

Jim Cullen. *A Short History of the Modern Media*. Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2013. 304 pp. \$35.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4443-5142-2.



Reviewed by Christopher D. Worrall

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As the sheer size of Margaret Blanchard's 1998 encyclopedic work would testify, histories of mass media in the United States face the immediate problem of balancing scope with reader accessibility. This problem intensifies when, as Jim Cullen attempts in this work, you try to talk about the topic directly to high school students. To try and encompass centuries of history across various forms of media in under three hundred student-friendly pages is a daunting challenge, and it comes as no real surprise that this work stumbles a couple of times along the way. However, that does not take away from what is ultimately an ambitious and engaging text that largely succeeds in delivering academic discussion to that most stereotypically unreceptive of audiences.

Formatted in the traditional model of a history textbook, *A Short History of the Modern Media* essentially acts as a whistle-stop tour of various media forms—literature, radio, theater, television, cinema, and the Internet—with selected case and genre studies that highlight significant examples of each. Through his introduction, Cullen stresses

the importance of connectivity in this definition of media. Not only are his forms of media defined as the "medium" between performer and audience, but he also stresses how individual mediums must be seen as part of a wider "media" and as parts of a wider cultural phenomenon (pp. 2, 3). This emphasis on connectivity between media forms is something impressively reinforced throughout this work, as his chapters discussing each individual media form manage to touch upon key relationships with the others without the chapters losing their individual focuses. Perhaps his best example of this is his discussion of television, wherein he notes its direct relationship with radio, and how the two genres first competed and then found distinct individual voices into the early 1960s. He then continues this into his discussion of the television sitcom, and shows how its origins (and many of the genre's early pioneers) originated their careers in radio.

Each of his chapters therefore acts like the gradual adjustment of a film projector, as general histories of a medium smoothly focus onto first a

genre and then a particular "text" in that genre that serves as a case study. While individual choices of "relevant" case studies will always leave some dissatisfied, Cullen's selection finds a smart balance between the classic (Edgar Allen Poe) and the refreshingly modern (Taylor Swift). Much like his genre studies, each manages to stay broadly focused on the genre in which it is situated. However, there is a deliberate and intelligent through line that reinforces both its overarching discussions of inter-medium connectivity and the particular relevance of each chosen source to both its genre and those it connected to.

This he perhaps best demonstrates through his analysis of the hit single *Beat It* from Michael Jackson's landmark album *Thriller*. Not only is he keen to stress the obvious impacts of visual media on the chosen song (especially when discussing its ground-breaking music video), but in his wider reflections on the album he also continues discussions of the supernatural and storytelling that were first referenced in the case studies for theater (the American musical) and literature (horror). Through that, he convincingly outlines how elements of classic media can be seen in the genesis and execution of one of the modern pop music's most iconic pieces of art. When one skims over this text's contents page, his choice of case studies seems as scatter-shot as anything. In reality, each is delicately linked to others without ever feeling overly contrived or forced.

Throughout the text, Cullen successfully walks a fine line of intellectual accessibility without ever getting too lost in either academic obtuseness or an over-eagerness to simplify. There are, however, occasional moments when the attempts to talk directly to the student jar; "reading does remain a way to have fun. Seriously" (p. 30). Also, while the balance of mediums discussed in this text is impressive, there are undeniable peaks and troughs across the genre and case studies. On the one hand, Cullen's discussion of the western film *The Searchers* (1956) is a master class in ac-

cessible academic writing: it draws on extensive cinema theory while also outlining its contentions in a clear, concise manner. On the other hand, the author's clear love and knowledge of cinema (reflected also in his publication past) does sometimes carry too far into his other genre analyses. In particular, references to film emerge in his discussion of literary horror perhaps at the expense of available comparisons present in literature. Moreover, the concluding discussions on digital media lack the depth and texture of the previous chapters, perhaps in part because its ever-changing modernity makes it a harder medium to tie together as concisely.

Such issues, however, do not detract too much away from what is ultimately an impressive and useful work. It is an educational text that will speak to students with a confident, gentle authority and it manages to draw out consistent intellectual debates from a range of well-written and refreshingly original case and genre studies. This a book of great interest and use to anyone in education, both student and teacher, and those interested in the general history of American media, society, and popular culture.

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