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Review of James Morrison, *Passport to Hollywood: Hollywood Films, European Directors.*

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James Morrison, *Passport to Hollywood: Hollywood Films, European Directors*. State University of New York Press, 1998. 311 pp. ISBN 0791439372.

Reviewed by Michael Tratner, Bryn Mawr College

Passport to Hollywood is a book that continually surprises me. The overt issue it explores—what happens when European directors of art-films move to the U.S. and make movies in Hollywood studios—seems at cursory glance to promise little more than either an anti-Hollywood tale of corruption or a pro-Hollywood tale of mass audiences demonstrating their intelligence. Neither of those stories is told, because what Morrison uncovers is the process by which stories of the differences between European art cinemas and Hollywood are constructed.

He reveals this process by focusing on movies in which Hollywood and European art cinema blur together; he shows that in each such movie something that had been accepted as a "difference" began breaking down—and at the same time a new way of defining the difference was emerging. He traces then a history of continual redefinition. Morrison never dissolves "Hollywood" and European art cinema" together, and he never lets them quite separate. The book accomplishes the remarkable feat of both sharpening definitions and showing they never hold up—or rather, he shows that definitions have distinct histories, lasting only a while before being reformulated, even though the same words continue being used.

A few examples may give a sense of what happens in this book, though I hate to give away the plot twists. For me, the most surprising moment in Morrison's book is his account of the 1950's, when he discovers an uncanny agreement between the vehemently anti-art movie criticism of the House Committee on Un-American Activities and the thoroughly artsy critics at *Cahiers du Cinema* who produced the theories that evolved into the French New Wave. Both these groups were involved in investigating Classical Hollywood cinema, and both discovered, as Morrison puts it, "a dual register, a kind of double consciousness . . . The Senate committee shares with the proponents of the *politiques des auteurs* the inclination to read Hollywood according to an interpretive model that posits a surface-level of signification that conceals or otherwise deflects attention from a nonetheless privileged depth level" (147). Morrison recognizes that HCUA wanted to expunge the "deeper" meanings in movies, while the *Cahiers* critics wanted to multiply them, but what is striking is that the two groups in effect supported each other in enunciating what became a norm for postwar film makers: the notion that all movies, including the most seamless Hollywood products, are divided, doubled, with deep hidden meanings distinct from obvious surface effects.

Morrison thus recasts the fifties from its stereotypic characterization as the last moment of wholesomeness before the revolutions of the sixties into a period during which the notion of deep irony existing throughout the social order became accepted by nearly everyone. Deep irony had been a trait of art cinema, not Hollywood, so the fifties also required a redefinition of that distinction. Such a redefinition arrived first on the side of art cinema, with the French New Wave adopting Classical Hollywood films as models for "art", and then the redefinition was completed by the New Hollywood movies which borrowed "art film" techniques to create quite popular works.

As surprising as Morrison's account of the fifties is his account of how the New Hollywood films maintain their difference from art films. Films such as *Midnight Cowboy*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, and *The Last Picture Show* attempt to maintain the mythic core of Classical Hollywood but recast this mythic core into a "self-conscious" form. Since the central structural myths of Hollywood were heterosexual, the New Hollywood films "return obsessively" to "the theme of homosexual panic" (211). To move from the HCUA to the concept of a "self-conscious myth" to homosexual panic is to make leaps that could leave this book nothing but a bunch of fragmented speculations, but it reads so smoothly, the arguments are so tight, that instead I feel that Morrison is revealing a new critical synthesis. He adds new dimensions to Laura Mulvey's important argument that modernist disruptions are needed to break out of the compulsory heterosexuality of Classical Hollywood films. Mulvey expects that such modernist intrusions would create non-pleasurable, non-popular films; Morrison shows instead that Hollywood found ways to use modernist elements to add a new *frisson*—homosexual panic—that only intensifies the heterosexuality and the visual pleasures of New Hollywood films. Moreover, Morrison does not simply view the films made in the last few decades as the first American films to break with the "spectatorial pleasures" of Classical Hollywood films; rather he traces such disruptions to early Hollywood, finding in Robert Wiene's films a tension between Hollywood and modernism that is also a tension between hetero- and homo-sexuality, though not reducible to such a tension.

Morrison presents the themes and techniques of modernism from a slightly skewed angle that makes modernism seem, well, not all that modernist any more. For example, he shows that modernism contradicts itself in its presentation of alienation. The emotional rejection of alienation as destructive pushes modernism toward a rather banal love of nature (though that nature is often presented as absent or unavailable) and a hatred of the urban environment; yet the urban environment is a condition for modernism to emerge. The geometric beauties of modernist works are utterly dependent on an anti-organic alienation modernism condemns. Morrison traces these contradictions in Wiene's film, *Sunrise*. The film cannot be described as either modernist or Hollywood: it uses many filmic techniques from Wiene's earlier, "modernist" or art-cinema period (such as cutting in subjective images disconnected from the diegetic flow), and yet it creates an anti-modernist thematics by presenting the city as redemptive and more conducive to relationships than the world of "nature" outside the city. Standard interpretations of the relationship of theme and technique in criticism of modernism fall apart: a concrete city can be filmed in fragmented sequences including disconnected images of nature and nonetheless create a sense of a warm, comfortable place. Fragmentation doesn't mean alienation—indeed scenes of organic wholeness may be more alienating than the familiar disjoint city.

While destabilizing clichés of modernism, Morrison also deconstructs certain standard premises of film history. Supposedly, European directors found it difficult to maintain their modernist vision of film art when they joined the studios of Hollywood. Morrison shows that much of the difficulty they faced was due to how easily Hollywood embraced whatever they sought to do: they and the critics who were invested in anti-Hollywood attitudes then had to devote considerable energy to reconstructing the difference between Hollywood and modernist art-cinema. The continual re-invention of differences was very productive, leading to new cinematic techniques in both realms which then were continually borrowed.

The only place I felt a small let-down in Morrison's inventiveness was in the last chapter, where he analyzes a post-New Hollywood film, *Cutter's Way*, which was promoted first as a thriller and then as an art film. It is a perfect example of a film that combines Hollywood and art cinema, but by that chapter, I felt I knew what was coming, and I did not see any overall theory of "post-New Hollywood" films evolving. I suspect the problem is just that it is always difficult to describe the most recent developments. Even without any overarching view of the present film scene, I still leave this book with a profound sense of having changed the way I view the present. For one thing, Morrison shows that all the hype about indie films and art films getting popular audiences in the last couple decades simply misses what was a part of Hollywood history from the beginning. Perhaps the title of Morrison's book should be read as self-referential: this book is itself a "passport to Hollywood" of particular value to those in the U.S. who need to visit Hollywood as if they were foreigners to begin to see how the distinctions between the familiar and the foreign have been created.