

JOHN BELTON



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John Belton

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AMERICAN CINEMA / AMERICAN CULTURE

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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 1990s, 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 focusses 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 20 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, 20 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 recent 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.

The methods and discoveries of "The New Film History," however, have not yet been applied to an introductory level text surveying the history of the American cinema. This book is 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 hopes 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 Holly-

wood cinema. Subsequent chapters refer back to these basic ingredients of narrative and stylistic form. Here, the function of mise-en-scene (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.

In setting forth this thesis, the book acknowledges that the relationship between American film and American social and historical reality is highly mediated and extremely complex. Films, quite clearly, cannot be viewed as simple mirrors of cultural reality. As fictional works, they do, however, have a “use-value.” They can be analyzed—even psychoanalyzed—to reveal something about the cultural conditions that produced them and attracted audiences to them.

Of course, their status as objective documents that reflect the currents of American popular culture remains severely limited. For example, images of women, blacks, Native Americans, Asians, and other minorities in American cinema have only an indirect relationship to the real status of these individuals within American society. Yet those images can nonetheless be read symptomatically to locate their source in the real social tensions that underlie America’s democratic ideal, in a profound sexual and racial inequality. In other words, the films do reflect American reality but in a distorted and displaced way. More often than not, they reflect back only what audiences *want* to see rather than what is really there.

This book, in turn, functions as another kind of mirror—a two-sided mirror like that found in motion pictures set in asylums or police stations. This mirror is a mirror on one side, but it is a window on the other side. A see-through mirror thus enables us to watch from one side something that takes place on the other side. The strategy that lies behind the arguments in this book is the strategy of the two-way mirror. It suggests that by *looking through* the movies, we are able to see both what takes place in them and what takes place in the audiences who watch them on the other side. By looking through the movies, we can see the process by which an American identity is both formed and reflected. In other words, by looking through and at the movies in certain ways, we can see how American identity is shaped in the movies and, at the same time, how the movies are shaped by it.

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.

This book could not have been written without the help of a number of other film scholars. In particular, I would like to thank William Costanzo, Thomas Cripps, Douglas Gomery, William Paul, Ed Sikov, and Elisabeth Weis of the curriculum committee for the *American Cinema* television course project for the New York Center for Visual History, who read the bulk of this book in manuscript form and provided invaluable suggestions for improving it. Special thanks go to Angela Aleiss, Elizabeth Belton, Ellen Belton, Thomas Doherty, Howard Karren, Robert Lang, Charles Maland, Dara Meyers-Kingsley, and Alan Williams who read and commented on specific chapters. I am indebted to Jane Belton, David Bordwell, Aaron Braun, Fred Camper, Linda McCarthy, Al Nigrin, Jessica Rosner, Phil Shane, and Kristin Thompson for their advice, research help, and/or assistance in providing illustrative material for the book.

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John Belton

During M-G-M's heyday as a studio, the end title of every M-G-M film read "Made in Hollywood, U.S.A." Though not every American film is or was made in Hollywood, the bulk of American cinema is the product of a specific mode of production which was perfected in Hollywood and which consists of a unique combination of various ingredients.

"Hollywood" is not only a place in California where movies are made. It does not only consist of studios, labs, and other buildings; nor of producers, stars, directors, screenwriters, and the other personnel who are actually involved in the making of movies. "Hollywood" is also a consistent and coherent set of aesthetic and stylistic conventions that audiences readily understand. Beneath these conventions lies an industrial infrastructure that works to maintain and support them. This industrial base includes the studio system and the star system, as well as the movie culture that grew up around these institutions.

Movie culture ranges in its scope from the discourses (or ways of representing things) of advertising, publicity, and fan magazines to the experience of moviegoing, which changes from decade to decade. The experience of watching a one-reel short film in a nickelodeon in 1908 differs dramatically from that of watching a silent feature film in a movie palace in the 1920s. These experiences, in turn, remain worlds apart from going to drive-ins in the 1950s, small-screen multiplexes in the 1960s and 1970s, and mall cinemas in the 1980s and 1990s.

This book explores the *phenomenon* of American cinema. It investigates what it is and how it works. In order to understand what American cinema is and how it works, it is necessary to look at it as a mode of production. Hollywood has its own way of doing things. Over the years it has developed a unique system of studios, stars, distribution, exhibition, advertising, and marketing that enables it to make a profit. This mode of production not only forms the nature of Hollywood as an industry, but it also determines the kinds of films that get made, the way those films look, and the way those films tell stories.

The first section of this text (Chapters 1-5) concentrates on the notion of "Hollywood" as a unique system designed for the efficient production of a rather unusual product—motion pictures. An initial chapter on "The Emergence of the Cinema as an Institution" traces the evolution of American filmmaking from a toy, novelty item and fairground attraction to a carefully

tailored mode of production which is designed to produce seamless narratives capable of entertaining a mass audience. Subsequent chapters on “Classical Hollywood Cinema” (“Narration” in Chapter 2; “Style” in Chapter 3), “The Studio System,” and “The Star System” explore the nature of this institution, providing a descriptive account of the basic elements that constitute Hollywood as a distinct mode of production.

Much as Hollywood turns the craft of film production, distribution, and exhibition into an efficient system, so it also systematizes its product. It makes and markets films according to yet another system—that of genres. The second section of the text (Chapters 6–10) looks at the way movies work by exploring the relation of major film genres to the specific industrial and cultural machinery that produced them—that is, to the institution of Hollywood and to the institution of American mass culture.

The system of genres duplicates, in the area of film product, the organizational strategies that underlie the film industry’s institutional base. This system establishes broad categories of film types that have proven their economic viability over the years and that, as a result, work to stabilize the production process by reducing financial risk. Audiences go to movies that resemble films which they have seen before. That is, audiences go to comedies, melodramas, war films, Westerns, and other broad categories of film types.

This section will also relate these films to the more general cultural concerns which inform them and to which they, in turn, give form. The arrangement of these chapters follows a quasi-chronological line, corresponding roughly to the decades in which the individual genres are best represented by the production output of the studios. Thus, the chapter on melodramas, though it covers the genre from 1909 (*A Corner in Wheat*) to 1982 (*E. T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*) and even makes a case for certain melodramatic aspects that structure *Home Alone* (1990), focuses primarily on the 1920s.

Though the chapter on film comedy discusses the genre from the 1910s to the 1990s, it concentrates on the comedies of Frank Capra, Howard Hawks, and other directors of the 1930s. The chapter on the war film, though it includes discussion of Vietnam War films, devotes the bulk of its attention to the 1940s. And so on and so forth with the other genres.

In other words, each genre chapter focuses on a particular decade but also traces the history of that genre beyond that particular decade. At the same time, it attempts to link shifts within that genre’s evolution to changes that occur within the larger profile of American cultural history.

Not all genres are covered here. There is no chapter on the musical, the gangster film, the horror film, the science-fiction film, or other major genres. Such coverage, though it might make the book more complete, would significantly change its focus and balance. Genres are a crucial part of the phenomenon of American cinema, but they need to be seen within the larger context of the institutional structure of the industry that produces them. And, as the chapters in the last section of the text suggest, individual genre films need to be seen within their larger cultural context—that is, within the history of culture.

Finally, the book concludes with a review of the history of recent American cinema. It provides an analysis of the postwar assaults on Hollywood by the anti-Communist witch-hunts of the late-1940s and 1950s, by the advent of television, by the social and political upheavals of the 1960s, and by the rise of new generations of filmmakers in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. These filmmakers (and their audiences) grew up during the Cold War, watched television as kids, and were shaped, in one way or another, by the counterculture of the 1960s, Vietnam and Watergate in the 1970s, and Reaganite America in the 1980s.

This history of Hollywood in the postwar years describes the dismantling of the old Hollywood as a unique system of production, distribution, and exhibition and the attempts to construct a new Hollywood out of whatever pieces of the old that could be salvaged and adapted to the needs of a changing marketplace. This section looks back to both the first part of the book, which describes the classical mode of production that is transformed in the postwar years, and the second part, which outlines the histories of various genres, which are themselves altered by this new mode of production. Indeed, the discussion of genres, which notes their postwar transformation, anticipates the final section. This segment of the book also traces the contemporary cinema's attempts to recover its initial integrity as a system through its interest in certain filmmaking practices, which are discussed in "The 1960s: The Counterculture Strikes Back," "The Film School Generation," and "Into the 1990s: Bringing It All Back Home." This final chapter juxtaposes mainstream Hollywood cinema of the 1980s and early 1990s with a variety of countercurrent cinemas, ranging from films made at the fringe of the mainstream by directors such as Martin Scorsese, David Lynch, and others to films produced by independent and minority filmmakers such as Spike Lee, Jim Jarmusch, Todd Haynes, and Julie Dash.

Each chapter concludes with a chronological filmography of relevant motion pictures that the reader might wish to look at in order to explore a bit further the ideas and issues dealt with in the text. Each chapter also provides a select bibliography of books and articles that can be consulted for additional information about the subject. A glossary of technical and other terms is at the end of the text to assist the reader in defining crucial nomenclature and terminology.

The movies play a crucial role in our lives. They entertain us, but they also educate us. The education which they provide lies not so much in what they show—in what stories or situations we see on the screen. Rather it consists of the attitudes that the movies take to the underlying concerns with which our culture seems continuously preoccupied. The chief concern which this book examines is that of twentieth-century America as well—the traumatic shift in identity that takes place as the country evolves from a nineteenth-century, rural, agrarian-based, social, cultural, and economic community into a modern, urban, industrialized mass society. The movies, which were born in the midst of this crisis in American identity, emerge as a crucial factor in its resolution. They serve, in part, to help us to negotiate this transition. This book looks at how they do that.

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