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Jonathan Rosenbaum. *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Limit What Films We Can See.* London: Wallflower Press, 2002. 192 pp. Â£12.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-903364-60-4.

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Movie Wars was originally published in America by A. Cappella Publishing in November 2000 and has been reissued in Britain. The reception on this side of the Atlantic will probably be sympathetic, as we also suffer–if not more so–from the disease of American blockbusters that invade our shores and colonize our screens. In 1997, the then-chairman of PolyGram Filmed Entertainment, Stewart Till, was appointed by the new Labour government to chair a committee on the British film industry. The result was a report, "A Bigger Picture." It pinpointed distribution as the Achilles' heel of the British film industry: many British films (if indeed most of them) never even got a release. British multiplexes are in the main owned by American studios or closely linked to their distributors. Britain's key player in the field, Film Four, has collapsed. In France, Canal Plus suffered a similar fate. PolyGram, the one independent European distributor (and financier)–responsible for backing such British films as *Trainspotting* and *Four Weddings and a Funeral*–has also disappeared, liquidated by an American studio. This is the territory covered by Jonathan Rosenbaum's book.

The book's title is quite misleading, as it would indicate a serious engagement with the political economy of Hollywood, at least on the lines of "A Bigger Picture." Instead, it is a funny and informative but supremely arrogant and self-serving meander through Rosenbaum's memoirs. It "loses the plot" soon after the first few chapters and rambles through what seems to be a reheating of old essays rather poorly stitched together. Clearly one would expect to meet concepts like "oligopoly," "synergy," "Marxism," or "capitalism," but maybe these have been erased for the dumbed-down reader, just what Rosenbaum accuses his targets–his colleagues and fellow writers on film, or at least their editors–of doing. He coins the cute little phrase "media industry complex," which makes good copy, but with not a reference to C. Wright Mills and with no further expansion into a discussion of the challenge of the media giants–Murdoch, Berlusconi, Lucas, Spielberg, Eisner–and their many-tentacled trans-national corporations in our age. Instead, he launches into a personal *ad hominen* bitch-fest and a celebration of his own writings. So this is not an intellectually interesting book, but rather a good read from an insider dishing the dirt and pedantically trashing his colleagues. His personal venom is worse than his intellectual bite. He is in a great tradition of American polemicists. Indeed a long time ago de Tocqueville wrote a whole chapter on "Why American Writers and Speakers are Often Bombastic."

Rosenbaum's thesis is that American film culture has been dumbed down. Art house films, particularly if they are subtitled, are systemically excluded from exhibition by the likes of Miramax's Weinstein. But as no explanatory paradigm is put forward other than a vague conspiracy theory about individual film makers who are "narrow minded simpletons who want to cover their asses" and rather overly taken with the merits of preview testing (p. 9), the book is rather weak and full on empty invective of the sort quoted. He maintains that there is still a market for art house films but what he does not say is how films can be distributed and exhibited to satisfy that audience.

It is really sad to see Marshall McLuhan being brought in, not to discuss his ideas about the global village or the media but to parade a very silly quote Rosenbaum writes, "It reminds me of Marshall McLuhan's account in his Introduction to *Understanding Media* of the 'consternation of one of the editors of this book.' He noted in dismay that 'seventy five percent of your material is new.... A successful book cannot venture to be more than ten percent new,"' which is trotted out not once but twice (pp. 28, 149). French film critic Serge Daney suffers a similar fate, even though he was widely considered to be one of its best practitioners. As noted,

no writer of any consequence on the political economy of Hollywood is used, for example, Richard Maltby, Tino Balio, Douglas Gomery, Thomas Schatz, or Justin Wyatt. Instead, Rosenbaum's main targets are film journalists, reviewers, and writers of an earlier age, baby boomers like himself: David Thomson, David Denby, Janet Maslin, and Susan Sontag. He even manages to slate Dwight Macdonald for casually admitting he had not been fully familiar with the meaning of "lap dissolve." And he does all of this exclusively in relation to himself, mentioning Macdonald's influence on him and his friendship with one of Macdonald's sons. But he totally fails to engage with Macdonald's Marxian critique of Mass Culture, which he dubbed "Masscult." As this is actually quite similar to Rosenbaum's own thesis about the dumbing down of film culture, this omission is little short of a betrayal. Nonetheless, the influence of Macdonald will live on long after Rosenbaum's snide dismissal. Furthermore, there is no mention at all of the even more influential Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School and their work on the "Culture Industry," where they specifically addressed Hollywood from a Neo-Marxist standpoint on similar theoretical, but eminently more sophisticated, grounds as Rosenbaum; nor is there anything about the work on media by Noam Chomsky, although he is mentioned. Instead, the very obscure figure of Ernest Boreman is dragged out of oblivion (if he, then why not the guru of PR and marketing in the twentieth century, Edward Bernays?), a manipulator of the public mind for profit, to whom he does refer but without much in-depth explanation. So in a way one can ask Rosenbaum, "What's new?" And what is new is the trans-national grip of Hollywood industry and its spread into all areas of the media beyond films, so that Disney really is a "Culture Industry" far beyond the limits that Adorno had dreamt of, and which, at least for the French, constitutes cultural imperialism at its worst: Disneyland as a "cultural Chernobyl."

As a good baby boomer, Rosenbaum has not left the sixties and is firmly in the auteur tradition of film studies, and he recognizes it. One of his more self-indulgent chapters is on the "wicked" American Film Institute (AFI) and its Top One Hundred Films List, which is in the old Andrew Sarris mold of a canon, or in his phrase, a pantheon. We had been led to believe that the book was about the problems of the distribution of mainly foreign films, but here we have a well-meaning institution trashed for bringing out, like so many others, its list of all-time greats. Rosenbaum fulminates about this commercial sell-out and just throws his own list without comment or justification into our faces. He does make a good point from a British standpoint that the AFI appropriates some of our best films: what are *The Third Man*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, or *A Clockwork Orange* doing there? However, does this merit more than a quizzical raised eyebrow? After all, the British Film Institute (BFI) got its own back by listing Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* at number fifteen on its list ot Top One Hundred British Films. That said, Rosenbabum's heart is in the right place as he lists some of the key American independent film makers in his one hundred (not listed in "best" order): Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* and *Stranger than Paradise*; John Cassavetes' *Shadows*, *Love Stream*, and *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*; and David Lynch's *Eraserhead*.

Rosenbaum's approach to American Indies is quite eccentric. He has actually written an excellent monograph for the BFI on *Dead Man* in which he praises Jarmusch for keeping the ownership of his films' negatives, but that is hardly a feasible strategy for cash-strapped directors.[1] One can only allude to Orson Welles and the recent clashes between Scorsese and Weinstein over *Gangs of New York* and the whole argument about "director's cuts." Film is above all a business and a huge one at that. Nevertheless, there are openings for American Indies such as the Coen brothers. Much of this activity has resided in the festivals at Sundance and Telluride for some thirty years. However, Rosenbaum turns his nose up at these and is decidedly snide about them without giving any serious reason: they will not pay his airfare. This is a dereliction of duty. He trashes the AFI but fails to mention that since 1995 they have held the AFI Los Angeles International Film Festival, where foreign art films get a showcase. So in chapter 9 he is off on his junkets to Cannes and other hot spots and rehashes of "what I saw last summer."

Rosenbaum trashes his eminent colleagues, and it is very true that reviewers are the cheerleaders and Pied Pipers of the film industry. They are too often, he says, in a sinister symbiotic relationship with the studios and are (although not his formulation) "quote whores," providing good taglines for the posters and trailers. (The worst example of this was the infamous case of "David Mannning": a critic invented by Columbia to promote their pictures.) But even more fearsome is the grip of the media industry which, as in the old times of Hearst as portrayed in *Citizen Kane*, journalists had to provide not only good copy each week but also to praise the corporation's products when made by another branch of the conglomerate. Many of Rosenbaum's victims are probably not that influential in getting the masses through the ticket barriers and Rosenbaum ignores the rise of "word of mouse." Who reads *The New York Review of Books* for

guidance on what to see tonight? That privilege more and more falls to the websites, one of the most influential being Harry Knowles's "Ain't It Cool News." Similarly, Rosenbaum praises *The Blair Witch Project* for being populist but fails to see that it was a brilliant marketing stunt on the web and a totally exploitative one. On the other hand, he trashes Dogme 95 with a wave of the pen, failing to address the possibilities of new digital technology for making films and for bypassing the media giants.

This is not a book I would put on reading lists for a Hollywood module. It certainly has its place in a university library, as it makes a contribution to the field of film journalism, and for any project or dissertation or thesis on that subject, I would expect *Movie Wars* to be part of the field covered. It has footnotes and an index but it is not really within the academic mode despite its aspirations.

Note

[1]. Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Dead Man* (London: British Film Institute, 2001).

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