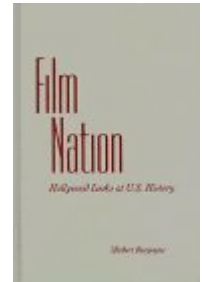


Robert Burgoyne. *Film Nation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. ix + 137 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8166-2070-8.



Reviewed by Ron Briley

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In *Film Nation* Robert Burgoyne, professor of English and film studies at Wayne State University, argues that popular film plays a crucial role in formulating the imagined community of the nation state. According to Burgoyne, Hollywood filmmakers, along with consensus historians, are responsible for articulating the national narrative of American progress. However, as many contemporary historians observe, this narrative tends to marginalize many citizens along the fault lines of race, gender, and social class.

In an analysis of five selected titles from the 1980's and early 1990's--*Glory*, *Thunderheart*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *JFK*, and *Forest Gump*--Burgoyne credits recent Hollywood directors, like Oliver Stone, with providing a counternarrative of ethnic, racial, and gender struggles to create a more inclusive national story. Using the traditional genre of the Western, war film, and the melodrama, the author contends the texts selected for analysis offer a "... model of civic pluralism that holds a nation should be a home to all, and race, color, religion, and creed should be no bar to belonging" (p. 11).

Burgoyne's essay on *Glory* emphasizes the film's politics of racial identity. The Black soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment are confronted with visions of identity from above (nation-state) and identity from below (racial and ethnic), and critics of Edward Zwick's film assert that in the blaze of glory and death at Fort Wagner, which concludes the film, a new myth of national consensus regarding racial integration and progress is forged. However, Burgoyne interprets the text as ambiguous, placing slavery and race at its center, and from the perspective of a racially-conscious present, "... the national narrative is hauntingly evoked not as a triumphant story of social progress, but as a collective narrative of social loss" (p. 37).

The master story of American progress is also called into question by Michael Apted's *Thunderheart*, which focuses upon the 1890 and 1973 Wounded Knee resistance by the Sioux nation to American cultural and territorial imperialism. Burgoyne praises the picture for its positive depiction of the Sioux people and their alternative value system of time and place, but the author laments that *Thunderheart* provides this appreci-

ation through the traditional vehicle of the Western genre, supporting war myths that render the Native Americans more acceptable to the dominant culture.

In his most complex essay, Burgoyne employs the Freudian concept of the rescue motif to argue that Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* allows hero Ron Kovic (Tom Cruise) to serve as the savior of the nation, " ... restoring the myth of the nuclear family as an emblem of promised community" (p. 59). Burgoyne argues that *Born on the Fourth of July* may be best understood as a melodrama in which the male protagonist, following Vietnam and paralysis from a war wound, recognizes the gap between the reality and promise of the American dream. The nation, symbolized as a woman, is corrupted by competition and commercialism, but the hero will provide redemption by creating a new cultural, political, and sexual order fulfilling the nation's promise and including all of America's citizens. Burgoyne's reading of Stone's *JFK* produces a similar sense of ambiguity. The nonnarrative structure of the film reflects modernist perceptions that historical truth is relative and notions of an imagined federal community are illusory, yet in Jim Garrison's (Kevin Costner) efforts to uncover the mystery of Kennedy's assassination there is a quest to reconfigure the national myths and recover a sense of unisonance.

In his final essay, Burgoyne tackles the immensely popular *Forrest Gump*, describing the film text as providing prosthetic memory, an effort to divorce sensual memory from historical context. Thus, Burgoyne reads *Forrest Gump* as a conservative text in which emotional understanding of the past is therapeutic, but often at odds with reality. The traditional interpretation provided by Gump runs counter to the more inclusive notions of imagined community reflected by *Gloria*, *Thunderheart*, *Born on the Fourth of July* and *JFK*, but this cinematic discourse demonstrates

Burgoyne's thesis that film continues to play a significant role in constructs of national identity.

Grounded in the language of postmodernism and deconstructionism, Burgoyne's short text is a difficult, but rewarding, read. While his interpretations are sometimes ambiguous and may provide more questions than answers, Burgoyne's *Film Nation* takes popular film seriously, and, to paraphrase Jacques Barzun's oft-quoted comment regarding baseball, those who seek to understand America must first study Hollywood and its role in developing American consciousness and identity. Robert Burgoyne's provocative book is an important contribution to that historical process.

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