to be concerned with more familiar auteurs such as Max Linder, Louis Feuillade, and Jacques Tati.

Yet the book's chronological and topical comprehensiveness/broadness permits Hayward to outline how another one of the popular genres, the crime film, has been "cross-fertilised". In the polars of the 1960s and 1970s, for example, the narrative and the visual style are said to display the influence of the contemporary American cinema (275). On the narrative level, the plot tends to centre on the criminal couple at the expense of the preceding themes such as proto-father/son relationship. The use of American fetish objects such as ostentatious cars and yachts are favoured visual motifs. In this way, Hayward again elicits aspects of this popular domestic genre as an international text. Located within the social and political contexts, the discourse on *la chose americaine* can be read to reflect revealingly the ambivalence felt by France "moving into the age of consumerism at the same time as it was experiencing a period of ideological and political confusion" (275).

Indeed, Hayward's intention to create a balanced work is demonstrated within her discussion of avant-garde/art cinema as well, in which the significance of works by female filmmakers of the post-feminist period is highlighted. The remarks by key figures of the field such as Serreau and Diane Kurys are quoted to show their resistance to the collective label "woman director" because of its reductive connotations. Then she carefully examines films such as Breillat's *36 fillette* (1989), Bellon's *L'Amour viole* (1977), and Dever's *Noir et blanc* (1986) to identify distinctive traits held in common among these works: narrative concern with the representation of female subjectivity from the female point of view, and the use of long takes that allow "characters time and space to establish themselves as subjects" (260). Carefully avoiding locating herself within conventional generalisation, she maintains a perpetuation of the representation of female subjectivity in French cinema which, she claims, was firstly seen in Dulac's cinema as early as the 1920s.

It may be felt that there are still more points to be developed at greater length. Hayward acknowledges that lack of space does not permit her to discuss subjects such as documentaries, short films, cartoons, and children's films. At the same time one might be almost overwhelmed by the variety of periods and topics covered. Yet when one remembers the initial goal of the author, this both factual and analytical book would certainly offer the reader an encompassing and informative introduction to a "global picture" of French cinema and to the issues surrounding the complex subject of the "national" in France's cinema. Employing both historical approaches and a conceptual framework this enjoyable book manifests "what (and how) the different cinemas of this nation have been saying about themselves and their nation over the last hundred years" (xi-xii).

The Naked Lens: An Illustrated History of Beat Cinema

By Jack Sargeant

London: Creation Books, 1997. ISBN 1-871592-29-1. 250 pp. 81 illustrations. £12.95 (pbk)

A review by Oliver Harris, University of Keele, UK

Beat studies has always been haunted by the tormenting problematic of ontology - of how to define and ground its subject - and as the field has grown over the last decade so has the critical need to embrace rather than wish away this inexorable revenant. Sargeant's book is a significant contribution to the Beat field that begins by giving the welcome impression of knowing its place, and that goes on to acknowledge the provisional nature of its pioneering intersection of Beat culture with underground film. When he stakes his aim as being "to attempt a cognitive mapping of this previously neglected area of cinema" (8), Sargeant puts the accent firmly on "attempt".

While covering your bets does not amount to a methodology, on balance Sargeant succeeds because the heterogeneity of his collection of essays and interviews responds to the "homogeneous hegemony" of postwar American society in keeping with the dissenting spirit of both the Beats and underground filmmaking (5). Variety and anomaly are strengths here; the weaknesses lie elsewhere.

He begins with Robert Frank and Arthur Leslie's quasi-vérité film, *Pull My Daisy* (1959), featuring major Beat writers Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Gregory Corso. He follows a lengthy description of its diegesis and mise-en-scene by even longer interviews with Frank and Leslie; while the latter are clear bids for offering valuable primary materials, they tend to fetishise biographical trivia rather than serve analysis or argument. This tendency is indicative of a wider problem. On the one hand, Sargeant's approach allows little time for engaging with the limited but established critical work on Underground Film, dating back thirty years to Parker Tyler's book of that title. There is an interesting case to be made for relating Beat writing practices and publication histories to how underground filmmakers contested the norms of industrial shooting, financing, production, exhibition, and professionalism in general - but Sargeant only gestures towards it. On the other hand, he has to wear his learning lightly in view of the likely compact between his book's anti-academic subjects and its semi-academic target audience: when he mentions queer theory to Ginsberg, it is derided as so much "intellectual blah" (158), and you sense the paradox of Sargeant's position.

After *Pull My Daisy* comes John Cassavetes' *Shadows*, a natural pairing since the films were immediately recognised as marking a turning point in the history of American underground cinema. Sargeant then moves on through a range of actors and filmmakers associated with New York Underground Film: Ron Rice, Taylor Mead, Jack and Harry Smith, and the seminal figure of Jonas Mekas. All of this is very interesting, and the work of Harry Smith, alchemist of experimental cinema, certainly merits serious attention. At the same time, it is

hard to see what is gained by insisting that much of Smith's work "can clearly be viewed as Beat" (98). Or to put it another way: if Harry Smith, why not Kenneth Anger? Or, since many of the selected figures worked in the orbit of The Factory, why not Andy Warhol? Or again, if Mekas is central because of his diaristic "personal cinema," why should Stan Brakhage be relegated to a footnote? At a certain point, Sargeant's resistance to an imposed "teleology" looks like an arbitrary licence, and his remit to include authors "who share only the belief in expressing their personal vision/s" (8) turns into a refusal to engage with creative and critical history. Sargeant might have avoided giving this impression by framing his montage of parts within a larger discursive structure; as a critical method, the mode of selection and juxtaposition can pose demanding questions, but only if it is underwritten by a certain authority. *The Naked Lunch* is a case in point.

This brings us to Part Two, devoted, for well-argued reasons, to William Burroughs. His participation in experimental film collaborations during the 1960s is given insightful coverage, and Sargeant clearly knows his Burroughs. But again there are revealing problems. Earlier on, he set an agenda by asking tough questions about the representation of women in *Pull My Daisy*; no such questions are asked of Burroughs. But the most significant failure concerns his treatment of David Cronenberg's version of *The Naked Lunch* (1991). This production ought to raise all sorts of interesting and important issues, about the naturalisation of Burroughs and about Hollywood's recuperation of the avant-garde. Since Cronenberg's lamentable movie has certainly been watched by more people than all of the other films cited by Sargeant put together, it is astonishing that he should close his book with so brief and so slight a chapter. As a note to end on, this is sadly downbeat.

The New American Cinema

By Jon Lewis (ed.)

Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1998. ISBN 0-8223-2115-7. 406 pp., 45 illustrations. £13.50

A review by Martin Flanagan, University of Sheffield, UK

Upon receipt of this book, my heart sank a little. This reaction was precipitated by the first cover graphic to which my attention was drawn: the hackneyed image of the besuited protagonists of *Reservoir Dogs* sauntering down the street in best Rat Pack mode. My concern that the book would share with recent popular film criticism the tendency to recalibrate American film history to BT and AT (Before Tarantino and After Tarantino) was to prove unfounded, however; the book's scope is wider than the predictable usage of cover images from *Reservoir Dogs* and *Taxi Driver* might suggest.

This is not to say that pulling together a loose collection of "different critical and historical perspectives" (2) under the umbrella concept of "New American Cinema" is not without its dangers; these terminological risks are anticipated by Jon Lewis in his introduction, where he concedes that the development of a coherent argument across the thirteen essays is precluded by "the entirety, the enormity of the subject at hand" (2). This statement is borne out by the volume, which in striving to address the nature and function of American film across a period stretching roughly from the hoped-for new wave announced by John Cassavetes' *Shadows* (1959) to the uneasy art house/multiplex consensus of the mid-nineties, demonstrates the impossibility (and ultimate undesirability) of assembling a coherent narrative of American cinema. The problem is not, of course, merely a temporal one. As Lewis' own contribution, "Money Matters: Hollywood in the Corporate Era" instructs us, changes in the economic circumstances and business culture surrounding movie production have the greatest impact on changing narrative styles and viewing trends. Indeed, the broadening portfolios and encroachment into ancillary markets by major production entities has brought about a situation whereby, as in 1980, the threat of a Screen Actors Guild strike can be defied because the studios can continue to record profit without having new films to release, so diversified have their interests become (101).

Despite Lewis' protests, some kind of narrative arc does emerge between the two polar essays that bookend the collection. The volume takes off from the fairly predictable moment of the transition of the *politique des auteurs* to Hollywood in the work of the "Movie Brat" generation (Scorsese, Coppola, Lucas, Schrader et al). David A. Cook's piece is intended as an overview, a provider of context for the following discussion, and as such can be forgiven for a lack of analytical insight also apparent in Chuck Kleinhan's "Independent Features: Hopes and Dreams", an essay that serves the same sort of historical, informative function much later in the book. Although there are many interesting detours along the way, it seems intentional that the book progresses in this fashion, developing from the concept of director as "author", stamping his or her personality on the film and asserting artistic control in the face of commercial values, to the final essay, Catherine Russell's piece on the "Ethnographic" avant-garde films of Peggy Ahwesh, Su Friedrich and Leslie Thornton, which celebrates

filmmakers who efface themselves as authoring personalities, question the issue of narrative control, and even disrupt the consensus of sound and image.

Lewis' decision to group the essays according to common thematics - producing three sections, "Movies and Money", "Cinema and Culture" and "Independents and Independence" - is understandable from an editorial point of view, and undoubtedly solves some of the problems of coherence arising from such an internally diverse package. The book is easier to use in this way, but the structure reflects a sense of missed opportunity present in some of the essays, the nagging feeling that more productive work could have been done on the grey areas in between these territories. For instance, Christopher Sharrett's account of the political half-truths and historical facts underlying the conspiracy premise of Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) is very thorough, but neglects to answer the most interesting question that it proposes: if the media, representing the vested interests of U.S. capital, was so compliant in the cover-up partially exposed by Jim Garrison, how do we explain the willingness of a multinational corporation like Warner Brothers to financially support and distribute such a politically sensitive film? Here, the intersection of commerce, ideology and art hints at a tantalising possibility that is sadly left undeveloped.

Lewis' own paper is arguably the most successful in the opening section, even though his analysis is more geared towards the prevailing business conditions of Hollywood than its artistic strategies. Power relations also inform the essays in the "Culture" section, although here the emphasis shifts from economics to gender and ideology. Tania Modleski decodes the gender relations of an important subgenre, the Vietnam film, unearthing in Nancy Savoca's *Dogfight* (1991) a film that breaks new ground in examining the war experience from a female perspective. Vietnam is also the backdrop for Fred Pfeil's "From Pillar to Postmodern: Race, Class and Gender in the Male Rampage Film", an essay that treats modern action films, often discounted as politically neutral or simplistically classified as reactionary, with the serious approach that their complexities demand. Another fascinating subgenre is deciphered in Sabrina Barton's confidently argued examination of the "woman's psychothriller". Barton firmly reinstates the spectator in the network of relations surrounding texts such as *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), as in his own way does Scott Bukatman in his excellent evocation of how new technologies and marketing techniques help science fiction movies to envelop the viewer and saturate every aspect of modern life ("Zooming Out: The End of Offscreen Space").

Ivone Margulies' work on John Cassavetes deals with a range of cinematic gesture that is as far as can be from that evoked by Bukatman, as is surely intended by Lewis in their contiguity. However, the inclusion of Ed Guerrero's insightful piece on the black film wave in the "Independents and Independence" section highlights the overly schematic nature of the book's structure. The essay, dealing with the collusion of Hollywood in the industrial marginalisation of black features and talent, speaks about money, culture, and the terms of independence equally, and as such could have been put in either of the two other sections. While it is possible to take issue with Lewis over the organisation of the book, the value and quality of the essays contained within it is incontestable.

Postmodern After-Images: A Reader in Film, Television and Video

By Peter Brooker and Will Brooker (eds.)

London: Arnold, 1997. ISBN 0340676914. x + 294pp. £14.99 (pbk)

A review by Kirsty Fairclough, University of Salford, UK

The last decade has seen an increasing number of titles emerging on the subject of postmodernism. It seems most of the work based on postmodern cinema and television is concerned with similar texts, for instance, *Blade Runner*, *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks* are recurring examples.

Postmodern After-Images offers a refreshing perspective and combines both "classic" statements on postmodernism by well known academics such as Jameson, Baudrillard and Kaplan, with new perspectives on gender, youth and ethnicity. It explores representations of the postmodern within film, television and video from the renowned work on the aforementioned examples to *Pulp Fiction*, *Beavis and Butthead* and the Gulf War.

It is unusual and valuable in its combination of film, television and video, whereas most texts of this type are restricted to the former two areas. The editors make much of the unique nature of their composition, suggesting that the study of the media is derived from two traditions, the first of which has drawn upon theories of discourse, ideology, and psychoanalysis and the second of which is much more concerned with institutions and political economy. In the light of this, the reader aims to contradict this division by including diverse aspects of film, television and video.

This collection attempts to convey a sense of transition by combining well-known essays such as Jameson's work on nostalgia film including "The Nostalgia Mode" amongst others, and newer essays which reflect the changing cultural agendas and shifting areas of attention. The editors point out that these classic works cannot wholly represent the postmodern condition and are used as reference points from which the new perspectives take their focus. The debate is constantly shifting and is represented here by identifying the changing structures of feeling of certain generational groups in essays by Vivian Sobchack, Kobena Mercer, Patricia Mellencamp and Prahtiba Parmar.

The substantial introduction to the reader is informative and engaging, if somewhat complex. This is not an introductory reader to the debates surrounding postmodernism. It requires the student to possess some knowledge of existing theories. The collection aims to convey a sense of passage beyond the postmodern and suggests that new perspectives are created out of a dialogue with the postmodern and also have a continuing dialogue with the modern. In the light of this perspective, we are offered a number of key questions: Whose experience does postmodernism describe? Who are the "we" referred to in the postmodern debate? And finally: What does the contemporary mean in terms of the postmodern or post-post modern condition?

Initially, there is some introduction to the conflicting and contradictory terms within the postmodern debate, which is helpful in distinguishing between cultural texts and social histories. This is followed by an introduction to the cinema section. This section is separated into two areas: Nostalgia and the Unknown and Styles of Pluralism. The first addresses the postmodern theme of a loss of historicity. Jameson's "The Nostalgia Mode" is a reference point from which Linda Hutcheon's "Postmodern Film?" and Barbara Creed's "From Here to Modernity" take issue with the implications of Jameson's work in terms of the idea of cinematic history that his seminal essay explains.

Styles of Pluralism consists of new perspectives on postmodern film such as Will Brooker's enlightening essay on *Star Wars* and Vivian Sobchack's "Postmodern Modes of Ethnicity" which explores the representation and cultural meanings of ethnicity in films such as Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger Than Paradise* and Norman Jewison's *Moonstruck*. The focus here is upon the different ways of reading the postmodern within a range of cultural texts, by gender or generation for instance.

Television: Hyperreality and Hybrid Selves contrasts some of the most significant statements surrounding television and postmodernism such as McLuhan's "The Medium is the Message" and Baudrillard's "The Reality Gulf", with new ideas about the medium such as Douglas Kellner's work on *Beavis and Butthead*. Kellner takes issue with the programme's alleged influence on American teenagers and offers the argument that the lifestyles of the characters accurately reflect the experiences of a generation.

Video: Commerce and Collage, a much smaller section considers both commercial video such as MTV through to Pratibha Parmar's experimental video films and looks towards video for the articulation of gender, sexuality and ethnicity. Patricia Mellencamp's analysis of Cecilia Condit's work, in particular, presents a fascinating and concrete example of the "transgression of binary codes which position women as enunciated other" and celebrates a remaking of Oedipal and Lacanian grand narratives.

There is a diverse range of essays here, which collectively offer a sense of transition and shifting cultural agendas. The combination of the popular and the avant-garde is both appropriate and well balanced. The work on youth, gender and ethnicity is especially welcome and confidently addresses the initial questions presented. This is a major contribution to the debate and is an interesting and engaging book for students of film, media and cultural studies alike.

Overall, *Postmodern After-Images* presents a thought-provoking and refreshingly different contribution to the postmodern debate and certainly offers a sense of what is to come within the dynamic aspect of cultural debate that is postmodernism.

Reception Histories: Rhetoric, Pragmatism, and American Cultural Politics

By Steven Mailloux

Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998. ISBN 0-8014-8506-1. xv + 206pp. £15.95

A review by Mark Bould, Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College, UK

Reception Histories expands upon a critical perspective Mailloux calls "rhetorical hermeneutics" and describes as "us[ing] rhetoric to practice theory by doing history" (ix). To achieve this he offers a series of reception histories--that is, "detailed rhetorical accounts of interpretations performed at specific times and places" (ix)--which engage with debates in post-structuralist theory, 19th Century American literature, and the ongoing Culture Wars in American universities.

Traditionally, hermeneutics and rhetoric have been regarded as distinct practices, one being concerned with interpretation and establishing meaning, the other with the sly construction of suasive language. Beginning with Plato's false etymology of "Hermes", which joins "this god of interpretation and language" with the role of "a contriver, a liar, a trickster not to be trusted" (3), Mailloux argues that because interpretation and language-use are inseparable, so too are hermeneutics and rhetoric. In Chapter One, these intertwined processes provide a venue for considering "understanding as articulation", with a focus on debates in the human sciences about ethnocentrism, cultural incommensurability, and interpretive relativism. Chapter Two concerns the role and meaning of Protagoras's man-as-measure dictum in the pragmatist tradition of James, Dewey, and Schiller, and in the neopragmatist theories of Rorty and Fish. Chapter Three "explains how rhetorical hermeneutics is simultaneously a rhetorical version of neopragmatism when applied to problems in interpretive theory and a rhetorical version of cultural studies when doing reception histories of specific interpretive acts within particular cultural conversations" (x). Moreover, it explores interpretation as translation rather than exposition, offering several interpretation-translations of an Emily Dickinson poem and a passage in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. These examples demonstrate that rhetorical hermeneutics is both "a form of cultural rhetorical studies that takes as its topic specific historical acts of interpretation within their cultural contexts" (56), and rather more complicated than it sounds.

The complexities and value of rhetorical hermeneutics are revealed in Part Two's reception histories which move away from explicit theorising so as to explore aspects of mid-19th Century New England culture and late-20th Century literary criticism by examining the reception contexts of several texts and acts of interpretation. Chapter Four considers Fuller's 1845 review of *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Mailloux utilises Douglass's own readings of slave narratives and slave songs to articulate the heterogeneity and multiplicity of reading positions; for example, as an escaped slave and outspoken abolitionist, Douglass combined insider and outsider perspectives on the meaning

of slave songs, but to assume his interpretation is "more accurate" because of his ex-insider status denies him the role of rhetor. In reading readings, therefore, it is imperative to ask who is reading, from what position, within what power relationships, and for what rhetorical purposes.

Fuller's review emphasises the religious implications of Douglass's narrative, an emphasis which might seem to the contemporary reader to be a perverse misreading. However, by establishing the context of 1845 Bible politics and the issue of slavery--particularly the controversy surrounding slave literacy--rehearsed in secular and religious newspapers and philosophical treatises on morality, Mailloux not only clarifies Fuller's reading but also positions it within a longer history of reading Douglass (which now includes his reading of Douglass and his reading of Fuller reading Douglass): "Does Fuller misread Douglass? Not within the story I have told about the cultural rhetoric of Bible politics. But my reading is, of course, only as strong as the case I have made. And this rhetorical act of reading will itself be historically read and rhetorically transacted" (102).

Chapters Five and Six--in their explorations of readings of *The Pilgrim's Progress* (including the slavery debate in 1840s sequels by other hands), and of the tropes of reading-as-eating and reading-as-mental-and-moral-exercise in various texts (including *Little Women* and its sequels) and institutional practices--further demonstrates the ability of rhetorical hermeneutics to combine the strengths of reader-response criticism with those of reception history.

To anyone unfamiliar with its contexts, Mailloux's *Reception Histories* is like walking into someone else's family argument, especially when, in Parts One and Two, he elaborates upon his reading of other people's reading of his earlier work. Even this is poor preparation for Part Three, in which he recounts his appointment, with a mandate for curricular reform, as chair of the English Department at Syracuse University, and his failure to convince his colleagues to adopt cultural hermeneutics as the model for humanistic scholarship. Memos, manifestoes, accusations, and arguments ensue. Rifts and compromises develop. Mailloux becomes Professor of English at another university. Conveyed without rancour, this provides an instructive example of cultural incommensurabilities in everyday life.

The greatest strength of *Reception Histories* is its reception histories. They are essential reading for anyone interested in 19th Century American literature and cultural politics. The earlier, more theoretically-involved chapters frequently require patience and hard work; they become clearer in retrospect.

The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema

By Ashis Nandy (ed.)

London: Zed Books, 1998. ISBN 1856495167. ix + 259 pp. \$62.50 (hbk); \$22.50 (pbk)

A review by Lalitha Nair, Edith Cowan University, Western Australia

This collection of six essays on Indian cinema as cultural articulation constitutes non-formal responses to films as political and social constructs. With minimal academic jargon, and "unencumbered by formal film theory" they make refreshing reading (16).

In the introductory essay "Indian Popular Cinema as a Slum's Eye View of Politics", Nandy attempts to explain the complex dynamics of negotiation of the traditional and modern. He brings forth a new metaphor for Indian popular cinema - the urban slum. The metaphor holds good as the constitution of the slum, with its remembered culture of the past and the generated synthesized culture of the present, account for the conspicuous interplay of tradition and modernity in popular cinema and legitimizes the transformation of the hero and the villain over the decades.

"Dilip Kumar Made Me Do It" is Ziauddin Sardar's lengthy personal reflection of the five main film texts which were a significant influence in his formative years - *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Devdas*, *Kaagaz Ke Phool*, *Pyasa* and *Ganga Jamuna*. The essay is a fond remembrance of an ideal past of the Hindi film, and a lament of its present day moral and aesthetic degradation in the light of experience of film texts in a diasporic community. Dilip Kumar and Guru Dutt films are seen as works of art with positive qualities, as films potent enough to "unfold the contradictions and problems, injustices and social malaise, poetry and aesthetics, richness and diversity of Indian culture" (24). But the highly popular Amitabh Bachchan films provide the contrast: the mirror that art holds up to life in the present day cinema produces only distorted images, in the repeated theme of the "emotionless, angry young man out for revenge" (55). However, the success of Pakistani television serials shows that it is possible to continue the aesthetic traditions of Indian classical cinema. The author seems to miss the subtle charm of shades of colour in his eagerness to see everything in black or white.

Rajni Bakshi explores the Raj Kapoor phenomenon with an analysis of the events that led to his films from *Aag* (1948) to *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (1985). In line with the personal style of the collection, she traces the decline of political standards, and the parallel decline in the personal life of Raj Kapoor and its corresponding reflection in his films. These two chapters substantiate Nandy's claim of the slum's remembrance of an ideal, traditional past in its effort to negotiate the reality of the present. The films of Dilip Kumar, Guru Dutt and Raj Kapoor constitute a tradition and a dearly remembered past in Hindi cinema which was later

encroached by the degraded elements of popular appeal symbolized by the Amitabh Bachchan genre of films.

It is the latter, the presence of Amitabh Bachchan as the angry young man, that Fareeduddin Kazmi speaks of in his essay on the theme of rebellion in conventional Hindi films. He puts forward the decline of the euphoria of post independent nationalism, the contradictions of later political life, the disappointments, urbanization and unemployment as factors that made inevitable the birth of the angry young man. But is the birth of this genre in Hindi cinema independent of the success of similar formulae in Hollywood? In a blatant glorification of this genre, Kazmi argues that these films "construct a coherent version of social reality, by playing out and grappling with social contradictions" (147). The perception that the films reflect and parallel in their narratology the degeneration of Indian politics from the collapse of Nehruvian vision and the new nation state form the basic thesis of these three essays.

Anjali Monteiro's essay "Official Television and Unofficial Fabrications of the Self: The Spectator as Subject" is a systematic technical analysis of the construction of subjectivity by the television audience. The author problematizes the communicative efficacy of televisual messages in a selected community. She establishes the position of television in the communication scenario and the inevitable negotiations of space that the medium promotes in the context of development. However the starting premise of development communication and television is not sustained in the later parts as the topic drifts on to informative and entertainment programs like the news and popular serials. She has identified the core concepts of spectator subjectivity as dictated by the dividing practices of caste, gender, the traditional and modern, the feudal and the nuclear.

The essay "On Castes and Comedians" by Ravi Srinivas and Sundar Kaali is an appraisal of the narrative strategies, the politics of power and the modes of representation in neo-nativist Tamil cinema. Genealogical formation is identified as the centre of power structure - not something new or specific to Tamil society. Caste is just one aspect in the dynamics of power in Indian society and in Tamil cinema. The chapter opens with the statement: "Popular cinema frustrates all search for realistic portrayals of the configurations of class, caste or gender in contemporary Indian society" (208). But what follows and the authors' conclusion that the popular film is potentially sensitive "not only to the collective anxieties of the present, but also to the collective aspirations and dreams for a future" is an affirmation of the power of the medium which can only be "realistic"(222). A sudden change of mind, or an editorial oversight?

Vinay Lal's chapter "The Impossibility of the Outsider in Modern Hindi Film" attempts to establish that the hero and the villain can never be outsiders because of the films' lineage from the ancient Sanskrit texts and their intrinsic link with Indian philosophy. The inclusion/exclusion phenomenon riddling Indian communities, the dividing practices all seem smoothed out in an endorsement of the utopian vision of this Indological view. This also precludes the entry or existence of a true outsider, in a system where all are insiders.

The prevalent view that Indian popular cinema is Hindi commercial cinema ignores the significance of other Indian language cinema. Ashis Nandy also subscribes to this view. But for a short chapter on Tamil cinema, the subtitle of the book could have been "Hindi Popular Cinema". Popular cinema is glorified in this book to such an extent that the "parallel", or "art" cinema and other less "popular" genres seem to have contributed little to the negotiation of social and political space in Indian culture.

The book would be of interest to students of media and cultural studies and is essential reading for students of Indian cinema as it provokes thoughts on the social and political aspects of popular film culture in India. The general reader would find the book informative on issues of identity, gender and caste politics. However a revised edition of the book would do better with an index.

So Close to the State/s: The Emergence of Canadian Feature Film Policy

By Michael Dorland

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998. ISBN 0-8020-8043-x (pbk); 0-8020-4182-5 (pbk). xi + 199pp. £13.00 (pbk); £45.00 (hbk)

A review by Fergus Morrin, University of Nottingham, UK

The maxim that "Canada works in practice, not in theory" can be inverted when used to describe Canadian feature film policy. Dorland's *So Close to the State/s*, like Ted Madger's *Canada's Hollywood* and, to a lesser extent, Manjunath Pendakur's *Canadian Dreams and American Control*, is a welcome addition to the criticism applied to the near constant malaise in (predominately English) Canadian feature film production.

Canada, as one of the world's richest countries, has consistently failed to match its feature film output to its economic strength. This is not, however, through the lack of government boards, committees, initiatives, programmes and legislation, however ineffectual, that has attempted to kick start a Canadian feature film industry. Since before the inception of the National Film Board of Canada, the Canadian government, with the aid of private production companies, has attempted to create policy in regard to feature film. Dorland is rather iconoclastic when it comes to the "personalities" and policies of Canadian cinema. He frowns, rightly, on John Grierson for acting as midwife to a still born cinema that offered little opportunity for filmmakers to stretch their creative ambition with projects such as *Maladie du pis de la vache (Udder Disease in Cows)*, and questions the government and the production companies for never really deciding what they wanted a film industry for. When the National Film Board sought to bring "Canadians closer to one another" it was often through the banality of army recruitment films or to cultivate tourism from the United States.

Dorland constantly highlights the difficulties inherent in government-led feature film policy by using Foucault's concepts of "governmentality" where the state is historically discontinuous and reliant on "the conduct of an ensemble of individuals [who find] itself implicated in the exercise of power" (21). Governments are unstable and where there is a lack of determined policies, situations become changeable. In regard to feature film policy in Canada the government has never decided whether Canadian feature films should be defined culturally or economically. The emergence of a Québécois national cinema in the 1960s was considerably more straightforward. The language barrier ensured that Quebec would not be over reliant on American products. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (Société Radio Canada) had to produce French language programming, as to rely on dubbing to create television productions for French audiences was, for obvious reasons, unacceptable. It was also unlikely for French speaking audiences to tune into U.S. television ensuring that CBC could act with something akin to a monopoly in Quebec. However, Dorland points out that Québécois cinema has always defined itself as "cultural" rather than economic, as a result English Canadian producers felt that Quebec provided "the model of cultural authenticity"

(124) and that by implication, English Canada lacked this "cultural authenticity". This unity of purpose has, ironically, made Québécois cinema the more economically viable. Unfortunately English Canadian cinema has not enjoyed this singularly defined purpose. For example, the government employed an economist, Otto John Firestone, who took a "common sense" approach to feature film production. He felt that an agreement should be made between Canada and the United States in the same vein as agreements pertaining to "an export industry like nickel which in the case of medium budget films must export 90% of its output" (104). The basic idiocy of this statement bypassed Firestone, causing one U.S. film industry executive to muse on the proposed U.S.-Canada Film Agreement that; "So far as I know, Canadian oil is just as good as American oil and Canadian cars are just as good as American cars but if Canadian films are going to be handled in the same way as oil and cars, it scares the hell out of me" (107). Every government committee has sought ways to encourage production; a quota system on Canadian films at theatres was rejected because there was little chance of Canada producing enough films to fill it, co-productions have, until recently, consistently failed to deliver on Canadian investment while tax breaks to foreign companies do little more than increase the profits of (mostly US) companies.

Dorland, toward the close of the book, brings us back to the theme that "Canadian film works in theory, not in practice" by arguing that a lot of energy has been expended on attempting to create a Canadian feature film industry, however, this energy has not been reciprocated by productions. This situation of near constant policy formation is summed up for Dorland by Denys Arcand; "Too much is written about our cinema. Basically, we don't have a cinema, we have film literature. . .If you were to collect all the dossiers, briefs, etc. that have already been written on our films, it would take longer to read than to look at the films. . .There is something unwholesome about it all" (p.125).

So Close to the State/s is an interesting and accessible account of a subject which is of little interest to many film theorists. This is the impetus behind Dorland writing the book and unlike other works on the subject Dorland refuses to lay the blame on a perceived cultural imperialism. Wishful thinking and best intentions aside, Dorland recognises that talking about Canadian cinema doesn't have the desired effect of creating a Canadian film industry. However, one can't help but feel that Dorland has, in some way, become part of the conveyor belt he dislikes, that he too has become involved in "all the conflictual, consensual, and paradoxical terms within which the Canadian feature film would be discussed and rediscussed. . .only thereafter to repeat themselves over and over again, endlessly" (136).

Studying Media: Problems of Theory and Method

By John Corner

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998. ISBN 0748610677. vii +182 pp. £15.95

A review by Rita Lago, University of Stirling, UK

"What perspectives can we best use to understand the media? (...) How can we relate theory to analysis and what different kinds of methodological problem does analysis of the various dimensions of media and mediation pose? Perhaps most importantly of all, what are the aims of media study, what kinds of knowledge do we hope to produce and for what purpose?" (1)

How frequently have both students and teachers of media studies asked such pertinent questions? Equally, how often have teachers been left to explain and account for the cruciality of both theory and method? Even so, to date not many academic books have been able to provide answers to these frequently asked questions, but instead have chosen to focus primarily upon further theorising the field.

For *Studying Media*, John Corner travelled back in time in search of his own earlier work, some of which was published as early as 1979, in an attempt to trace the development of the field of theory and method in media and cultural studies. To do so, this book is composed of nine different essays, addressing a variety of questions and subjects ranging through textual and cultural analysis, television theory and reception studies amongst many others. However, here in the composition of the book lie simultaneously both its most positive and negative characteristics. Whilst collecting a sample of essays, previously published across three different books and a number of editions of three leading journals undeniably makes life easier for those interested in the subject, the question which arises is whether this is really necessary? Are media and cultural studies academics and students incapable of searching for the material previously to be found across a number of publications?

However, anyone who has actually read this book knows that this is not the case, very much on the contrary; as this re-publishing goes far beyond the simple act of repeating the same words under a new title and with a new publication year. Instead, it is an extremely successful and timely publication, even if it relies on the use of previously produced work. Unlike many similar publications, Corner actually contextualizes each essay with a brief commentary, and it is these commentaries which give a new lease of life to his earlier work. In fact, not only are they exemplary of how academic work and ideas evolve over the years, but also that the circumstances in which work is produced is not static. Additionally, and equally relevant, is that John Corner also considers, and in a sense takes this opportunity to respond to, comments and criticisms from fellow academics to his original work.

Furthermore, the book is also permeated by an underlying attempt to understand and explain how and why media and cultural studies have evolved mainly in the UK, namely by tracing

the history of the field as a subject of academic study, indeed one with which every teacher and student should be familiar.

Summarily, does John Corner's book actually contribute to the understanding of the relationship between theory and method in media studies, whilst also assisting students in accepting the need to study theory as much as method? Personally, I think it does both things, but primarily it is a source of encouragement for students, teachers and academics alike.

Is *Studying Media* worth purchasing and if so, who should read it? Firstly, it is more than worth the expense, it is a step forward in addressing the difficulties that lie in the relationship between theory and method and as such should be compulsory reading. Regarding who should read it, although extremely well written, it is at times permeated by both somewhat inaccessible language and content. So although such a book should be read by all students of the subject, one cannot realistically expect students other than at an advanced level to really comprehend it, but then this is what the book itself humbly suggests. Ultimately, although this book actually does what it says it will do, and is aimed at whom it claims to be aimed, it is still a challenging and thought-provoking publication, even if some of the material is almost older than the vast majority of contemporary media and cultural studies students.