

Bryan W. Rommel-Ruiz, *American History Goes to the Movies. Hollywood and the American Experience*. New York: Routledge, 2011, 296 pp., ISBN: 978-0415802192.

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American History Goes to the Movies is an insightful study of popular representations of some of the historical events that have defined the American experience. Stating that “Americans have a problematic relationship with their history” (2), Rommel-Ruiz maintains that historical movies provide meaningful ways of engaging with the national past and offers, at the same time, opportunities to think about the present. As he states in the introductory chapter:

People crave stories because they are meaningful; and herein lies the attraction of films as historical narratives and why Americans prefer cinematic historical representations to that of academic monographs, the primary form professional historians present their scholarship. (5)

While it is true that this topic has been addressed both by historians and film theorists, the book is original in the way it connects both approaches and considers films as cultural texts that do not have necessarily to be historically accurate in order to have historical value. In doing so, he opposes “historical historians” and advocates for an examination of historical films as historiography mixed with cultural significance.

Divided in eight chapters, this volume covers films from several genres to illustrate how the Civil War, the Wild West, the experience of Irish or Hispanic immigrants, the assassination of JFK, or the events of 9/11 are depicted in popular Hollywood texts, influencing the way Americans understand their history and interpret contemporary concerns. Unlike other publications on historical films, *American History Goes to the Movies* focuses on a few key texts, whereby we are challenged to consider their invaluable contribution to historical interpretation.

Chapter 1 deals with American religious history, particularly with the way films address the problem of evil as it is connected with gender and race. The author takes a functionalist approach to religious phenomena to discuss the ways in which the discourse of evil in films like *The Crucible* or *The Exorcist* refer back to Colonial American History and the Salem witchcraft trials of 1692, raising ques-

tions of power, gender relations and social change in American society. Particularly interesting is, from my point of view, the analysis of *The Exorcist* and how it addresses the topic of female sexuality as a demonic possession. Although the author is quite right when he holds that the film focuses “upon gender, sexuality, and the social anxieties generated by the liberation movements of the 1960s” (41), there is no mention to the strong backlash movement in gender representation in Hollywood films of the 70s, which meant a return to traditional roles, embracing what Susan Faludi calls “the Pygmalion tradition”, thereby men redefined women, and reclaimed them as their possession and property (167). This tendency of returning to traditional roles would partly explain, I believe, the movie’s condemnation of female adolescent sexuality, and how Regan’s body is depicted as object in the scenes where her body is meant to be possessed by supernatural demons.

Chapter 2, entitled “Redeeming the South, Redeeming the Nation” condemns the fact that some filmmakers, and American people in general, are hesitant to alter old (racist) beliefs concerning the controversial periods of the Civil War and the Reconstruction. As we read:

Images of President Lincoln embody the American nation’s ambivalent historical memory about the meaning of the Civil War, and nowhere is this more evident than in Civil War films and historical interpretations of Reconstruction. In both cases, president Lincoln (particularly his assassination) embodies the controversial history which the trauma and bloodshed of Southern Reconstruction provoked. (41)

Although a few scholars like W.E.B Dubois challenged these interpretations, historians and filmmakers alike have portrayed Reconstruction as a “tragic era” of black misrule and corruption, celebrating its end. Like Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) or *Gone with The Wind* (1939), more recent visions of the conflict, such as *North and South* or *Glory* equally retell traditional stories of family or lovers divided because of the conflict, failing to incorporate modern interpretations about race, emancipation and political economy that arose after the Civil Rights movements of the 50s and 60s.

In a similar manner, chapters 3 and 4 connect cinematic history and academic historiography when analyzing the American frontier and the West. Perhaps the most successful chapters, they illustrate how the image of the Native American as depicted in the Hollywood Western changes according to historiographical interpretations. While Mann’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1991) considers the fluidity of cultural exchange that defined the middle ground colonial settlement in the eighteenth century as the promise of a new America, Ford’s older movie *The Searchers* (1956) reflects President Jackson’s perspective of Indians and presents a narrative where captivity is a sign of the country’s decay. Chapter 4 goes further in this analysis when it considers Westerns like *The Searchers* or *How The West Was*

Won (1962) not only as a lens through which American understand their past, but as a way to confront the turbulent issues that took place during the 50s and the 60s in the US. As such, these texts illustrate the book's main thesis whereby films are cultural texts that reflect American anxieties about contemporary issues, namely race relations. In a similar manner, we read how the so-called revisionist Western becomes a cultural space from where to engage with the past and interrogate American institutions, as *Little Big Man* (70) does with family, Christianity, capitalism and the military, in spite of the film's faith in the mythos of the West. It is interesting to note how the author finishes his intriguing analysis with Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992), an ambivalent text that rejects the myth of the West while reflecting the post-Cold War America, and does not mention the popular (yet polemical) Western *Brokeback Mountain*, released in 2006, where the issue of homosexuality displaces the typical Western narrative.

Chapters 5 and 6 offer an illuminating exploration of the relationship between films about the American immigration experience and immigration historiography to suggest that historical films best reflect the major themes of American social history, understood as a revision of the American national narrative as it includes previously marginal, illiterate and minority peoples. Particularly interesting are the ways the author sees historiographical interpretations of the Irish American experience as reflected in Scorsese's *Gangs of New York*, and proposes that the film advances these arguments by showing a much more violent depiction of the conflict between nativists and immigrants, an aspect that immigration historians tends to minimize. While this way of engaging with the past challenges us to think about the meaning of American history, it is in films addressing the Mexican American experience where the project of social history is best represented. Films like *Mi Familia* and *Real Women Have Curves* are about becoming Mexican American, yet they resist narrative closure. Quite disappointing is the fact that the author acknowledges, following Monroy, that these two films just follow one historical trajectory, affirming, however, that "there is another [trajectory] that accounts for continued Mexican cultural rebirth that is equally valid" (189), to which we are not given any example, leaving readers confused whether this alternative trajectory of the Mexican American experience does find representation in Hollywood cinema.

Chapters 7 and 8 deal with US recent past and the way historical narratives have somehow challenged the objectivity of academic history and have engaged, not free from controversy, with traumatic events such as the assassination of President Kennedy and the 9/11 terrorist attacks. However, and in order to prove Oliver Stone's *JFK* as a narrative that demands that viewers relive these historical events and act as historical agents, the author focuses far too much on the conspiracy theories (regarded as counter narratives) that surround the assassination of President Kennedy, obscuring the analysis of other films that may have dealt with

this same problematic. Unlike *JFK, World Trade Center*, also directed by Stone, criticizes the historical and political dimension of September 11th in a different way, as it is about human triumphs when confronted with a tragic historical event that deeply affected American people as a nation.

In short, this text, written in an accessible and clear language, makes it ideal for any graduate or postgraduate course on the study of American history on film.

References:

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