

PREFACE

This book introduces the reader to basic issues related to the phenomenon of American cinema. It looks at American film history from the 1890s through the summer of 2003, but it does not always explore this history in a purely chronological way. In fact, it is not (strictly speaking) a history. Rather, it is a *cultural* history, which focuses more on topics and issues than on what happened when.

It begins with a profile of classical Hollywood cinema as a unique economic, industrial, aesthetic, and cultural institution. It considers the experience of moviegoing; the nature of Hollywood story-telling; and the roles played by the studio system, the star system, and film genres in the creation of a body of work that functions not only as entertainment but as a portrait of the relationship between an American national identity and an industrialized mass culture that has slowly evolved over the past century.

This book assumes that the reader has little or no formal training in film history, theory, or aesthetics. It presents fairly basic concepts in such a way as to encourage discussion, not so much of individual films, but of films in general. For this reason, the book concentrates on large groupings of films—on genres, topics, and periods of film history.

This textbook differs from the more traditional histories of the cinema for certain specific and important reasons. Over the past 30 years, the field of film study has undergone a tremendous transformation. This change has been spearheaded by the work of a new generation of scholars who challenge the traditional way in which film history has been written and taught. Introduction to Film courses that, 30 years ago, taught film as art, drew heavily upon the approaches of New Criticism. Contemporary film courses now teach film not only as art but also as film, and they attempt to situate film as an art form within a larger industrial, economic, social, and cultural context. They rely heavily on cultural studies, new historicism, psychoanalysis, and other contemporary critical disciplines.

Film history texts have changed over the years as well. In the past, histories consisted of simple, chronological accounts of who-did-what and what-happened-when, and of the stories of great men (sic) and their achievements, and of straightforward accounts of the influence of technology and economics on the course of a history that unfolds in a linear fashion up to the present. More recently, film scholars have begun to rewrite these traditional histories, creating

what Thomas Elsaesser refers to as “The New Film History.” At its best, this history is driven by a sophisticated, theoretically informed revisionism. It simply refuses to accept the easy answers to basic historical questions which had been offered up by past historians. “The New Film History” can best be seen in the work of David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson (*Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*) and of Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery (*Film History: Theory and Practice*), though it can be found in a number of other scholarly efforts as well.

With the initial publication of *American Cinema/American Culture* in 1994, the methods and discoveries of “The New Film History,” were applied to an introductory level text surveying the history of the American cinema. That book was an attempt to put the principles of “The New Film History” into action—to present and to make accessible the findings of contemporary film studies to college students taking introductory level courses in film, American Studies, or Cultural Studies. In other words, it sought to provide an updated map of the terrain of American cinema.

Traditional histories of the cinema rely upon certain unquestioned assumptions which underlie the way they are written and read. They assume, for example, that the meaning of history is best represented through the time-worn format of the chronological narrative of events. They suggest that the fact that one event takes place after another somehow automatically “explains” that event. In this view, each event derives from a prior event; it comes from a cause-and-effect chain that runs smoothly and linearly from some origin in the past to the present.

This book understands that history does not only consist of “one damned thing after another,” but of ideas, problems, and issues. For that reason, the text gives a certain priority in its organization to thematic over chronological concerns. This textbook is designed not as a blow-by-blow account of who did what and when, but as an historically informed *portrait* of American cinema, provided through a clear and concise description of its most salient features.

Nonetheless, a sense of history strongly pervades the book, guiding the structure of specific chapters and of the book as a whole and providing a survey of the American cinema’s major character traits as they take shape over the decades. Seen from the perspective of a cultural phenomenon, American cinema emerges as a stylistically unified body of work (as discussed in the chapters on classical Hollywood cinema), generated within a certain mode of production (see the chapters on the Studio System and the Star System) that is uniquely dependent upon modern technologies developed for the recording of images and sounds. These general characteristics of American cinema underlie the nature of the particular products which that cinema produces—the various genres of films discussed within the text, ranging from comedies and Westerns to war films and melodramas.

Traditional film histories tend to be unsuitable for introductory film courses in that they frequently omit any discussion of aesthetics, presuming that basic matters of film form have been dealt with in a prior course. This text,

however, doubles as both a cultural history and an introduction to aesthetics and film form, introducing and explaining basic vocabulary in the chapters that discuss the narrative and stylistic practices of classical Hollywood cinema. Subsequent chapters refer back to these basic ingredients of narrative and stylistic form. Here, the function of *mise-en-scène* (lighting, set and costume design, camera angle and movement, etc.) and editing (eye-line matching, shot/reverse-shot editing, the 180-degree rule, parallel editing, etc.) is explored in terms of their relation to the overall system of classical Hollywood style.

Traditional film histories present themselves as purely objective accounts of “what happened in the past.” They disguise their own position in relation to that past. This text, however, in addition to providing factual information and surveying what contemporary scholarship has revealed to us about the subject, develops a clearly delineated thesis and encourages instructors, students, and general readers to question and test that thesis by holding it up to close scrutiny. The core of that thesis rests on an assumption that American cinema reveals, both directly and indirectly, something about American experience, identity, and culture.

The relationship among American cinema and American identity, as mediated through American culture, is extremely complex. Each shapes and is shaped by the other in a constant process of mutual determination.

American cinema plays a crucial role in the process of identity-formation. Films not only serve as texts which document who we think we are or were, but they also reflect changes in our self-image, tracing the transformation from one kind of America to another. More importantly, the American cinema plays a crucial role in assisting audiences in negotiating major changes in identity; it carries them across difficult periods of cultural transition in such a way that a more or less coherent national identity remains in place, spanning the gaps and fissures that threaten to disrupt its movement and to expose its essential disjointedness.

The first major cultural crisis that American cinema addressed was the trauma in national identity brought about by the transition from an agricultural to an industrial nation, which took place in the United States after the Civil War. The period from roughly 1865 to the beginning of World War I (1916) witnessed a cataclysmic transformation of America from a largely rural to a predominantly urban culture, from an agrarian to an industrial economy, from a nation of producers (farmers, small businessmen, and shopkeepers) to one of consumers, and from a community of individuals to a mass society. Popular response to this rapid urbanization and industrialization combined an enthusiasm for technological progress and economic growth with an anxiety about the threats these changes posed to preindustrial American values. At the same time, urbanization, industrialization, and mass culture brought with them social and economic problems that justified those anxieties. On the one hand, preindustrial notions of individuality and personal agency (i.e., the ability of individuals to accomplish things on their own) were compromised by the social subject’s new, disempowered status of anonymity within the mass. Victorian

America believed that the individual would be properly compensated for his/her integrity, energy, and hard work. But industrial trusts and monopolies had rigged the system in their favor, preventing the individual entrepreneur from securing an appropriate reward for his or her efforts.

At the same time, modern mass culture, according to Ann Douglas and others, was believed to have “feminized” traditional American virtues. In response to the “crisis of masculinity,” leaders such as Theodore Roosevelt praised “the strenuous life,” advocating a return to a more rugged way of life in the wilderness in an attempt “to reinvigorate American society.” Roosevelt complained that the youth of America were brought up in a “slothful ease . . . that was creating a generation dominated by the over-civilized man, who has lost the great fighting, masterful virtues” and insisted that the country must struggle “to stave off effeminacy that is one of the dangers of nations that grow old and soft and unwilling to endure hardships.”

Roosevelt sought to correct these problems. To protect the individual, he sought legislation to bust the trusts. In an attempt to preserve the manly virtues that made this country great, he created five national parks and 51 wildlife refuges where American boys and men could pursue the strenuous life. He also led by example, hunting bears in Yellowstone, leading safaris in Africa and expeditions up the Amazon. He also founded the Rough Riders, a crack company of soldiers he commanded in the Spanish-American War.

Two major reform movements—populism and progressivism—arose in an attempt to address the excesses brought about by industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of mass culture. The *politics* of populism and progressivism were short-lived, roughly spanning the period between the presidential campaigns of populist William Jennings Bryan (1896) and of two progressives, Theodore Roosevelt (1904/1912) and Woodrow Wilson (1912/1916). But as systems of belief, the *ideologies* of populism and progressivism outlived the rise and fall of the Populist and Progressive political parties.

Populist ideology was rooted in the ideals of the Jeffersonian democratic tradition. Thomas Jefferson envisioned America as “a republic of yeoman farmers, each man working his own land, free to develop in his own way.” For Jefferson, the moral virtue of the American citizenry depended upon its association with the land. According to Jefferson, the American character was rescued from the corruption and decadence of the Old World through regenerative contact with Nature. But, more importantly, the land became, for him, the basis on which American democracy was to be built. The availability of free land in the West guaranteed each American an opportunity to own land, and, thereby, to have an equal stake in the affairs of the nation. The universal ownership of property would not only empower Americans but ensure their self-sufficiency and independence.

Populist ideology looked back with nostalgia to the “lost Eden” of pre-industrial, agrarian America, to the nation of shopkeepers, artisans, farmers, and small towns that, as historian Richard Hofstadter wrote, existed “before the development of industrialism and the commercialization of agriculture.” In

returning to the original values and beliefs of Revolutionary-era America, populism advocated “democracy, honest and unobtrusive central government, leadership by decent men, equality of opportunity, [and] self-help.” Responding to the post-industrial present, populism, as Jeffrey Richards noted, “opposed big business, the political machine and intellectualism as the things most likely to hamper the individual’s pursuit of happiness.”

Much of American cinema can be mapped in terms of its relation to notions of political, social, cultural, and economic reform articulated by populist and progressive ideologies. On the silver screen, American masculinity survived the onslaught of modernity in the form of countless male stars from Douglas Fairbanks and Clark Gable to Sylvester Stallone and Harrison Ford. In *Jaws* (1975), Chief Brody (Roy Scheider) opposes civic corruption *and* battles a great white shark, proving that in modern America one man [sic] could still make a difference. As for the “lost Eden” of small-town America, it can be found in the Bedford Falls of Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946); its nightmarish alter-ego, Pottersville, turns out to be a bad dream, prevented from becoming a reality by the heroic efforts of populist reformers such as George Bailey (James Stewart). Even films that portray a world dominated by urban alienation, drugs, despair, crime, and corruption, such as *Taxi Driver* (1976) look back to populist and progressive mythology. They depict the consequences of an industrialization and urbanization that was not held in check. They turn populist and progressive ideology inside out, providing a portrait of their worst nightmares. The boundaries of the American cinema are defined by these two diametrically opposed visions—the utopian vision found in Capra, Spielberg and others and the dystopian vision found in film noir, Scorsese, Lynch, and others. These two visions constitute a single, larger, more complex vision that represents the deeper contradictions within the American psyche.

This book has been written in conjunction with the television course and series *American Cinema*, produced by the New York Center for Visual History as part of the Annenberg/CPB project collection. It also corresponds with a student study guide, written by Ed Sikov, which has been carefully designed to function equally well independently of these supplementary materials.

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John Belton

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Changes to this Edition

- Full chapter on the Musical, spanning its history in film and cultural significance
- Analysis of David Lynch's *Mulholland Dr.* in Chapter 2, replacing that of *Goodfellas*
- Expanded coverage of "The Studio System" in Chapter 4 and of "The Star System" in Chapter 5, including a new case study of Tom Hanks' career
- Expanded coverage of the contemporary war film, including Gulf War films and an extensive comparison of *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line*
- More extensive discussion of *Unforgiven*, including a comparison to Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man*
- Extensive updating in the final chapter to reflect the changes in the film industry
- Updated coverage of Film School Generation work such as that of Martin Scorsese and Spike Lee

Ancillary Support

A text-specific, Online Learning Center at www.mhhe.com/cinema2 is available for student and instructor use. This website offers several tools to reinforce text content as well as various resources for extending knowledge of the material. Features include multiple-choice chapter quizzes, a glossary of key terms, links to related websites, and more.

Also available with the second edition is a student Study Guide (ISBN: 0-07-310287-3), written by Ed Sikov. This guide integrates the American Cinema instructional video series, produced by Annenberg/CPB, with the textbook. For more information on the Annenberg telecourse, please visit www.learner.org or call 1-800-LEARNER (1-800-532-7637).

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