

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Shyon Baumann, *Hollywood Highbrow: From Entertainment to Art*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007, 225 pp. \$US 35.00 hardcover (978-0-691-12527-5)

Reflecting on film aesthetics, André Malraux wrote in 1939: “cinema is an art form, but also an industry.” In Hollywood, movie production was first an industry, only sometimes an art, and then almost by accident, since US feature films were not made with that purpose. The acceptance of film as art only came later. Hollywood has two unique achievements. First, the US film industry has succeeded in dominating the movie market in most countries. Second, as demonstrated in this timely book, most moviegoers and film critics (at least those without any serious education in world film history) now consider American cinema as art rather than mass culture. Popular filmmakers such as Steven Spielberg, Clint Eastwood, George Lucas, and Sean Penn, are viewed as if they were really “great directors” or important artists in world film history. They are without doubt famous. Although they were obviously skilled and benefited from big budgets, massive promotion, and overall distribution, they cannot in any sense be considered by most film historians at the level of Fritz Lang, Akira Kurosawa, François Truffaut, Éric Rohmer, Ingmar Bergman, or Federico Fellini. How have the movie industry and the media come to legitimate the status of these American directors?

In the opening pages of this, his first book, Shyon Baumann argues that “the legitimization of Hollywood film as art occurred mainly during the 1960s” (p. 3) in what he calls “the intellectualization of American films” (p. 152). The book’s theoretical framework is drawn mainly from Howard Becker’s idea of “art worlds,” which states that a work of art can be accepted in its field if there is some aesthetic concept behind it and if there is room for discussion about the specific work. Baumann concludes that “Becker’s analysis applies to Hollywood films” (p. 112).

Using a variety of data, the author demonstrates that “a legitimating ideology for film developed first for foreign-language films, most strongly in the period 1945–60” (p. 152). The recognition of movies as art first occurred in Europe, especially in Italy and France just after World War II. The way some influential European critics considered movies then led towards the next step, when some celebrated foreign films began to be treated as art by many US critics: “the evidence from reviews shows that

the perception of foreign films as art acted as a pathway for the legitimization of the art world for Hollywood films” (p. 113). The way films were perceived in Europe led to changes in the American critique and in the way films were marketed by US distributors. Before the 1950s, even film festivals were conceived differently in Europe and the United States: in Europe, awards usually meant artistic quality, while in the US, it was almost the opposite: “during the early decades, the awards served to make the industry seem decent and then glamorous, not high art” (p. 55).

Another major shift occurred in Hollywood when the star system based on actors and actresses, inside and outside their character in movies, began to focus more and more on the director persona, seen as an “*auteur*,” and therefore an artist, potentially a “genius” (p. 83). Here, Baumann quotes Tim Bywater and Thomas Sobchak, who once argued that “where there’s an artist, there must be an art” (p. 83). As consequence, new journals dedicated to cinema (like *Sight and Sound*) and “serious” film critics like Pauline Kael or Andrew Sarris paid as much attention to selected US filmmakers as to the movies themselves, and perhaps a little less to the glamorous stars (p. 158). At some point in the 1960s in the US, selected quotes from favourable film reviews began to be used as marketing tools for the promotion of movies, on film posters and advertisements (p. 146).

Bauman’s book suggests interesting possibilities for future research, such as the institutionalization of film criticism as a profession, especially in newspapers and general magazines. Many of these writers, who lack any academic training in film history, become very influential in the field of film consumption. They usually gain their status in their daily practice: they are not hired because of their competence, but become experts because they write in a magazine, attend film festivals, are invited to press screenings, and get paid for their work.

There are some minor inaccuracies here and there in the book. The long-lived idea of “the seven lively arts” was not created in 1924 by Gilbert Seldes (p. 114); it was in fact copied by Seldes from a French critic named Ricciotto Canudo, who in 1919 “invented” it in his *“Manifeste des 7 arts.”* Also, the French title of Jean Vigo’s film is “*Zéro de conduite*” not “*Zero conduite*” (pp. 198, 225). In Spain and France, Buñuel’s first name was always spelled Luis and not “Louis” (p. 69).

These quibbles aside, *Hollywood Highbrow: From Entertainment to Art* is an important contribution to many disciplines: sociology of art and cinema, political economy of culture, American studies, cultural studies, even marketing, and, of course, film studies.

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