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Seeing Through Movies*

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At one time, movies were beneath the notice of academics; they ranked lower even than such acceptable relaxants as detective mysteries. Times have changed: hundreds of universities now offer courses in various aspects of the movies—their history, their art, their sociological significance, and how to make them. Out of the closet have poured dozens of professors who have long harboured a secret passion for the movies. Where books on the movies were once few—and swiftly remaindered—they are now published in such floods that it is hard to keep track of them.[1] Some are amusing, some are worthless, and some seem to stake a claim to the attention of academics, including those in the social sciences and history. I propose to offer notes and commentary on the latter.

Movies have evinced academic interest in four main modes: (1) as a cult object; (2) as an art or craft; (3) as an object of sociological, psychological, historical or aesthetic interest; and (4) as a tool for research.

(1) The cult of the movies finds most of its academic devotees amongst undergraduates. Movies are screened, discussed in coffee bars, form the bases of alliances and liaisons, generate books, articles, posters and other impedimenta of fanship. Delightful as all this is, it remains in the penumbra of legitimate academic concern.

(2) Among the earliest manifestations of the academic study of the movies was their inclusion in the curricula of theatre, communications, and fine art schools as a technical option. Undergraduates learn, in such programmes, how to write movie scripts, how to operate Super 8mm cameras, how to direct, to edit, to light sets, and so on. Sometimes a certain amount of study of the art and history of the movies is part of the syllabus. This consists mainly of extended screenings, with little or no attention to historical or aesthetic, and certainly not to psychological or sociological, questions about movies. First in Europe (Poland, Italy, France), and latterly in America and Britain, such film school training has produced good film makers. Mostly it has not added to academic understanding of movies.

(3) As a focus of historical, sociological and psychological and, for want of a better word, what I will call literary-critical interest, movies have revived in the

* My thanks to Joseph Agassi, Charles Altman, Garth Jowett, Paul Monaco and Brian Sanders for helpful criticism. Full bibliographic details and price are given only for books under review. Other literature is cited in the normal conventions of *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*.

1 An admirable effort to keep up has been undertaken by Professor George Rehrauer in *Cinema Booklist, Cinema Booklist Supplement One* and *Cinema Booklist Supplement Two*, Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1972, 1974, 1977.

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last ten years. The tradition of such inquiry goes back to their earliest days. Temporarily eclipsed as an object of academic interest by television, movies are coming into their own again. Questions such as these are asked: can the history of the movies be separated from general social history; are movies social cause or social effect; do movies reflect, refract, obscure or distort the society in which they are made and the society which they portray? Do movies, as a popular or mass art, offer clues to the times—to the collective unconscious, to the dreams, aspirations, fantasies, politics, values of their audiences? Do the movies contain hidden as well as overt messages? Are movies art in any sense? Are there standards of quality and achievement? Can the meaning, symbolism, semiotics of movies be deciphered? Attempts to raise, answer and debate these and other questions constitute the bulk of the academic study of the movies.

(4) There is also the claim, made by film archivists, historians, sociologists, and the like, that movies are of value as relics of, windows onto, their time and place. Like historical documents, they are useful research tools. It follows that researchers in these fields should study film, and that they should also make films. A pioneer in the study of film was Siegfried Kracauer, of whom more later. The embodiment of academic research in film form has scarcely begun (see the discussion in Smith [ed.], below).

Leaving aside then the cult of movies (1) and production schools (2), we can look at the social and aesthetic analysis of the movies (3), and at their significance for research (4). I shall offer some sceptical thoughts on the value of movies as documents, or raw data, for the historian or social scientist (Section 1, *Movies as a Window*); and on how movies and their history are studied (Section 2, *A Window on Movies*). The scepticism I shall express does not stem from snobbery or animus towards movies, but from personal experience in trying to study film and its history, and trying to use it as an historical or sociological window.

1. MOVIES AS A WINDOW

It is persistently claimed that movies are a window on society and its history. Here is D. J. Wenden, Fellow and Bursar of All Souls College, Oxford, and an historian of modern Europe:[2]

> The silent films from 1895 to 1927 recreate for us the society which created them [p. 180].

In the preface to his book Wenden writes of encouraging other historians 'to look at old films as material for the understanding of the twentieth century' (p. 8). A somewhat more specific advocate is Roy Armes, a specialist in Film and Television Studies at Hornsey College of Art:[3] 'The cinema has a potential for realism because... the camera itself does not cheat' (p. 17), it captures 'the surface detail of life' (p. 19). Michael Wood, a professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University is similarly confident:[4]

> All movies mirror reality in some way or other. There are no escapes, even in the most escapist pictures.... What remains constant is an oblique but unbroken connection to the historical world... [p. 16]. It is a relation of wish, echo, transposition, displacement,

2 D. J. Wenden, *The Birth of the Movies*, New York: Dutton, 1975. Pp. 192. Paper Can. $7.25.

3 Roy Armes, *Film and Reality*, An Historical Survey, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974. Pp. 254. Paper, 45 new pence.

4 Michael Wood, *America at the Movies*, or, 'Santa Maria It Had Slipped My Mind', New York: Basic Books, 1975. Pp. xii + 206. Can. $11.00.

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inversion, compensation, reinforcement, example, warning... [p. 15]. The business of film is the business of dreams... but then dreams are scrambled messages from waking life [p. 16].

These are among the more recent claims made concerning the value of studying the movies. It has also been claimed that they capture the collective political unconscious (Kracauer 1947), our collective sexual fantasies (Tyler 1944, 1947; Wolfenstein and Leites 1950; Greenberg 1975), the cultural essence of historical periods (Deming 1969, Dowdy 1973, Smith 1975), the Jewish immigrant's dream of W.A.S.P. America (Sylbert 1974), changing attitudes towards the negro,[5] and so on. If any of this is true, then movies are indeed valuable social and historical documents. Such documents should be preserved and studied. Despite the qualified scepticism I shall later express about the value of movies as historical documents, I do not deny that such claims are intriguing, and might be true. It follows that films ought to be preserved. The trouble is, such claims are so general, so unrestricted, that they are an argument for preserving every piece of film.[6] Who can afford to do that? Scarce resources impose choice, and choice raises the question of what is interesting and why?

Let us distinguish here between film used as *raw material* for the study of history or sociology or psychology, and attempts to shape raw film in order to *capture* historical or social or psychological reality. Newsreels, documentaries, instructional films and fiction movies all make attempts to capture history on film. But, while we are all properly sceptical when we see Christopher Plummer impersonating Wellington and Rod Steiger Napoleon at *Waterloo*, Richard Harris hamming *Cromwell*, or Charlton Heston as Moses (*The Ten Commandments*), Michaelangelo (*The Agony and the Ecstasy*) or General Gordon (*Kartoum*); and while we consider ourselves duly sensitized to the propaganda behind *Triumph of the Will* (Germany 1936) or *The True Glory* (UK/USA 1946); do we remind ourselves that even a piece of unedited newsreel footage involved a news editor selecting events, and then assigning a camera team to that place or, at least, a cameraman deciding to point the camera at *that* and pressing the button?

Selection is only half the story; fakery is the other. From the earliest times movie-makers have faked and re-staged events for their newsreels and documentaries. In 1902 Georges Méliès faked the coronation of Edward VII (Ames, p. 26), prize fights were faked (Ramsaye 1926, pp. 110 and 288), and so much World War I footage was faked we do not know for sure which is which.[7] *March of Time* faked ('re-staged') a lot (Fielding 1972, p. 232), and the famous picture (and statuary) of the Marines raising the flag at Iwo Jima seems to have been arranged for the camera. *Patton* (USA 1970) goes so far as to show several 'takes' of General Patton stepping ashore in Sicily to emphasize how calculated even newsreel shots were.

The argument here is not over what is authentic, for if a piece of film is selected, as every piece is, it is not raw; and if the piece of film is not raw, it is not

5 The literature on this topic grows very fast and already comprises the following: Noble 1948, Mapp 1972, Bogle 1973, Powers 1974, Maynard 1974, Patterson 1975, Leab 1975, Cripps 1977.

6 Notoriously, professional film archivists dispute on this point, how to know what amateur film may prove invaluable (Zapruder's footage of President Kennedy's assassination, for example), or which apparent hack will later be hailed as important (Alan Dwan, Samuel Fuller, Roger Corman)?

7 This criticism was made of the BBC TV series *The Great War*, which tried to use only the authentic; but is a poorly photographed jumble more authentic than a faithful attempt to show how it was?

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authentic even if the piece is not faked; therefore no piece of film can be regarded as simply a transparent window on a lost world. Yet even this equation of raw with authentic (and not raw with inauthentic) is not unproblematic, especially since raw experience, the undifferentiated manifold, is doubtless chaotic and meaningless.

Nevertheless, there is a difference between fact and fiction, a faked scene and a 'real' one. A newsreel shot of the real Churchill, however contrived, is decisively different from a shot of an actor impersonating Churchill. To the historian, I think the difference is that film of the real Churchill will bear interpretation about Churchill and about the contrivances that may or may not be detectable in this film of him. Although a secondary document, it has primary source elements, just as a newspaper story, which correctly quotes a Churchill speech, has such elements. The impersonation of Churchill, however, is secondary in the strong sense that it does not bear interpretation about Churchill; since it is someone else's interpretation of Churchill it is primary evidence only of its author or authors and their view of Churchill, rather than Churchill as such. A difficult philosophical question is: in what respects can we say there is a Churchill as such independent of anyone's view of him?

Leaving that question aside, what is the value to the historian of even apparently non-faked material? My earlier comparison with a newspaper article suggests a clue. By itself, the piece of film of Churchill is useless, for it is open to any interpretation, as all documents are. We can control interpretation only by building up a restraining context from other sources like letters, diaries, public records, eyewitness accounts, and previous histories and biographies. Overwhelmingly, these are pieces of paper, they are almost never pieces of film. Why is paper overwhelmingly primary, why does paper constitute the context for interpreting film? For one thing, ours is a world of bureaucrats and clerks whose primary material is paper. Film can correct, supplement or flesh out paperwork, but it is no more primary than a newspaper. Consider again the impressive television series *The Great War*. The film footage was organized by means of a spoken commentary written by historians; film was a nice visual aid. The meat of its argument was entirely contained in the scripts written by historians of the calibre of John Terraine and Corelli Barnett. Moreover, those episodes were academically second best to their books. When Terraine or Barnett writes a book he does real history, i.e. he argues about interpretation with other historians. Film is a very poor and very clumsy medium for presenting argument. It can present a one-sided view very persuasively to the uncritical, but becomes positively *avant-garde* when alternatives are suggested (e.g. Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad*). The main reason for the primacy of paper is that written language is the best medium for rational discussion.

Film resembles a window in that it seems to put before your eyes what is happening. But what is happening is not a function of what you see and hear—events are more complex than that. Things seen and heard only have sense, significance, can only be focussed, when we have background knowledge and ideas. Movies are not in any simple sense a window on the world,[8] any more than what you see through a window is what has happened. Writing is vastly superior as a discursive medium. Complex alternatives can be stated and argued concisely and delicately. Film cannot do this.

This is not to deny all social and historical value to movies. To lay eyes on an actual place or person is a precious thing; why else do we visit battlefields or study old portraits? When viewing old silent comedies featuring Chaplin, Ar-

8 The Paramount newsreel called itself 'the eyes and ears of the world'; see Fielding 1972, p. 173.

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buckle, Lloyd, the Keystone Kops, Keaton, the eye wanders to the fascinating background of the broad, dusty streets of Los Angeles sixty years ago, the few buildings, the streetcar routes through orchards, unfenced railway crossings, parched hillsides, all of which are uncontrived and viewed unself-consciously. So that was what it once looked like in part and in places. Contrast it with the similarly unself-conscious use of downtown Los Angeles in a recent Walt Disney film, *Return to Witch Mountain*. Watching a television re-run of a tedious biopic on Jerome Kern—*Till the Clouds Roll By* (1946)—the attention is captured by Van Johnson's capacious, knee-length, double-breasted jacket. From the snappy style in which the musical number is put over and the girl's slinky slit skirt one concludes that his now-ludicrous outfit was once thought to be 'sharp'.

Is such information mere trivia, a gratuitous time machine trip to a lost landscape? I fear that the answer is 'yes'. Film is not the material of history. Documents are the material of history. At best, film is a visual aid. It is very nice to see and hear dead people, see places as they were, the state of technology, and so on; film may be a useful check on interpretation, but it is not essential and not necessarily enlightening. For one thing, such small detail indicates what a very poor information load film can carry. Two minutes with a written document and two minutes with a film are totally different orders of load. Film is a more cognitively dense medium than music or painting, to be sure, but in its imagery and descriptive bias it resembles poetry rather than prose. For another thing, and perhaps most decisively of all, its discursive weakness means that it cannot participate in the debate about historical problems, which is what history is really all about. This needs a little expansion.

Those who advocate the value of film archives for history often betray a naive view of the discipline of history as being a descriptive narrative of what actually happened. A few academic historians also subscribe to this view, but they have to perform contortions to do so. For the view just described begs a basic question: history is mostly debates between historians about just what did exactly happen, why it happened, and what would be an adequate account of its significance. Some take one view, others a second, still others a third, and so on, on any given historical topic. An historian could *embody* his view in a film, just as he could embody it in a play (George Bernard Shaw used plays and prefaces, not films, as his medium), but how could he defend it, footnote it, rebut objections and criticize the opposition?

With the appropriate substitutions, the bulk of what I have said about film and history, applies equally to film and sociology and film and psychology. Films do sometimes illustrate, or, in a partisan manner, advocate, points in these subjects. But one need only look at filmed history to see what a joke it is: *Madame Curie, The Life of Louis Pasteur, Young Tom Edison, Alexander Graham Bell, Alexander the Great, Attila the Hun, The Charge of the Light Brigade, Freud,* etc. are no more serious history than Shakespeare's Tudor-inspired travesties; they add little or nothing to the debate about the nature of genius (since they nearly always employ the plot about the man with the brilliant idea who must over-come resistance, doubters and sabotage); they evade the academic meat while nevertheless providing a vivid portrayal that is hard to correct. How does the viewer of *Freud* grasp the points of controversy, weak and strong, from it? He doesn't, he has to read serious psychology.

Several recently published books such as a general discussion of film and history (Smith, P.), two attempts to do history with film (Monaco, Richards), and some attempts to do sociology, social psychology, philosophy, etc. through film (Berton, Cavell, Wood, Thomson, Smith, J., McConnell) provide a few more concrete examples of the relationship between film and academic disci-

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plines. The first Smith, Paul, who teaches history at King's College, London, is an editor. His *The Historian and the Film*[9] is a book of papers by twelve persons with various forms of interest in the use of film in history, some are university teachers, others film makers. They discuss the value of film as an historical source, the use of film as a teaching aid, and the making of films about historical topics. Much information is supplied about procuring films. There is some disagreement between the writers about whether film is suited to analytical or discursive use (Nicholas Pronay versus Arthur Marwick), on the value of using film as raw material rather than as a shaped exposition, and on the balance of power between film-making experts and history experts. As a handbook it has value, as an airing of basic issues it was sorely needed.

Most of the doubts raised earlier in this review are not discussed. The volume is optimistic that film is growing in importance for the historian. Certainly it will be used more and more, but whether, as a medium, it is amenable to the aims and discipline of academic history is not clear. In so far as history is the telling of interesting, enlightening and plausible stories, film can probably cope—although length, attention span and detail are difficult points. In so far as history is scholarship, mastery of sources, argumentation, weighing and testing of stories against evidence, there is about as much hope of film's being the vehicle of choice as there is of its being the vehicle of criminal trials. As a visual aid, as a supplement, as a vivid illustration, film is useful. It exists as a document to be studied by the researcher, but how to use it is still far from clear.

Paul Monaco, who teaches history at the University of Texas at Dallas, makes a valiant attempt; but despite formidable scholarship and close attention to detail, he has to employ a rather questionable hypothesis. *Cinema and Society*, subtitled 'France and Germany During the Twenties', is a social and industrial history.[10] It begins with an excellent summary of the then state of the film industry in France and Germany based on extensive work in the journals and newspapers of the time, and, in Germany, in the archives of UFA. Professor Monaco has isolated the 110 most popular films of the period, and proceeds to analyze them thematically. His implausible central hypothesis is that these films bear analysis because they reflect collective obsessions, dreams, wishes. French films, for example, often have orphan stories, these 'represent a recurrent, dreamlike working off of the French national trauma of having experienced in short order the disintegration of those very alliances that had meant victory instead of defeat in the First World War and that were assumed to be the necessary guarantee of French security for the future' (p. 101). Or, 'The recurrent theme of betrayal that has been documented from the dramatic contents of the most popular films of Weimar Germany suggests an association at the latent level to the trauma of the nation's defeat of 1918' (p. 128).

As a work of history, this study is superb. It is lucidly written. One can only be grateful for a work that accepts some theoretical discipline. However, the hypothesis is never defended and never explained. If there is a collective character to the latencies in movies, how does it get there? Kracauer, whose work Monaco rightly criticizes, argues that writers and directors of talent are instruments for detecting and amplifying such themes. Monaco ignores creators, but fails to notice that Herbert Gans (1957) has provided a sociological hypothesis to connect the film maker and the audience. Gans's argument is that because film-making is a collective endeavour or a kind of committee work, the end-product, the film, tends to reflect the perception a group has worked out of the audience it is trying to reach, and a group's self-corrected perception of the

9 Cambridge University Press, 1976. Pp. viii + 208. Can. $14.50.
10 New York and Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1976. Pp. viii + 194. $9.95.

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potential audience will likely be better than that of any single individual. Popularity, then, signals success at reaching and hence 'reading' that audience. Such an analysis of the micro-structure of production in France and Germany might have been arduous, but will need to be undertaken one day.

The other problem is that Monaco uses the theory of hidden meanings without regard to the trenchant criticisms that have been made of it (especially by Fearing). These two points aside, this is one of the best attempts yet made to use films as a window.

Jeffrey Richards is a young historian of Byzantium who teaches at the University of Lancaster. His ambitious book *Visions of Yesterday*[11] is dedicated to the view that 'the popular arts have a great deal to tell us about people and their beliefs, their assumptions and their attitudes, their hopes and fears and dreams' (p. xv). Well, perhaps they have. Dr. Richards chooses to study 'The Cinema of Empire' (Hollywood films about the British Empire); 'The Cinema of Populism' (the films of three Hollywood directors: Frank Capra, Leo McCarey and John Ford); and 'The Cinema of National Socialism'. Two hundred and twenty pages are expended on the films of Empire before we reach the conclusion: 'The basic fact that has emerged, I think, from the investigation is that the whole genre bears the distinct imprint of the public school' (p. 220).

The next one hundred and seventy pages (less the magnificent and plentiful stills) are devoted to three directors who have already been extensively studied, and to possibly the most contentious of all national cinemas. But here Dr. Richards gallops along, side-stepping all debate, concluding: 'In a very real sense, all three of the movements we have been examining were religious and the films can be seen as ritual enactments of the creed.... Their purpose was ... to sustain and encourage behaviour' (p. 359).

What is the academic value of all this? These popular films have very decidedly not told us 'a great deal' about 'people and their beliefs' etc. And, indeed, why should they? There are some simple methodological questions here. How can the popular arts 'tell us' things? As the Hollywood saying goes, 'If you want to send a message, call Western Union'. How can factory-made Hollywood movies contain all this information? This question, on an answer to which the entire plausibility of Richards' work depends, is avoided. Two possible ways of answering it suggest themselves. The information is intentionally put there, and it is unintentionally there. Each answer throws up further problems. Even assuming the information is there, at the very most doesn't that tell us about the beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, hopes, fears and dreams of a few thousand people living on the West Coast of the United States in the nineteen thirties and forties? Clearly this would not be enough to justify a book like Richards'. My guess is that he believes the film-making process taps some reservoir of cultural meaning. Such reasoning goes back at least to Siegfried Kracauer, who in his 1947 book *From Caligari to Hitler* tried to argue that the Nazism deep in the German soul showed itself to the perceptive viewer of German movies from about 1921 onwards.[12] His idea was to treat films on a par with dreams, but not any old dreams, rather, the dreams of the collective unconscious. Perhaps Richards' view is the same. Certainly that would make sense of his study of the cinema of Empire, populism, and Nazism. But the obvious difficulty here is that we would need to look at how the films were received at the box office before we

11 Toronto: General Publishing Co. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), 1973. Pp. 391. Can. $19.80.

12 In February 1920 *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* was released. Kracauer's incredible ideas were severely reviewed by the leading psychologist Franklin Fearing in *Hollywood Quarterly*, 2, 1947, 422-27.

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could say that these films reflect the beliefs, assumptions, etc. of the people at large. Kracauer at least raises (and evades, pp. 7-8) the question. Furthermore, the typicality or atypicality of the team of creative personnel needs scrutiny, as does the 'embedding' of the film in current genre conventions and cycles of popularity. By ignoring all these matters Richards renders his own work incoherent. The fact also that he fails to defend his selection of films, and appears unaware of a study such as Dorothy Jones's (1955), makes it difficult to see his work as academically serious.

Pierre Berton, a Canadian journalist, in a book as lavishly illustrated as Richards', sets out to show that Hollywood's travestying of Canada's history, landscape, Indians, mounted police, and ethos is a contribuuting cause to why *Canadians* have such a poorly developed sense of national identity.[13] As with Richards' work there is a run-down of endless movies, each illustrating (i.e. verifying) rather than critically considering (advancing or testing) the argument. An argument does not gain in plausibility, still less in logical strength, by being repeated and repeated, re-stated from this and that angle. There is no intellectual discipline in the work. Canada's lack of national identity (if there is such a lack and if there is such a thing to lack) is more likely a product of objective conditions such as the disparity and historical separateness of its regions.[14] Hollywood rubbish drew on pre-existing traditions and was accepted because of a lack of corrective, rather than itself being a cause.

Stanley Cavell is a Harvard philosopher who in 1963 offered a seminar on movies that he describes as 'a failure' (p. x) because 'more was described than had been shown' (p. x).[15] His 'impressionistic scholarship' does not inhibit him from claiming women are more memorable than men in Hollywood movies, and 'The requirement for a *certain* indiscriminateness in the accepting of movies ... has its analogues in the past of the established arts: anyone who is too selective about the classical composers whose music he likes doesn't really like music' (p. 13).

In fact he starts off by admitting his book is not really about movies, or about the world they constitute, but about Stanley Cavell, an object of study I find eminently resistable. Let him say it his own way:

> I had some words I could believe in to account for my experience of film, and I felt I should then proceed systematically; that I should somehow find a way to view and review a good number at least of American talkies, and then test the words against them. This proved to be impossible... because my thoughts would not form around any such procedure.... Therefore I am often referring to films I have seen only once, some as long as thirty years

13 *Hollywood's Canada*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1975. Pp. 303. $13.95.

14 F. Sparshott, in his presidential address to the Canadian Philosophical Association, 1976, articulates this well: 'Is Canadian nationhood the expression or the outward counterpart of a community seeking self-determination? Historically, it is not. The isolated settlements of the Atlantic seaboard, the fisherman's rendezvous of Newfoundland, the abandoned French empire of the Saint Lawrence, the loyalist refugees of Upper Canada, the fogbound traders of the West Coast, the exploiters fanning southward out of Hudson Bay, the settlers who followed steel to the hinterland, had little more to do with each other than with the native peoples they infected, slaughtered, or brushed aside.... The Confederation of 1867 was a matter of convenience rather than passion, and it is sometimes more comforting to ask who was convenienced and in what way. Mutual defence at best, commercial advantage more often, have cemented the various unions of groups of people whose interests and outlooks had little connection.'

15 *The World Viewed*, New York: Viking Press, 1971. Pp. xvi + 174. $2.50.

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ago... a few faulty memories will not themselves shake my conviction in what I've said, since I am as interested in how a memory went wrong as in why memories that are right occur when they do [xii-xiv].

In order to know that a memory has gone wrong one must check it. That it has gone wrong can only be of general interest if it can be shown to be the working of a general mechanism. Professor Cavell's confidence in the value of his faulty memories seems ill-placed.

Michael Wood, who teaches English at Columbia University, admires Cavell for reasons he does not vouchsafe. His book illustrates more of the problems of the undisciplined approach. It is not history, sociology or psychology. It is the 'insights' of an expatriate *littérateur* as he recollects the movies of the forties and fifties. As his exact contemporary, who also misspent his youth in British cinemas watching mostly American movies, and who has now also settled in North America, I was able to enjoy and appreciate all the clever things he said. But, when the book is finished, one is left with little other than the ideas that movies are a world, and a tradition. When one goes back over the book one finds wierd arguments and wild generalizations. On page 42 Stanley Cavell is praised, even though the 'insight' cited is admittedly 'upside down' (i.e. the contrary of the truth). And what about these wild ideas?

The assumptions that turn women into the liberal intellectuals of the film universe also turn actual liberal intellectuals, in the minds of many people, into women [p. 68].

The war put women in men's jobs, and the murderous wives of the forties... probably represent a bad dream of soldiers coming home [p. 71].

But then what happened in the fifties? Did we put Communists in the place of women as the monsters we loved to hate? Perhaps we did [p. 71].

The fifties were a peak in American self-deception [p. 72].

We were tolerant then. For the whore with the heart of gold we substituted the heart that went whoring, in love with all mankind [p. 74].

A major English response to the whole of life is a complicated resignation [p. 76].

Look at the get-out devices: 'in the minds of many people', (how many, which, how do we know?); 'probably' (how estimated); 'perhaps' (perhaps not, Hollywood's anti-red films were a brief phase); 'we' (i.e. Wood and who else?). Moreover why was there more self-deception in the 1950's than in 1776 or 1976? How does one measure self-deception? It is at least arguable that fifties politicians like Eisenhower and Dulles had a clearer and less blinkered view of the world than they have been credited with; it is also arguable that the British national character doesn't exist. America is not competitive and Britain resigned as such, but American social institutions are arranged to foster competition, while British social institutions are arranged to confine and mute it. There are good geographical and historical reasons for this. No designing hand, explicit philosophy, or national character is needed for the explanation; if anything, it is the other way around.

David Thomson's *America in the Dark*[16] is, like Wood's, a reflection on the movies in America.[17] Its theme is that 'Hollywood is so pervasive a culture that

16 David Thomson, *America in the Dark*, Hollywood and the Gift of Unreality, New York: Morrow, 1977. Pp. 288. Can. $10.95.

17 Perhaps there is something about my generation. David Thomson is of it, and is also an Englishman transplanted to North American film teaching. My colleague at York University Robin Wood is another example, and John Russell Taylor of the University

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its influence is as great now as ever; it is only proper that a source of make-believe should be more potent when not actual or material.... This book is an exploration of what that relationship has meant to America, and the way "America" has become an imaginary future for the rest of the world...' (p. 33). In the course of his argument he ranges widely, touching down for extended consideration of *Citizen Kane*, gangster movies, women's pictures, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *All the President's Men*—the latter being seen as maverick products possible only in American popular cinema.

Thomson is sceptical: 'Film departments are often recruited from disenchanted or heretical literature teachers and while they admit the compulsive thrill of moving images in the dark, they flinch from the women's picture' (p. 204). He queries the idea that the director is the responsible creator, and also the notions that films mirror the collective unconscious and that film is a language. He also makes slips ('For fifty years few reflected on [film's] deeper influence' [p. 192]), and overstates ('But perhaps the cinema has made us more lonely, more anxious, more insecure, and more imaginatively alienated than we might have been' [p. 236]).

Aside from weaknesses of scholarship and argument, the gravest shortcoming of the window-gazers we have so far considered (with the conspicuous exception of Monaco) is lack of method. They lack method, I suspect, not just because they fail to attach themselves to an intellectual discipline, but because they are writing without the guidance of a properly formulated intellectual problem and hence of theories matched to that problem and a tradition of discussion surrounding those theories. As a result, what stands out in their work are the faults; the insights and good points are unmemorable because they are unrelated to any continuing intellectual discussions, and hence do not have criteria by which they can be evaluated. Only a certain fluency in the writing distinguishes the better from the worse. Richards, Berton and Cavell write poorly; Wood, Thomson and, as we shall see, the other Smith write well. Monaco, the exception, displays all the virtues of scholarship and historiographical awareness. His book is, despite my criticisms of it, an exemplar of what film scholarship should be.

An ambitious attempt to use movies as a window is made by Julian Smith, a Professor of American Literature and Cultural History at the University of New Hampshire and author of *Looking Away*.[18] His book contains elaborate examination of American attitudes to war in general and to the Vietnam war in particular as displayed in the movies. Although such a summary sounds unpromising, because it is often said that there are no films about the war in Vietnam, Smith in fact locates a handful directly about the war, about veterans of the war, and others apparently remote from the war, yet carrying highly significant undertones, e.g. westerns.[19] Smith writes well, has done his homework at the Movieola, and bombards us with intriguing scraps of information (such as that

of Southern California is someone I knew at School. Those of us born just before World War II were around to have movies work on our imaginations during times of great social crisis, and then to watch the beloved movies crumble before television. We are the last movie generation.

18 New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975. Pp. 236. Can. $10.25.

19 *Saigon*, 1948; *Rogue's Regiment*, 1938; *A Yank in Indo China*, 1952; *China Gate*, 1957; *Five Gates to Hell*, 1958; *The Quiet American*, 1958; *Brushfire*, 1962; *The Ugly American*, 1962; *A Yank in Viet Nam*, 1964; *To the Shores of Hell*, 1965; *Operation CIA*, 1965; *The Lost Command*, 1966; *Born Losers*, 1967; *Angels from Hell*, 1968; *The Angry Breed*, 1968; *The Green Berets*, 1968; *Hail Hero!*, 1969; *Satan's Sadists*, 1969; *The Big Bounce*, 1969; *Homer*, 1970; *Summertree*, 1971; *Chrome and Hot Leather*, 1971; *Welcome Home, Johnny Bristol*, 1971; *Limbo*, 1973; etc.

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John Ford supervised a documentary for the USIS, *Vietnam! Vietnam!*, that reduced the war to the western formula, and was found unfit for release). His book is the single best argument for the incursion of the literary-historical generalist into film studies. Yet Smith finds 'with the possible exception of *The Losers*, a motor-cycle gang exploitation picture, every American fiction film set in Viet Nam has supported our involvement' (p. 20). This is because of pre-censorship: 'a general disinclination to get involved in a brouhaha unless a significant opportunity for profit is involved' (p. 20). If this is true, then I don't see much to be critical of. But Smith himself casts doubt on its truth when he mentions many films critical of war in general and the Vietnam war in particular (veteran films, student rebellion films), and shows that the boy scout era of war films has been left behind. So far from indicting Hollywood for political caution, Smith's book has given us plenty of grist for the defence of American pluralism.

Clever insights, erudite overkill, together with lack of problems and method characterize Frank D. McConnell's *The Spoken Seen*, subtitled 'Film and the Romantic Imagination'.[20] McConnell teaches English at Northwestern University, and he too is struggling to say that film is a language, that its traditions, artefacts, stars and even machinery are touchstones of self-reference. Towards the end there are excellent discussions of *Pick-Up on South Street, The Creature From the Black Lagoon* and *Warlock*—in which he shows how genre is not what creators think in terms of, but what operates in their minds perhaps below the level of consciousness. A final chapter on the star as a piece of the film-maker's vocabulary is sensitive to what film acting is and what it is not. Throughout the writing is racy (for example, sex-star Edy Williams' remark, 'There'll be all sorts of frontal nudity and sex, and I'm going to make everyone in the audience *come*', or Sam Goldwyn's suggestions that male star quality is not just knowing a man has balls, but a matter of hearing them clacking together when he's on screen are discussed). But a book that wants to show us that 'film ... is one of the most revealing historical arts available to us, a deep insight into the psyche of its age' (p. 172) gets us bogged down in this:

> ... film, through its own internal, ontological dynamics, gives us possible solutions to those problems, solutions which anticipate and frequently surpass the solutions offered by our most valuable writers. Film, in other words, has grown to be a kind of quintessential *writing*, possessed of all the velleities and difficulties we have come to associate with that seemingly innocent word. We have already discussed film as the writing of Cartesian space. It remains to examine how film may also become the writing of that other space, the space of the primal cave, the home, out of which and in contrast to which our idea of the great, difficult world is formed [p. 102].

What is the upshot? Not that film archives are of no value. From time to time they may be very useful illustrations or supplements to the work of historians; they are fraught, like any documents, with pitfalls. (Notice that I have not mentioned the point that much 'fiction' film is exaggerated and misleading if taken as a serious guide to what the society was like in which it was made.) For historians of film, or fashion, etc. films are essential. This defence is weak, but it is sufficient. Overkill in defence is not a good principle. All film should be saved; only destruction needs justification.

2. A WINDOW ON MOVIES

Studies of the movies, rather than study of other things through the movies, takes two forms, history and criticism. A third form, sociology, is still miniscule.

20 Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975. Pp. xiv + 195. $2.95.

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This has partly to do with a tendency to collapse sociology into one or other of the other two. For example, Wood's *America at the Movies* is popularized history and sociology by a non-specialist in either discipline. Professor Stuart Kaminsky's promisingly titled *American Film Genres*[21] makes no reference to the sociological meaning of genre, and consists simply of a chapter each on western films, gangster films, horror films, etc. Andrew Tudor, who teaches sociology at the University of York, also joins sociology with criticism. His first book *Image and Influence*[22] is a survey of the possibilities of film sociology which argues that sociology and film criticism should somehow fuse their endeavours. (He explicitly pleads with sociologists to take seriously the 'insights' of critics.) True to this view, his next book *Theories of Film* is a survey essay on the writings of various critics.[23]

Having devoted a whole book (1970) to advocating the sociological study of film as a separate discipline, I shall leave that issue and concentrate in this survey on matters of history and criticism. I shall try to show how both historical and critical work suffer from lack of a sociological and philosophical touch.

* * * * *

A basic trouble with the study of the history of the movies is that it has not yet been taken over by professional historians. History is a disciplined activity that far too many writers about film know little about. Hence they underestimate the difficulties. They write histories of the movies premissed on unexamined critical, historical and historiographical assumptions. They persistently fail to state and analyze their first-order historical *problems*, to relate their own work to what has gone before, and to indicate where their own research has been original. Often enough authors see fit to confine their research to viewing the bulk of the films they discuss. This assumes that associated facts about the persons, events, firms and so on responsible for the film have been previously established by other scholars on whom we can rely. This is far from being the case. I know of no writer on film, for example, who, when discussing putative influence of film or on film, closely investigates the actual dating of the films discussed. Films are in preparation many months, and completed ones are sometimes withheld from release for a time. Such details are sufficient to break an influence argument altogether. Yet one never sees an author indicating dates exactly; most simply rely on the date of first release to theatres. Much worse, a great many authors who write about film indulge in what might be called 'period magic'. This is the idea that, by magic, time divides naturally into decades, and that, moreover, the ten-year marks within each century are highly significant. Hence we are told that the teens, the twenties, the thirties, the forties, the fifties, the sixties, the seventies are highly significant units in the development of film.[24]

21 Stuart Kaminsky, *American Film Genres*, Approaches to a Critical Theory of Popular Film, Dayton, Ohio: Pflaum, 1974. Pp. iv + 232. Can. $9.05.

22 Andrew Tudor, *Image and Influence*, Studies in the Sociology of Film, London: Allen and Unwin, 1974. Pp. 260. £5.75. Cf. my review, *Times Higher Education Supplement*, no. 182, April 11, 1975, p. 21.

23 Andrew Tudor, *Theories of Film* (Cinema One Series, No. 23), London: Secker and Warburg, 1974. Pp. 168. £1.30.

24 A useful series of survey monographs has appeared under the titles, *Hollywood in the Twenties, Thirties*, etc. Yet the dominance of individuals and firms, of generations, events such as sound and the Great Depression, and changes in style constantly burst these decade boundaries. For an explicit discussion of the problem and even a defence of it see William K. Everson, *American Silent Film*, New York: Oxford University

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An equally contentious, but less obvious, assumption is that wars punctuate film history; consequently we get such gross periodizations as beginnings, World War I, *l'entre deux guerres*, World War II, post-war, Korea and McCarthy, the fifties, the Vietnam years, and so on. Wars do not coincide with decade divisions, and so these two chronologies sit poorly with one another. It is amusing to see some authors struggling to operate with both. Lack of historical background often also shows through as film writers glibly sum up developments in the world outside the studios. This kind of generalization usually betrays an attitude of journalism rather than scholarship, marked by verbal transitions such as, 'Meanwhile, in Washington . . .', etc.

All this is obvious enough one would like to think; but there is little or no awareness of it in most of what is published as movie history. Great men or Cleopatra's nose assumptions go without challenge; not to mention writing film history in terms of heroes and villains. Heroes are usually inventors and pioneers, creators and artists, visionaries and theorists, even critics; villains are usually businessmen, investors, entrepreneurs (moguls, czars), producers, firms, theatre managers, politicians, and even the general public.

More subtle are the unexamined critical and historiographical assumptions. The history of painting or music should, it seems, obviously begin with paintings and painters, compositions and composers. What should the history of movies begin with? Movies, of course; but who is responsible for them? The answer usually given is directors. Other claimants are producers,[25] writers,[26] stars,[27] or even studios.[28] No general answer may be possible, but, if pressed, I would opt for a committee or unit, sometimes dominated by one of these people, sometimes not;[29] the answer in any single case being a matter of fact requiring research. Pauline Kael has suggested the practical solution of methodological pluralism, namely, in advance we do not know, therefore, each film should be approached and analyzed with the help of as much information as we can obtain.[30]

Critically-minded historians of painting or music know that concentrating exclusively on painters and composers is a mistake. For one thing, they always connect up with a past (their definition and identification is hardly possible otherwise), a past that sets their artistic problems, that constitutes a tradition with which they seek continuity or from which they seek discontinuity. For another thing artists often group themselves into, and hence function in, schools such as pre-Raphaelite, Group of Seven, *Groupe des Six*, atonalists, etc. Furthermore, artists are at work in a particular place and time, whether seventeenth

Press, 1978. Pp. x + 387. Can. $20.95. The first volume of a new series entitled *A History of the American Cinema*, Everson's book is serious and based on such careful research. Yet he declines to discuss and correct his predecessors.

25 One of the first critics (later a director) to argue for the producer was Karel Reisz, see his 'The Showman Producer', in *Cinema 1951*, ed. Roger Manwell, Harmondsworth, 1951, pp. 160-67.

26 See Richard Corliss, *Talking Pictures*, New York 1974. Pauline Kael in *The Citizen Kane Book* (New York 1971) argues a very strong case for the writer; as does Howard Koch in 'A Playwright Looks at the Filmwright', *Sight and Sound*, 1950, pp. 210-14.

27 Unreflective members of the general public sometimes think the stars make it up as they go along.

28 See the Introduction to Higham and Greenberg, 1968.

29 Hugh Fordin's aptly subtitled *The Freed Unit at MGM* (New York 1975) suggests that in the twenty-five years after sound, in big studios, film-to-film dominance changes, but that in overall output the committee and its working conditions persist.

30 Tudor castigates her only because he fails to grasp this point (p. 16).

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century Amsterdam or nineteenth century Russia. None of these things can be ignored by the historian of art. Yet none of these three things (tradition, schools, and society) is unproblematic. Attitude to the past, artistic schools, and social setting need to be handled critically. The atonalist revolt against romanticism did not necessarily free them from romantic influence. One could argue that in the movies the entire history is a series of variations on romanticism (see McConnell), couched as both acceptance and revolt; that many of the alleged schools had little or no cohesion (e.g. documentary, expressionism, neo-realism, the new wave); and that films bear an intricate and woefully unanalyzed relationship to their society.

Many of these inadequacies will show themselves and be rectified by time. Academically serious work is beginning to be done, old shibboleths overthrown. Elementary studies of social context, traditions and schools are beginning. Period thinking, great men thinking, and so on are being challenged. Where the deepest lack is, and where I am not yet optimistic, is in the basic question of what the history of the movies is about. Biographies, narratives, illustration of a critical *idée fixe* or conventional wisdom all seem to me intellectually barren. History has to do with explaining how and why things happened. What do we want to explain about the movies? The achievement, I suppose, of the great artists (or great committees). But, then, we need some idea of who they are. That is the problem of criticism.

Before proceeding with the problem, let me call attention to some historical and genre studies of note. D. J. Wenden and Robert Sklar[31] are both professional academic historians, and both have written new film histories, Wenden's on America and Britain up to 1927, Sklar's about America only to date. Both also use the social setting rather than great men as an organizational focus.

Wenden's tale of the nickel medium developed by Jewish moguls for immigrant audiences and the gradual emergence of popular art is quite familiar. He does not take the reader into his confidence about where the problems of academic film history lie, and hence where what he says is objectionable and where contentious. He writes a good chapter on film and politics, although he seems to feel that Russian films were persuasive because Russian film-makers attended to techniques of mass persuasion. This is a *non sequitur*, and perhaps stems from an astounding comparison of Eisenstein to Goethe and Shakespeare (p. 76). Reinforcing his view (mentioned on p. 375 above) of film as valuable to the social historian, he claims for John Grierson's 1929 documentary about fishermen, *Drifters*, historical value as a film of real people in real situations. There are clear factual errors.[32]

31 Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, A Social History of American Movies, New York: Random House, 1975. Pp. x + 340. $14.95.

32 Page 10, he repeats the legend that by 1929 the movies were America's fourth largest industry, a contention disposed of by Mae Huettig (*Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry*, A Study in Industrial Organization, Philadelphia, 1944, pp. 56ff.) in 1944. On p. 12 Eadweard Muybridge's oddly spelled name is mispelled. On p. 108 he suggests socially critical movies operated with heroes and villains, and never criticized the system. On pp. 153-54 he repeats Terry Ramsaye's story that Hollywood was attractive to pioneers because, among other things, of the closeness of the border when Patents Trust agents were on the prowl. But see Richard Dale Batman, 'The Founding of the Hollywood Motion Picture Industry', *Journal of the West*, 10, 1971, 609-23. On p. 165 Robert Flaherty's backer for *Nanook of the North* is said to be an American fur company, when in fact it was Revillon Frères. On p. 166 Wenden implies that Douglas Fairbanks Sr. was a former All-American college football star. In fact, according to

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His central chapter 'Movies and Society' surveys the ground and adds a new point: movie houses were never licensed for booze, hence the cinema was preserved as a place of family entertainment. He might have added that when films themselves came to seem morally objectionable this threatened their status as 'family' entertainment and restrictions on admission led to youth's being flung back to the street, the gang, the pub. His conclusion is that the mass popularity of movies entrenched the age of the common man and his pleasures.

Robert Sklar taught history at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and now is Chairman of the Film Department at New York University. His *Movie-Made America* (an allusion to Raymond Moley's 1938 volume *Are We Movie Made?* which in turn alludes to H. J. Forman's 1933 volume *Our Movie Made Children*) is bulkier than Wenden's, as beautifully illustrated as Berton's. Sklar, like Wendon, sees the movies as growing out of the demands of the immigrant working class, and constituting a common people's challenge to big business and established American culture. This very challenge, he thinks, explains the attempt to censor and control:

> It was a humbling experience for the traditional cultural elite to learn, as they did in the 1920's that their healthy and wholesome minds did not infallibly arrive at unanimity, even on what seemed so clear cut an issue as obscenity in motion pictures. This recognition was part of a process of the devaluation of what may be called "literary" forms of opinion, in contrast to "social scientific". In the previous generation, the beliefs and judgments of professors, clergymen, essayists and other cultural figures were regarded by their peers as sufficient to define and explain social reality; during the cultural crises and transitions of the war period, social science practitioners had emerged as equals, if not superiors, in the field of social fact and as guides to right conduct. Social science methods may have been no less subjective, opinionated and class bound than the explanatory modes of lay and clerical essayists, but in the 1920s their aura of modest self-confidence, precision and careful procedure seemed to offer a clarity and persuasiveness that all competing forms of social explanation lacked [p. 134].

Sklar's book is lucid and absorbing, and contains quite a lot of primary research (although it is deficient in scholarly apparatus). It complements and supplements Lewis Jacob's classic *The Rise of the American Film* (1939).

When we turn to Garth Jowett's even bulkier *Film the Democratic Art*,[33] however, we enter an entirely new order of endeavour. Jowett, like Monaco, Sklar and Wenden, is an academic historian, who teaches communications at the University of Windsor, and he has written an original, meticulous and path-breaking history. For one thing, it is entirely new, utilizing primary sources no-one else has touched. For another, it constantly tests received opinion and generalization against hard documentary evidence. For a third, it is a true social history that never is deflected by discussion of film directors or film art. Jowett looks at movies as a new social institution erupting into American society, and at the efforts of people in that society to understand, control, tame and utilize that institution. Although the book is bulky and has much apparatus, it tells a story. Movies are not (*pace* the received view) the poor people's art. From the first they are a commercial potential, an aesthetic potential, and the focus of a grave social ambivalence—attractive and threatening. Movies join booze, jazz, cars and radio as one of the transforming agencies of twentieth century American culture. So much of what Jowett writes is totally new and fascinating that all other recently published books on the movies pale by comparison. Jowett has set

Richard Schickel (1973) Fairbanks was a college dropout who did one term at Harvard in a special course. He was obsessed with the theatre from his early teens and was always noted only for acrobatics, not for competitive games.)

33 Boston: Little Brown, 1975. Pp. xx + 518. $19.95.

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an exacting standard for future work on movie history, one that may not be surpassed for a long time.

Professor Harry M. Geduld teaches comparative literature at Indiana University. His *Birth of the Talkies*[34] plugs a long-noticed gap in movie history, namely, the arrival of sound. A great deal of space (over one hundred pages) is taken up with an account of how various lines of experiment were explored to combine film and synchronized sound. These experiments go back to before the turn of the century. Using patents office records, newspapers, and the work of others on the early history of the cinema, Geduld is able to show that the sound revolution of 1926-27 was not the result of a technical breakthrough. Indeed, the Warner Brothers Vitaphone system was a disc-synchronized one, tried out on short films extensively before the first full-length feature was hazarded (with music and synchronization of the songs only). Warners' reasons for undertaking the risky venture had to do with their economically ailing company. The public quickly became very excited by the glimpses of synchronized dialogue, and so pointed the direction exploitation needed to take. So much for the theory that necessity is the mother of invention; rather, invention is the midwife of demand. After this initial public *éclat*, sound-on film was perfected, and quickly ousted disc-synchronization. To modern ears it was a considerable time before sound recording was anything close to an acceptable fidelity. Improvements in simple sound recording itself had to come first.

Geduld's book reads rather like a revised doctoral thesis: it is too long and detailed in many places where nothing new is added and only assiduous research is displayed. Although he corrects some received misconceptions, the story is not significantly altered from an account such as that of Lewis Jacobs,[35] and although he explicitly mentions the conflicting published accounts of the same episode, there is no thread of thesis or argument in the book. Partly this has to do with his failure to scrutinize and take to task the many published histories of the period, and partly it has to do with his not using company records. I don't know whether the records of all of the majors exist, and if they exist whether they are open to inspection,[36] but certainly the analysis and argument of Mercillon (1953) is nowhere discussed.[37] J. Douglas Gomery's unpublished Ph.D. thesis has already superseded Geduld.[38]

* * * * *

A great deal of the so-called criticism of film, like a great deal of criticism of the arts, isn't worth the paper it is printed upon. Most studies of directors, thema-

34 Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975. Pp. 337. $12.50.

35 Lewis Jacobs (1939), pp. 297-301.

36 Wisconsin Center of Theatre and Film Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison have the whole of United Artists records up to 1951. See Tino Balio, *United Artists*, The Company Built by the Stars, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976. Pp. 323. $15.50.37 As I understand it, Mercillon argues very convincingly that the movies were not part of the mainstream of American business before sound. Largely self-financed, they could not command the vast resources needed to capitalize for sound, and that is where the traditional concentrations of capital moved in and gained control (especially the houses of Morgan and Rockefeller), a process fully consolidated during the bankruptcies of the depression. Mercillon is not even mentioned in Robert Stanley's *The Celluloid Empire*. A History of the American Motion Picture Industry. New York: Hastings House, 1978. Pp. viii + 328. Can. $9.50.

38 J. Douglas Gomery, 'The Coming of Sound to the American Cinema: The Transformation of an Industry'. Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1975. Two extracts have appeared, see Gomery 1976*a*, 1976*b*.

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tics, schools, national cinemas, and so on are an insult to their readers' intelligence. One reason for this is common to all the arts: the virtual collapse of standards in the face of modernism; to be more precise, the abandonment of standards by those who should know better.[39] Film has not been in existence long enough for us to talk of a collapse of standards, or even of modernism.[40] Here is where it differs decisively from the other arts, and where it seems to me both film history and film criticism flounder.

The question I am raising is very basic: are the movies a traditional high art? I shall suggest that they are a popular art, a very different thing, and that they pose diferent historical and critical questions. Why do I think they are a popular art and not a high art?

1. The way they are made. Traditional high arts are the work of an artist or a workshop dominated by a master. Films are almost always the work of a committee. The fact that, to a greater or lesser extent, the committee may come to be dominated by one individual or another does not alter the point. The work of committees needs to be studied by group psychology and sociology.

2. Films are not self-contained: they draw heavily on previous films; they use formulas, exploit genres, go in cycles, employ stereotyping and conventions that even the particular committee credited with making them cannot take credit for since they evolve slowly.

It is true that Gombrich, in *The Story of Art*, shows how painting also draws on itself; conventions, styles, discoveries, techniques are added to the tradition. Similar claims could doubtless be urged for fiction, poetry, music, theatre, etc. What then is special about movies? Perhaps it is that the conventions are not yet diffused into the general culture and hence constitute a specialty, a barrier to the unitiated. Those trained in literature or music are naïve to think they can simply transfer their critical skills to movies.

3. As a result there is no agreed body of work that constitutes *the* tradition of the art of the film.[41] Chaplin and Eisenstein would scarcely get a mention in my canon; Bresson and Hitchcock wouldn't get into many other people's. Where literature has its Shakespeare, music its Bach, painting its Rembrandt, the movies have—who? They do not even have a starting point.

Perhaps the movies are too young, perhaps the popular arts, the collective arts are not really understood yet. We don't know how to judge them, how to explain them, how to study them. The problems are unclear, hence the theories more so (*pace* Tudor, Andrews). Each year I screen movies to a new set of undergraduates, and each year they react differently and unpredictably to the same movies. At the very best, it seems to me, academic study of the movies has to try to sort out and explain some of this. Gans's theory of subcultures is one such attempt.

Herbert J. Gans teaches sociology at Columbia University. In *Popular Culture and High Culture* he works out in essay length ideas he has been publishing since 1957.[42] Gans is critical of the usual highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow distinctions, and of those critics of popular culture who dismiss everything below highbrow as *kitsch*. He endeavours to argue first, that the high, middle, low ranking does not coincide with a decline in quality; but rather, second, are labels for whole taste cultures and their public; and, third, that social class,

39 See Wolfe (1975).

40 *Pace* Mr. Armes.

41 Cp. Tudor, p. 8. An interesting discussion of criticism is to be found in Francois Truffaut, *The Films in My Life*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978. Pp. x + 358. Can. $15.95.

42 New York: Basic Books, 1974. Pp. xii + 179. $10.00.

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education and affluence are determinants of which taste culture people find themselves in; although, fourth, clear distinctions of quality are possible within each taste culture. He does not deny that a case can be made for the overall superiority of highbrow, creator-orientated culture. What he wants to stress is that other taste cultures cannot be lightly dismissed as indistinguishable and worthless. A class society that allows freedom and pluralism must develop a more tolerant and encouraging policy towards the alternative taste cultures that exist within it.

One might expect that those who write about genres would know and rely on Gans's work. This would be to expect too much. Kaminsky, Solomon, Wright and Cawelti do not even mention his name. *Genre*, a French word meaning kind or type, has become a vogue-word in criticism. Lawrence Alloway (1964, and 1971) hinted that genre should be both a sociological and an aesthetic category, that the grooving of American films into genres, and then into cycles within genres, told one something about the American film industry and its audience. Furthermore, the evaluation of films made no sense without that grooved context. Kaminsky teaches film history, film authorship, film genre and production in the Division of Film, Northwestern University. His volume offers genre criticism as an antidote to highbrowism, but he is unable even to define it: genre = 'works . . . sharing . . . motifs . . . that . . . identify . . . a kind or style' (p. 10).

Stanley Solomon, who teaches at Iona College, tries to reconcile genre and highbrowism by offering[43] a run-down of the usual genres—western, musical, horror, crime, detective, war—that is not thorough, not geared to popularity, does not explain how limiting conventions can be turned into potent expressive instruments, but merely gives three or four pages on those genre films he considers have transcended more popular film-making, that go 'beyond formula'. 'Genre in the cinema, as elsewhere, surely provides refuge for much mediocrity, but it also provides us with much art, and it is this aspect of genre that concerns me in this study' (p. 9). The book ends up as short essays in the literary-critical style about this film and that; we are taken 'beyond formula' without the discipline of going through it.[44] His level of accuracy recalls that of Cavell and Wenden.[45]

Professor Will Wright, a sociologist at the University of California, San Diego, has written 'a structural study of the western', *Six Guns and Society*.[46] His beginning is promising in that he intends to study not just any old westerns in any old way, but the sixty-four top grossing westerns between 1930 and 1972 by means of a methodologically disciplined application of structuralism, this rather vague word having come to mean the view that myths and stories conceal or

43 *Beyond Formula*, American Film Genres, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976. Pp. 310. Can. $7.55.

44 The best formula-genre study I know of is Alloway (1971).

45 On p. 134, discussing *The Bride of Frankenstein*, Solomon asserts that in the sequence with the blind hermit the monster's natural goodness surfaces. Ill-treatment and self-defence explain his violence. Solomon forgets that the monster has the brain of a killer (see *Frankenstein*), and is apparently amoral. Playing with the little girl by the river in that film, he enjoys throwing the flowers into the water and watching them float. Guilelessly, he picks up the little girl and throws her in, and is quite disappointed when she doesn't float. (This sequence was cut from some versions of the movie.) He is violent, strong, clumsy, and is only restrained from attacking Baron Frankenstein his creator in *Bride* by the persuasive Dr. Pretorius who has promised him a bride. Solomon also thinks the hermit perishes in the fire, when he is clearly led to safety by the two men who have recognized the monster.

46 Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975. Pp. viii + 217. $10.00.

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symbolize sets of binary oppositions, that these are the *meaning* of the myths, and that disclosing them has explanatory force. Being a sociologist, Professor Wright does not think the structures he discerns flow from the basic workings of the mind, but rather from the social context.

The book seeks to explain the popularity of the western. So far as I can see his answer is that the western is popular because it 'represents a conceptual model for social action' (p. 198). The author proceeds to argue his thesis by first reducing the variety of westerns to four basic types: the classical western, the vengeance western, the transitional western, and the professional western. The classical western (1930-1950, e.g. *Duel in the Sun, Shane, The Far Country*)[47] shows a lone hero entering society, saving it, and being accepted; the vengeance variation (1949-1961, e.g. *Stagecoach, The Man from Laramie, One-Eyed Jacks)* shows a vengeful hero who makes himself an outcast and then returns; the transitional western (1950-1954, e.g. *Broken Arrow, High Noon, Johnny Guitar*) shows a hero protecting society and then leaving it; while the professional western (1959 to date, e.g. *Rio Bravo, The Professionals, True Grit, The Wild Bunch)* shows a skilled group accomplishing a task then staying together.

How are these changes to be explained, and how is their popularity to be explained? The author's view, to put it crudely, is that they parallel and symbolize America's transition from a market economy through a planned economy to a corporate economy, and that the myths constitute a kind of injunction: the way to achieve in a market economy is to separate yourself from others and use your strength as an autonomous individual (pp. 186-87):

> The vengeance variation—in the context of a tentative planned economy—weakens the compatibility of the individual and society by showing that the path to respect and love is to separate yourself from others, struggling individually against your many and strong enemies but striving to remember and return to the softer values of marriage and humility. The transition theme, anticipating new social values, argues that love and companionship are available—at the cost of becoming a social outcast—to the individual who stands firmly and righteously against the intolerance and ignorance of society. Finally, the professional plot,—in the context of a corporate economy— argues that companionship and respect are to be achieved only by becoming a skilled technician, who joins an elite group of professionals, accepts any job that is offered, and has loyalty only to the integrity of the team, not to any competing social or community values [p. 187].

The view of the American economy is explicitly taken from Galbraith, MacPherson and Habermas.

Though the author's theory of the relation between films and society is not stated, it is implicit that the symbolic structure of popular myths portrays the dominant pattern in the economy and hence encapsulates its rules for success, provides a basis for social action. Regardless of whether the typology of plots is satisfying,[48] regardless of whether one swallows the sweeping generalizations about 'the' American economy,[49] regardless of whether one thinks structuralism explains anything, or indeed says anything, the decisive question is whether films bear such a simple relationship to society as is required for Professor Wright's purposes. Since he specifies no mechanism that would enable such symbolism to get itself built into commercial entertainment, indeed he consciously side-steps the issue on page 13, there is no arguing with him. Neverthe-

47 Concentration on box office winners has the disadvantage that archetypal classic western like *The Gunfighter, The Westerner, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, etc. are not used. Wright forgets to use the ideal-type method.

48 Whatever happened to the 'psychological western', usually dated from *Broken Arrow*? What of the Indian themes?

49 Galbraith, Habermas, MacPherson are hardly uncontroversial.

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less, here are some general reasons why the relationship might not be so straightforward. 1. Films are conceived up to two years before release. 2. Films are related to other films, as follow-up vehicles for stars, or as parts of cycles, or simply to cash in on a new gimmick. 3. Films are made by committees, units, who discuss and forge compromises on all points at all stages of production, each film constituting for itself a different committee. 4. The view of America and the world as seen from Los Angeles may not be that of Galbraith *et al.*, or indeed that of the many fellow-travellers who worked in Hollywood up to the late forties, and then were purged.

Even if they are not mentioned, Gans's sociological ideas are very neatly complemented by the ruminations of John Cawelti, a professor of English in the University of Chicago in his *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*, subtitled 'Formula Stories in Art and Popular Culture'.[50] Cawelti's thesis is that popular art, as opposed to high or serious art, operates mainly with formulas. A formula is variously:

> a structure of narrative or dramatic conventions employed in a great number of individual works [p. 5], ways in which specific cultural themes and stereotypes become embedded in more universal story archetypes [p. 6], a combination or synthesis of a number of specific cultural conventions with a more universal story form or archetype [p. 6].

Formulas are utilized to construct an ideal world without the disorder, ambiguity, uncertainty and limitations of the world of our experience. Formulas are thus moral fantasy; whereas high art is mimetic, i.e. confronts us with the world as we know it.

> formulas become collective cultural products because they successfully articulate a pattern of fantasy that is at least acceptable to if not preferred by the cultural groups who enjoy them. Formulas enable the members of a group to share the same fantasies [p. 34]
> 1. Formula stories affirm existing interests and attitudes by presenting an imaginary world that is aligned with these interests and attitudes...
> 2. Formulas resolve tensions and ambiguities resulting from the conflicting interests of different groups within the culture or from ambiguous attitudes towards particular values
> 3. Formulas enable the audience to explore in fantasy the boundary between the permitted and the forbidden and to experience in a carefully controlled way the possibility of stepping across this boundary...
> 4. ... formulas assist in the process of assimilating changes in values to traditional imaginative constructs [pp. 35-36].

Adventure is the moral fantasy of victory over death (p. 40). Romance is the moral fantasy of love, triumphant and permanent, overcoming all obstacles and difficulties (pp. 41-42). Mystery is the moral fantasy that all problems have a clear and rational solution (p. 43). Melodrama is the fantasy of a world that operates according to our hearts' desires (p. 45). Alien being or states fantasize that the unknowable can be known and related to in some meaningful fashion (p. 40).

The next seven chapters apply this to popular crime fiction, especially *The Godfather*, to the classical and the 'hard-boiled' detective story, to the western, and to the best-selling social melodrama of Hailey, Metalious, Robbins, Susann, and Wallace.

Films are referred to here and there throughout the book, but always in a cursory and unsatisfactory way, given that the author previously published an excellent study of the western.[51]

50 Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976. Pp. viii + 336. $15.00.
51 *Six Gun Mystique*, Bowling Green: Popular Press, 1971. Pp. x + 138. Paper $2.50.

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To end this survey I come now to the timeless ones, the purely aesthetic writers who ignore history, the sociology of production and of the audience, who look at films and film makers as though they were in an aesthetic vacuum.

Roy Armes's book attracted my attention because of its title, *Film and Reality*. This vexed philosophical question has long seemed in need of extended treatment.[52] Alas, the title is misleading. Armes has actually written just one more general introduction to the history of the cinema, more highly selective than most, and organized by theme, not period.

Starting from what J. Dudley Andrew rightly calls the cliché that all movies take their style either from the brief actualities of Lumière, or the illusions and fantasies of Méliès, Armes has two-thirds of his book laid out. Some fish, of course, slip through the net. If Renoir is a realist and Griffith an illusionist, what is Eisenstein? What happened to the musical? Armes invents a third category called 'modernism', which seems to mean experimental or innovative in some obvious or self-conscious way, and hence embraces the avant-garde, Eisenstein, Buñuel (not a poetic realist?), Welles, Resnais, and Godard.

Fair enough. All organizing schemes have their problems. The chief flaw in Armes's approach is the philosophical and critical failure. He tries to operate with such notions as reality, fantasy, truth, lies and so on, but only succeeds in getting completely muddled. He says the camera does not cheat, but doesn't say if the pencil does. The camera records the surface details of real life, yet realism is just one style among others (p. 20). Watch him wriggle over Flaherty. Flaherty was an explorer, who wanted to show Eskimo life. Yet he insisted on reconstructing a lost past, on staging everything for his camera. In other words he *faked* it. Yet Armes declares Flaherty was 'not interested in the harsh everyday life of the Aran Islanders and their monotonous fight for food and a living' (p. 35). Flaherty's films are not tiny but absolutely true vignettes like those of Lumière (p. 25), but spacious (i.e. big) and far removed from social and political realities (p. 38), (i.e. absolutely false).

Confusion deepens when we are told documentarists extract from actual subject matter, and can be judged by what we learn from other sources (pp. 48-49). By chapter 6 events have to be rebuilt; by chapter 7 realism can be poetic; and by chapter 8 realism becomes 'films about the lives of ordinary people' (p. 65).

What can one make of all this? That the author is confused? Undoubtedly. That what he says can be rectified? No. In the naïve sense Armes wants, there is no simple reality or actuality that can or cannot be captured on film. Films *create* worlds, their styles are their worlds; creativity and imagination are involved in fiction, history, sociology and science. The difference between a novelist's truth and an historian's truth is that what the one describes did, whereas what the other describes did not, actually happen.[53]

Andrew Tudor and J. Dudley Andrew[54] both write about film theories. When I see the word 'theory', I immediately reach for a problem. If there are film theories (of which I am not altogether convinced), what problems of 'film' do they solve? Tudor counters this challenge by showing how the status of theory has been claimed for everything from general assertions about the medium, to making explicit the assumptions behind film criticism, to a systematic body of empirically tested knowledge, to the consistent application of principle. But

52 See Jarvie 1978.

53 See Nowell-Smith 1972.

54 *The Major Film Theories*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1976. Pp. x + 278. Paper $3.95.

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answers without questions are difficult to judge. Tudor himself poses the following two questions: how to understand the empirical operation of the film medium and how to make judgements of quality (p. 14). The first he calls the quest for a model, and second, the quest for an aesthetic. Most theorists deal with one or the other, or mix them up. Eisenstein is the beginning: he began the analysis of the use of the language of film to gain effects. John Grierson, on the other hand, elevates realism into an aesthetic, justified sociologically by the modern need for a cultural context that will draw together atomized industrial society.

In Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin an attempt is made to work out such a realist aesthetic. Both flounder because they proceed from the contentious assumption that the cinema has an essence and that that essence is its power to lay bare realities. The latter founders because capturing the real leaves no scope for creativity.

Turning next to recent developments, Tudor has a final chapter on *auteur* and *genre*. *Auteur* writing starts, I suppose, from the question, who is responsible for this interesting work, and how do its effects succeed? Answer, according to Tudor, the director is *auteur*, and he creates on the basis of a central structure on which all his films are variations or developments.

Genre is a set of conventions or tradition which is taken as a category in our culture;[55] hence, it is a set of meanings, a set of resonances in the culture on which an *auteur* can draw. Hence, unlike '*auteur*', it is a model rather than an aesthetic notion. But, Tudor argues, genre presupposes we have a model of the basic cinema language to which genre is an addition or refinement. Yet we do not have this knowledge, and we do not know much about the *auteur* and his view of the genre, about his audience and their view, and what the *auteur* knows about his audience.

So in the end Tudor legitimates the discussions and concerns of his contemporaries who probe about in that murky area, the language of film. It is said to be necessary as a prolegomena to almost anything else. When faced with such a claim, various obvious points arise. Buildings need foundations; it is not at all clear that knowledge does. Isn't it hubris to in effect say that what everyone has been doing hitherto is of doubtful value because it is premature? And anyway, what are we to do in the meantime? Suppose the inquiry into foundations, basics, horses before carts is abortive? Should everything come to a halt? Tudor's radicalism is a familiar argument to a philosopher. In the modern period alone, Bacon, Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Mill, Husserl, Russell, Logical Positivism, language philosophers and goodness knows who else have used the same argument. So pervasive is it that many philosophers take it that if philosophy is a primary activity, it must be about meaning. Yet the funny thing is, philosophers have been saying things for thousands of years without benefit of meaning analysis. Moreover, such meaning analysis as has been completed hardly affects any of this. People have been writing about how film works, about why some films are good for some time too. The problems are, as I have tried to indicate, no canonical body of work and grave confusion. Pauline Kael adopts an eclectic pluralism. When she discusses a genre movie, she ranks it in that way, an art movie this way, etc. Tudor thinks this is terrible, calls it inconsistent and impossible to argue with. To thus dismiss arguably the finest critic the movies have produced is a measure of his ambivalence and his shortcomings.

55 Tudor's few paragraphs on this manage to say more than the entire books of Kaminsky and Solomon. Better still is Jack Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster/Crime Film*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1977. Pp. xvi + 366. Can. $14.95.

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J. Dudley Andrew's book is longer and more detailed, but organized in much the same manner. He too thinks there are two strands of film theory, realist and formative. He also discusses Eisenstein, Kracauer and Bazin, but leaves out Grierson and includes Munsterberg, Arnheim, Balazs, Mitry and Metz. He also legitimates contemporary practice and concerns. Although he is more thorough; he is less critical. Tudor impugns essentialism: all those who argue from the essence of film to the way it should be. Andrew makes nothing of this. Moreover, Andrew surveys authors, rather than pursuing a line of argument the way Tudor does. Thus he seems to overlook the fact that his theorists are often working on different problems. Munsterberg, for example, wanted to know how movies work for us, what work the mind does. Arnheim, by contrast, is more concerned with how are the movies an art; while Eisenstein is after how the movies achieve their effects, how the language communicates.

3. CONCLUSION

When I began to study movies seriously in 1953, they were regarded as a trivial and unserious topic, and their study lightweight. I have since come to the conclusion that this is the opposite of the truth. Film is a baffling and novel phenomenon, and most of those who write about its history, sociology and aesthetics are quite *out of their depth*. They flounder and flail, and ultimately sink without trace. No one (except antiquarians) much bothers to read Vachel Lindsay, Sergei Eisenstein, V. I. Pudovkin, Rudolph Arnheim, Bela Balazs, Paul Rotha, and John Grierson anymore. I predict the same fate is in store for Roger Manvell (cf. the tone of the review of his *Penguin Film Review* in *Sight and Sound*[56]), Gilbert Cohen-Séat, Siegfried Kracauer, André Bazin, Jean Mitry, and Christian Metz. Fruitless quests for the essence of film, arguments won by manipulating definitions, philosophical muddles about film having a special relation to something called the real world, phenomenological, semiological, linguistic, structural and other fancies all just evade the basic problems that surround this popular art. Box office and longevity cannot be ignored. Critics praised Eisenstein and pooh-poohed *Gone With the Wind*. Eisenstein's films are quaint relics, almost unwatchable and crude; *GWTW* grows in stature all the time. It is rapidly becoming a classic. The public sees something in *The Sound of Music, The Dirty Dozen, The Exorcist, The Godfather, Jaws,* and *Star Wars*. Like *GWTW*, these are masterpieces of popular art. They are not masterpieces *because* they made millions; but they are not not masterpieces because of that either.

These last points are conundrums, challenges. As someone who writes, reads, thinks and teaches about movies as well as goes to the movies a lot, I don't know the answers to these problems. Once upon a time I would have thought I did. I do know that most academic writing about the movies is a bore, premissed on the indefensible proposition that what goes on in literary criticism can be transposed to films, not noticing that much that goes on in literary criticism is indefensible too. It is a bore because it tells us nothing; and it tells us nothing because it does not address itself to genuine problems. In a way, I want to end this survey there, on an inconclusive note, for I am only a spectator, not a practitioner. Besides, the sceptic is not obliged to provide remedies. The most I will say is that sociological and historical work with film needs a starting point, a centre of intellectual interest. My suggestion is that we use the existing literature. The deficiencies of what has already been written on these topics provide some genuine intellectual

56 Vol. 47, no. 2, Spring 1978, p. 128. Cf. Geoff Brown, 'Which Way to the Way Ahead?' *Sight and Sound*, 47, 4, Autumn 1978, pp. 242-47.

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problems of correction and diagnosis. From such second-order work engaging first-order work will flow.

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