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Ulrike Weißenborn: Just Making Pictures. Hollywood Writers, The Frankfurt School and Film Theory

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Ulrike Weißenborn: Just Making Pictures. Hollywood Writers, The Frankfurt School and Film Theory.

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I should declare at the outset that I am not suitably qualified to review *Just Making Pictures*. You should be a knowledgeable fan of F. Scott Fitzgerald, and be familiar with Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses Don't They?* (1935) and Nathaniel West's *The Day of the Locust* (1939). Unfortunately, I have never had the inclination to read any of them since I saw some over-flattering publicity stills of Robert Redford from Jack Clayton's version of *The Great Gatsby* (1974) – I was more into *The Towering Inferno* at the time. Ulrike Weißenborn's thesis is that these works, which are but a small portion of that well-known literary sub-genre, Hollywood fiction books set within the Hollywood film industry, have a critical approach to film theory similar to that of the Frankfurt School circle, which included Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, exiled to California during the 1930's.

Previous analysis of these Hollywood novels have seen them as products of the Californian region/climate, or as representing Hollywood as a symbol of the American dream/nightmare, or from the biographical perspective of Hollywood as destroyer of literary talent, the novels expressing "the authors' personal frustrations over their loss of artistic integrity" (S.10) when they went there to write for the movies (See *Barton Fink* [1991] for details). However, Weißenborn believes the authors' close encounters with the Hollywood system gave them insights into the way movies are produced and received by their audiences similar to more formal film theorists.

Just Making Pictures is divided into two main sections dealing with Hollywood as a mass culture phenomenon and the psychological dimension of film, plus a much smaller third section, seemingly tacked on to the end, about Hollywood's take on Hollywood.

Members of the Frankfurt School, having seen the effect of totalitarianism on the Weimar Republic, saw "movies as a powerful instrument of manipulation and reification within a capitalist society and judged the movies predominantly in terms of their fascist potential" (S.15), opinions shared by Nathaniel West and Horace McCoy who viewed the Hollywood system as perpetrating "a mass deceit which is used to support the power structures within society" (S.15). Throughout the depressed 1930's Hollywood's "from rags to riches" stories proved extremely popular. West believed that work (or non-work) under capitalism created the need for a vicarious participation in life. Horkheimer and Adorno saw leisure as an escape from the mechanized work process. They all agreed the media had an effect on the public spheres, and the commodification of mass cultural goods encouraged the consumption of actual goods. Adorno saw film "as a destroyer of origin and authenticity" (S.43), whereas Walter Benjamin believed film to be a revitalizing force. *The Day of the Locust* incorporates elements of both cultural theories. Siegfried Kracauer "presents the film world as a symbol of cultural entropy" (S.55), a view shared by West.

Ernst Bloch welcomed film as a vehicle of utopian thinking, an attitude embodied in the imaginative vision of Fitzgerald's Hollywood producer, Monroe Stahr, in *The Last Tycoon* (1941). Bloch believes film to be "capable of visualizing the hope content inherent in daydreams" (S.78), which strengthens the ego and reduces resistance to the often unconventional content of its wishes. Stahr thrives on the creative possibilities inherent in film.

West and Fitzgerald "profitably explore the movies as a place where collective cultural forces and the individual psyche interlock" (S.105). For West, "the filmviewing experience evokes an emotionally and intellectually retarded response in its viewers" (S.111). Fitzgerald is more positive. Christian Metz describes the splitting of belief, the contradiction of holding different meanings simultaneously which is necessary during the act of filmviewing. A double structure of belief also forms the backbone of Fitzgerald's characters' romantic vision. In *The Last Tycoon*, Fitzgerald is well aware of the viewing process and envisions a cinema which makes the audience aware of its spectatorial position, providing them with a direct rather than a vicarious experience, "one that answers the needs of a dramatically changed society." (S.132)

Generally, I found this a difficult book to read. It quotes many scenes from the original novels in great detail. Some of the links between these pre-war novels and the cultural/film theories of the Frankfurt School are dubious to say the least. For example, Nick is the first person narrator of the *The Great Gatsby* (1980 edition) who is cast in the role of an observer: he doesn't take part in the action but only observes it, an experience similar to that of the spectator in the audience watching the film. Surely the definition of a narrator implies he is often apart from the action. How many other books have first person narrators who are often side-lined? There are other instances where Weißenborn stretches credibility when finding

connections. Fitzgerald, West and McCoy are able to describe the phenomena of film production and reception perceptively enough but their analysis seems to me to be a little vague, with Weißenborn giving them more credit than they deserve.

Lastly, I don't really see the point in the very brief discussions on films like *The Player* (1992), *Barton Fink* or the filmic adaptation of *Day of the Locust* (1975) at the end of *Just Making Pictures*. They appear to be neither related to the main thesis of the rest of the book, or in-depth enough. Mainstream Hollywood analyzing mainstream Hollywood is a theme in itself. The only reason for this chapter's inclusion could be the re-occurring image of Barton Fink (not) tapping away on his typewriter which is constantly conjured up by the subject matter. In fact, I didn't find *Just Making Pictures* very interesting and identified with Fink's obsession with his peeling wallpaper.

To end on a more positive note, Weißenborn has obviously a great love of her subject matter and the chapter dealing with the psychological dimension of filmviewing contains clear explanations of some of the various film theories currently in circulation.

Drew Bassett (Köln)

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