

Movies
About
the
Movies

Hollywood
Reflected

Christopher Ames

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The idea of Hollywood is the most original idea
Hollywood ever had—the only one that it ever
made up by itself. . . . In its impact on the world,
it's the most powerful idea it ever had.

—Richard Schickel (*Hollywood on Hollywood*,
American Movie Classics documentary, 1993)

culture grows less and less tenable, as the contradictory dynamics of the movies we have discussed reveal. My frequent recourse to terms such as "contradiction," "tension," "paradox," and "ambivalence" attempts to express the cultural uneasiness that surrounds the art and industry of motion pictures, an uneasiness that has its roots in American self-definition. The combination of critique and celebration in the genre of movies about Hollywood captures that central ambivalence that viewers and critics express toward their culture, a resistance to manipulation and a reveling in it.

At the conclusion of a book on Hollywood movies, it is worth recalling the fate of writers in the films about Hollywood. The nimble Cagney of the writing team Benson and Law offers some hope, if one views cynically writing formula scripts for fifteen hundred dollars a week as success. Otherwise the images are of silencing: Dixon Steele crushing Laurel Gray's neck in apoplectic rage, Joe Gillis floating dead in the pool he had always wanted, David Kahane gurgling unto death in a reddened puddle. These perhaps are the casualties of the success of mass culture, casualties that audiences are complicit in bringing about. And the very concept of "popular culture" calls to mind the images of audiences that run through these films: Cecilia choking back tears as Fred and Ginger dance across the screen, Arthur and Eileen dancing before similar screen images miming their movements in a Hopperesque theater, prisoners in chains laughing at a cartoon screened in a church. From all of these Hollywood stories, it seems Sturges's image best captures the mixed fate of the moviegoer. The church may have ceded its role to art, as the modernists envisioned, but the new church is the movie theater, where we are moved to laughter in our chains.

Appendix: Film and Videotape Availability

Most of the films discussed in this book are available in 16mm from film distributors. All are available on videotape, and most are also available on laserdisc. The information below may be helpful for ordering videotapes and laserdiscs.

The Bad and the Beautiful. MGM/UA Home Video M300959.

Boy Meets Girl. MGM/UA Home Video M202944.

In a Lonely Place. RCA/Columbia Pictures Home Video 60940.

Last Action Hero. Columbia/Tri-Star Home Video 27933.

Columbia/Tri-Star Laserdisc 19669, 27936, LD19669.

Pennies from Heaven. MGM/UA Home Video M800147. MGM

Home Video Laserdisc ML 100147.

The Player. Columbia/Tri-Star. New Line Home Video 75833. Image

Laserdisc 2290LI; Criterion Laserdisc 1318L; Pioneer Laserdisc 31251.

The Purple Rose of Cairo. Vestron Video 5068. Image Laserdisc IDVL 5068.

Singin' in the Rain. MGM/UA Home Video M202539.

Stand In. Monterey Home Video 133-287.

The Star. Warner Home Video 12489.

A Star Is Born (1937). Barr Video HM0026. Image Entertainment Laserdisc 130.

A Star Is Born (1954), Restored Version. Warner Home Video 11335A/B; Warner Home Video Laserdisc 1020, 11335LV.

Sullivan's Travels. MCA Home Video 80551. Pioneer Artists Laserdisc 120.

Sunset Boulevard. Paramount Home Video 4927. Paramount Laserdisc 130.

What Price Hollywood? Turner Entertainment Video 6197. Image Laserdisc ID 7079 TU.

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Studies of Movies about the Movies

- Anderson, Patrick Donald. *In Its Own Image: The Cinematic Vision of Hollywood*. New York: Arno Press, 1978. A reprinted dissertation from the University of Michigan (1976). Anderson's study is the best combination of historical perspective and wide-ranging discussion of the genre. Referring to more than one hundred films, Anderson surveys recurrent conventions of the genre and then focuses on how these films reflect American ambivalence about material success. He sees a celebration of rags-to-riches stories dominating films about Hollywood before the 1950s, while films from the fifties and following present "the dark side of the dream." Good bibliography and filmography.
- Barris, Alex. *Hollywood according to Hollywood*. New York: A.S. Barnes, 1978. Heavily illustrated, Barris's study presents a popular survey of the genre, emphasizing star performances and box-office results. The chapters divide the genre into categories such as "Hollywood Kids Hollywood" and "Hollywood Salutes the Boys." The book covers many films, most in one or two paragraphs; occasionally a discussion approaches one page. Indexed.
- Behlmer, Rudy, and Tony Thomas. *Hollywood's Hollywood*. Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1975. This volume surveys more than two hundred films about Hollywood and is copiously illustrated. Behlmer and Thomas divide the films into thematic categories and pay a good deal of attention to the level of accuracy in the depictions of Hollywood and filmmaking. Though the format suggests a coffee-table book, the research is thorough and the discussion of films consistently intelligent—by far the most useful of the surveys of the genre. Discussions of individual films range from a few sentences to three or four pages. Indexed.
- Maltby, Richard, and Ian Craven. *Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995. This is actually a textbook for an introductory film class, but it is significant for this study in that the authors often use films about Hollywood for illustrative purposes (e.g., *A Star is Born* and *Singin' in the Rain*) in the context of what they call an analysis of the commercial aesthetic. The work positions itself in the tradition of Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson's *Classical Hollywood Cinema* but with greater attention to the means of production and reception.

- Parish, James Robert, and Michael R. Pitts, with Gregory W. Mank. *Hollywood on Hollywood*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1978. An alphabetical reference work on the genre, this volume presents entries on virtually all the films about Hollywood prior to its publication. Entries run about a page and include film credits and cast lists, plot summaries, intelligent evaluations, and, often, quotations from contemporary reviews. Contains a fascinating and well-researched essay on movie shorts about Hollywood. This is a very useful work that would benefit from updating and republication. Illustrated.
- Stam, Robert. *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1992. A useful reprint of a 1985 study, this critical analysis focuses on the anti-illusionist effects of reflexivity. Though a good portion of the book examines reflexive film, only a small part of that deals with Hollywood film (Godard is treated at the greatest length). A brief section on reflexivity in the Hollywood sound film examines *Sullivan's Travels*, *Singin' in the Rain*, and *Sunset Boulevard*. A later section discusses the critical reaction to Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories* in ways that anticipate my treatment of the critical failure of *Last Action Hero* and *Pennies from Heaven*. The book does an excellent job of connecting diverse works in an illuminating way. Clearly written throughout, with a good bibliography.

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