

Steven J. Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1998)

Steven J. Ross, professor of history at the University of Southern California, has written a unique book. Although the title *Working-Class Hollywood* suggests a study of labour conditions in a company town, the subtitle *Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* indicates both the real subject of the book and the broad scope of its argument. There have been many studies of the film industry's early years, its east-coast origins and the westward migration of filmmakers and production companies who founded the "Hollywood studio system." Likewise, much has been written on the birth of mass entertainment, particularly of how "going to the movies" became an integral part of urban life in the years before and after World War I. *Working-Class Hollywood* rearticulates the history of this period in order to emphasize the complex relations between social conflict and the representation of class in popular culture. Prof. Ross contends that "Filmmakers were more concerned with portraying the hardships of working-class life during the silent era than at any subsequent time in the industry's history. Movies turned class struggles previously confined to the hidden, private realm of factories, mines, and fields into highly visible parts of public culture."⁽⁷⁾ One might quibble about whether the struggles between capital and labour in America had ever truly taken place in "private," but there is no denying that the early cinema's ability to portray events in gripping, widely-accessible images, gave a new dimension to public awareness of social conflict. Prof. Ross sees the cinema as doing more than simply informing people about class relations in America: in his view, the film industry provided one of the mechanisms by which class consciousness, and therefore class relations, were forged.

The eight chapters of *Working-Class Hollywood* are divided into two sections. Part I largely deals with the period from the 1905 opening of the first "Nickelodeon" to the United States' 1917 entry into World War I. By this latter point, the cinema had grown from novelty attraction to a cultural and communications medium of such importance that President Wilson charged a "Committee on Public Information" with the task of using film (and other media) to align public opinion behind the war effort. By 1917, also, the companies that made America's movies were beginning to coalesce into an oligopoly of "major" and "minor" producers that was to dominate the industry for decades thereafter. Both the war and the formation of the studio system were to have dismal consequences for the movies' portrayal of class relations. Part II of *Working-Class Hollywood* is concerned with those consequences as they were manifested during the 1920s. It describes how a vital tradition of oppositional filmmaking was to dwindle and all but disappear by the time Al Jolson told audiences they hadn't "heard nothin' yet" and the era of the talkies had begun.

Film in America gained its popularity in the first decade of the century by appealing primarily to working-class audiences in industrial cities teeming with

new inhabitants. Wherever movies were shown in the United States, they provided audiences with images and stories in common, whether the spectators came from Naples, Kiev or Tuscaloosa. But the cinema quickly became more than simply one of the means for integrating newcomers into the values and customs of urban America. Like the immigrants and the wage-earners in its audiences, the cinema itself was a new factor in the dynamics of society, and like immigrants and wage-earners, its mere presence changed the world that gave it place. "Legitimate" theatres implicitly excluded working-class audiences, often by language, but also by admission price, dress, and the aura of snobbery in which theatre-going was shrouded. Prof. Ross quotes one commentator of 1917 to the effect that "if you wish to be respectable [when you go to the theatre], you must take a taxicab and wear a dress suit." (15) By contrast, in the decade or so before America went to war, film theatres proliferated throughout its cities and towns, dedicated to providing amusement to the masses for a few cents per head. In 1910, 26 million tickets were sold each week. By 1920, the figure had risen to 50 million. Workers and their families flocked to neighbourhood movie theatres, where the 10- and 20-minute films of the pre-war era ran continuously throughout the day and evening, and where spectators could escape into manufactured fantasy for a few minutes or a few hours as the mood took them and opportunity permitted.

What did they see there? If the vast majority of the early one- and two-reeler films were indeed fantasies with little bearing on the experiences of most spectators, there were films among them that took as their subject precisely the living and working conditions of the people who formed the audiences. These are the films at the heart of *Working-Class Hollywood*. Prof. Ross claims to have "identified at least 605 movies made between 1905 ... and April 1917 ... that could be classified as working-class films." (42-43) He defines a working-class film as "any movie whose plot revolves around working-class protagonists." (42) Based on the scope of his research, Prof. Ross estimates that at least 2130 working-class films were made during the period. They came from a variety of makers: from well-established production companies as well as from fleeting operations which often left only a single film to mark their passing. Some were commissioned by labour organisations such as the American Federation of Labor and the Western Federation of Miners. Some are attributed to activist filmmakers who seemed to have risked their own resources and reputations on the proposition that audiences would accept entertainment that was also politically aggressive. Indeed, Prof. Ross asserts, "Within a few years of the nickelodeon's appearance, labor filmmakers battled their conservative counterparts for control of the screen and of American consciousness." (85) Most of these 605 films have disappeared. Prof. Ross was able to see 91 of them. He assessed the rest on the basis of reviews, film catalogues and other descriptive sources. Although they all dwelt on working-class characters, the greater portion of the 605 films did not emphasise (or at least did not seem to emphasise) class conflict per se. Many were "innocuous

romances, melodramas, comedies, and adventures,” while others “depicted the general hardships of working-class life.” However, half of these films, he says, were “highly politicised labour-capital films” portraying the confrontations not just of individuals struggling with private conflicts of desire and ambition, but confrontations between characters consciously intended to represent social and economic classes. Assigning these labour-capital films to sub-categories according to his readings of their different political agendas, Ross labels 112 of them “liberal” in their orientation, 82 “conservative,” 22 “anti-authoritarian,” 7 “populist” and 11 “radical.” (57)

Given the figures Prof. Ross himself provides, it seems extravagant to describe, as he does, the early years of American film production in terms of a contest of ideas that might have gone either way. What strikes one immediately is the vast disproportion between the number of those films that seem not to have had obvious political or social significance, and those films which Prof. Ross tells us displayed some political awareness. He tells us that in the years from 1911 to 1915 some 22,900 films were released in the United States. Even if, as he says, over two thousand of these dealt with working-class life in some more or less direct way, the breakdown of outlooks among the 605 films he has categorised suggests that fewer than one thousand films of all those made might have fallen into the category of “labour-capital films.” A third or so of those were likely to be “conservative” in orientation. So, over a period of five years, the battle “for control of the screen and of American consciousness” must have been fought out between over 22,000 films on one side of the lines (apolitical and conservative), and possibly 700 on the other (from liberal to radical). In such a situation, referring to a struggle for control of American consciousness is referring to a combat that was, to say the least, unequal.

Perhaps, however, the important thing is not the disproportion of the opponents in the contest, or that the outcome was at any time likely to be other than that it was. Perhaps the important thing to note is that the battle took place at all, and that some filmmakers, imaginative, innovative and determined, regarded their work as precisely, if figuratively, a battle, a struggle, or rather a series of struggles, with potential consequences in the “real world.”

Not all oppositional filmmakers were outside “the industry.” Indeed, Prof. Ross is at some pains to remind us that, at least up until 1917, what we have come to know as “the industry” was still taking shape, and was still fluid enough to include a variety of political perspectives.

At one level of “working-class” filmmaking, Prof. Ross considers films by D. W. Griffith and Charlie Chaplin, two creative giants of mainstream filmmaking, whose movies were seen by many millions of spectators, and influenced audiences, filmmakers and film critics throughout the world. The subjects of their films were often the inequities of class society. Films by D. W. Griffith, who ran the only fully-unionised Hollywood studio before World War I, are classed by Prof. Ross as “populist,” the sort which made clear, value-laden contrasts

between those who worked for a living, and those who lived on wealth that others produced. Griffith has long been credited as one of the key figures in establishing the cinema's narrative and conceptual forms. He made cross-cutting a fundamental dramatic instrument of narrative film, a means of raising tension by cutting from one strand of images to another, and back again, as a story comes to its thrilling conclusion. Prof. Ross reminds us that in film after film, particularly in his earlier years at Biograph in New York, Griffith used cross-cutting to emphasise the disparities between the ways the rich and poor lived, "to build audience sympathy for the poor and hatred of the rich." (49)

Prof. Ross does not dwell at length on the political sympathies explicit in the output of Griffith and Chaplin (classified as a maker of "anti-authoritarian" films). Their work has been treated extensively elsewhere. His key chapters, the most original, informative, and sometimes inspiring passages of *Working-Class Hollywood*, are detailed accounts of films made in the margins of and clear outside the entertainment industry, made with the deliberate intention to portray the struggles of working Americans, particularly those engaged in labour and social activism. With these chapters, Prof. Ross restores to film history an often radically oppositional tradition that has received little if any treatment elsewhere. Some of these films were clearly one-off productions; others were meant to be founding projects of a labour-oriented cinema intended to rival the fantasies Hollywood produced. Prof. Ross refers to these films as the products of a "worker film movement" that flourished in the years before World War I and was revived in the first half of the 1920s. He admits, however, that each of the films he discusses was made by people who had no contact with the makers of the others, and who had little in common except a determination to make movies "that showed unionists and radicals defeating employers, solving the problems of the day, and helping wage owners realize their long-held dreams." (87)

The tradition of the "worker film" began early. In 1911, the American Federation of Labor commissioned a Dayton, Ohio filmmaker to make *A Martyr to His Cause*, a film meant to defend union official John McNamara against the charge of setting a dynamite blast that killed twenty employees of the anti-labour Los Angeles *Times*. Assuming that McNamara had been framed, and that the publicity surrounding his trial would tar labour organisations with the brush of anarchism, the AF of L had McNamara portrayed as an "industrious, family-loving" (94) worker, whose mother breaks down and weeps in the final scene as she reads a letter from her son in prison assuring her that he is "innocent of any infraction of the law." (94) The public run of the film, which seems to have attracted considerable business, as well as the cause for which the AF of L enlisted the aid of the movies, broke down when McNamara confessed to bombing not only the Los Angeles *Times* but a number of bridges throughout the United States. But the point was made that working-class America did not have to be content with sitting in the audience for films, it could also make them.

Those films that followed also tended to be driven by incidents in recent

labour struggle. *What Is to Be Done?* written and produced by Joseph Leon Weiss, a member of the Hebrew Actors Union and a co-founder of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, dramatised a Rockefeller-ordered massacre of miners' families in Ludlow, Colorado. It was released in November of 1914, only two months after the incident it portrayed. Others were produced when labour unions and socialist groups realised that the cinema offered an unrivalled opportunity to spread their messages among many more than could be influenced by lectures, pamphlets, and even mass rallies. *From Dusk to Dawn* (1913), a fable of union activism undertaken by men and women workers, takes the hero from the shop floor through strike action to election as governor of California on the Socialist ticket. It ends as hero and heroine pledge to remain "Comrades for life." (97) Clarence Darrow himself — who had actually represented John McNamara — appears on screen to defend the hero of *From Dusk to Dawn* against conspiracy charges brought by capitalists and politicians. *From Dusk to Dawn* was seen by an estimated half-million spectators.

Working-Class Hollywood ranges broadly over the problems of producing, distributing and exhibiting films that flatly contradicted the dominant images of America put on the screen by the film industry in the silent era. He discusses the way that, beginning in about 1911, the rise of the "movie palace" theatres, seating upwards of 1000 customers, imposed middle-class tastes and expectations of restraint on audiences who had been used to a lively, participatory form of spectatorship in the small nickelodeons. He describes the increasingly tense labour relations in the companies that were evolving into "the Hollywood studio system," and the studios' output of "red scare" films in the postwar era, which implied that organised labour was little more than a front for Bolshevik ambitions in America. Such is the extraordinary depth of Prof. Ross's research that he is able to offer detailed accounts of the internal operations of film production companies established by unions and labour activists to try to counter the vicious propaganda from an industry that by 1920 had become completely intertwined with the financial interests of Wall Street and the country's largest corporations.

Although the success of early productions such as *From Dusk to Dawn* gave hints that a bright future lay ahead for a popular, labour-oriented film culture, the reality was to be very different. Financing production, gaining distribution, fighting the censorship of state and local officials who in case after case prevented the exhibition of films that they judged inflammatory, all proved to be insuperable obstacles to building the infrastructure needed to maintain a flow of films to the screen. None of the directors of the pre-war films described by Prof. Ross seems to have made another in the same vein. No print of any of the films survives.

By the end of the war, the opportunities for making such films were already on the wane. Audiences content with short, relatively simply-made films in the early days of movie-going, came to expect ever more polished productions. Nickelodeons, with their few hundred seats and polyglot audiences, were giving way to movie palaces where the carriage trade was not ashamed to be seen: "If

anyone had told me two years ago that the time would come when the finest looking people in town would be going to the biggest and newest theater on Broadway for the purpose of seeing motion pictures,' wrote Victor Watson, 'I would have sent them down to ... Bellevue Hospital.'" (32) By the 1920s, the movie palace had become an attraction in itself, complete with orchestras, variety acts on stage, luxurious washrooms, and little hesitation about cutting the films they screened to fit their own programmes. Opulently, often exotically, decorated, staffed by uniformed attendants, enticing audiences from morning till late in the evening, the movie palace was hailed as a peculiarly 20th-century expression of American democracy, even as it offered its still largely working-class audiences a luxurious, fleeting fantasy of wealth unsustainable in the real world outside.

Working-Class Hollywood is a history of film production, distribution and exhibition in the era of the silent movie, and of the advent of commercialised, mass culture. Its particular value is in documenting worker resistance to the growth of Hollywood and what it entailed: the erasure of an awareness of class from popular consciousness, and the marginalisation of cultural production that had anything but a consumerist orientation.

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