What do we talk or write about when we talk and write about American film history? The answer is predictably complex and elusive, because there is a lot to talk and write about, because the medium as it has evolved over more than a century in the United States encompasses the textual, the industrial, and the social. This *American Film History Reader* acknowledges and accommodates this complex and elusive task by showcasing a range of historical writing, sampling a variety of answers to this fundamental question. When we talk or write about film history, we by necessity talk and write about a lot of different things.

The project of this book is twofold: (1) to provide the reader with a selective history of American cinema; and (2) to provide an introduction to historiographic practice as it relates to American moviemaking and moviegoing. The book is composed of eighteen essays organized into six parts focusing on: Industrial Practice, Technology, Reception, Films and Filmmakers, Censorship and Regulation, and Stardom. Appreciating that methods and materials change over time, this structure allows us to showcase a breadth of historiographic approaches and a range of research materials within each of these six parts. Each essay is a point of entry into a history that necessarily accounts for the essential and inherent commercial, experiential, social, and cultural aspects of the medium. This thematic structure organizes essays that are to an extent chronological as we are keenly interested in the evolution or trajectory of work within each of the six schools of film history we have chosen to highlight in this book.

The selection process within each part heading was difficult; and no doubt different editors might well have made some different choices. The task of choosing just three essays from the extensive historical work in each category resulted in selections not, or not just of work with a canonical significance, but rather, or also, work that presents an apparent trajectory within each of these approaches. Each essay is introduced separately and specifically and for each of our choices we provide suggestions for additional reading chosen rather carefully from work we could easily have selected instead.
We are interested in schools of film history – schools focusing in different ways on political economy, textuality, scientific and technological innovation, audience reception, industrial intention. And we are interested in the different ways different historians work within these categories . . . how, over time, the study of industry, technology, reception, auteurism, content or workforce regulation, and celebrity has evolved within film studies.

Again, we should note that a comprehensive project is quite beyond the scope of this book. Our goal is not to create a set of canonical readings or writings but instead to offer film studies scholars and students as well as general readers a manageable set of texts that together introduce how an American film history might be written, how it might be studied, taking into account a range of concerns, sources, socio-political arguments closely examined and ably discussed by eighteen influential film historians.

As this book suggests, there is no single unique and perfect approach. Movies in America merge the commercial and the artistic, the industrial and the creative. To talk about one half of this duality, this paradox, requires some accounting of the other. Cinema in the U.S. is mechanically and/or technologically reproduced. It is by artistic and commercial intention promoted, distributed, and exhibited as a mass medium with a profound, significant effect on its mass audience. What and how we talk about movies ranges from close readings of individual and representative texts to broader social, cultural, economic, and political concerns. There’s the notion of movies and me, movies and you, movies and America, movies and the global audience and marketplace. This American Film History Reader introduces such a complex historical conversation with an eye on encouraging further reading, further conversation.

The parts can be taken separately as specific interventions into an historical study or taken together as a complex interdisciplinary approach to a history that cannot be so simply told. Each part has its own inherent history and trajectory, its own seminal or central texts, its own unique materials and methods. What follows is an introduction to each of the six interventions, each of the six schools of American film history we showcase in this book.

Industrial Practice

The first film course at an American university dates to 1915, the year D.W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation was released nationwide. The class was offered through Columbia University extended education and focused on the “photoplay” as a literary genre. The course was taught by university faculty and local theatre and film professionals and given its extension status it was something of a hybrid, at once an academic course (in literary studies) and a trade school skills class (like auto repair). A second early experiment in university film studies came over a decade later at Harvard – a business of film course taught by a who’s who of early industry players: Adolph Zukor, Cecil B. DeMille, Marcus Loew, William Fox, Jack Warner, Sam Katz, Robert Cochrane and Louis B. Mayer. These two early forays into film education took a while to take root at universities nationwide, but they nonetheless revealed a fundamental tension in teaching and writing film history: whether to focus on films as works of art or as products of a commercial enterprise.¹

The first systematic study of the relationship between mode of production and film style was certainly David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson’s work on classical Hollywood. Their notion that film style (what was discussed in film studies classes, many of which were offered by English Departments at the time) might be rooted in business practice (which rather distinguished film from the other arts), foregrounded Thomas Schatz’s *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*, which provided a second important bridge, this time between industry studies and auteurism. Schatz audaciously complicated the notion of authorship to include collaborations between artists and businessmen, filmmakers and studio executives and producers.

Studio history was also of interest to the cultural historians Robert Sklar in *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of the Movies* and Garth Jowett in *Film: The Democratic Art: A Social History of the American Film*. Both authors contextualized industrial production with regard to the social and political effects of motion pictures.

Today, industry histories rather abound in film studies and cover a wide range of topics. There are histories of movie labor (Danae Clark’s *Negotiating Hollywood: The Politics of Actors’ Labor*), movie advertising and promotion (Justin Wyatt’s *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*), movies and racial politics (Jesse Algernon Rhines’ *Black Film/White Money*), movies and global capitalism (Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurria, and Richard Maxwell’s *Global Hollywood*). The focus on industry has come to inform other approaches, especially auteurism: Jon Lewis’ study of Francis Coppola’s Zoetrope project for example and Thomas Elsaesser’s essays on blockbusters and the “new economy Hollywood.” Key to these newer industry histories is an awareness of the fundamental dialectic of film study: that movies are at once art and commerce and an affirmation that one cannot be fully understood independent of the other.

**Technology**

Technology studies has a long history as a significant genre of film writing. At least as far back as the World War One era, those studies typically appeared in trade journals, and were written by film professionals for their colleagues. For the next thirty or forty years, *The Motion Picture Projectionist, The Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers*, and *American Cinematographer*, among
others, were the places to find information and analysis on a variety of subjects directly related to the technologies of cinema; color or 3D cinematography or stereophonic sound.

In the film histories written during these same years, however, from around 1920 through the 1950s, technology came to be relegated to the margins or entirely absent. Terry Ramsaye’s *A Million and One Nights*, from 1926, established the pattern. This history of the first thirty years of film was itself endorsed by Thomas Edison, one of the inventors of the motion picture camera, whose photograph appeared on the frontispiece. Ramsaye devoted the first quarter of the book to the machinery developed by Edison and others, and particularly to such cinematic precursors as Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey, the high-speed photographers of the 1870s and 1880s. Then, however, technology dropped out of Ramsaye’s story, replaced by studios, stars, and spectacle. Similarly, Benjamin Hampton’s *History of the American Film Industry*, from 1931, touched only lightly upon the machinery that the industry used, in an opening section about Edison and other early inventors, and then at the end, with a discussion of the introduction of sound. Margaret Farrand Thorp, in *America at the Movies*, her 1939 examination, mostly ignored film technology altogether. 9

With few exceptions, this was the state of things in American film studies for decades. The film stock, the lights, or the projector were understood to be of utmost significance during the very early period of film’s existence. After that, however, the important story of film would be the development of the feature length movie, or the star system, or the changing status of the director, or the relationships between film and cultural context, with only the coming of sound technology in the late 1920s worthy of notice. During this time, the serious study of technology still could only be found in those trade journals devoted to spreading the news about mechanical developments.

By the 1950s and for the next thirty years or so, academic interest in film technology began to grow. All of the reasons for this shift remain unclear, but of particular importance would be a new publication, *The Hollywood Quarterly*, which first appeared in 1947. The Quarterly was designed as a place where scholars and practitioners might talk to each other and to a common readership. As a result, the journal published articles by such film and cultural historians as Theodor Adorno, Iris Barry, Siegfried Kracauer, and Georges Sadoul, as well as filmmakers talking about their craft: Chuck Jones and Norman McLaren on animation, or Edith Head on costume design. 10 This as much as anything marked the migration of technology studies into film studies, and when *The Hollywood Quarterly* became *Film Quarterly* in 1957, the journal kept publishing significant works about movie technology, including the two essays reprinted here by Charles Barr and Barry Salt.

In the 1970s and 1980s, scholars interested in the economic history of American film came to understand that technological advances often fueled industrial development and expansion. This period witnessed the scholarship of Douglas Gomery, for instance, about the influence on the international market of the coming of sound. In similar fashion, Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson’s foundational *Classical Hollywood Cinema* described motion picture technology – lighting, microphones, and cameras, for example – as fundamental to the development of the visual and narrative systems that governed American film at least from World War One until 1960. 11 Thus as it moved from margin to center, the study of technology has transformed our understanding of the place of research,
design, and invention in the film industry, and our sense of the impact of the mechanical apparatus of cinema on the stories that we see on screen.

**Reception**

Questions about the audience have been central to film studies for at least a century. In the German context alone, Emilie Altenloh completed her *Sociology of the Cinema: The Audience* in 1914, while Hugo Munsterberg published one of the earliest, extended works of film theory, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*, in 1916. Both works were marked by a detailed interest in spectatorship, in the case of the former a cataloging of preferences and habits among filmgoers, and in the latter a broad view of the medium’s psychological effects on viewers.

For many years, when American film scholars studied the audience, their efforts were marked by the analytical, quantitative method of Altenloh. As we move through Robert and Helen Merrell Lynd’s 1929 study of Muncie, Indiana, *Middletown*, to the Payne Fund Studies of the 1930s, to Margaret Farrand Thorp’s *America at the Movies* from 1939, to Leo Handel’s 1950 monograph *Hollywood Looks at Its Audience*, to David and Evelyn T. Riesman’s 1952 essay, “Movies and Audiences,” we can see many of the same inquiries and interests. Scholars during this period sought to determine who, precisely, made up the audience, what those audiences wanted to see, when those audiences went to the movies and for what reasons, and how viewers might be affected by the movies they saw.

In a broad sense, as film studies became more firmly established as an academic discipline, as it moved closer and closer to literary studies, and as it came under the influence of 1950s French *auteur* theory, about the significance of the director, American scholars moved away from the more sociological concerns of previous decades. Indeed throughout the 1960s and 1970s, scholarship on audience invoked the spirit of Munsterberg far more than that of Altenloh, using Marxist, semiotic, and psychoanalytic approaches to imagine a more theoretical rather than empirical viewer, and to investigate the ideological and linguistic effects, among others, of the film text on an undifferentiated audience.

Over the last thirty or forty years, scholars have moved back to a more sociological, empirical study of audiences, but one always informed by the theoretical advances of the previous decades. Such scholars as Melvyn Stokes, Richard Maltby, Janet Staiger, Ruth Vasey, Gregory Waller, Annette Kuhn, and Catherine Jurca, as well as those represented in this volume, opened new inquiries into historically specific audience studies. These scholars have shown us that film audiences must, on the one hand, be thought of in international terms and on the other as a vast number of small audiences, separated by age or class or race or gender or location. And these audiences have understood movies, and have enjoyed them or been displeased by them, in varied ways, and in ways that films and filmmakers could never fully control.

These new audience studies, marked by a sense of the complexity of audiences and by the ways filmgoers and films interact with various institutions and leisure activities, owe a great deal to the expansion since the 1980s in the available materials for studying film viewing. Holdings at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Los Angeles, at the New York Public Library, at such universities as UCLA, the University of Southern California, and Wesleyan
University, as well as the federal Freedom of Information Act provide extensive evidence relating to the film audience. As a result, we can understand the intricacies of the history of spectatorship as never before, and appreciate the varied relationships between film text and film viewer.

Films and Filmmakers

The *auteur* theory, which focuses on films and their filmmakers, holds a crucial, albeit controversial position in cine-historiography. For many serious film scholars today, *auteurism* is regarded as a necessary and necessarily flawed first step away from historical models drawn from the social sciences (especially sociology and psychology, as discussed above) and towards a methodology more akin to art and literary history, a brief stop, so to speak, en route to an historical method that focuses less on the effect of movies and more on the films and filmmakers themselves.

The *auteur* theory first emerged in postwar France, rooted in the reactionary politics of a handful of young film journalists (François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer, and Claude Chabrol) and their venerable editor André Bazin at the film magazine, *Cahiers du Cinéma*. The *auteur* theory that they promoted was pure provocation; it celebrated the American cinema at the expense of the French tradition, and argued, somewhat paradoxically for a “politique des auteurs,” the notion that despite a commercial, collaborative system rigged to obscure authorship, the key to appreciating and understanding American cinema involved a necessary identification of the American movie director as the principal if not sole author of his or her films.¹⁵

*Auteurism* spread to England (where critics for the magazine *Movie* embraced the notion of the director as *auteur*) and to the United States where the film critic Andrew Sarris systematized and historicized American cinema according to certain filmmakers and their films. In doing so, Sarris insisted upon a basic, crucial assumption: that films are works of art — it is astonishing that as late as 1968 that was still an argument that needed to be made — and that films (good and bad, big and small, commercial and independent) are made by individual artists of varying abilities and significance. In his groundbreaking *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929–1968*, Sarris created an elaborate and highly impressionistic scheme for the wide range in quality he observed in American moviemaking, ranking directors and their films.¹⁶ Transcendent artists like Chaplin and Welles occupied “The Pantheon.” Well-known directors with inflated reputations prompted inclusion in a chapter titled “Less than Meets the Eye.” Especially important to Sarris, and this he got from the French *auteurists*, was the rescue of under-rated directors who labored in relative obscurity during their careers. While Sarris’ accounting was based mostly upon astute, close textual analysis, his work nonetheless veered into journalistic subjectivity and his persistent bickering with Pauline Kael, the film reviewer at the *New Yorker*, mired his critical analysis in unproductive discussions of taste. Moreover, affections at the time among the literary community for the ahistorical New Criticism relegated Sarris’ work to outlier status among the cognoscenti.

What eventually cemented the importance of the *auteur* theory in the historiography of film in the U.S. is its role in the evolution of film studies at universities after the Second World War. As film studies evolved into a viable discipline, it
did so because the *auteur* theory, flawed as it may have been, implied a fundamental connection to already established historical methods in established disciplines: art and literary history. In art history, it was the convention at the time to teach the great works of the great artists. In literature classes, the Great Books tradition persisted. The insistence on authorship – that despite the commercial enterprise out of which American films are produced, there might nonetheless be a tradition of great films and great filmmakers (just as there was a tradition of great works of art and artists, great books and writers) – eased the transition of film studies into the established liberal arts curriculum.

Much as the historical traditions in film are more nuanced today, the organization of material for the purposes of teaching or writing history often betrays a continued celebration of the best and the brightest, great artists and their works of art. As such, *auteur* critics and historians have more recently used the films and filmmakers approach to explore a range of other topics: a semiotics of cinema (Peter Wollen’s *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*), issues of gender and sexuality (Molly Haskell’s *From Reverence to Rape*, for example, as well as Judith Mayne’s work on the filmmaker Dorothy Arzner), cultural and political history (Andrew Britton’s “Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment (1986)” and Robin Wood’s *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*). What distinguishes the *auteur* approach today is its versatility, that a close look at films and filmmakers might be a starting point for a study of genre, gender and sexuality, politics and culture, industry and technology.

**Censorship and Regulation**

Content censorship has been a fact of life for filmmaking and filmgoing in the U.S. since the advent of the medium. The challenge for American film studios has never been whether or not to censor, but instead a matter of finding a practical way to *use* censorship. On the one hand, content regulation addressed civic concerns about the effect of the medium on the mass audience but on the other the practice was necessarily incorporated into studio operations from film production through public relations. The goal of the 1930 Production Code, for example, was not only to establish a fundamental moral guidebook, but also to assure the free flow of movies through the marketplace, which at the time was complicated by local censorship boards as well as religious and progressive grassroots organizations. The 1968 Voluntary Movie Rating System bypassed morality altogether (except with regard to hard core pornography) and was instead designed to classify a newly diverse range of productions (films rated: G, M, and R – later G, PG, PG-13, R, and NC-17), again to be assured free and fair trade in the marketplace.

There are a number of historical studies that focus on the effect of censorship on movies and moviemaking (Frank Miller’s *Censored Hollywood: Sex, Sin and Violence on Screen* and Gerald Gardner’s *The Censorship Papers: Movie Censorship Letters from the Hays Office, 1934–1968*) and/or the significance of content censorship to American cultural history (Frances Couvares’ edited collection *Movie Censorship and American Culture*; Gregory Black’s *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics and the Movies*; Thomas Doherty’s *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality and Insurrection in American Culture*; and Charles Lyon’s *The New Censors: Movies and the Culture Wars*). These cultural studies
regard the complex social contract forged between the studios and a mass culture at once fascinated by and more than a little leery of the power of the moving image. Larger questions regarding the cultural significance of institutionalized censorship in general (Marjorie Heins’ *Not in Front of the Children: Indecency, Censorship and the Innocence of Youth*) and/or works that focus on judicial questions regarding obscenity and pornography round out the more socio-politically inflected work on the subject.

Eschewing the public debate about morality, some historians of censorship have focused instead on industry organization and operation: Lea Jacobs’ *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928–1942*; Matthew Bernstein’s edited collection *Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation in the Studio Era*; Thomas Doherty’s *Hollywood’s Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration* and Kevin Sandler’s *The Naked Truth: Why Hollywood Doesn’t Make X-Rated Movies*. This body of historical work rather overlaps with industry or studio history and regards content regulation as a matter of studio policy and procedure, industry organization and operation, mode of production and censorship’s impact upon film form or style.

For historians, content censorship is the most studied mode of industry self-regulation. But there are other forms of industry supervision and management worth studying: the studio workforce, for example. Content censorship and workforce regulation are inextricably related. Movie censorship was first instituted industrywide by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA), then headed by Will Hays, following a series of movie star scandals. The connections between workforce regulation and content censorship were especially significant during the Hollywood blacklist when politically progressive speech in movie screenplays was treated much the same as speech expressed in “questionable” political affiliations and union memberships.

The very formation of the studio system involved a fundamental regulation of a creative and artisanal workforce. The Fordist system streamlined and standardized production, and workers were by necessity tied to option contracts that guaranteed exclusivity and exploitation. Unionization was as much a reaction to the inevitable collapse of the studio system as it was a reflection of a dynamic opposition between an industry committed to using regulation for public relations and a progressive workforce committed to a free and fair marketplace, a stake in industry profits, and the freedom to work on whatever project one chooses.

**Stardom**

The movie star has fascinated film scholars since the beginning of the star system in the early 1900s. Around 1908 or 1910, film studios realized the importance of their performers, who went from being uncredited and unpublicized to being scrutinized by millions of fans and celebrated by the film industry. Historians often identify Florence Lawrence as the first movie star, with her persona carefully constructed by the various film studios that employed her. By 1915, Vachel Lindsay, in his book, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, extolled “the pale Lillian Gish” in Griffith’s *Enoch Arden* (1911), and also told readers about one of the other great female stars of the day and the kind of film she makes; “we know the Mary Pickford mood,” whether the actress portrays “a doll, a village belle, or a church angel.”
Lindsay, of course, was a poet, and his writing about movies showed a poet’s sensibility. Even with less aesthetic aspiration, though, scholars for many years concentrated on the individual star, like Gish or Pickford. In the 1930s and the Payne Fund Studies, which examined the effects of movies on children and adolescents, American researchers worried about the onscreen impact of John Gilbert or Clark Gable, for example, and whether they might be able to convince young girls to forget all sense of moral propriety. Around this time, scholars also took an interest in the star system in general, often disparagingly, as they examined an industrial system that worked to commodify celebrity on a large scale. Paul Rotha, for instance, in his encyclopedic The Film Till Now, from 1930, castigated the Hollywood film studios when he wrote, about the late 1910s and early 1920s, that “the American cinema began to succumb to the personality process, resulting in the tyrannical reign of the star-system,” and that the movie companies “decided to recapture the attention of the public by the wholesale exploitation of stars.”

In France, which we tend to mythologize as a bastion of the cult of the director, the 1972 publication of sociologist Edgar Morin’s Les Stars helped galvanize modern star scholarship. Since then, in British and American-based film studies, the work of Richard Dyer and Christine Gledhill has been instrumental in bringing greater and greater sophistication to star studies. As a result, the historical analysis of movie stars has become a significant aspect of film studies, as we examine the ways that movie audiences have understood stars at various times, or the ways that stars might be used to organize the visual and narrative logic of films, or how they take part in a broad range of cultural production and activity, for instance fashion, music, or politics. From Vachel Lindsay to the present day, the movie star has served as one of the most important ways for us to understand many of the pleasures we take in cinema, and also to assess the American film industry and the ways it provides those pleasures to a global audience.

Notes


INTRODUCTION


