



Nick Browne, ed.. *Refiguring American Film Genres*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. 320 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-20730-1.



Reviewed by Pearl Stratyner

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This compilation of criticisms and analyses of cinematic genres, edited by Nick Browne, is both interesting and provocative. It grew from a symposium on the need for reevaluation and reexamination of Hollywood's classic age system of categorizing films according to set formulas. Those moviegoers who view genres as fluid and as changeable as the popular cultural scene they mirror will applaud these new insights. On the other hand, those who are comfortable with the well-defined and recognizable patterns might prefer to let things be. Specific characterizations, plot lines and background motif made it easy for the viewer to pinpoint the photoplay, its direction and its denouement. It fits a proscribed niche—a Western, a musical, a melodrama, comedy or crime story. Motion pictures in the '30s and early '40s usually did not venture from these determined outlines. This identification of genres with their distinctive icons was reinforced in the '70s.

Several critics convincingly argue that there must be a new way of looking at themes that are more relevant to today's American society. Nothing should be written in stone. Themes of war, re-

ligion, law, civil rights and diplomatic struggles cross over borders and form new ones waiting to be identified and analyzed. Genres should be fluid, working through historical periods to portray popular culture. The writers raise important questions. Do genres terminate? Are new ones recognizable? How can they revise the foundations? How can they emerge because of historical imperative?

Thomas Schatz' essay on the World War II combat film analyzes the way a new genre emerges as an historical imperative. Before World War II, Hollywood integrated war themes into the existing classical format. Concentration was on spy dramas and not combat. The studios were attacked by conservative and isolationist groups and accused of inciting entry into the war. But once the United States was officially in it, Hollywood's goal was the same as the government's. Win it! President Roosevelt did not attempt to control Hollywood's output. Within six months of Pearl Harbor, one-third of the films directly pertained to the War.

Such photoplays as *Wake Island*, *Bataan*, and *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* depicted the transition from war themes within the familiar to the combat film. Realism--frequently taken from documentary footage, narrative and a large dose of romance--brought the fighting home to moviegoers. Unsurprisingly, the end of the War saw a decline in this genre. Then at the end of the decade, there was a sudden surge of interest. With the release of *Sands of Iwo*, *Jima*, *Battleground* and *Twelve O'Clock High* the combat film became established. It is still alive and well today. Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, a World War II soldier caught behind enemy lines, reaffirms this.

In "Melodrama Revised" Linda Williams takes another look at this genre, which to many seems a relic from the Victorian Age. She points out that moral values are an integral part of our social fabric. They come to us through the melodrama's emotional appeal. Rights and wrongs are weighed. Sympathy usually goes to the victim, hopefully, justice prevails. Glaring cultural problems--racial conflict, class struggle, gender inequality and ethnic confrontations--cannot always be dealt with rationally. But when we are emotionally involved, we are more inclined to find solutions. Anna's problems in *Way Down East* could not be tackled head on. She had to experience a sham marriage, desertion, death of her illegitimate baby, social ostracism, poverty and the prospects of a loveless and bleak future. But this tragedy was not of her own making. When her former lover is a dinner guest in her employer's home and castigates her as a fallen woman, it forces a denouncement. The problem of the double standard is brought into focus. When justice wins out, albeit in the nick of time, good moral values are solidified. However, the double standard is not corrected in this film. The viewer must deal with the problem.

Another interesting contribution by Michael Rogin, "Democracy and Burnt Cork," deals with the New Deal genres, the blackface musical and

the racial social problem, or civil rights film. Two major films, *Gone with the Wind* and *The Jazz Singer* make visible the relationship between ethnic groups. Racial-ethnic lines are crossed. They involve role playing and identity transformation. The two genres, separated previously, synthesized during the '30s and '40s and separated again. The concentration was on making the immigrant an American, homogenizing society. *Pinky* and *Gentlemen's Agreement* are two other films discussed highlighting racial prejudice and changing identities. The former deals with a Black woman's move into the white world, and the latter, with a Christian's move into the Jewish world. These two genres diverged with the split between Jews and militant blacks.

The fascinating subject of film noir is discussed by Vivian Sobchack in "Lounge time: Postwar Crimes and the Chronotope of Film Noir." World War II was supposedly America's good war. But postwar America's future was not bright. The atomic threat and cold war destabilization cast a constant shadow. The action of film noir depicts this. They are grounded by chronotopes or templates--deserted streets, dingy rooming houses, lonesome diners--conveying suspicion and danger.

Since the '80s, nature themes have been prevalent. Leo Braudy discusses this genre. He believes it is not clearly delineated with set motifs. But is a metagenre that seeks answers beyond reason. Myths and stories involving nature are part of our national psyche. *The Star Wars Trilogy* depicts the problem of good and evil. Good forces are composed of presumed innocents who are close to nature; they must win over the technologically superior evil forces.

Other essays include Carol J. Clover's "God Bless Juries," David J. Russell's "Monster Roundup," Rick Altman's "Reusable Packaging" and George Lipsitz's "Racial Representation in 1970's Cinema." The reader should come away with new understandings of how genres evolved,

and new ways to interpret them. Useful, extensive notes are included after each essay. Stills of movies discussed and several posters add visual appeal.

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