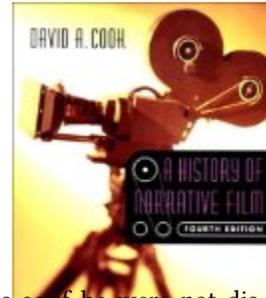


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David A. Cook. *A History of Narrative Film*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004. xxviii + 1120 pp. \$71.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-393-97868-1.

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Like David Bordwell and Kristin's Thompson's ubiquitous text *Film Art*, this book is a long-time survivor; it has clearly been a great success for the publishers and has established itself as a standard textbook in many film studies courses. It is a hefty tome and quite an expensive one, so if a student is to be advised to purchase a copy, its usage as a textbook has to be assessed. It is undoubtedly an encyclopedic book, rather than an academic one with a thesis to argue, and therein lies both its strength and weakness. It purports to be "a history of narrative film" but neither of the terms "narrative" or "history" are discussed as paradigms or methodologies. Both terms can be problematic and that should be acknowledged. One would expect some discussion of what is meant by "narration" as it is defined in the various books on that topic in relation to film, such as Edward Branigan's *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (1992), David Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1987), and Kristin Thompson's *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique* (1999). It could also have done with some discussion of the theory of history as covered in Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery's *Film History: Theory and Practice* (1985). Instead, all we get is a very brief discussion on film language in the preface. This book's aim appears to be a fully comprehensive history of world cinema, so it is in competition with Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's anthology, *The Oxford History of World Cinema* (1999), as well as Bordwell and Thompson's *Film History: An Introduction* (2002).

As to how the book is structured, we are told by the author that, "I have excluded documentary cinema, animated cinema and the experimental avant-garde" (p. xxv). Fortunately, for the sake of the encyclopedic coverage of his book, this is a vow Cook does not quite keep as he does discuss documentary, although he does so by

sliding it in under scare quotes as if he were not discussing "proper" documentary. It is included with Robert Flaherty as "narrative documentaries" and Leni Riefenstahl as "propaganda documentaries." He also discusses Claude Lanzman's *Shoah* (1985) and Max Ophuls's *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1969), as well as the influence of documentary on British cinema.

There is no introduction as such and we dive straight into the technological innovations of the nineteenth century, although there is no mention of Jonathan Crary's key book on that *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (1992). Indeed, the whole book is extremely biased towards a technological approach and there is a good book on the history of film technology screaming to get out. Cook serves up an hors d'oeuvre of weird names for the many apparatuses and an alphabet soup of acronyms for the many film processes in the first and final chapters.

Cook's main aim in updating the fourth edition is to deal with the "hegemonic control by American distributors of virtually every film market in the world," globalization, and the dominance of CGI (Computer Generated Imagery) so that cinema has become "a particular case of animation" (p. xxi); but, at the same time, the contradictory tendency of the democratizing effects of digital cinema has to be taken into account and it needs to be shown how that can liberate young film makers from the control of the money men.

One of the justifications for the high price of the book is its excellent color insert between chapters 11 and 12 on "Color Technologies: A Brief Overview." Cook also provides a vast number of illustrations, which he believes should be seen and read "as part of the same critical fabric" (p. xxxviii). However, strangely then, there are no

in-text references to them. The visual analyses of several films are some of the best parts of this book. Sequences such as the Odessa steps from *Potemkin* (1925) are very well covered, as are the Rosebud sequences from *Citizen Kane* (1941). Also D. W. Griffiths's *Intolerance* (1916) and *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) are well analyzed and acutely reviewed. Nevertheless this sort of pedagogic effort only really comes off best with the newer technologies of CD-ROMs and video/DVDs. Thus Robert Kolker's book *Film Form and Culture* (1998) comes with an excellent CD-ROM, and the video/DVD *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese through American Movies* (1995) covers technology very nicely. That said, a separate chapter dedicated to Orson Welles is excellent, though again Cook insists on focusing primarily on technology and sound.

As a reference book it has an added drawback in that it does not clearly point students to further reading. Admittedly the selective bibliography takes each chapter into account, but this is far too long for a student (unless she/he is a doctoral candidate), and it would be far more helpful to have this at the end of each section. For instance, Cook does this to good effect for English heritage films (but he misses out on one key contributor to that debate—Claire Monk) and for Nazi and Soviet propaganda films where he suggests a few specific books.

There are more than a few slips that mar a book of reference. The usual typo error in spelling Gandhi occurs in the title of Attenborough's film as *Ghandi* (1982) (p. 499). Peru's population is quoted as 7.9 million (p. 808), but in the 2003 census that was 27.1 million. Admittedly this is hardly a central fact for narrative film history, but it does undermine the credibility of other facts cited in this fact-laden tome. Equally, if this is a fully updated edition there is a problem with Italian film. Two of the most famous and successful recent Italian films are simply omitted: Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* (1997) and Tornatore's *Cinema Paradiso* (1989). In the index the listing for *Dogme 95* is for pages 568-708, but in fact that is a misprint and *Dogme 95* is actually on pages 568-570.

The encyclopedic coverage also presents a problem of balance. Cook insists on including the most esoteric areas such as Bolivia, Peru, and Chile. But he gives them the same amount of pages as for *Dogme 95*, which is not only perhaps the most important of the "new waves" in recent years, but also has great implications for Cook's

two key theses on CGI and Hollywood's hegemony. This encyclopedic tendency degenerates too frequently into merely a series of lists, so it looks like a textbook for a Gradgrind film school.

The Movie Brats are well covered up to the debacle of *Heaven's Gate* (1980). But there was a resurrection in New Hollywood in the 1980s and 1990s with the rise of the independents and the other strand of New Hollywood: the CGI blockbusters. That is all well covered in focused books such as Jim Hillier's collection *American Independent Cinema* (2000) and Geoff King's *New Hollywood Cinema* (2002). Cook's concluding chapter deals almost exclusively with the technological aspects of CGI, but one of the most quoted examples, the death of Oliver Reed during the shooting of *Gladiator* (2000) and the subsequent digital manipulation of his image to finish his scenes, barely gets a footnote. Yet that has given rise to much speculation about the future use of stars and even the resurrection of some old ones.

There are some strange omissions. The recent rise of animation through Disney and DreamWorks is not covered. There is no coverage of the Coen brothers (just a note in the color section), and David Lynch barely merits a footnote and, again, only with a reference to CGI (p. 883). Spike Lee is not there either, nor is there anything on blacks or gay and lesbian Queer cinema as is covered in the Hillier book. These are new narratives surely? Whilst the American hegemony of distribution is cited as a key theme, there is no mention of the key players such as Harvey Weinstein of Miramax, or New Line, Fine Line, Sony Classics, etc. (Although, admittedly there is a good reference to Deutsche Columbia on page 604.) Nor is the Sundance film festival covered at all.

Cook's massive book is certainly a work of much research, though there is much argument, and it is theory-light. As a book of reference, it has its place in any library that covers film studies and it is a useful starting point for many researchers who wish to follow up the multiple lists he has collated. There is also much up-to-date information on technology and, indeed, on its history. But one of the problems concerns the fact that technology is a moving target and the convergence of technologies and the internet are doubtless just over the horizon. But then Cook will be able to produce a fifth edition.

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