

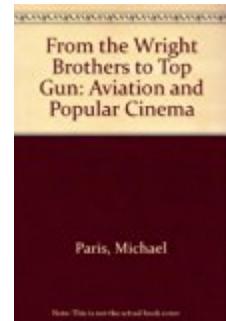
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Michael Paris. *From the Wright Brothers to Top Gun: Aviation, Nationalism and Popular Cinema.* Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1995. 218 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-4073-3.

Reviewed by Uday Mohan (American University)
Published on H-PCAACA (June, 1996)



Air War and National Pride in Film

Cinema and aviation share several historical linkages. Emerging concurrently, the two technologies were perhaps the most socially transformative of the last fin-de-siecle era. Both generated technological wonder in the popular imagination, realigned notions of time and space, and had “golden ages” that lasted into the 1950s. Cinema and aviation have also shared striking entanglements with nationalism, and this connection is the subject of Michael Paris’s book.

Paris, a senior lecturer in history at the University of Central Lancashire, attempts to show how cinema has both reinforced and helped shape popular thinking about aviation as the sine qua non of national technological achievement and a means of mass destruction. To make his point, Paris offers succinct, and sometimes far too brief, thematic summaries of more than five hundred aviation films, from the 1901 *A la Conquete de l’Air* to the Reaganite entertainments of the 1980s. This survey of almost a century of cinematic aviation focuses on Hollywood and British cinema, but Paris occasionally adduces Soviet, German, Italian, and Japanese film productions. To make some of his points, the author also uses the limited secondary literature on the subject, though—surprisingly—he omits some recent relevant work on war films by Jeanine Basinger and Thomas Doherty. At a very general level, Paris’s argument that aviation, cinema, and nationalism have been intertwined in some way from the start seems reasonable. But, having offered this insight, he approaches the topic in a surprisingly naive and narrow way.

A chronological survey begins with the trick films that explored the novelty of aviation, which filmmakers eventually situated in either comedic or dramatic formats. By about 1909 an additional style and content had emerged, as aviation became embedded in narrative and the narratives served both to acclimate the public to aviation as a common societal feature and address the potential destructiveness of aviation as a way of bringing war to population centers from the air.

Fear of aerial destruction became a partial reality with World War I, but aviation films helped to boost morale by celebrating the accomplishments of a new national and cinematic hero, the air fighter; by displaying the breakthroughs of aviation technology; and by linking aviation to the fighting spirit of the nation. Wartime mythmaking and propaganda strengthened the ties between cinema, aviation, and nationalism, further marginalizing an earlier internationalist perspective on aviation and providing images and themes for the airwar films of the 1920s and 1930s. The stories of duty, sacrifice, and technological accomplishment in the films of the interwar years served national propaganda purposes well during a time of drift and depression.

For subsequent decades Paris describes some general shifts in aviation film content that relate to the onset of World War II and to the Cold War peace, but he breaks little new analytical ground. For example, he provides a few generic descriptions of civil aviation films, but then attaches to this subgroup of films his familiar list of

the nationalist features of the war film—duty, risk, discipline, heroism—thus reducing civil aviation movies to little more than nationalist propaganda. By the penultimate chapter, however, even the nationalist framework is barely discussed, suggesting that this framework, loosely applied throughout, may be inappropriate for all aviation films.

But narrowness in conception (and poor editing and proofing) are not the only problems here. A third of Paris's conclusion, which is only half a page long anyway, is given over to a quotation saying nothing more than that film has political content and is not simply art or entertainment. Why this needs to be said in a university press book is baffling, but it suggests that Paris wants to do little more than politicize aviation films. But even here there are problems, for Paris never really de-

finer his terms. "Propaganda," "nationalism," "Establishment," "film cycles," are all used too loosely to be analytically insightful. In his analysis the author makes little distinction between documentary and feature films. And the assumption throughout is that audiences simply soak up the ideological messages Paris sees in the films. This book provides useful data on, and description of, aviation films, and some very preliminary taxonomies, but little in the way of sustained genre or textual analysis.

This review is copyrighted (c) 1996 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations. It may be reproduced electronically for educational or scholarly use. The Associations reserve print rights and permissions. (Contact: P.C.Rollins at the following electronic address: Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pcaaca>

Citation: Uday Mohan. Review of Paris, Michael, *From the Wright Brothers to Top Gun: Aviation, Nationalism and Popular Cinema*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. June, 1996.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=490>

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations, 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 P.C. Rollins at Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu or the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.