reviews

review article:

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Jeffrey Richards, *Visions of Yesterday*. 1973, 391pp.

Jeffrey Richards, *Swordsmen of the Screen: From Douglas Fairbanks to Michael York*. 1977, 296pp.

Colin Shindler, *Hollywood Goes to War: Film and American Society 1939–52*. 1979, 152pp.

Christopher Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns: From Karl May to Sergio Leone*. 1981, 304pp.

Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1930–1939*. 1984, 374pp.

Derek Elley, *The Epic Film: Myth and History*. 1985, 223pp.

Graham Petrie, *Hollywood Destinies: European Directors in America, 1922–1931*. 1985, 257pp.

Stephen G. Jones, *The British Labour Movement and Film, 1918–1939*. 1987, 248pp.

Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan (eds), *Mass-Observation at the Movies*. 1987. 477pp.

Annette Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality, 1909–1925*. 1988, 160pp.

James C. Robertson, *The Hidden Cinema: British Film Censorship in Action, 1913–1972*. 1989, 190pp.

Robert Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1939–1948*. 1989, 278pp.

Peter Stead, *Film and the Working Class: The Feature Film in British and American Society*. 1989, 272pp.

'Cinema and Society' is the title of a series of books under the general editorship of Jeffrey Richards and published by Routledge.

Since the publication of Richards's own *Visions of Yesterday* in 1973, a further twelve volumes have appeared, half of them in the last three years. As with all series of this kind, the 'Cinema and Society' title has, to some extent, served as a label of convenience for a variety of books of different kinds. Initially, the emphasis of the series was on surveys of relatively neglected film types or genres (the imperial film, the swashbuckler, the war film, the epic and the spaghetti western) aimed at the general reader; while latterly the series has consisted of more conventionally academic discussions of various aspects of British cinema. It is these later volumes with which I will be primarily concerned. Not only have they provided the series with a greater coherence than it previously possessed, but they have also generated a degree of internal debate which makes it appropriate for them to be considered together. The key volume in this respect is undoubtedly Jeffrey Richards's *The Age of the Dream Palace*, which is not only the most substantial work in the series but also the one which in a sense 'sets the agenda' for many of the titles which follow. As such it provides a good starting point for a more general discussion of the series and the issues which it raises, particularly those relating to the study of ideology and film censorship.

In *Visions of Yesterday*, Richards had been primarily concerned to describe what he labelled the 'cinema of Empire': those films, both British and American, which 'detail the attitudes, ideals and myths of British Imperialism'. (p. 2) Although the films are linked to a preceding ideology and literature of Empire, they are largely discussed in isolation from their immediate cinematic context of production and exhibition. In *The Age of the Dream Palace*, however, Richards is more directly concerned to situate his discussion of British films of the 1930s in relation to the context and constraints within which they were produced. His general argument is that films of the period largely conformed to the dominant ideology and 'for the most part played their role in maintaining consensus and the status quo'. (p. 324) His central explanation for this is censorship: 'It is the censorship system', Richards argues, rather than 'the dictates of commercial necessity or the artistic vision of production chiefs', which provided 'the framework within which the cinema operated as a cultural and social force'. (p. 89) This emphasis is echoed both in James C. Robertson's *The Hidden Cinema*, in which it is argued that censorship has 'exerted a greater influence upon film history than is often immediately apparent' (p. 5), and also more generally in the writings of film historians, where censorship has often been regarded as 'the first reality'.[1]

Both Richards and Robertson add considerably to our understanding of the workings of the British Board of Film Censors (particularly during the 1930s and 1940s when a script vetting system

1 See, for example, Nicholas Pronay, 'The first reality: film censorship in liberal England', in K.R.M. *Feature Films as History*, Short (ed.), (London: Croom Helm, 1981).

was in operation), and provide plenty of evidence to justify their arguments regarding the ideologically conservative nature of censorship. However, there is also a sense in which they overstate their case and attribute too great a power to censorship in circumscribing the potentially subversive, or merely plural, meanings of film texts. This is in part an empirical issue concerning the abilities of censors fully to appreciate the aesthetic and ideological subtleties of the individual films and scripts which they encounter. But it is also, and perhaps more importantly, a theoretical issue concerning the degree to which the semiotic productivity of the film text may 'outstrip' the operations of censorship.

As Annette Kuhn argues in her *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality*, the model of censorship employed by Richards and Robertson not only involves an overly deterministic conception of power, but also relegates the films themselves to secondary importance in the inquiry (see pp. 3–4). Thus, in the case of Robertson, the absence of any consideration of actual films inevitably exaggerates the restrictive power of censorship and its success in achieving its ends, when the evidence of film texts might suggest otherwise (as in the case of *Victim* [1961], for example). Richards does follow up his discussion of censorship with a consideration of films, but his conclusions either only barely substantiate his dominant ideology thesis (the identification of Jessie Matthews's 'middle-class individualism', for example, seems a shade forced), or appear to underestimate the degree of internal complexity, or even tension, in individual films (the extent to which Gracie Fields, for example, personifies 'consensus' seems less clearcut than Richards suggests).

Part of the problem here is that the emphasis on scripts in Richards's discussion of censorship is carried over into his discussion of the films themselves, discussion which is concerned primarily with plot, character and theme (which are generally conceived independently of style). Richards is aware of the dangers in this and, responding to criticisms of *Visions of Yesterday*, puts in a defence of what he describes as 'the literary interpretation'. (p. 5) His argument is that most of the films he discusses were based either on novels or on plays, and that under the 'strict studio conditions' of the 1930s 'the visuals are chosen to match the message, to tell the story as it is written'. (p. 6) Ironically in doing this he also agrees with critics from an entirely different perspective, those who have traditionally lamented the apparent stylistic impoverishment of British cinema.[2]

However, while the subordination of visual style to plot is a characteristic of all classical narrative cinema, not just of British cinema of the 1930s, style is never simply a neutral vehicle for plot, even in the least imaginative of productions. It will inevitably involve, albeit to different degrees, an amplification of, elaboration

2 For an influential statement of this position, see Thomas Elsaesser, 'Between style and ideology'. *Monogram*, no. 3 (1972).

3 Tom Ryall, *Alfred Hitchcock and the British Cinema* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 165.

upon, and even on occasion a subversion of, the meanings suggested by the script. And while stylistic richness might have been more commonly associated with American than with British cinema, it was still possible, as Tom Ryall has argued, for Alfred Hitchcock, working within the studio conditions of the 1930s, to produce a number of formally and intellectually selfconscious works, which operated at 'the limits of classical cinema'.[3] Admittedly, Richards excludes Hitchcock – somewhat problematically – from his analysis, on the grounds of his exceptional 'creative intelligence' (p. 5); but it is true, nonetheless, that many British films of the 1930s possess a greater formal interest than Richards is prepared to allow. A focus only on the plot of a film such as Basil Dean's *Sing As We Go* (1934), for example, would clearly fail to do justice not only to its formal and stylistic complexity, but also, I would argue, to its moments of ideological subversiveness.

A similar weakness is to be found in Robert Murphy's otherwise valuable survey of British cinema in the 1940s, *Realism and Tinsel*. Although he shares with Richards a concern to place films in their social and industrial contexts, he is preoccupied less with matters of ideology than with the critical rehabilitation of a number of cinematic types (loosely categorized as costume pictures, contemporary melodramas, gangster films, morbid thrillers and comedies) which he regards as having been unfairly neglected by the critics, with their traditional preference for works of realism and social relevance. His argument, clearly important, links with a trend in British film criticism towards defending those films (such as the work of Powell and Pressburger, or Hammer horror) which have characteristically defied the conventions of social realism. However, it is an argument which requires the support of detailed film analysis, and here Murphy's concern, like Richards's, with 'thematic patterns' (p. 2) makes it difficult for him to substantiate his case fully and to bring out successfully the aesthetic and ideological complexities of the films he is championing.

There are two aspects to this. In the first case, Murphy is, probably correctly, reluctant to make exaggerated claims for the artistic merit of some of the films he is describing. By the same token, however, he is almost equally reluctant to make such claims on behalf of films which might legitimately merit them. Thus while a film such as *Night and the City* (1950) is recommended for its 'marvellously evocative impression of London at night' (p. 164), its clearly superior level of achievement compared with other 'spiv' films of the period is barely registered, let alone accounted for. Moreover, despite the book's polemic, there is still a certain conservatism in the way in which judgements are arrived at, and a timidity about recasting the terms in which films might be analysed and evaluated. Murphy argues, for example, that *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* (1948) is not 'a film which stands up to detailed

critical scrutiny'. (p. 188) What he means by this is that he finds it 'irritatingly shoddy'. This may be so, but it does not follow that the film would not reward further critical investigation, especially given its immense popularity, its peculiar hybridisation of British and American cinematic traditions, and its apparent provision of an outlet for attitudes and emotions normally suppressed in British films. What is required, in this case, is not simply a closer attention to the operations of the film text, but also a way of conceptualizing the film in relation to more general ideological processes.

However, if a full understanding of the relations between film and ideology requires a closer regard to formal detail than either Richards or Murphy provide, it must also entail a consideration of the role of the audience, and of their readings of film texts. This is an argument developed by Stephen G. Jones in *The British Labour Movement and Film, 1918–1939*, in which the author criticises Richards's view of the British cinema in the 1930s as an ideological instrument for maintaining the status quo. His main argument here is that the ideological effectiveness of films in this period cannot simply be 'read off' the intentions of the censor or the economic interests of the film business. Following Richards, Jones notes that the cinema audience was primarily working class, and argues that the film industry had to cater to popular tastes and attitudes. Moreover, he suggests, working-class culture in the 1930s was 'fairly resistant to formal incorporation in the hegemonic culture' (p. 21), and hence the working-class cinema audience would not necessarily interpret a film's message in the manner which was intended (although he also disagrees with Richards's portrait of the general conservatism of British films in the 1930s). This also links to an argument of Annette Kuhn's in *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality* regarding the difficulties facing the censor in regulating the ways in which working-class audiences would interpret individual films (see, in particular, her discussion of the VD film).

Jones, in this respect, raises a crucial area of inquiry – but fails to pursue it, in part because of his emphasis on the organised labour movement's relationship to the cinema rather than on the working class and cinema more generally. As a result, his claim that 'working-class people used the cinema in their own ways and on their own terms' (p. 27) remains by and large unsubstantiated; while his emphasis on films simply as 'escape' from the rigours of work prevents him from developing any explanation of how working-class audiences might generate readings of texts which resist dominant ideological constructions (and hence of how film texts might themselves be profitably analysed as sites, as he puts it, of 'ideological contestation'). Some evidence of what audiences actually thought of films during this period is provided in Part One of *Mass Observation at the Movies* (in its study of

'Worktown'/Bolton); but, fascinating though much of this material is, a bald enumeration of individual comments, independent of any theoretical perspective, is relatively unilluminating. What is required is not only more empirical evidence but also an analytical approach which can combine textual analysis with a conceptualization of readership in social and historical terms. Michael Denning's analysis of nineteenth-century dime novels in relation to their working-class readership provides a suggestive example in this respect.[4]

4 Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London: Verso, 1987).

Something like this might also have been expected of Peter Stead's *Film and the Working Class*; but the book is a major disappointment, for it barely begins to get to grips with the issues raised by its avowed topic. Class, or indeed the working class, is never actually defined or even discussed in conceptual terms, while the problems involved in accounting for the production and reception of films in societies divided by class are scarcely registered, let alone addressed. There is no attempt to specify how the social and industrial contexts of film production might shape the ways in which the working class is seen on the cinema screen, or how readings of films might vary according to social class (or, for that matter, given Stead's militantly philistine approach to criticism, of how any readings other than 'commonsense' ones might become proper objects of inquiry). Indeed, strangely, the book's opening chapters are concerned hardly at all with the relations between film and the working class. Chapter One develops an argument about the early American cinema's pursuit of middle-class respectability, while Chapter Two follows up with a cursory discussion of those filmmakers (Griffith, Chaplin, Vidor) whom Stead sees as having successfully convinced middle-class intellectuals of cinema's 'significance'. These chapters set a pattern for much of what follows: not a discussion of film and the working class as such, but an increasingly wearying survey of middle-class critics and their oft-repeated demands for a more socially committed or 'realistic' use of cinema (as in both Britain and America in the 1930s). However, since Stead is also at pains to emphasize that this enthusiasm for social commitment was rarely shared by working-class audiences, it makes his emphasis on critics not only puzzling but also, given his claim that critics might on occasion be regarded as spokesmen for the people, something of a nonsense.

Far more helpful in this respect is Annette Kuhn's *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality, 1909–1925*, which, in addition to making a valuable contribution to our understanding of censorship, is concerned to contribute more generally to debates about the theorisation of film. Her project is to challenge the traditional conception of censorship as an act of prohibition undertaken by a special kind of institution, in favour of a notion of censorship in terms of the socially and historically specific 'ensemble of powers,

practices, and discourses' (p. 10) in which it is embedded. In doing this, she is involved in a broader critique of the 'text-context dualism' which she sees as governing not only the study of film censorship but film studies as a whole. Thus, in her case studies of early British censorship she not only shows how censorship depends upon an interaction of institutional and textual practices, but also indicates how, in her terms, the social inhabits meaning in the way that film texts are read. Thus, to take two of her examples, Kuhn demonstrates how the 'meanings' of a text may require extratextual knowledge in order to be fully activated (as with *Maisie's Marriage* [1923]), or how extratextual discourses may impose a 'meaning' upon a text not necessarily underwritten, or implied, by the text itself (*Where Are My Children* [1916]). The strength of this work is its combination of attention to textual detail with recognition of the socio-historical variability of a text's reception – even if this does create an element of unresolved tension between the critic's reading of the text on the one hand, and those readings which have in fact been socially and historically activated on the other.

Kuhn's attempt to cross the divide between what have often been taken as incompatible approaches to the study of film is also important in the context of *Screen*. Jeffrey Richards's *The Age of the Dream Palace*, for example, was dismissed by *Screen* when it first appeared.[5] The problem with this was not that the criticisms of the book were wrong (although they were ungenerous to the book's wealth of scholarship and detail), so much as that they were mounted in a generally unproductive 'either-or' fashion. Richards's predominantly 'sociological' approach to the study of the British cinema, for example, was contrasted with the critical emphasis on 'aesthetics and style' in studies of Hollywood. Thus, it is suggested, a film such as *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955) 'is as likely to be discussed in terms of its genre (melodrama) or its auteur (Nicholas Ray) as it is in terms of its "overt" subject-matter (youth, youth culture and the "social problem" of the generation gap)'. (p. 6) This may be so, but it does not necessarily follow, as is implied, that the first approach is superior. For while the underestimation of 'aesthetics and style' in studies of British cinema is undoubtedly a shortcoming, it could equally well be argued that a neglect of questions of 'ideology and society' has been inhibiting for studies of the American cinema, creating gaps which are only now being filled.[6] Instead of counterposing the two approaches, it would be far more useful to attempt to bring them together, and so encourage work capable of addressing questions of society and ideology without necessarily sacrificing a concern for formal detail or for the productivity of the film text. What such a project might involve is suggested by Fredric Jameson's insistence on the importance of grasping culture not only 'in and for itself, but also in relationship to its outside, its content, its context and its space of intervention and

5 See, Andrew Higson and Steve Neale, 'Introduction: components of the national film culture'. *Screen*, vol. 26, no. 1 (1985).

6 See, most recently, Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Film* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988); Richard Maltby, *Harmless Entertainment: Hollywood and the Ideology of Consensus* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1983).

7 Fredric Jameson, 'Marxism and Postmodernism'. *New Left Review*, no. 176 (1989), p. 42.

of effectivity.'[7] While such a programme may be out of fashion, it is important that the need for it be restated. It is also a programme which not only the 'Cinema and Society' series, but also *Screen* itself, could profitably pursue.