The American Movie Industry/Brazilian Cinema

The American Movie Industry: The Business of Motion Pictures

Editor: Gorham Kindem
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Brazilian Cinema

Editors: Randal Johnson and Robert Stam
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REVIEWED BY KEYAN TOMASELLI

> Every cinematic tradition has its own intertext /context/. Every film is part of a text larger than itself; each film is a discourse responding to other discourses; each film answers and echoes those that have preceeded it.
>
> Randal Johnson and Robert Stam (p. 19)

One of the recurring problems facing the student of the cinema concerns the academic over-emphasis on form, on the content of film. Very little is written about the structure of the industry which is responsible for that form. More often than not, the discussion of 'the industry' itself is limited for the authors conveniently divide their historical material into conventional categories: 'the machine' or 'apparatus', 'the Nickelodean theatres', 'patients', 'sound', 'censorship'. 'the studios', 'stars', 'anti-trust suits', 'publicity' and so on. While the connections between these categories are often implied, they are rarely developed. Nearly allthe studies concerned with the film industry or 'business' are written from an orthodox neo-classical framework. Fewer still discuss the effect of industry structure, ownership and control and mode of production in terms of content. Hence, the study of cinema has split into two or three seemingly separate though parallel paths: the study of content *per se*; the study of the machine and apparatus *per se* and the study of the industry *per se*. While a number of authors have attempted to draw these three strands together, such works remain in the minority[1].

One attempt to move in a more comprehensive direction is offered by Gorham Kindem who has grouped eighteen chapters under major headings: "Initial Patterns of Production, Distribution and Exhibition", "The Development of Business Strategies", "Technological Change: Sound and Colour", "Regulation and Censorship",

"Media Interaction: Television and Film" and the "American Role in the International Film Industry".

While the above categorization may not, at first glance, appear to be all that different to received knowledge, the way the subject matter is treated *is* different. This is clear from a perusal of the various chapters notwithstanding the fact that 17 of the 18 contributions are reprints from already published journal articles. Four of the chapters are taken from the *Journal of the University Film Association* which under the editorship of Timothy Lyons explored and challenged the conventional wisdom of the industry/content and film/television interfaces. A further four articles are reprinted from the *Cinema Journal*, which developed out of the University Film Association, but which seems equally concerned with industrial practice.

The most striking aspect of the papers collected in Kindem's book is the emphasis on the economic and the methodological depth used to analyse it. While descriptive, the individual analyses are also explanatory, calling on statistics and numerical methods to assist interpretation. The marraige of Marxism and regression analysis is best seen, for example, in Kindem's chapter on "Hollywood's Movie Star System" and Stuart's "The Effects of Television on the Motion Picture Industry 1948-1960". While Stuart offers statistical proof for the often postulated negative effects of TV on the feature film industry, confirming conventional wisdom, Kindem's fascinating analysis which explains the attraction of the movie stars of the 1940s and '50s in terms of the "Continuing Audit of Marquee Values" is not a little confusing even for this reviewer whose maverick social science background contains no memory of this particular term. Indeed, it is doubtful whether many students of cinema have an understanding of the statistical methods used in this book. It would have helped had the reader been given a brief description of the assumptions underlying the statistical methods used, their application in the present context, and an explanation of their results in more descriptive terms.

Kindem's book certainly begins to plug the gap in the cinema student's knowledge of both neo-classical and Marxist economics and their application to the movie business. The economic-content lacunae has occurred mainly because of the liberal arts heritage of university arts faculties which have tended to take a much more literary or textual view of things, as well as to the average arts student's horror of anything mathematical. Added to this is the distrust of the mindless number crunching which proves (rather than disproves) the obvious, so clearly evident in the quantitative revolution which swept the social sciences during the late 1960s and early '70s. Kindem's collection is a welcome relief from this kind of statistical self-gratification. It could be that *The American Movie Industry* will herald a more contextual approach to the study of the industry calling on numerical methods where necessary, but applied with care and due regard to theoretical explanation. Whether film students are ready for such a statistically oriented paradigm remains to be seen.

Like all readers which are culled from pre-existing sources, *The American Movie Industry* comes across rather eclectically. Though

its chapters are arranged both chronologically and thematically, the book's progression is often disjointed. Kindem is not unaware of this problem and points out the book's strengths and weakenesses in the following manner:

> The complexities of the American film industry are revealed by viewing its history from several different perspectives. The overlap among the case studies ... is expansive rather than redundant. Different approaches highlight various economic, social, political, legal, and aesthetic forces. The portrait of film history that emerges is similar to a cubist painting (pp. xxiv-xxv).

That cubist painting is made up of neo-classical economics, "generalized" Marxism and quantitative methods. Despite this plethora of different perspectives "revealing the richness and complexity of the subject" (p. xxv), a number of authors repeat the common knowledge of specific conjunctures without offering new perspectives or explaining the longer term significance of particular historical events. The oft cited purchase by 20th Century Fox of a 50% stock interest in the NTA film network and sale of 390 features to the latter company is the most telling example (Stuart, p. 304).

All in all, however, Kindem's tome is a useful resource book which for the most part takes nothing for granted and often fills in the information left out of similar readers.

In contrast to *The American Movie Industry* which is an anthology, Randal Johnson and Robert Stam's *Brazilian Cinema* was conceived and developed as a collective project by Brazilian and American scholars. More than 250 of the 367 pages are original work. While concerned mainly with content, the book is both implicitly and explicitly aware of context, or more comprehensively, "intertext". The latter accounts for a film's insertion into the historical weave of discourse and the way it responds to other texts, filmic and non-filmic.

The film analyses of "Part III" of the book, "Cinema Novo and Beyond", for example, generally place the films within a broad cultural and political conjuncture. The context or intertext is Brazil's dependency first on Portugal and latterly on North America: "Brazil's 'underdevelopment' is structurally linked to the development of the nations that have successfully dominated it" (p. 17). The Brazilian case, as Paulo Gomes points out, is a peculiar one, Brazil not being colonized as such:

> The European 'colonizer' found the native 'colonized' inadequate and opted to create another. The massive importation of Europeans followed by widespread miscegination assured the creation of a new colonized, although the incompetence of the colonizer aggravated natural adversities. The peculiarity of this process, by which the colonizer created the colonized in his own image, made the colonized to a certain point, his equal (p. 245).

Gomes' observation perhaps underlies the often contradictory relationship which exists between Brazilian film makers and the

state and which is evidenced in many of the arguments found in the book.

"Part I: The Shape of Brazilian Film History" outlines the various phases of Brazilian film making from Cinema Novo through to the later phase called "Brazilian Cinema". The first phase of Cinema Novo (1960-1964) was composed of films made by directors who were antagonistic to commercial Brazilian cinema, to Hollywood and its industrial imperialism. The basis of their independence was influenced by Italian neorealism (the use of non-actors and actual locations) and the production strategies developed by the French New Wave. The Brazilian directors were, however scornful of the politics of the New Wave: "We were making political films when the New wave was still talking about unrequited love" (Carlos Diegues, p. 33). The films of this phase of Cinema Novo deal with the oppression facing both the urban and rural lumpenproleteriats.

The second phase of films were less optimistic, lamenting the failure of populism, developmentalism, leftist intellectuals and corresponds to the military takeover, particularly between the years 1964 and 1968.

The underground strain of Cinema Novo was itself critical of the technical polish and production values attained by the dominant form of Cinema Novo. This counter-cinema demanded a radicalization of the "esthetics of hunger" and rejected the dominant codes of well-made cinema in favour of the 'dirty screen' and 'garbage esthetics'. Repression and censorship, however, led to the marginalization of Cinema Novo's leading directors who began to work outside Brazil. Many later returned as the political spectrum swung more towards the left.

The political turmoil and extreme social experiences of Brazilian film makers radicalized them in a manner seldom appreciated by oppositional film makers in South Africa. In South Africa, oppositional film makers are few and far between, and of those who do engage in this practice, few have much idea of the praxis of radical film making, though a strong knowledge of political economy. The Brazilian movement, on the other hand, was immediately aware of itself as a movement and as a part of a larger process of social transformation. It was therefore able to address numerous fundamental, critical, political and practical problems in a more or less systematic way.

"The Theory of Brazilian Cinema: The Film Makers Speak" forms the second part of the book. It is compiled from theoretical articles, manifestoes and statements from both individuals and collectives, providing a documentary history from 1960 to 1980. The ongoing problematic which resulted was marked by a virulent debate between protagonists of different positions. The result was a debate, the like of which is almost totally lacking in South Africa except perhaps between positions on the left. On the one hand are those film makers (mainly documentary) who see no need to contextualize their films which are designed to speak from the unarticulated memories of the repressed black classes. On the other, are the more structurally oriented, theoretically based producers who insist on the film maker encoding a conscious

reflexivity into their texts, thus alerting their audiences of the warping effects of cinima reality.

In Brazil the polemic raged in print ranging from the vulgar Marxist postulates of Carlos Estevan who proposed a 'popular revolutionary art' but simultaneously disdained as "coarse" and "backward" the cultural production of the people, to more sophisticated socialist positions. Just as Ross Devenish asserted the positiveness of "the freedom of our poverty", so Diegues attributes the birth of Cinema Novo to the demands of low budgets with their concomitant freedom of creation.

Glauba Rocha's seminal address entitled "An Aesthetic of Hunger" was an attempt to articulate a social theme, together with a particular strategy into a truly revolutionary aesthetic (p. 68). He argues that this aesthetic is a reflection of "our greatest misery in that this hunger is felt but not intellectually understood" (p. 70). The resulting "culture of hunger" manifests itself in violence: "Cinema Novo shows that the normal behaviour of the starving is violence; and the violence of the starving is not primitive ... /it/... is the initial moment when the colonizer becomes aware of the colonized". In other words, only when confronted with violence does the colonizer understand, through horror, the strength of the culture he exploits" (p. 70).

The statements of other film makers in this book are equally penetrating and revolutionary. They are the kind that were met with scepticism and rejection by many of the delegates who attended the "Culture and Reststance Symposium" in Botswana last year[2]. In Botswana, the emphasis was on the individual production. Little thought was given to distribution or Randal and Stam's observation of Brazilian cinema that "while the masses were in the film, they were rarely in the audience". As Andrade and Viany point out, were the masses to be in the audience as well, the film would be immediately repressed. The qualification is added by Rocha who argues that under these conditions the very act of viewing becomes an act of resistance.

Brazilian Cinema is polemical, it is passionate, it makes no attempt at impartiality. It is really a collected statement of leftist film makers in Brazil. It presents a debate and very often that debate hinges around the role and effect of Embrafilme. To some film makers Embrafilme represents a victory in Cinema Novo's struggle against the multinational film companies by giving the Brazilian public broader access to its national cinema. On the other hand are the arguments that popular cinema involves more than box office statistics, that a popular cinema must reach the potentially revolutionary classes with a viable political programme. This position argues that Embrafilme merely reflects the contradictions of the Brazilian political economy.

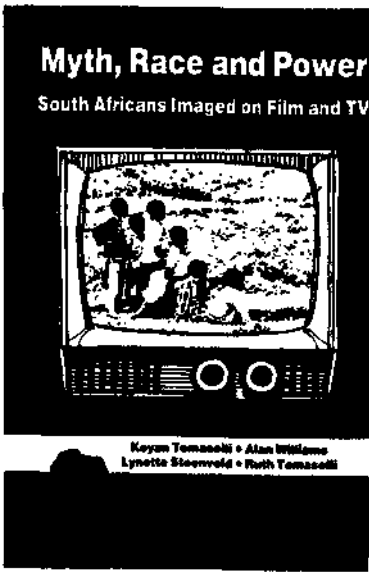
The irony of Brazilian cinema is that its output is often more socially challenging, more political and far more critical than films made in so-called democratic countries such as America and South Africa. Where Johnson and Stam have shown Brazilian film makers as relatively autonomous, despite the repressive nature of their society, the cinema of America and South Africa continues to be tied to the demands of monopoly capitalism. As the authors themselves put it:

> Looking at Brazilian Cinema for an American is like looking into a distorting mirror. The image is familiar enough to reassure but alien enough to fascinate (p. 17).

NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1] See, eg., de Lauretis, T. and Heath, S. 1980: *The Cinematic Apparatus*. MacMillan, London

[2] See Hayman, G. 1982: "Class, Race or Culture: Who is the Enemy?" *Critical Arts*, Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 33-38



This book examines films, videos and TV series made by local and foreign producers. Titles discussed include Van der Post's **Testament to the Bushmen**, films by John Marshall on the !Kung, The SABC's **They Came From the East** and the British-made **White Tribe of Africa.**

The authors discuss the very thin line between propaganda and documentary. State propaganda films examined include **To Act a Lie, A Place Called Soweto** and **White Roots in Africa.**

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