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CINEMA JOURNAL Book Reviews

Robert H. Stanley. *The Celluloid Empire: A History of the American Movie Industry*. New York: Hastings House, 1978. 338 pp.

Robert Stanley's purpose, announced in his preface, is to write a history of "America's movie industry" which will serve as both a text and a "frame of reference." Stanley asserts that *The Celluloid Empire* reflects "the broad consensus in the field." Of the five sections of the book, chapters 1 through 3 narrate the story of the Hollywood industry through the late 1950s. In chapter 4, Stanley presents a history of censorship only parenthetically related to the surrounding "economic" material. *The Celluloid Empire* concludes with "The Direction of the Future," covering industrial events through early 1978. The chapter is rather deceptively titled, since only 8½ of its 44 page attempt to predict future trends.

Insofar as a historian writes organized narratives of events, he/she shares certain story values with the writer of fictions. The concern to render one's history interesting and entertaining will necessarily result in dramatic distortions of events (plot) and characters. But the prose of *The Celluloid Empire* is at times little more than a string of clichés. The "impoverished" condition of Zukor and other immigrants is stressed by anecdotes (Zukor swept "floors in a fur shop for $2 a week," p. 17) in order to contrast their later wealth and power. The nickelodeons were a scene of pathos where "immigrant slum dwellers would huddle together to live vicariously" (p. 8).[1] Throughout his history, Stanley writes in the language of melodrama: superlatives like "enormous," "incomparable," "most famous," "most popular," and "unparalleled power" fill the pages. The high contrast discourse is not only suspect because of its exaggerations, but it is not particularly readable. An awkward and monotonous series of subordinate clauses results from Stanley's desire to pack as many facts as possible within a given sentence. Typical: "Miss Pickford's high salary was justified by her enormous box office appeal which was the prime reason that in its third year of movie-making, Famous Players cleared more than a million dollars" (p. 25). Clearly, *The Celluloid Empire* is not intended as a work of literature, but the "style" of a history can be justly criticized when it interferes with a clear presentation of the "facts."

Stanley asserts that *The Celluloid Empire* reflects "the broad consensus in the field" (p. vii). Is there such a consensus? Recent tendencies in film studies have rendered the notion suspect. As industrial practice emerges from the obscure background of film history to claim a position at center stage, the "consensus," if it ever existed, becomes increasingly fragile. Stanley's brave attempt to narrate/dramatize the clutter of received fact and opinion will rapidly become outdated, not only because of the continued "progress" of events, but because past events are "in process" of rediscovery/reinterpretation. Any representation of a consensus will be highly provisional, never definitive.

Moreover, it is difficult to determine how accurately *The Celluloid Empire* reflects a supposed consensus because Stanley has chosen not to footnote the text. Although the author includes a selective bibliography, it is nearly impossible for the reader to discover which source has been utilized for any given datum.

It is not my intention, however, to quarrel with Stanley's selection and interpretation of isolated historical "facts." A critical reading of *The Celluloid Empire* should describe and evaluate the specific text in relation to its context (the field or "system" of film history). Every history is systematic insofar

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as it finds a pattern—an order—in the chaos of events. History reads, then represents, events in order to gather their "sense" and establish a continuity between them. When historians agree on the selection, the organization and even the "meaning" of events, it is permissible to speak in terms of a historical *system*. I must approach *The Celluloid Empire* through the argument that the loose system of knowledge known as film history has been put in crisis.

In part, the crisis is the product of an invasion of economic/technological history into a traditionally "aesthetic" domain. As a result, the system has become decentered (or two-centered), hence unstable. But the crisis in the system of film history can also be tied to a complex "continental" stance (structural, semiological, psychoanalytical, Marxist) adopted by many contemporary historians. Historical practice is now motivated by a will to reread, to de- and reconstruct previous histories. Historiography (metahistory) attempts to identify certain founding assumptions of the historicizing act and to question the validity and/or utility of these assumptions. As a reviewer within the suddenly self-critical field of film history, I will examine several *arenas* in which Robert Stanley's representation of the industry meets metahistorical questions:

1) Can one realistically write a history of the American film industry which excludes Hollywood's international operations?
2) How are costs, "grosses," and profits to be defined; what is their meaning?
3) How are "facts" to be integrated into the historical narrative; how important are "story values," lucid storytelling?
4) What is the relationship between film economics and "censorship"?
5) What is the interface between aesthetics and economics; is the business of movies necessarily antagonistic to the "art" of cinema?

An arena is the site of an *agon;* it is a theoretical space surrounded by spectators (in this case, readers) in which antagonistic assumptions are revealed, clarified and in some sense purified through a struggle for dominance. As the anthropologist Victor Turner puts it, the arena is "our cockpit of confrontation, encounter and contention."

Turner uses the term to describe the "setting" of political struggles:

> an arena is a framework—whether institutionalized or not—which manifestly functions as a setting for antagonistic interaction aimed at arriving at a publicly recognized decision. The antagonism may be symbolic or actual, an interchange of messages or tokens indicative of challenge . . . or an interchange of blows or fusillades . . . an arena is an explicit frame, nothing is left merely implied.[2]

The arenas identified in this review, however, circumscribe a confrontation which is wholly ideological. The events (the "material" which history works) have already happened. One cannot change the events themselves, only their meaning. At issue here is the translation and systematization of those events into "meaningful" historical discourse. What ground rules, conventions and or codes should such a discourse utilize? In the arena of writing, an industrial history encounters the reaction of a historiographical problematic. My hope is that the reaction will clarify the nature of the act, and vice versa.

In order to remain coherent, comprehensible and *readable,* a historical system is regulated by some principles of exclusion. The historian decides what is most valuable, therefore central. Stanley's center (approximately, Hollywood 1927–1960) is surrounded by a periphery (silent film, censorship, the 70s and "the future") presumably less valuable, but still worthy of inclusion in the history. But, there is something missing in this book—*the world.* International cinema could rightly be considered as a periphery to be exlcuded from the study of a

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strictly American celluloid empire. *Could* be avoided if the Hollywood hegemony were confined to American soil. But the empire outruns the flag. Stanley's book is not the history of the American industry, as he claims, but the story of the industry *in* America.

The Celluloid Empire is an isolationist history. Although Stanley expands the field of film economics to include the sociological/moral issue of censorship, and is quite ready to expound the glories of non-celluloid technologies, he declines to consider Hollywood's overseas operations. This despite the clear and readily available evidence that large revenues from international markets are essential to the Hollywood economy. In 1953, Motion Picture Association of America's president, Eric Johnston, stated to the United States Senate that "no other major United States industry is perhaps so heavily dependent on exports for its economic health and well-being"[3] Although Johnston may have exaggerated the situation in order to make a political point, Thomas Guback came to similar conclusions in his 1969 study of the interdependence between the American and European film industries.[4] In the 1978 "Anniversary Edition" of *Variety,* Jack Valenti reminded the industry that the "global market provides half the gross rentals of U.S. theatrical films and a quarter of the gross revenues from television sales. The foreign revenue is indispensable to the continuing production of films for theatres and for the financing of prime American tv programs. It is not profit. It is the return of needed production capital."[5]

Although we may safely discard Valenti's contention that one cannot make "profit" overseas, the importance of Hollywood's overseas operations is too great to be ignored by anyone who claims to be writing a history of "the industry." Yet Stanley never once mentions the activities of the Motion Picture Export Association—the legal cartel established in 1946 as the so-called State Department of the Motion Picture Association of America. Nor is there any information from which the reader can ever infer that 1) 49.7% of the majors' theatrical rentals in 1976 were collected outside the borders of the U.S.A. or that 2) *every year* from 1969 through 1975 foreign rentals significantly exceeded domestic rentals at MGM.[6] Nowhere in Stanley's book can one learn that the U.S. majors produce dozens of films overseas which are never seen in American theatres. Although the term "Empire" used in Stanley's title conventionally implies some form of imperialism, one would never guess from the text that Hollywood has any interest in the international market. The result is a monocular vision of economic history which will deceive the unwary reader.

How complete should a history be? Although Stanley has chosen to exclude the international market as irrelevant to the American industry, he compensates in "The Direction of the Future" by a plethora of domestic detail. The major portion of the chapter is a company by company survey from the late 1950s through early 1978. Too often these minihistories degenerate into lists of cost and gross figures for innumerable "smash hits," bridged by capsule biographies and a dizzying record of the rise and fall of some 41 executives. In his care to list *all* the names, no matter how short the executive reign, Stanley risks losing the reader in a maze of detail. The "story" of the history is fragmented into multiple plot-lines. Since *The Celluloid Empire* is of dubious value as a source for the "facts" of film history, but will be useful to those who require an overview of industrial trends, the requirement of narrative clarity should outweigh the passion for totalization—piling up the details.

More problematic than this stylistic reservation, however, is the question of Stanley's figures on film "grosses." They are simply not to be trusted. The first problem is the word; Stanley refuses to define what he means by "gross." Typical is a remark on Columbia's *Easy Rider:* "Made for about $400,000, the film grossed over $25 million and

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skyrocketed its players into major box-office attractions" (p. 239). What does Stanley mean by a $25 million "gross" and where does he get his information? Since the text is not footnoted, one can only speculate whether his source specified theatrical box-office gross or net rental "grosses" returned by the theatres to the distributor. *Variety's* annual list of "All-Time Rental Champs" lists domestic (U.S. and Canada) net rentals for *Easy Rider* (including re-release) of $19 million.[8] Even relatively low rental terms of 50% of the box office would mean that the theatres took in at least a $38 million gross. Or is Stanley referring to world rentals? There is no way to tell. A second example: *The Graduate* "grossed over $100 million" (p. 259), in *The Celluioid Empire,* where *Variety* lists $49.98 million domestic rentals. Presumably Stanley's figure here refers either to U.S.-Canadian box office or total world rentals (including domestic). Stanley's gross for *Chisum* is posted at $20 million; *Variety* lists $6 million rentals. Yet the $47 million gross for *American Graffiti* agrees exactly with the *Variety* rental figures. Neither *Variety* nor any other trade paper is listed in the bibliography, despite references to less reliable sources such as *Time, Newsweek,* and *The New York Times Magazine.*

Nearly as disturbing as his vague gross figure for given films is Stanley's habit of comparing cost and gross figures from various years while disregarding the impact of inflation. Dino De Laurentiis's production of *King Kong* "cost $22 million to produce," but the author immediately adds: "The original production of *King Kong,* it will be recalled, was made on a budget of $650,000" (p. 261), thereby explictly inviting us to contrast figures that cannot be fairly compared. The point is obvious—the 1933 production of *Kong* was less expensive in "real terms" than the 1976 version. But Stanley makes no attempt to warn the reader that the 1976 dollars should be deflated; he merely juxtaposes the figures. If film scholars are to compare costs or grosses over a period of years or decades, *someone* (with the aid of a computer, the Department of Commerce Consumer Price Index, the Gross National Product inflation rate, or *Variety's* charts of ticket price inflation) will have to inflate/deflate all figures to some standard "real" dollar amount. One need not use the government's standard year; figures adjusted for 1978 could be revised every year according to the current year's inflation rate once the basic information has been assembled. As books and articles on film economics begin to proliferate, the need for deflation processing is paramount now! Until such a project is completed, citation of costs, grosses, and profits will never clarify the "facts," but only confuse them.

If the word "gross" should be struck from Stanley's text because of its imprecision, the censorship chapter poses quite a different problem. Why was it included at all? Beginning with page 174 of *The Celluloid Empire* a rupture of 65 pages breaks the narrative of "economic" events. Chapter 4 carries censorship from 1895 through the 1973 Supreme Court rulings, concluding with an editorial in defense of free speech:

> When weighed against the many compelling needs within American society, it would seem that expenditure of limited law enforcement and judicial resources to prosecute obscenity cases involving forewarned, consenting adults does not warrant a high priority (p. 230).

The story is out of context, to put it mildly. The insert is surrounded by economics, but Stanley builds no bridges between the two sets of knowledge. Through his abrupt presentation (Why here? Why not in an appendix?), moral and economic issues appear to be essentially foreign realms.

Clearly, there *is* some relation between morality, censorship and film economy. In order to be "bought" by the public, a feature film experience must *re*present the public cultural fantasies which are publicly disavowed or re-

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pressed because the fears and desires they express are insufficiently domesticated. Fantasies which are too close to the original "wild" or "lawless" desire will necessarily conflict with the censor (public or private), but whenever desire has already been "unofficially" recognized/tamed/translated through jokes and other so-called spontaneous "folk" representations, a film which screens such revisions will succeed commercially despite the force of "official censorship. In a more or less representative democracy, these moral (ideological) adjustments will eventually be authorized by the legal code. This hypothesis is a simplistic one, meant to serve only as a stimulus to further thought on the moral/economic interface. But if Stanley, or any author, attempts to place censorship within the context of an economic history, at least *some* theory of relationship should be presented as justification.

In his preface to *The Celluloid Empire,* however, Stanley is quite willing to describe the relationship between the economics and the "art" of film—essentially antagonistic. He begins with a celebration of the "potential of the motion picture medium to enlarge human thought, emotion and experience . . . " Then comes the "but," explaining why the medium has not reached its destiny: "But more than any other art form, the creation of motion pictures is rooted in the realism of dollars and cents . . . Indeed, the exigencies of business too often take priority over the principles of cinematic expression" (p. vii). The die is here cast. Although the reader may question whether cinema is the art most constrained by economics (What about architecture?), although he/she may recollect that rarely if ever has a consensus been achieved on standard "principles of cinematic expression," these claims are mere supports to the organizing idea that one should study film economics because the business of movies determines (and tends to destroy) the art. Neither here nor in the body of the text does the author attempt to prove an assertion which he seems to consider self-evident. Yet constant references are made to the degradation of art in the industrial system. Warner's films of the thirties are characterized as "superficial" because "temperament and talent" were subordinated to "discipline and order" (p. 51). The Warner crime films, in particular, "lacked subtlety or depth," while the studio's musicals presented only "the surface realities of American existence" (p. 60). Meanwhile, "Under the banner of Twentieth Century-Fox, Darryl Zanuck, an advocate of efficient production, turned out films that, with rare exception, had formula plots, stereotyped characters, surface conflicts, and predictable denouements" (p. 83). Stanley invites us to think that Zanuck's productions were inferior *because* of his efficiency. *Citizen Kane,* in contrast, is considered "brilliant" (p. 74), but Welles, as we know, was the Hollywood rebel par excellence. Although Stanley is writing a story of economics he inserts aesthetic judgments throughout the history, presumably to illustrate his common sense argument that efficient business equals "superficial" or "slick" art, thereby betraying the potential of the medium. Behind this assumption lurks the Romantic notion of the artist as the isolated genius necessarily opposed to repressive social/economic systems. Artists who function successfully within the system ("classical" artists, genre artists) are immediately suspected of betraying their *daemon* as well as their art—art which must be the expression of an individual alienated from community values.[9]

While such a conception of art and the artist may be useful when writing a history of modern painting or the novel (or the cinema of Godard), it is a questionable assumption when dealing with a mass art in every film which "speaks" to a large audience—an art in which every commerical success is in some sense a remake of previous film experience. Inherited conventions, characters and plot structures are primary in the "creation" of a popular art. An art which is founded

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on the repetition (with variations) of certain formulae is not necessarily less valuable than the relatively "original" discourse of (capital A) Art produced for an educated and/or wealthy elite. The pleasure of recognition, the delighted surprise at a sudden twist in the old "known" patterns is central to classical *and* popular artistic production. It is unfortunate that Robert Stanley's aesthetics are derived from the "Modernist" or Romantic ideology with its cult of the original, its mythology of spontaneity, etc. Such an aesthetic stance is, to say the least, inappropriate in a history of an industry/art in which popular (thus economic) value is based on the classical aesthetic of *re*-creation voiced by Ezra Pound in the command, "Make it New."

Although *The Celluloid Empire* is largely a study of the "moguls," their producers and stars, Robert Stanley moves behind the front office to consider briefly the role of the Hollywood trade unions—material which is missing from most histories. Otherwise, there are few surprises in the narrative. For the most part the author works materials which have already been collected, processed and published by previous authors. Stanley re-collects these materials and subjects them to a kind of secondary revision—a rewrite which will disturb some primary researchers because of its simplifications, speculations, and highly colored prose. I do not mean to condemn the book, however. Although even a "popular" history can and should be read within the problematic of contemporary historiography, *The Celluloid Empire* is not intended for scholars. It does not claim to be a work of primary research or a historiographic study. Stanley's book *is* significant because it is the first systematic narrative of industrial motion picture history, published in one convenient volume. It will probably be assigned as a text in film history courses simply because it is the only book we have of its type, although teachers who prefer material closer to the source may assign *The American Film Industry* (Tino Balio, ed., Madison, 1976; reviewed in the Spring 1977 *Cinema Journal*). Robert Stanley's achievement is primarily a logistical one. In a field which has lacked a general history of the accepted economic "facts," he has organized a more or less complete narrative of these facts as they are provisionally known. But *The Celluloid Empire* remains, at bottom, only a collection of facts stitched together by an awkward continuity. The field of industrial history still awaits a historian who is aware of historiographic issues. Above all, the field awaits a writer.

—*Dennis Giles*

NOTES

[1]In this issue of *Cinema Journal* Robert Allen corrects the myth that patrons of nickelodeons were necessarily poverty-stricken. His study of nickelodeon locations in New York City strongly implies that at least part of the fully "Americanized" middle class also attended the movies.

[2]Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, pp. 133–134. The "arena" metaphor, which I have adapted from Turner, is ultimately derived from the Homeric "contest" (*agon*), the action of tragedy and the bullring, with reference to Nietzsche/Derrida notions of "free play."

[3]Quoted in Thomas Guback, *The International Film Industry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969).

[4]Guback, p. 91.

[5]Jack Valenti, "Valenti Values Film-TV Coin in Oseas Mart," *Variety*, January 4, 1978, p. 1.

[6]*Variety*, June 14, 1978, p. 5; *Variety*, May 26, 1976, p. 6. At the 1971 bottom of the industry's (domestic) economic cycle, foreign rentals exceeded domestic rentals by about 6%. By 1977 the boom in domestic attendance reduced the foreign share of the market to below 50%.

[7]*Variety*, January 31, 1968, p. 19.

[8]Published in *Variety's* annual "Anniversary Edition" the first week of January and again in the May "International" edition.

[9]For a fuller discussion of this issue see this author's "Introduction" to the Industry/Technology/Ideology section of *Film Reader 2*, pages 125–127.

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