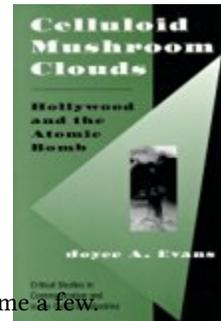


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joyce A. Evans. *Celluloid Mushroom Clouds: Hollywood and the Atomic Bomb*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1998. xi + 212 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-2613-9.

Reviewed by Mick Broderick (Independent Scholar)
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Evans' study, based on her Ph.D. dissertation, explores Hollywood films concerned with nuclear issues from 1946 to 1964. Why Evans limits the study to this period seems rather arbitrary. Certainly the bulk of nuclear movies have been made in the years after 1964, but it is specifically those produced within the postwar Hollywood system that interest her. There is nothing inherently wrong with Evans' defined criteria for selecting these films, nor the breadth of her study; merely it is the frequent inconsistencies which lessen the impact of her findings.

Even at the definitional level there are problems. Over the course of the introduction Evans continually contradicts her stated parameters. After announcing the study commences in 1946 (p. 1) there is an incomplete discussion of several 1945 movies. Next, the study is defined as starting in 1947 (p. 15) and later on the same page, 1949. Similarly, the book is confusingly rendered as concluding in either 1964 or 1965. Nor is the work strengthened by a highly derivative time-line of significant nuclear events run in parallel with a chronology of films which Evans defines as "nuclear." This taxonomy (which commences in 1945 and ends in 1965) is full of errors and omissions. For example, *Strategic Air Command* is cited twice (1955 and 1957); the first U.S. nuclear submarine is listed as developed in 1960, six years too late; and the allegorical *White Heat* is cited as an overt nuclear film, contradicting her own definition that a motion picture must make "specific reference to atomic war or its aftermath, atomic testing and its effects, radiation, atomic technology, postatomic holocaust societies on earth or imagined planets, or atomic scientists" (p. 15). A passing glance at the first few years of the chronology suggests that from Evans' own criteria she neglects movies such as *Shadow of Terror*, *Flight to Nowhere*, *The Best Years of*

Our Lives, and *Rendezvous 24*—to name a few.

There are far too many errors to detail here (most of which judicious editing should have eliminated), but a representative howler is Evans' claim that the reason for studio special effects creating the A-bomb explosions in MGM's official Manhattan Project docudrama *The Beginning or the End?* was that "actual footage of atomic explosions was unavailable to Hollywood at the time." Despite the fact that this type of footage had been used in drama features (and newsreels) within weeks of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki blasts.

Evans' focus concentrates on films produced within the Hollywood system and makes a case for analysing this output as an economic commodity influenced by various market forces, while inheriting "residual elements" from prior cultural artefacts and accumulated genre works. While the author occasionally chides film scholarship which "simply" looks for correlations between reflecting social values at the time of production, she privileges an analysis which concentrates on "economic pressures inherent in Hollywood's industrial mode of production" and the "personal ideologies of individual filmmakers." Yet for titles such as *The Lady from Shanghai* and *Above and Beyond* which are discussed in the "cultural atmosphere" of political and economic influences (HUAC and Korea), they are wrongly dated and contextualised years after their actual production and release. Such historical flaws can lead to potentially dubious inference and argument.

Evans is at her best when describing the multitude of economic influences affecting Hollywood such as antimonopolisation legislation, official government propaganda campaigns, the impact of television, the emergence of independent B-movie producers in the mid

to late-1950's, and the substantial baby-boomer market emerging around the same period. However, the analysis of individual movies and their newly auteurist B-film independents is eroded by omission. After highlighting Roger Corman's industry impact several nuclear films are discussed but the filmmaker's generically significant postatomic Teenage Caveman is noticeably absent from the book.

Similarly, the veracity of her arguments is often undermined by erroneous conclusions. After discussing films which address postnuclear scenarios Evans claims that "despite their individual plot variations, these films never suggest that the human race would not survive a full-scale nuclear confrontation. Humans, albeit in mutated form, continue to thrive." Thrive? Given her preceding examples, this conclusion is dubious—either billions are annihilated with only two or three survivors, or future societies are depicted as genetically damaged to the point of social entropy and inevitable extinction.

What this study lacks is a broader theoretical base of film genre, one which would enable Evans to advance her thesis more convincingly. Asserting that studios experimented with the atomic themes in postwar years while engaging with known generic formulae is fine, but why not present evidence of deviation or symmetry within the generic corpus by comparing Above and Beyond with, say, *Twelve O'Clock High*. Deeper generic introspection

might have restrained such claims that Hollywood experimentation in domestic atomic testing and concerns with the effects of fallout "took the form of dark comedy" citing as examples *The Atomic Kid*, *Living it Up* and *Ma and Pa Kettle Back on the Farm*.

The merits of *Celluloid Mushroom Clouds* can be found in the historical foregrounding of various economic and political constraints upon Hollywood. But neither the mechanism for nor the rationale of these "causes" through to the "effects" on filmmakers and the industry are convincingly articulated. Rather, despite the author's stated aim, the bulk of the study enlists cultural and/or textual analyses which offer little that is novel concerning the films under scrutiny. Summarizing the evolution of nuclear films, Evans says "Rather than exploring new themes and issues surrounding nuclear development, the representations remained linked to their original portrayals." Unfortunately, the same observation applies to this book.

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