

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sumiko Higashi. *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture: The Silent Era*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-08556-5; \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-08557-2.

Reviewed by Steven Mintz (University of Houston)

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When the American Historical Association recently issued pamphlets on current historical research, it inadvertently omitted two of the most innovative and exciting fields in American historical scholarship: Western history and cultural history. If one omission reflected a persistent east coast bias within the profession, the other may well have reflected the uneasiness of many unreconstructed social historians with forms of cultural analysis emphasizing the way that people symbolize, structure, and perceive the world around them.

Much of the most sophisticated work in American cultural history has focused on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, examining the ways that cognitive styles and structures of perception shifted during the rise of a culture of consumption. Recent scholarship by Lears on advertising, Halttunen on manners and presentation of self, Rubin and Wilson on best-sellers, Kasson on amusement parks, Erenberg on nightclubs, and Leach on department stores argued that a consumer culture is not simply a system of social relations of production and consumption, but a cultural system that also generates a distinctive psychology, symbolic coding, rituals, and modes of seeing. In her important addition to this growing body of literature, Sumiko Higashi, Associate Professor of History at SUNY-Brockport and the author of *Virgins, Vamps, and Flappers: The American Silent Movie Heroine* (1978), turns our attention to the critical role of the silent film as an instrument of cultural conversion and transformation. Through close readings of specific film texts, supplemented with a vast array of previously untapped material from the DeMille archives, she shows how he helped to legitimate film as a form of art and entertainment during a period of intense ethnic, racial, and class tensions, and then, in the 1920s, became

a fashion trendsetter who rationalized consumption as a form of cultural refinement and promoted new gender and marital ideals.

The book begins by analyzing DeMille's role in the legitimizing of cinema and film authorship during a period when the differentiation of highbrow and lowbrow cultures was intensifying. By drawing upon high class stage plays and the grand opera, DeMille consciously resituated films between 1912 and 1915, cultivating reviews in major newspapers and thereby influencing middle class perception of cinematic entertainment as an art form. The book then turns to DeMille's reformulation of melodrama as a major cinematic genre. Downplaying societal, financial, and political intrigue, DeMille foregrounded courtship, marriage, family interaction, and domestic ritual, focusing on the conflicts of values between an older stress on moral character and new notions of personality. Higashi also shows how DeMille's sentimental melodramas served to mitigate social tensions during a period marked by a resurgence of nativism, xenophobia, and fear of the urban "Other" and functioned as a primer on middle class values.

The heart of the book is a remarkably insightful discussion of the uses of "spectacle" in DeMille's films. Higashi shows how DeMille used fashion and furnishings to transform the sentimental heroine into the "new woman" and companionate wife; how he used "orientalist" images of luxury and sensuality to mitigate conflicts of value over consumption; and how he drew upon Progressive era civic pageantry (including historical reenactments, tableaux vivants of historical events, and parlor theatricals) to create historical and biblical epics addressing contemporary anxieties over gender, sexuality, class, family



instability, and urban pluralism.

Theoretically sophisticated, gracefully written, forcefully argued, this book is sure to exert a powerful influence on our understanding of early twentieth century cultural transformations. Rejecting a social constructionism that reduces actors to reflections of a cultural milieu,

Higashi portrays DeMille as a key cultural modernizer who nevertheless embodied much the ambivalences of his time. An architect of the consumer culture, he expressed a deep moral ambivalence about the benefits of urban life; a proponent of modern “realistic” entertainment film, he never wholly rejected Victorian didacticism and pictorialism.

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