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War and Film in America: Historical and Critical Essays
(review)

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Nation essay reveals, this ideal is not a simple, monolithic white supremacy: it covertly undermines itself by acknowledging the contradictions in its own position. In a bravura piece of writing, he argues that, although Southern whiteness appears to triumph in the big Klu Klux Klan procession at the end of the film, it is Gish's Elsie Stoneman, a Northerner, who has, in effect, rescued southern whiteness from its debilitation and corruption; for the film, both of these have been brought about by southerners consorting with black women, and, hence, creating the dreaded "mulattos" of Griffith's imagination. The general implication is that whiteness is a pathological state, which normalises itself by using especially cunning narrative sleights of hand.

These added chapters are notable for their force, subtlety and human perception, and similar qualities are on view in the previously published material. One of the best pieces is a study of *Victim*, the pioneering early Sixties "gay" film starring Dirk Bogarde. Here, Dyer offers an acute analysis of the film's attitudes towards homosexuality, and of the self-betrayal that lurks within its seemingly impregnable structure. In its sensitivity to structure, in fact, the book's overall critical approach is a compelling dramatisation of the actual experience of sitting and responding in a cinema (this writer's experience, at any rate). It investigates the sense of being lured into a labyrinth of light, imagery and meaning, where you feel that you are being pursued by something wholly unattainable, yet as close as a handclasp. Only when the film has ended, and you stop and look clearly for the first time at the whole structure, do you realise that all along you have been haunted by the shadow of your own self.

Dyer is an acute guide to this shadow world. In his essay on homosexuality and film noir, to take just one instance, he demonstrates how Clifton Webb's waspish, gay sophisticate in *Laura*, or the lesbian characters in Sinatra's *Tony Rome*, are ghostly doubles who haunt the heterosexual male protagonists, either frustrating their attempts to possess the heroine, or disrupting the even arc of their narrative journey. By contrast, gay-generated imagery and types are doubles of gay people themselves, being both an object of erotic pleasure and a more external self-definition: "the image of gay desire is also an image of what the gay person is." (Chapter Four: "Seen to be Believed.") Although Dyer refers to distinct "dominant" and "oppressed" groups at times, the general tendency is to highlight their complex interrelationships, where each party, to a degree, echoes the other.

The Matter of Images achieves this impressive depth and resonance, because it is a collection of relatively short, limited pieces, written originally for a range of scholarly and more general publications. One result of everything being so concentrated is that Dyer has no need to weigh down the writing by endlessly spelling things out, like some academic books; he attacks with the force of a commando, rather than with the lumbering apparatus of the full-scale assault. For this reason, the book packs more punch, and covers more ground, than weightier studies: also, when

he is writing for a less specialised audience, like the readers of the old *Marxism Today*, his prose relaxes and lightens, and it is a deep pleasure to read. The only drawback, for we hacks who fumble with similar material, is that, faced with work of this excellence, a mild depression sets in. The collection is ample proof that Dyer is the king of his particular hill, and anyone else trying the ascent is well advised to give up and seek contentment by pottering about on the beginners' slopes.

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**Marilyn J. Matelski and
Nancy Lynch Street, editors.**
***War and Film in America:
Historical and Critical Essays.***

McFarland, 2003.

208 pages; \$32.00 paper.

Key Distinctions

War and Film in America is another addition to the ever-growing number of written exercises addressing the war drama genre. And, as is typical with a book made up of essays by various authors, the quality can significantly vary. It should be noted that this book deals exclusively with films released after World War II, and predominantly with those texts that either directly or indirectly reflect American responses to the Cold War and/or the Vietnamese conflict. Yet, its contributors never clearly define what they mean by a war film and never seriously engage combat films. For instance, the briefly discussed *Black Hawk Down* (2001) intensely recreates an actual combat situation that took place in the 1990s between American troops and irregular indigenous forces during a misguided humanitarian operation in a civil war torn Somalia. But is it a war film? At pains to point out the "partnership" between Hollywood and the military—which has always been the case, and which has obviously resulted in various quid pro quos—the editors/authors lose sight of the key distinctions between war dramas, war allegories, combat films and films about the military.



What the editors/authors do proclaim in *War and Film in America* is that the "old definitions" of combat are no longer applicable in the new world order of the 21st century. Yet no new definitions are ever proffered—other than a post-modernist

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-