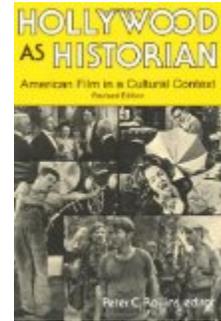


Peter C. Rollins. *Hollywood as Historian: American Film in a Cultural Context*. Lexington Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 1998. 288 pp. \$18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8131-0951-0.

Reviewed by Robert Fyne (Kean University)  
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## Truths and Distortions: Hollywood as Historian?

First published in 1983, Peter C. Rollins' motion picture study, *Hollywood as Historian*, an innovative, essay collection that, in one way or another, cited the film industry's role as media persuader-quickly became an established reference work in cinema criticism. Why wouldn't it? Containing twelve articles that examined the myriad roles American movies, with all their truths and distortions, have played depicting national history, this book took a hard look at the tricky world of screenplay perception, seeking answers to an ongoing question: does Hollywood influence society or is it the other way around?

With such discrete topics as the controversy of D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), the pro-League of Nation propaganda stance in Darryl Zanuck's World War II entry, *Wilson* (1944), the underlying political tones of three New Deal tracts, *The River* (1937), *The March of Time* (1935-1951), and *Native Land* (1942), and the quiet irony in Stuart Heisler's wartime contribution, *The Negro Soldier*, this anthology offered many explanations to this timely problem. Another chapter discussed Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931), *Modern Times* (1936), and *The Great Dictator* (1940) emphasizing the role of the tramp while other essays dissected the social criticism found in John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) Anatole Litvak's *The Snake Pit* and Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* (1954). Still other articles scrutinized the anticommunism paranoia of Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), the censorship problems associated with Mike Nichols' *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), and the moral perspective of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*

(1979). Lastly, another chapter traced William Fox's entrepreneurial career, the mogul, who-after many trials and errors-implemented a practical sound system, a technology that, overnight, ended the silent film industry.

Now available in a revised edition, *Hollywood as Historian* includes an elaborate film, television and American studies bibliography essay, a section that examines most of the current general and scholarly articles plus a thorough listing of academic journals and associations. With information about finding film reviews, locating photoplay titles, using dictionaries and companions, plus selecting pertinent internet sources, this chapter, as Dr. Rollins suggests, provides the necessary information for anyone ready to launch a research project. (More information can be found at the *Film & History* web site: <http://h-net.msu.edu/~filmhis>.)

All in all, *Hollywood as Historian* has provided scholars, media specialists, and students with important information these past seventeen years and this new edition will only continue to serve the academic community and generate further discussion. What, then, is the current debate regarding film and history? Can motion pictures change attitudes of social and political relevance? Does Hollywood seek to imbrue their own interpretations or merely blend in with the mores of the times? How much pressure do governmental, corporate, or legal organizations exert on a film's content? These questions, and many others, are answered, argued, dissected, and even countermanded in *Hollywood as Historian*. A comprehensive index by personal name, themes, and film titles is an

extremely useful tool for users of this important anthology.

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