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Walter Metz: Engaging Film Criticism: Film History and Contemporary American Cinema

2005

<https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2005.1.1690>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Ascárate, Richard John: Walter Metz: Engaging Film Criticism: Film History and Contemporary American Cinema. In: *MEDIENwissenschaft: Rezensionen | Reviews*, Jg. 22 (2005), Nr. 1, S. 93–95. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2005.1.1690>.

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Walter Metz: Engaging Film Criticism: Film History and Contemporary American Cinema

Bern, Bruxelles, Berlin, Frankfurt/Main, New York, Oxford, Wien: Peter Lang 2004, 226 S., ISBN 0-8204-7403-7, € 24,90

For over two decades, millions of Americans have set themselves weekly before their television sets to watch Pulitzer Prize-winning critic Roger Ebert screen short clips of recently released Hollywood films and carry on a sometimes contentious dialog with program co-host, the late Gene Siskel (whom Richard Roeper replaced in 2000). The two then rate the works in question, which often cost upwards of

\$50 to \$100 million to produce, on a ‘thumbs up/thumbs down’ scale. Both Ebert and Roeper write for the *Chicago Sun-Times* and more people visit the former’s website for Internet movie reviews than any other. So influential are these critics’ opinions that Hollywood studio publicity departments strain their negative reviews to pluck from them even the faintest praise for decontextualized insertion into press copy and ad layouts. But whatever popular acclaim the two enjoy stops at the walls of academia. Film scholars have developed theoretical tools and a sophisticated vocabulary inaccessible to the unstudied masses who thrive on Ebert and Roeper’s Caesarian binary. Enter media scholar Walter Metz with *Film Criticism: Film History and Contemporary American Cinema*. The book tries to bridge the gap between these two disparate groups. On the one hand, Metz maintains, critics like Ebert should inform their public anti-intellectual criticism with film theoretical methods. On the other hand, film scholars should no longer disdain to consider possible connections between popular films and older, more canonical works. Metz argues convincingly. His method involves intertextual analysis, the construction of a dialog between contemporary films and those of Hollywood’s past by locating overlooked visual and thematic parallels between them.

Metz defines three different kinds of intertextuality. In referential intertextuality, a text directly and overtly references another (as *Play It Again, Sam* [Herbert Ross, 1972] does to *Casablanca* [Michael Curtiz, 1942]). In imaginative intertextuality, a link may credibly be made between one text and another based upon political, historical, or generic considerations, whether or not the author of either text knew of the other’s work (*The Life of David Gale* [Alan Parker, 2003] and *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* [Fritz Lang, 1956], both of which concern the ethics and efficacy of capital punishment). Finally, in star intertextuality, an actor’s previous film portrayals or political activities inflect subsequent readings of his or her later performances (Dustin Hoffman’s roles in *All the President’s Men* [Alan Pakula, 1976] and *Kramer vs. Kramer* [Robert Benton, 1979] as well as his liberal political leanings, for example, may color the way spectators view his character in *Outbreak* [Wolfgang Petersen, 1995]). Metz divides his work into three sections dealing with geopolitics, identity politics of gender and masculinity, and identity politics of race and whiteness, subdividing further into ten separate chapters to analyze different pairings or triads of films.

Metz admits to an eclectic method, but one example should illustrate its effectiveness. In a book entitled, *In the Name of National Security*, Robert Corber argues that post-Cold War discourses prolonged rather than ended ideological conflicts that had emerged during the Cold War itself. Taking this as an entry point for his own analysis, Metz then demonstrates how Alfred Hitchcock’s geopolitical thriller *North by Northwest* (1959) may be read as a conservative vehicle for extolling the value of the traditional patriarchal family and the danger to national security that obtains when the stability of this unit is threatened. Metz then binds

this analysis to the Arnold Schwarzenegger action film *True Lies* (James Cameron, 1994) by identifying an intertextual web of references between the two films within a shared conflation of national and familial concerns. In Hitchcock's work, a man mistaken for a spy extricates himself from the situation only by preventing Communists from smuggling secret microfilm out of the country. In the end, he marries his lover, an actual spy. In Cameron's film, a spy mistaken for a common, workaday husband and father prevents Middle Eastern terrorists from unleashing a nuclear conflagration on a U.S. city. In the end, he saves his troubled marriage and the lives of his wife and daughter, who in turn become spies. Metz also supports his argument by a pair (one of several throughout the book) of well-chosen parallel screen captures from each film.

Bound by no single theoretical approach, the author underpins his analyses with admirable adeptness by drawing upon a wide range of voices, some of them mutually antagonistic. Thus, he examines dialogical humor in *The Bridges of Madison County* (Clint Eastwood, 1995) through the lenses of Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* and Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Other theorists deployed to serve various and particular ends include Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Fredric Jameson, Wolfgang Schivelbusch, and Susan Sontag. Metz's book will appeal to film scholars and to students just beginning film studies. Both groups should be encouraged to (re)examine modern, popular films for intertextual dialogs with older ones and to pursue further analytical work along the lines that Metz has so elegantly laid out. The author includes a bibliography and always enough theoretical background to make his arguments comprehensible even to those with little knowledge of film or cultural studies.

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