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[Book review] The new film history:sources methods and approaches by ames Chapman, Mark Glancy and Sue Harper

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Book Review

James Chapman, Mark Glancy and Sue Harper (eds.) *The New Film History: Sources Methods, Approaches*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, £50.00 (HB only). pp 288. ISBN-10: 0230001696, ISBN-13: 978-0230001695.

Reviewer: Mike Chopra Gant

For several years the ground has been subtly but perceptibly shifting in film study, a minor methodological revolution has been taking place, a revolution usually designated by the vague term, 'revisionist history'. This much-needed volume gives a name to this movement and begins to define the parameters of this exciting new paradigm. The 'New Film History' has developed in the context of two existing paradigms of film study; 'text' based 'readings' of films, and the 'old' film history. As Chapman, Glancy and Harper explain, broadly speaking, historical studies of film traditionally fell into one of two categories; aesthetic film history—concerned with the history of film as an art form—and the idea of 'film as a reflection or mirror of society' (2). The New Film History has as an attempt to address the conceptual limitations of both this latter historical approach, and of the largely decontextualised 'high theory' of film studies, combining the most valuable elements of both approaches to develop an understanding of the complicated relationship between society and representation. Three key features distinguish New Film History from the 'old': greater methodological sophistication, taking account of the complicated relationship between films and their social context; the centrality of primary sources, making use of a wider range of data and making it central to the analysis; and sensitivity to film's status as a cultural artefact with its own aesthetic conventions.

The scope of the New Film History is extremely broad, and this volume reflects the wide range of different approaches covered by the term. The book has four thematic sections and succeeds in presenting a corpus of work which possesses a coherence that is more than the sum of its parts.

The first section, 'History', examines issues that arise from the representation of the past in films. Eschewing simplistic emphasis on the question of historical 'accuracy', the essays in this section examine the complexity of representing history in film and the blurring of boundaries between empirical 'facts' on the one hand and myth and legend on the other. Melvin Stokes provides the first substantive chapter, examining representations of the American Civil War and romantic myths of the 'Old South' in *Gone with the Wind*. Stokes argues that the film is more contradictory than is often assumed, upholding the legend of the 'Lost Cause' on the one hand while also foregrounding the aggressiveness of Southern men and intermittently suggesting the brutal reality of slavery. In the second chapter in this section Sue Harper traces the importance of the historical film for the British film industry. In his chapter, Mark Connelly engages in a detailed contextualised reading of a single film, *Gallipoli*, finding in that movie a powerful reworking of myths that helped form the Australian sense of national identity. Completing this section of the book, James Chapman develops a similar

reading of a film into a kind of meta-analysis that uncovers the roles played by contemporary political and social values in determining which aspects of history are accepted and even embraced by movie audiences at particular times.

The second section of the book examines one of the central concerns of film theory; authorship. The idea that films are shaped by authorial voice (usually that of the director) provided one of the earliest ways of approaching film study and has proven one of the most enduring. Here the distinction between the New Film History and more traditional approaches is particularly noticeable, marked by a shift of focus away from the director, and by the use of archival material to 'establish distinctive voices among the prevailing babble of discourses... and locate those which were most influential' (70). Thus the three chapters in this section focus not on the directors of films, but on others whose importance has previously been neglected; set designers (Laurie Ede), screenwriters (Andrew Spicer) and stars (Peter Krämer).

Genre is the focus of the third section and here it is the insistence that genres must be recognised as arising from 'particular historical and cultural circumstances' (117) that distinguishes the New Film History from other approaches. In this section the substantive chapters are provided by Jeffrey Richards, who examines the role played by cold war politics in shaping the swashbuckler genre; Martin Shingler, who looks at the shifting meanings of 'melodrama'; and Jonathan Munby, who explores the connections between 1930s gangster movies and 1980s gangsta films.

The final part of the book examines an aspect of cinema often neglected by more traditional film study; reception. The rise of reception studies was probably contemporaneous with the early development of the New Film History and while the two should not be conflated, there are clear parallels between the two; notably the fragmentation of previously monolithic accounts of meaning-making and the use of archival evidence of actual responses to movies as opposed to those implied by theoretical frameworks. Mark Glancy examines the reception of Hitchcock's *Blackmail* and reaches unexpected conclusions about the meanings taken from the film by its original audiences. Sarah Street delves into the reception of the British movie, *Black Narcissus* in the USA. Ingrid Stigsdottir and Tim Bergfelder explore cultural differences in the reception of Bergman's *Persona*, and, providing the final chapter in the collection, Justin Smith discusses the potential and pitfalls of 'web ethnography' as a method for researching reception.

Overall *The New Film History* is an extremely valuable contribution to debates about films and guide to some of the most exciting trends in film study today. It would make an excellent introductory reader for film history students. The only word of criticism is directed at the publishers, whose decision to publish the volume in hardback only is difficult to understand and can only limit its accessibility. Hopefully a paperback edition will follow soon.