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Hollywood Comedians, The Film Reader (review)

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pastiche of assaults on the old order that frequently serve only to highlight an inadequate historical knowledge as related to the primary subject.

As indicated in the introduction, the editors/authors are at collective pains to point out, with apparent intended irony, that the two greatest “exports” of the United States during the past century have been “war and entertainment”—a somewhat misleading claim that the reviewer would contend would be more accurate to identify as war materials and popular mass media—and that therefore the American film industry has been a shameless shill, or “silent partner,” of those agencies of the U.S. government that shape and/or execute American foreign policy.

The proofs for this book of essays were submitted just before Operation Iraqi Freedom commenced and both the introduction as well as a couple of the contributions reflect a near hysteria when referring to the insidious militaristic nature of U.S. foreign policy—tendentious polemicizing that more often than not gets in the way of more dispassionate film analysis—comparing the Nazi Kondor Legion’s infamous bombing of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War with a claim of indiscriminate American napalming of Vietnamese villages as deliberate terrorist acts is a bit of a stretch (p. 10).

Most of the eclectic contributions in *War and Film in America* merit perusing. Richard A. Kallin’s essay about *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) is an interesting close reading that contends that the classic WWII POW film is less an antiwar statement, and more of a psychological investigation of the “collision” between “duty and pride” of the two main antagonists, British Colonel Nicholson and Japanese Colonel Saito. However, it almost seems out of place when contrasted with the slant of the other essays, particularly since this film is a British production, directed by David Lean. Donald Fishman’s essay about films and the Cold War is a thoughtful examination of three well known American releases—the most compelling being his argumentation regarding the political subtext of individualism’s triumph over socialist collectivism in the 1949 film version of novelist Ayn Rand’s eponymous *Fountainhead*.

Although the co-authors deliver some interesting insights upon John Huston’s controversial documentary, *Let There Be Light* (1945; 1981), their analysis is marred by an unsubstantiated historical claim regarding massive WWII psychological casualty figures in the last year of that war—a footnote references a secondary source that barely broaches the topic of wartime psycho-neurotic cases, let alone the relevant statistics (p. 69). This essay’s attempt to make direct links with the post-traumatic stress syndrome associated with the Vietnam War are somewhat strained. Marilyn J. Matelski’s essay on the impact of war upon family relationships, comparing and contrasting *The Way We Were* (1973) and *The War at Home* (1996) is conceptually engaging—but it is difficult to make the connection between the largely ideological rifts that gradually erode the love of a couple between the 1930s and 1950s

and the experiential gulf that separates a Vietnam combat veteran from relatives with whom it would appear he was already emotionally estranged. Barbara J. Walkosz’s essay on the impact of the Cold War upon American civility, as portrayed in three 1967 films, is well written but, the analysis of three of the more controversial releases from that year, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, *The Graduate*, and *Bonnie and Clyde*, is more of a statement upon 60s social movements than a discourse that focuses upon the titular theme of the book.

The film engagement with Vietnam era combat trauma in the Rasmussen, et al, essay is well executed. It clearly examines the dichotomy between the traumatized/victimized Vietnam veteran of *Jacob’s Ladder* (1990) and the Rambo films’ muscle-bound sociopathic restorer of 1980s Americans’ confidence in their military prowess. Suzanne McCorkle’s essay on two 1990s films that confront terrorism, *True Lies* (1994) and *Patriot Games* (1992), makes some valid points regarding post-Cold War American films contributing to a perception of the U.S. being in a more or less permanent state of war. But the final essay, written by co-editor Nancy Lynch Street, on Stanley Kubrick’s British produced classic Cold War satire, *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), is flawed by some basic factual errors as well as by its descending into a polemicized diatribe with a not so hidden 2003 partisan agenda.

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Frank Krutnik, editor.
Hollywood Comedians,
The Film Reader.

Routledge, 2003.

\$22.95; 224 pages.

Captivating and Enlightening

Proposing to fill a twenty-year void of books examining the comedian film, editor Frank Krutnik has amassed thirteen scholarly works for *The Hollywood Comedians: The Film Reader*. This compilation is both captivating and enlightening. The book is divided into five parts: Part One—Genre, Narrative and Performance; Part Two—Approaches to Silent Comedy; Part Three—Sound Comedy, The Vaudeville Aesthetic and Ethnicity; Part Four—Comedian Comedy and Gender; Part Five—Post Classical Comedian Comedy.

In the essay “Buster Keaton, or the work of Comedy in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” Tom Gunning focuses his dis-



cussion on the oft-made comparisons between Keaton and Charlie Chaplin. Gunning does a nice job of highlighting the differences between the two, making reference to the overt social commentary often seen in Chaplin's films (this is discussed in further detail in William Paul's "Charlie Chaplin and the Annals of Anal-ity") and how this differed from the approach Keaton took in his work. Gunning also speaks to the way each performer used the camera to relate to their audi-

ence, stating "[w]hereas Chaplin used film to create a startling intimacy with his audience, allowing them insight into his most private moments of romantic longing and disappointment . . . Keaton's relation to the audience remained distanced" (74).

Joanna Rapf's fascinating piece entitled "Comic Theory from a Feminist Perspective—A Look at Jerry Lewis" begins with a look at femininity, as well as masculinity, in the comedic world: "If women are indeed primal earth mothers, sources of life and order, comfort and reassurance, apple pie, chicken soup, and everything that builds a foundation to give others the strength to grow, the comedy . . . is anathema to the feminin" (146). Rapf then transitions to examining how Jerry Lewis, through his film work, interprets not only male patriarchy, but "idealized" masculinity in general. According to Rapf, "[Lewis'] flagrant rejection of conventional standards of realistic and narrative expectation, and his ambiguous approach to gender and sexuality all put him in what can only be called an unexpected and surprisingly revolutionary camp" (152).

Part Five of the book, entitled "Post-Classical Comedian Comedy" may have the most resonance for modern-day moviegoers. Bambi Haggins, in her piece "Laughing Mad—The black comedian's place in American comedy of the post-Civil Rights era" effectively traces the history of black comedians since the 1960s. Beginning with Dick Gregory, Bill Cosby and Richard Pryor, Haggins outlines the rise of each of these performers and the adaptations each made during their careers to either conform to the mainstream, or reject it. Haggins uses the term "negotiating blackness and the mainstream" (73).

Haggins then turns to "the next generation" which includes performers such as Eddie Murphy and Chris Rock, comparing this "next" generation to the previous generation of Pryor, Murphy and Cosby. Is Murphy the true "air apparent" to Pryor? Is Chris Rock a blend of both Pryor and Gregory or a completely different type of comedian based on the times in which he lives? These are just a few of the questions that Haggins' essay implores the reader to ask. As race and racial identity are inextricably linked to any discussion of the black comedian, Haggins appropriately ends her piece by stating "[a]s long as conventional wisdom dictates that sardonic, cultural critique cannot play well at the Cineplex, the

underbelly of race relations and racial inequity in post-Civil Rights American will not be the stuff of which Hollywood comedies are made. So . . . who is laughing mad now?" (184).

Finally, Philip Drake's piece—"Low Blows? Theorizing performance in post-classical comedian comedy"—focuses on comedian Jim Carrey. By examining Carrey's films such as *Ace Ventura*, *Liar, Liar* and *Me Myself and Irene*, Drake examines such questions as whether films focusing on the physical are part of the "dumbed down" comedic film milieu, what goes into an audience enjoying a comedic "screen performance" and, as Drake states in his piece, "what we mean by 'dumb' performance and what is at stake in its interpretation and critical evaluation" (189). As Drake points out, many comedians who go on to stardom in the film industry, hail from vaudeville, comedy clubs and television. It is often this background, especially that of television, that shapes the nature of the comedian's performance and the familiarity that the comedian's audience has with the performer. Ultimately, Drake questions what influence the audience's own identification with the comedian's star persona has on the lens through which a filmgoer views that star's performance.

Additional essays include Steve Seidman's "Performance Enunciation and Self-reference in Hollywood Comedian Comedy," Mark Winokur's "The Marx Brothers and the Search for the Landsman," Peter Kramer's "Derailing the Honeymoon Express: Comicality and Narrative Closure in Buster Keaton's *The Blacksmith*," and Kathleen Rowe's "She Done Him Wrong: Spectacle and Narrative." There are also contributions from Patricia Mellencamp, Henry Jenkins III, William Paul, Steve Neal, Frank Krutnik and Steven Cohan. The introduction states that the book " . . . illustrates the disparate critical and theoretical projects that have embraced the comedian film in recent years"(1). *The Hollywood Comedians, the Film Reader* accomplishes this and much more.

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Kerry Segrave. *Piracy In The Motion Picture Industry.*

McFarland, 2003.

\$36.50; 222 pages.

Another Crisis

The FBI warning which appears at the beginning of copyrighted videos and DVD's should not be taken lightly. Jack Valenti