

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Leslie Midkiff DeBauche. *Reel Patriotism: The Movies and World War I (Wisconsin Studies in Film)*. Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997. xviii + 244 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-299-15400-4; \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-15404-2.

Peter C. Rollins, John E. O'Connor, eds. *Hollywood's World War I: Motion Picture Images*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997. vii + 304 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87972-756-7; \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87972-755-0.

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Leslie Midkiff DeBauche correctly asserts that “there is a dearth of historical and critical writing linking World War I and the movies” (p. 35). Apart from a few notable works, such as Michael Isenberg’s *War on Film: The American Cinema and World War I* (1981) and Larry Wayne Ward’s *The Motion Picture Goes to War: The United States Government Film Effort During World War I* (1985), the subject has mainly been dealt with as part of more general studies, such as histories of film or surveys of American culture.

Certainly, there exists nothing comparable to the vast literature on the Second World War and film (on which one may consult Peter Rollins’s extensive booklist in *Film & History* (vol. 27 [1997]: 96-107). One might be tempted to conclude that film was not an especially significant ingredient in the American experience of World War I, nor the war an important influence on Hollywood.

But these conclusions would be incorrect, as shown by these two, quite different books. Leslie Midkiff DeBauche carefully explores the impact of the First World War on the American film industry, while Peter C. Rollins and John E. O’Connor view the subject from the opposite direction: the impact of film on our understanding of the war.

DeBauche hopes to provide a more accurate impression by means of “melding perspectives on film production, distribution, and exhibition with those of cultural history” (p. xvii) and, in the process, to correct a number of misconceptions prevalent in previous works. The uni-

fy theme of her book is “practical patriotism,” which means that leaders of all aspects of the film industry understood that, with the outbreak of the war, “it was appropriate and reasonable to combine allegiance to country and to business. In fact, ... that enlisting in the war effort on the homefront would likely benefit the film industry’s long term interests” (p. xvi).

The First World War occurred at a time of great corporate and technological development in the film industry. In fact, during the war, many of the features that would characterize American film for several decades appeared, including the dominance of the great Hollywood studios, the star system, the national distribution agencies, and theater chains. DeBauche argues that Hollywood’s response to the war was not a simple one and cannot be understood merely by examining the war films. The topicality of the war was one—but only one—influence on film production. The theme of practical patriotism reveals how the makers and distributors of film made decisions that took the war effort and morale into consideration along with artistic and corporate factors. They were bound by the capabilities of the actors and directors they had under contract and were obliged to assess the preferences of audiences and to guard their positions vis-à-vis competitors. DeBauche examines all of these factors as they operated during both the war and the following decade.

DeBauche’s careful and thorough research results in an instructive narrative which is bolstered in each

chapter by a case study of a significant film or personage. She does not hesitate to take issue with previous writers, arguing that they—including Isenberg—were frequently guilty of “generalizing from incorrect historical premises” and consequently presented interpretations of the relationship of film and the war that were misleading or simplistic (especially pp. 35-44). This is solid, meaty fare, which is not merely intellectually nourishing but well-presented in clean, graceful prose from which jargon and muddled terminology are, mercifully, almost entirely absent.

The feast continues in the fourteen essays edited and introduced by Peter Rollins and John O’Connor. The authors, many of whom are well-known to readers of *Film & History*, include historians and specialists in cinema studies and technology. A few of the essays are broadly thematic, but most focus on specific films which the authors use as case studies, illustrations, or interpretive tools with which to examine subjects such as production, reception, genre, and myth. The coverage of the essays extends from the wartime films to modern television treatments. Although there is less duplication of DeBauche’s material than one might anticipate, there are some interesting comparative points. For instance, in his essay “The Great War and the War Film as Genre,” James M. Welsh analyzes D. W. Griffith’s *Hearts of the World*, by several measures the most spectacular wartime film, and *What Price Glory?* made by Raoul Walsh in 1926. DeBauche also discusses both of these films, especially the former. Welsh’s use of the two films to define the meaning and nature of the “war film” and DeBauche’s endeavor to illustrate the operation of practical patriotism in the distri-

bution of major films make the two treatments mutually reinforcing. There is more dissonance, however, between DeBauche’s discussion of the 1920s and the essay on the same subject by the late Michael Isenberg.

Isenberg argues that “common themes in films often reflect the fears, desires, ideas, attitudes, or beliefs of the mass audience to which they play” (p. 41). For DeBauch, this is too simplistic an explanation, and she prefers also to explore the economic and corporate forces that influenced the making of war films during the twenties. The authors of other essays explore topics such as race and national cohesion, the air combat film, antiwar sentiment, and the experiences of veterans. The final chapter, an extensive filmography, creatively categorized and helpfully annotated by Gerald Herman, is a tour de force. Inevitably, in such a collection, the reader is sensitive to the varying approaches and styles of the authors. Accordingly, the editors, in their introduction, make a determined effort to point out unifying themes: the importance of film as a resource for scholars and the powerful presence of the First World War as a continuing image in American life created, to a considerable extent, “with a cinematic pen” (p. 10). The decision to bring together this group of essays, however, was a wise one. The voices of the contributors do not confuse, but rather blend, giving the feel of a symposium. The research and thinking encapsulated here is deep, extensive and, on the whole, presented with vigor and clarity. Although each of these books is fascinating on its own, the fortuity of their appearance at the same time marks a significant advance in the literature of this subject.

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