

MARTIN HOLTZ, *American Cinema in Transition: The Western in New Hollywood and Hollywood Now* (Frankfurt am Main etc.: Peter Lang, 2011), 539 pp.

The Western was never dead. Few movie genres have been such popular targets for critical obituaries and then have been found, upon closer inspection, to be very much alive, albeit in qualitatively quite diverse manifestations. Not only is there a continuous outpour of Westerns, there is also a continuous critical reception thereof. And although the monograph under review here does not initially stand out—it is neither transnational, transdifferent, transmedial nor of any other prefixed conviction—but appears rather conventional, it has a lot to commend it.

The starting point is not the Western, but Hollywood. The underlying research interest of Holtz's book is "the transition that Hollywood has undergone over the last forty years" (2), or more precisely, the changes and continuities from New Hollywood (which he dates 1967–1976) to what he calls Hollywood Now (which for him begins 2001 with the caesura of 9/11). "For an evaluation of 'Hollywood Now,'" Holtz argues, "it thus seems to be beneficial to compare it with its formative years, which are regarded as so different in character yet already anticipated much of what has happened since" (3). For this comparison, he continues, a genre-theoretical approach is most useful because "genres are by nature transitional, paradigmatically mirroring the developments of Hollywood as a whole" (4), especially one of its most fundamental ambivalences: "American cinema has always clung to established formulas, eager to build on successes of the past" (4), yet realizing that renewal is inevitable in order to remain successful and economically viable. Hollywood's development, in other words, is characterized by the same dialectic that characterizes genre development: difference and repetition. According to Holtz, then, the Western is simply the best genre for this comparison because it is prototypical, perennial, and, most importantly, negotiates a "national mythology" (4). For Holtz, the history of the Western is the "history of Hollywood in general" (4).

This ambitious research interest is guided by three overarching arguments: first, that "the historical development of genres is influenced by a complex set of factors which transcends the simplicity of a single theoretical

model" (5); second, that "the development of the American cinema from New Hollywood to Hollywood Now is marked by a consistency in terms of artistic inventiveness and ideological ambiguity despite changing historical backgrounds, industrial structures, artistic profiles, and audience compositions" (5); and third, that "the Westerns continue to be an eminently relevant form of cultural expression which paradigmatically reflect the complexities of American cinema" (5). Of these three, the second is the most interesting. The first seems almost obvious, since any decently complex cultural formation transcends a single theoretical model—apart from the fact that few theoretical models are "simple"; and the third is, at least for any avid film fan, almost intuitively convincing, and its rejection rather than its support would need vindication. Nonetheless, taken together, the three arguments make for a demanding and interesting program, which Holtz then implements in all 480 pages of text and five chapters (including an introduction and conclusion), an impressive works cited list, including almost 500 films, and an additional CD with a PDF of 150 pages of stills and short explanatory comments.<sup>1</sup>

In a first step, Holtz discusses genre in film. This chapter covers 40 pages and delineates the familiar problems and paradoxes of genre definitions and theories; it deserves praise in itself because it remains clear and readable at all times, contrary to much genre theory. In the end, Holtz arrives at a number of "cinematic" (iconography, chronotope, style, themes, narrative structure, ideology) and "extra-cinematic" (industry, artist/auteur, audience) "determining factors" that bring together syntactical, semantic, pragmatic, as well as diachronic and synchronic contextual elements of film-genre analysis and make up the framework for his subsequent analyses. What makes this chapter particularly convincing is the fact that Holtz systematically stresses the formative and fundamental importance of

<sup>1</sup> Advantages of the CD are the size, resolution and color of the stills; disadvantages are inconvenient accessibility and lack of analytical context. Ideally one would have to read the book with the PDF open at all times. The disadvantages are excusable, though, since the book obviously would have been much longer and much more expensive with the images incorporated.

the socio-cultural and historical background for genre development.

The next chapter provides a film historical and analytical comparison of New Hollywood and Hollywood Now along the lines of socio-cultural background, industry, auteurs, and audience. Only then—beginning with chapter four on page 111—do we get to the Western and its manifestation in New Hollywood and Hollywood Now; the analysis and comparison is, mildly put, extensive. It is almost overwhelming in its thoroughness and detail and covers more than 360 pages. The “determining factors” mentioned above are now further differentiated into a host of factors which are keyed to New Hollywood and Hollywood Now, respectively—e.g. setting and props (both), community and individual (New Hollywood), race and ethnicity (both), civilization and savagery (Hollywood Now), and so on.

A short summary cannot really do justice to the results. Very generally, the conclusion for New Hollywood is that “genre becomes precisely the locus of subversion” (273) and that the Western, through working with the foundational myth of the USA, is a criticism in disguise (273). The tension between New Hollywood as an industrial venture that channeled dissent and as a stage for criticism and resistance is, according to Holtz, typical of popular culture as Stuart Hall conceptualizes it (273). For Hollywood Now, Holtz concludes that here, too, the Western shows the signs of the times—it is historiographic, metafictional, postmodern, self-reflexive—and is character-

ized by a “similar ideological polyvalence” (473): “criticism and affirmation are united in sometimes uneasy alliances” (473), yet the Westerns tell “stories that demand to take a stand” (473) and are a critical reflection of the history of the genre, of Hollywood, and of film (473). Overall, Holtz writes, the Western develops from a predominantly conservative genre in classical Hollywood, to one of “artistic innovation and subversive political implications” in New Hollywood, to a self-reflexive cultural artifact, an “aesthetic mode that is freely combined with other genres for either commercial or socio-analytical purposes in Hollywood Now” (479). Regarding film genres in general, Holtz claims that as “an industrial category film genres have lost much of their importance, as an interpretive frame, however, they are of increasing significance” (480). Obviously, coming at the end of almost 500 pages of interpretation, Holtz cannot claim much different. Nonetheless, the claim is valid. After all, genres are among the most fundamental and powerful meaning- and sense-making frames we employ.

It will come as no surprise by now that I have little to criticize about this book. It is a bit long, its style at times a bit stuffy, but none of this counts as substantial criticism. It might not follow any of the current research trends (and should not have to), but for anyone interested in genre theory, film history, and/or the Western, or all of the above, it is a must.

Braunschweig

Rüdiger Heinze