

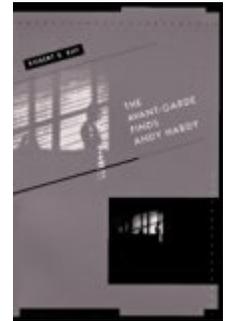
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Robert B. Ray. *The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995. 246 pp. \$52.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-05537-7; \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-05538-4.

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Hymn to Mainstream Values

This is a provocative, amusing, and occasionally irritating book. Robert B. Ray's chief complaint is that contemporary film criticism has become calcified and predictable. The reason, he says, is that critics have concerned themselves too much with "rational" analysis that searches the narrative, structure, and action for purposeful meanings and underlying ideology. This approach is a rare point in common to traditional and postmodern critics. Among other things, such criticism requires knowledge of the larger body of work surrounding the particular movie being picked apart and evaluated, and so it necessarily diffuses attention away from the immediate experience of movie-watching. The result has been repetitive questions with recurring answers. That has not only made criticism dull, Ray writes. It has left it laughably out-of-line with the movies it is supposed to illuminate, which are endlessly surprising and mysterious and which speak, each with a unique voice, to our irrational, ambiguous, intuitive selves. This complain has a lot of sense to it.

This is more than a case of critics caught up in themselves, Ray argues. He draws on Walter Ong's

claim that there have been two revolutions in human communication—the shift from oral to alphabetic cultures, and the change from the alphabetic to the “electronic” or “cinematic.” These shifts involved not merely the transmission of information but revolutions in thinking and perceiving the world. The basic problem with criticism nowadays is that it has not followed that change. It tries to apply the perspective and thinking of one perceptual universe to another. Analyzing a movie on alphabetic-literary terms is a bit like listening to a poem as if it were an essay.

Instead, Ray writes, critics should apply the surrealist tradition of the avant-garde arts, especially the approaches of Roland Barthes. A movie should be analyzed on the same terms with which people watch it, with the perceptual interaction of the viewer and the viewed that our society first experienced with photographs. Its “realism” lies in the free flow of connections and dynamic creation of meanings that are well outside film criticism's traditional approach.

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