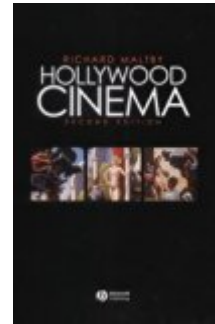


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard Maltby. *Hollywood Cinema*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003. 544 pp. \$59.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-631-21615-5; \$78.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-631-21614-8.

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Hooray for Hollywood Cinema

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The first edition of Maltby's book came out in 1995 and this is the second, updated, expanded, and much improved edition. The first quickly made a significant impact as a textbook and soon established itself as one of the key readings for any university module dealing with Hollywood, indeed, in some cases, as the set book. So this edition is much welcomed, but just as it has some excellent additions it also has some problems. The main one is the extended length: at some seven hundred pages it has become slightly unwieldy to read and one yearns for a lectern! Perhaps it has taken on more than can be handled adequately in one textbook and thus, if some of my criticisms are that it does not sufficiently address some areas, that would seem a contradictory judgment.

One great irritant is the extremely poor reproduction quality of the stills, even those from black and white films. I am aware of the added cost of color printing, but to see the small still from *Titanic* in blurred black and white seems a bit pointless. One of the direct competitors in the film textbook stakes is David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's *Film Art: An Introduction* (7th edition), also published in 2003, which has color prints and film frames, but admittedly is about twice the price.

Some of the improvements are an updated chronology with significant events and films for each year, notes grouped by page number (thus easier to locate), and a glossary of terms in bold in the text. New features are a summary of key points and lists for further reading at the end of each chapter, boxes with graphs and statistics,

and appendices on the production code and ratings system (all very useful for students).

Like Archilocus's hedgehog, as noted by Isaiah Berlin, Maltby has one big idea—his coinage of the “commercial aesthetic.” This is paralleled to Adorno and Horkheimer's coinage of “culture industry,” but without the irony of an oxymoron. Maltby maps his own field as concerned “primarily with questions of culture rather than of art” and he “concentrates exclusively on mainstream American cinema” (pp. 10-11) and “avoid[s] critical reconstructions of Hollywood movies that overlook their commercial status” (p. 59). The arrival of *Titanic* gives Maltby a golden opportunity to demonstrate his thesis in part 1 of the book, entitled “The Commercial Aesthetic.” Nevertheless, the attempt to elide the difference between film as art and as business retains some element of oxymoron.

Maltby has a debt to the historical empirical turn exemplified by Douglas Gomery and Robert Allen's *Film History Theory and Practice* (1985) which is now long out of print. This is developed in part 2, “Histories,” and in the major extensions to this edition with new chapters on “From 1948 to 1980” and “Since 1980.” But Maltby is also indebted to the neo-formalism of Bordwell et al. of the Wisconsin school, especially in the chapters of part 3, “Conventions,” where he tackles the formal system of Hollywood. And thus, unsurprisingly, the entry in the index for “Bordwell, David” is one of the most extensive.

The one area where Maltby seems to depart somewhat from his path is the final chapter on “Theories.” He

does pull back to it at the end, but this does seem like a rather unnecessary excursion though “Grand Theory.” It will make difficult and obscure reading for most students. Had he related it more directly to Hollywood it would have made more sense—thus the key essay from *Cahiers du Cinema* on *Young Mr Lincoln* (which is mentioned) could be dealt with in more depth, and equally Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure” essay that basically excoriated the mainstream Hollywood mode of representation. This whole area of cine-psychoanalysis and semiotics is dealt with much better in the further reading that Maltby himself indicates, such as Robert Stam’s *Film Theory: An Introduction* (2000), and he would have been wise to restrict his discussion to neo-formalism, and history and reception studies, and his own engagement with that. Had he actually wanted to deal with contemporary film theory, he should have dealt with Gilles Deleuze (who is not mentioned at all), as well as Fredric Jameson (who only gets a brief note on page 510) and Slavoj Žižek (who does get a few more references).

There are some areas which I think Maltby could have dealt with in rather more detail, like independents, digital production, and Hollywood as McDonaldization. Many of the students reading this will have vocational aspirations to enter the industry and they would be thinking of guerrilla filmmaking and their hero Robert Rodriguez, with his book *Rebel without a Crew or How a 23-Year-Old Filmmaker with \$7,000 Became a Hollywood Player* (1996) on the making of *El Mariachi*. Of course, the bottom line is that he was incorporated into the mainstream and his film remade with a Hollywood style budget as *Desperado*, and with a star, Antonio Banderas. Maltby does bring out correctly this crossover between indies and mainstream, pointing out the incorporation of the indies’ distributors Miramax (not well indexed) and New Line into the studio conglomerates, but perhaps not sufficiently.

He has a box about “Box Office Grosses” (pp. 200-201), but instead of comparing *The Blair Witch Project* and its mainstream sequel *Blair Witch 2*, he merely refers to the original while providing the poor takings of the latter. The interesting point here surely is the promotion of *Blair Witch Project* through “word of mouse” with Barnum and Bailey-style hokum, and that it must have given the highest rate of return in Hollywood history if we take for granted the \$35,000 budget figure quoted on IMDB.com compared with the U.S. gross of \$140 million. Another instance is that of the Wachowski brothers and their sophisticated lesbian gangster debut *Bound*, which did not make its budget back on the U.S. gross but nevertheless catapulted the brothers up to the huge Ma-

trix franchise. Doubtless there is much to learn also, in due course, from the attempt by movie brat Martin Scorsese to break into the big time with the Miramax-backed *Gangs of New York*, which failed to recover its \$100 million budget with the U.S. gross. That is a confirmation of the “death of the auteur” from the “Hollywood Renaissance” of the 1970s, and of the rise of the New Hollywood moguls Lucas, Eisner, and Spielberg. I would have expected much more about this and especially Spielberg who fits so perfectly the “commercial aesthetic,” and even more about his founding of the new studio DreamWorks (there is just one reference in the chronology). Other developments in that field may be too close to deal with at the present time, but presumably in a third edition we will hear of the AOL Time Warner merger and the Vivendi Universal saga.

In a new and useful section on “The Triumph of the Digital,” Maltby discusses the digital revolution but there are too many omissions. He only discusses it in terms of distribution and exhibition, and sidelines the production side, which again fascinates students as a form of making films cheaply in the style of Dogme. And as for style, he needed to address how digital changes film from a photographic realist medium to an electronic painterly one, which possibly accounts for the return of animation. These aspects, as well as computer-generated imagery (CGI) and special effects (SFX), which herald, he argues, “apocalyptic possibilities for cinema in which ‘death of cinema’ is envisaged,” also require discussion of Lucas’s Industrial Light and Magic, and Disney’s Pixar (p. 263).

Maltby repeats several times that Hollywood earns more for the United States in exports than any other industry bar military hardware. But he does not discuss cultural imperialism, nor the GATT spat with France, which claimed (and got) “cultural exception.” Theater director Ariane Mnouchkine, for example, described EuroDisney as “a cultural Chernobyl,” and this applies to American films as well. The GATT negotiations only appear in the chronology. The expansion of Hollywood abroad is an interesting cultural and economic issue and may not be quite within Maltby’s scheme. For instance, back in the 1930s MGM established a huge studio in Britain, MGM British, and by the end of the 1960s the U.S. studios controlled over 90 percent of the British film industry, only to disappear back to the United States in the early 1970s. (Alexander Walker’s *Hollywood England* [1986] covers this phenomenon well.) Maltby discusses the James Bond franchise in terms of a Hollywood product, which is the sole legacy of that incursion. But is the James Bond franchise British or American? More re-

cently, there has been the huge incursion of U.S.-owned multiplexes, and distribution and exhibition systems are U.S. dominated, not just in Western Europe but in the ex-Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe, too. Whether that is a subject that should be more fully covered in Maltby's already lengthy *Hollywood Cinema* may be debatable, but "Hollywood" is now a global cultural institution that is parallel to what George Ritzer called the "McDonaldization of society."

Overall, Richard Maltby's *Hollywood Cinema*, then, is a very well researched and most knowledgeable book. It is very clearly written, which makes a fine contribution to the study of film and Hollywood in particular, especially with his concept of a "commercial aesthetic" as a paradigm. Together with many useful in-depth analyses of individual films, the book will prove to be a popular and required text.

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