



Resource Review

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Name of reviewed item:	Film Histories: An Introduction and Reader
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Publisher / distributor details (see note below):	Edinburgh University Press 22 George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LF www.eup.ed.ac.uk
Publication / release date:	December 2006
ISBN number (if applicable):	Hb 10 0 7486 1906 7 Pb 10 0 7486 1907 0
Technical details (if software – see note below):	n/a
Price:	Hb £60.00 Pb £18.99

Review:

This is a substantial book, running to 585 pages, which provides a comprehensive and concise history of film from the late 19th century to the present day.

The introduction to the book begins with an apology for the strong emphasis it places on American cinema and Hollywood but this is inevitable in any book which attempts to cover such a broad subject in a single volume and in one which is aimed at the general film student at undergraduate level. Some elements of this book would also be suitable for A-Level and other Level 3 film and media students.

The book has a very user-friendly structure. It is split into two sections, the first the period from the early developments of film to 1945 and the second from 1946 until 2006. There are 24 chapters each covering a specific period, giving an unbroken chronological study of film and cinema. This book differs from most others of its type in that each chapter is further divided into two sections. The first section, written by the three authors, is a general description of the period in question and the themes of cinema development associated with that period e.g. the rise of national cinemas as a means of popular propaganda in the 1930s, 'Blaxploitation' in the 1970s etc. The second section comprises a detailed essay by an established authority on a particular element of cinema associated with that period. In adopting this structure, the authors have managed successfully to combine two types of film text book: an all-embracing and succinct history book and an excellent collection of essays which

provide a chronological analysis of the development of cinema. This means that the book works on two levels and can be read in two separate ways by two distinctly different types of reader. One who wants a general history and one who wants detailed academic analysis. It is a book that can be dipped into for either general or in-depth information about specific periods in cinema history.

Having said that these two elements of each chapter can exist and be read independently, the two are clearly linked. The essays are introduced in the latter part of the text of each introductory element of the chapter giving a brief description and rationale for the inclusion of the essay, a description of its background and that of the writer and a description of the research methodology employed. The essay is also placed in its historical context and its place within the academic study of film. However, the essays themselves are not confined to purely academic or theoretical subjects, but also examine such areas as film distribution, exhibition, finance and other practical elements of the film industry. Each essay is preceded by a series of questions posed by the authors to the reader in which they are asked to identify certain aspects of the essay and are given guidelines as to what they should look out for when reading it. This method provides a useful bridge between the two elements of the chapters and helps to introduce the general reader to the depth and detail covered in the essays. This in itself provides a very useful basis for study of each chapter, subject and historical period.

The chapters themselves follow a common structure. Each begins with a description of the developments in American cinema which, generally takes up most of the chapter. This is followed by parallel activities in Britain, Western Europe, particularly France, Italy and Germany and is then followed by descriptions of developments and film making activities in other relevant areas such as Japan, Latin America, Australia and Africa. These sections place film making activities in each country firmly within the historical, social and economic climate at the time and clearly identify how indigenous cinemas reflect these elements of their society at any given period in their history. This is particularly useful to student readers whose knowledge of twentieth century history is frequently limited; and who can rarely understand the ways in which cinema reflects the period in which it was produced and addresses its contemporary audience. Because of this inclusion, the book can be read as a good introduction to the history of popular culture in the twentieth century.

The economic and social backgrounds to the development of film and to individual national cinemas is well described and explained from the early days of film as a fairground novelty through periods of very popular cinema-going, the competition from television, home entertainment and alternative forms of production and exhibition. It also provides a considered view of financial developments particularly in Hollywood and objectively analyses the rise and decline of the studio system, influences from Europe and the rise of independent film making, globalisation as well as an unbiased description of the McCarthy era, Hays Code etc.

The book is particularly useful in the ways in which it identifies connections between film making activities in each country and how they have influenced each other from the early twentieth century onwards. For example, Denmark established itself as a significant and influential film producing country in the 1900s and 1920s, partly because most of its films were exported to Germany where they were seen by and developed to satisfy the needs of this wider audience. Sweden, however, did not have similar export arrangements and, consequently, developed its own very localised and individual film making traditions and styles which were developed for a small local audience. This example serves to illustrate the fact that the authors do incorporate relevant non-American developments in cinema which are usually omitted from other general film histories.

The book is not confined to examining trans-national influences in film making with each historical period, but shows how the influence of film movements such as Italian Neo-realism and genres such as the Western continue to influence later film makers in Hollywood and elsewhere.

The book does have some omissions. The chapters on the very early technical development of film making make no reference to Louis Augustine Le Prince choosing to concentrate on Edison and the Lumiere brothers. It identifies some technical developments in film making such as synchronised sound, colour and wide-screen formats but does not provide much detail of how these work; in fact, there is very little description of the film making process. I feel that a chapter or appendix covering how a film is actually made, possibly accompanied by a timeline of major technical developments, would lead to greater understanding and would complement the rest of the book very well.

The book is well supported by notes and academic references at the end of each chapter which is a good indication of further study but there is no filmography nor is there any indication of how to access the less well-known films. This can be very frustrating for film students who need to watch these films as well as read about them.

The book does not contain any illustrations. Stills from relevant films would support the text well. This, combined with the rather dull front cover and the title do present a rather dull and forbidding first impression which would not be appealing to younger students. This is unfortunate, because the book is eminently readable and is written in a style which easily engages the reader. The most useful addition to the book would be an accompanying DVD containing short extracts from films described. This would help to introduce students to the films and encourage their own viewing; it would also transform this book from being a very useful addition to the canon of film history writing to its becoming a definitive text.

I feel that the book is an excellent general history for undergraduate film and media students and would also be very useful for those studying popular culture and cultural history.