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.

Reviewed by Steven Mintz (University of Houston)
Published on H-Film (January, 1996)

Robert B. Ray is convinced that the semiotic paradigm–the mode of film interpretation which draws upon structuralist, psychoanalytic, ideological, and feminist methodologies–has grown stale. Film studies, until recently the most innovative field in the humanities, has, in his opinion, grown redundant and predictable. The application of semiotic and other critical approaches to the study of popular cultural forms, which once exposed "the ideological abuse hidden by the apparently natural stories and images of popular culture," now merely serves the "immediate institutional politics of academic tenure and promotion" (p. 7). Repetitiveness, however, is not the semiotic paradigm's only flaw. Semiotics, he is convinced, is unable to explain certain fundamental questions: Why do certain movies–for example, Mickey Rooney's Andy Hardy series–become popular? Why do individual scenes in otherwise forgettable movies fascinate us? How can we understand seductive and enigmatic representations that appear in even most ordinary films?

Convinced that hermeneutics as a tool of film interpretation is exhausted, Ray proposes alternative ways of thinking and writing about the movies drawing upon the avant-garde. Instead of conceiving of the avant-garde simply as certain distinct forms of artistic self-expression, Ray instead thinks of it as a "new attitude toward knowledge" interested in the way that the new communication technologies of the twentieth century were able to generate words, images, and sounds that threw into question traditional notions of subjectivity and cultural value. Ray's goal is to reinvent film studies, by drawing on certain characteristic avant-garde methods–games, chance, fragments, and collage. The volume details some of his and his students' experiments with new forms of interpretation.

The book begins in the mid-nineteenth century, with the appearance of three new ways of making modern urban life "legible": the photograph, the detective story, and the best-selling paperback book. Ray discusses issues raised by these new cultural forms, such the status of detail and the relationship between image and language. Ray then turns to the new technologies of the photograph and film that also arose during the 19th century and argues that many critics failed to see that these new image-based technologies produced new ways of thinking and looking at the world. Photography and film, Ray argues, encouraged new cognitive habits, in which viewers tended to focus less narrowly on a specific theme or narrative and instead roam across a frame.

The heart of the book explores the way that viewers actually "watch" a film as they continually interrogate and interact with film scenes and produce meanings that the film makers never contemplated. Ray is particularly interested in the way that certain "nodal points" in a film assume greater emotional intensity than their place in the narrative would suggest.

Unconventional in structure and organization, The Avant- Garde Finds Andy Hardy is a demanding and suggestive work that offers challenging reinterpretations of the work of Walter Ong, Andre Breton, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida. To film critics, its signal importance lies in its appreciation of the way that viewers interact with individual scenes and images, finding emotional meanings in the cinematic details of even the most formulaic films.

Copyright (c) 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact h-net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Steven Mintz. Review of Ray, Robert B., *The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy.* H-Film, H-Net Reviews. January, 1996.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=277

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.