



Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies

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Hailed as the definitive work upon its original publication in 1975 and now extensively revised and updated by the author, this vastly absorbing and richly illustrated book examines film as an art form, technological innovation, big business, and shaper of American values. 80 black-and-white photos.

Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies Details

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Author : Robert Sklar

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From Reader Review Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies for online ebook

Tim says

Movie-Made America is a cultural history of the movies. As such it asks deep questions about how movies have altered our desires and conception of reality, especially related to consumerism, and about the limits of its ability to make alterations, especially regarding social class and capitalism. Looking at movies and directors, but also at the business of the film industry and its relationship to the larger American culture, this is an excellent overview. It would be great if it carried through to the modern day, but its handling of the beginnings of film (love his dismantling of Edison) and of the golden days of the industry (in the 30s and 40s) are incisive. In the mixture of art and commerce, of stars and their audiences, comes much of our 21st century culture of entertainment and celebrity. It is good to have a tour guide that is so willing to make harsh judgments.

Emory Dunn says

Read this for my film/history class. This book was a great look into Hollywood culture and history of film. The majority of the book is about old Hollywood and that is the strongest part of the book.

Diana says

Some bias at the end makes me wonder a little about how objective the beginning is. And of course it's lacking a bit due to when it was published/revised. Overall, though, a very readable and informative overview of American cinema history. Worthwhile.

Teresa Wang says

Pretty interesting but verrrryyyyy longgggggg

Mike says

Let me say that this was an incredibly important work when it was published. Up to that point, histories of film had mostly been indices of movies or Great Man texts. Sklar took movies off the screen and into the streets, so to speak. With that said, it is overly broad and attempts to tackle too much. As a introductory text, it is great. However, I did not learn much new from it. It is certainly a foundational text and worth reading just to see what conversations were happening back in the mid-70s, but it is very much a product of its time.

Meen says

Really liked the early history (the first part of the book), but grew bored as it moved into the late 20th century. This might be because the book was originally written in the 1970s, so what was present then is history now and I think that gives a different perspective and probably leads to different historical conclusions. And that problem is even worse for the updated portion of the second edition (which takes us up through the early 1990s).

The Story of Film: An Odyssey was much more enjoyable! Go watch that and skip this book (or at least the second half of this book).

Rebecca says

I had to read this for my film class. I didn't read the entire thing, but I read most of it. The content was pretty interesting, and it would be even more so if I could view the films it discusses. It is a new and interesting way to look at films.

Dwight says

Really nice read about the cultural history of movies in the United States. Some very interesting stuff. My only complaint is having read the original 1975 edition. As a result, 34 years of American movie culture go untouched. At any rate, it addresses the beginning of film quite nicely. I think it'll end up having been a good jumping off point to other books that go into more (recent) detail.

Steve says

Sklar wrote this in the late 70s, then updated it with a few new chapters in the mid-90s. His focus on the role movies played within American culture over the course of the 20th Century is at times fascinating, at times evasive, at times insightful, at times grasping at straws. But he is always extremely readable, and filled with historical details sometimes dropped maddeningly in asides as he focuses on bigger picture ideas. Because the Hollywood production method that began in the 1910s and held on tightly until the late 1940s made for a virtual symbiotic connection between movies and culture, it's no surprise that Sklar is at his best telling stories from that period. After that, there are many sections where he seems more interested in covering as wide a range of niches as possible than in really connecting to the culture, but that is a problem of describing a post-monoculture society. I get the feeling that this is a foundational book in cultural studies, and that much important work has occurred in the years since it was published.

Amanda says

This is a fairly dreadful "history" of the American film industry that relies heavily on the ideas of the "great man" theory of history and definitely takes the view that nothing good happened after the break-up of the

studio system in 1948. FAR too many metaphors and a great many unsubstantiated claims about audience reception.

J. Lynn says

I wondered why this book stopped its exploration into movie history in the 70s... Until I saw it was published in 1975. Whoops.

Ke says

This book provides a sweeping history of the American film industry (as the title may suggest), but the title may not suggest that it gets in depth in some parts more than others. Nevertheless, I recommend it to anyone who believes that America is culture-less.

Dan Gorman says

Engrossing, but dated and suffering from a feeling of incompleteness. Robert Sklar shows how liberalizing and conservative forces have vied for dominance within the movie industry. Immigrant and working-class Jews pioneered the movie industry, and their films challenged Victorian Protestant ideas of gender and violence in art, but simultaneously this working-class art form was done for profit, not working-class solidarity. By the 1930s, outside finance and moralistic reformers (first Progressives, then political conservatives, especially the Catholic Legion of Decency) had gained substantial control over Hollywood. Most films became innocuous and conservative, with critiques of democracy, racial injustice, and capitalism becoming rare (though not extinct). The rise of TV and European boycotts of American films, plus the new rock and roll youth culture and the disastrous Cold War blacklists, damaged the American movie industry. A brief revival of contrarian values, expressed in films like "Bonnie and Clyde," "The Graduate," "Raging Bull," "The Godfather," etc., clashed with the rise of blockbuster action films, many of which advanced a black-and-white version of morality that fit with Reagan-era conservatism. The book ends in 1994, so Sklar brings us through the advent of home video, amateur film production, and independent movies, but he is writing before DVD/BluRay, the superhero film wave, streaming, and the commercial Internet.

The book is incomplete in the sense that, while it touches on racial injustice in Hollywood films, it does not explore the African American independent film industry of the sound era or Hollywood's minstrel films (e.g., the "Amos & Andy" series). There is no discussion of Mexican or Spanish-language cinema, nor does Sklar touch on the U.S.'s substantial takeover of the Canadian box office. The book is woefully disappointing on the topics of women and gender. The experiences of major actresses, male executives' sexual predation of female and child actors, and early female directors such as Ida Lupino are completely omitted. Such topics would have fit Sklar's aim of writing a cultural history of the movie industry's impact on American society. More material on the blaxploitation era and the careers of Sidney Poitier, Richard Pryor, and Eddie Murphy would also have been useful.

Sandra says

Increased my knowledge on how films are made and was part of my reading when I was in Film Studies at Concordia University. Still on my shelf at home. As well as others on documentaries, and books on film theory.

Steve says

This book is one about which I have decidedly mixed feelings and the three star rating I give it is definitely a composite of the four star rating I give the first half of the book (chapters 1-14) and the two star rating I give the rest of the book. It is the first of the histories I have read that seriously deals with the origins of movies in the "peep-shows" of the storefront nickelodeons and its transformation into the spectacular movie houses of the twenties and thirties. For the first 246 pages, the book is a solid if somewhat dry account (I disagree strongly with the blurb on the back that says the book has not a "speck of dust or dryness in it") of the origin of movies.

The problem begins with Chapter 15, and section 4 of the book, ominously titled "The Decline of Movie Culture". What I objected to is how Sklar increasingly turned the latter half of the book into a political polemic, and moreover a particular kind of left-wing polemic (very left libertarian) that looks increasingly dated. (Something to consider is that the first edition of this book was published in 1975, and revised in 1994. This book is to my mind a prime example of a badly revised work). It is not that I think that politics can't intrude in history - there are many openly political historians left and right - but rather how Sklar handles it. (In other words, I dislike too much cant regardless of its origin, but I accept that all work, academic or not, will have some element of cant in it)

Further, his account becomes increasingly laced with a kind of haute-academic snobbery that got under my skin. I have lots of friends who are leftish or at least liberal who have the tastes that Sklar deplores and I just don't like how he valorizes working/lower class culture while reflexively dismissing "bourgeois" culture, not the least because as an academic, Sklar himself **was** bourgeois (using the material definition of bourgeois) [Sklar died in 2011]. Movies, despite the many adaptions of books that have been made, are not literature and should not be held to that standard. Moreover, as 2015 Nobel Laureate in Literature Svetlana Alexievich has asserted, fiction has had problems depicting the world (and I would add particularly post-WWII fiction).

Hence, a lot of his analysis, rather than being qualified like this "this could be read as" or "a case can be made that", is presented as "this **is** such and such". The problem with so much cultural analysis is that it is so subjective to the author and I dislike it no matter the politics of the writer.

But even more galling to me is how Sklar opens with a bomb throwing line only to retract it shortly thereafter. Here's an example: "Among the victims of a monster shark [i.e. JAWS] and a malevolent death star [i.e. STAR WARS] was the dream of a personal, participatory cinema." p. 373 (in brackets mine). However, at the start of the next paragraph he qualifies it: "To say that JAWS and STAR WARS derailed this ideal is, of course, an exaggeration." This smacks of irresponsibility, and I do offer the mea culpa that I have done this - probably because I have read authors like Sklar doing it - and have been smacked down by my professors sufficiently that I try not to do it anymore and respond negatively when I encounter it. And I have come to agree that it is a bad habit.

Hence, much of the later parts of the book is marred by bad scholarship and this is a shame because when Sklar gets it right, and especially when he offers the appropriate qualifiers, his analysis is hugely enlightening and enjoyable to read even where I don't agree with him.

But ultimately he missed a huge opportunity, namely, to evaluate in these pages how Hollywood negotiates between "Memory and Myth". It's frustrating because he keeps getting close but doesn't ever pin it down, although he correctly - in my view - identifies it in STAR WARS, where Lucas (as did Spielberg) drew on the sentimentality of the B-movie features and integrated that into a sharp appreciation of the power of myth - the Joseph Campbell kind of stuff only with new subjects and storylines. He keeps mentioning how Hollywood is a different kind of storytelling than plays and books, but never quite develops a theory of storytelling that can explain it.

Nonetheless this book is still an essential, if flawed, primary source for anyone delving into the history of moviemaking.
