

Timothy Corrigan (ed.), *American Cinema of the 2000s: Themes and Variations*. New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2012. 270 pp.

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If nothing else the oft-heard response to 9/11 - that events unfolded just ‘like a movie’ - spoke of the importance cinema had gained by the start of the twenty first century as a lens through which to view and comprehend American life. It is fitting then that cultural fallout from the attacks is particularly notable in film, as *American Cinema of the 2000s: Themes and Variations* attests: eight out of its ten chapters mention 9/11 either in passing or at length as an influence on the movies they discuss. This is not to say that analysis becomes a protracted dissection of one event’s influence, though it remains that the World Trade Centres’ absence is a discernible aporia in the films this book evaluates. For where does an industry devoted to spectacles go, when a disaster as tragically photogenic as 9/11 kick-starts the decade?

American movies did not lack these seismic events to respond to in the 2000s. The Iraq War, financial crisis, or the first black president all support editor Timothy Corrigan’s remark that this was a decade of ‘fast-paced turbulence and change’ (2). Like previous entries in the Screen Decade series (Rutgers University Press’s ambitious overview of U.S. film from 1890 to the present), the book traces such flux by designating one chapter to each year of the nation’s cinema. As Dana Polan warns in her chapter on 2009, this structure incites the ‘temptation for the historian...to argue that his/her chosen slice of time was somehow especially meaningful’ (216). We can extend her caution to the whole book: in analysing the

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decade just past, there is a risk of presenting contemporary film as the progressive fruition of over a century of cinema. Yet contributors avoid this by highlighting what certain movies reveal about American society, rather than propounding their artistic worth. In Polan's hands, for instance, a film as seemingly trivial as *Hannah Montana* provides valuable insights into the political implications of new consumer identity cultures in the United States.

Indeed, analysis is at its strongest when contributors foreground the problems that a historicist unravelling of film and culture engenders. In '2001: Movies, Smart Films, and Dumb Stories', for example, Linda Ruth Williams notes how 9/11 lures critics to read apocalyptic portents into movies produced in ignorance of the attacks. Consistency of format works in favour of a need for careful contextualisation, each chapter beginning with a short preamble of the year's major developments before three or four longer sections read specific films within these broad historical currents. This set template does not, however, inhibit the diversity of scholarly voices. While Sharon Willis offers close textual readings of movies in 2002 under the rubric of melancholy, Thomas Schatz's chapter on 2008, by contrast, traces how the interests of global media conglomerates now suffuse the U.S. film industry to its creative detriment. Such variety in approach not only makes for lively reading, but forestalls any holistic view of separate film-years as part of a unifying, decade-long gestalt.

Identifying common themes between movies is nonetheless one of the book's main goals. Dina Smith's comparison of Disney's *Enchanted* with *Lars and the Real Girl* (the 'real girl' being a sex doll named Bianca) in terms of how both explore the relationship between fantasy and reality is startling in its incisive juxtaposition. Unfortunately this is one of only a few instances where contributors examine independent as well as mainstream cinema. With the exception of Karen Beckman's look at offbeat pieces like Jacqueline Goss's *How to Fix the World* in her chapter on 2005, the collection focusses largely on commercial big-hitters. This is understandable for a book using cinema to take the national pulse: the bigger the hit,

the more Americans it probably resonated with. That peripheral gems may take longer to discover, given how they lack the market propulsion blockbusters enjoy, then proximity to the decade under discussion also hampers analysis. In fact, who can say how films of the 2000s will seem in light of cultural, economic or technological changes yet to occur?

The book does hint at the worry of whether movies can, as Polan asks, be anything ‘but one signal among others’ (231) in a society now saturated with new media and communication technologies. If 9/11 showed how like a movie reality had become, the digital revolution is outpacing and undercutting the film industry’s ability to depict that reality. As an introduction to this turbulent decade for U.S. movies, *American Cinema of the 2000s* will be useful both for undergraduates and established scholars as a springboard to unpicking, in series editors Lester Friedman and Murray Pomerance’s words, the ‘connections between American culture and film history’ (n.p.). Despite the inevitable problems of historicizing a period that has only just passed, the collection offers astute and self-aware readings that demonstrate how significant a barometer of the American moment cinema can be.