

MUSEUM MOVIES: THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART AND THE BIRTH OF ART CINEMA

Haidee Wasson

Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005, 314 pp.

Reviewed by Paul S. Moore

Museum Movies helped explain a little puzzle for me. Haidee Wasson's confidently composed book would probably help anyone in film studies with a thing or two. Her history of the Museum of Modern Art's Film Library is, in a sense, the story of where film studies came from; as the subtitle says: *The Birth of Art Cinema*. My own problem was a special film show in Chicago in 1926, "Old-Time Movie Week," which included a selection of Griffith, Sennett, and other shorts from the early 1910s. Also included was a clip of McKinley's 1901 inauguration, which allowed the entire show to be incorrectly bannered, "the movies of 25 years ago... the films of our childhood." For its time, this chance to see old movies again was unique, and the advertising supposes nostalgia is the *only* reason to go. I knew it was exceptional, but only after reading *Museum Movies* did I understand why. The book explains that habits, discourses, networks, and even postures of watching films as art, specifically watching old movies for aesthetic purposes, were institutionalized in the 1930s, most concretely as a result of the founding of MoMA's Film Library in 1935. More generally (and this is why the book is really about the origins of film studies itself), Wasson argues that art cinema is socially constructed, but she avoids the pitfalls of now-routine "invention of" books by leaving this conclusion largely implicit. Rather than offering an overstated genealogy of film studies, the book shows how film appreciation owes a great deal to specific people, like Iris Barry and John Abbott at MoMA, and its Film Library, which came about because of a few well-connected people, changes in the technology of film, and the cultural purpose of the museum.

Wasson's introductory chapter, "Making Cinema a Modern Art," lays out the argument that cinema could be widely understood as an art form only when the conditions to facilitate that sensibility had been developed. In other words, she offers a material sociology of cinephilia, a social history of texts, spaces, manners, technologies, and economies that came together to make the Film Library "a novel, hybrid, and quintessentially modern institution, one that resonated with other institutional projects to make film respectable or institutionally useful." The remaining chapters are organized loosely around those other institutional conditions and contexts: technology, the museum, the film industry, distribution cir-

cuits, and the audiences themselves. Perhaps surprisingly, but with great rewards, the Film Library itself does not become a central character until the halfway mark. The first half of the book, instead, lays out the contexts that allowed the very idea of the Film Library and mass film appreciation to flourish.

A chapter on the possibilities of mobile theaters explains how the technological and industrial conditions of an "amateur" 16mm gauge of film stock and portable projectors facilitated new types of film viewing. Eastman Kodak, Bell & Howell, and Victor Animatograph coordinated the adoption of 16mm in 1923. Amateur, educational, and industrial filmmaking flourished, almost all of it non-profit. An unintended outgrowth of the new standard of 16mm, Wasson argues, was the ability to more easily view movies, even mainstream ones, for aesthetic appreciation. The educational, non-profit aspects of the Film Library were largely inherited from existing industrial networks set up around 16mm exhibition.

The next chapter looks at MoMA and modern museum practices more generally, especially in relation to film. If many modern artists wanted to create art for the masses, places like MoMA gave shape to a "mass museology." Design and architecture were included alongside the traditional fine arts, expanding the conventional boundaries of objects worthy of art appreciation. This was obviously important in having cinema accepted as an art form. MoMA also created for itself an (inter)national scope to ensure that its audience was not limited to New York elites. The museum thus developed a publicity machine that reproduced modern art in every way possible: "To some degree, the field of art history, art journalism, art catalogues, coffee-table books, blockbuster exhibits, and even the seemingly ubiquitous gift shop owe their genesis to the potential and the perils of this living, mediated museum." Cinema could easily attach itself to these precedents (enabled by 16mm), but the resulting form of film appreciation had to be configured to follow educational mandates that were national in scope.

Wasson then traces how "The Film Library Takes Shape," which is where her heroes, Iris Barry and John Abbott, show up to fight adversity, effect compromise, create new canons and interpretations, and give birth to art cinema. The Film Library had to work within the limitations and budgets set by 16mm technology, as well as MoMA as host and the Rockefeller foundation as philanthropic patron. Gathering, archiving, preserving, and exhibiting film prints meant dealing with Hollywood and world-wide film industries, and relying on an international network of schools, film societies, and lending libraries through which the Film Library would have an impact beyond its screening room in New York. This required some pussyfooting around Hollywood—playing off movie stars' egos, dealing with copyright and legal issues, quelling commercial exhibitors' fears of competition, and counteracting studios' neglect of the films in their vaults.

Although the film industry was a constraint no worse than others, and Hollywood has only a peripheral if constant place in the book, the climax of

Wasson's tale is a private screening at Pickfair in August 1935, where Barry and Abbott presented a retrospective of American film. They argued for the historical and aesthetic importance of these stars' and moguls' labour, but ultimately the occasion was mostly nostalgic (not unlike the "Old-Time Movie Week" in Chicago 1926). For the mainstream film industry, old movies were primarily treated as home movies, the personal scrapbooks of Hollywood insiders. Wasson is blunt here: "No directors or actors could help them gain access to films except for the very few who controlled rights to their own material"—Mary Pickford and Harold Lloyd in particular. Even Griffith and Chaplin, at the centre of the canon the Film Library was developing, gave no support or donations. "Years later, Barry wrote: 'This visit proved vastly agreeable but was, in a sense, a wild goose chase. We soon realized that, perhaps understandably, no one there cared a button about "old" films, not even his own last-but-one.'" Besides providing cameo star appearances and a critique of capitalism, the story also concisely explains why structures supporting cinephilia and film appreciation were slowly to take shape.

The book has few shortcomings, but I can't help noting Wasson's hesitancy to explore theoretical tangents, even obvious questions that are directly relevant. I am sympathetic to the idea that a well-researched historical case might be over-interpreted, over-theorized, precluding alternative interpretations. Still, *Museum Movies* reinforces the separation of history and theory as distinct genres, noting with just a sentence how Bourdieu provides a methodological foundation, and twice dropping in Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay with the mere phrase "technological reproducibility." I don't think it would have been such a different book if these moments had been pursued for a few hundred words each. A recent forum on "The Crisis in Publishing" in *Cinema Journal* included the view that theory is dead, or at least out of fashion. Clearly, history is not dead or out of fashion, as demonstrated by exceptionally strong books appearing in the last couple of years (many, like Wasson's, published by the University of California Press). By and large, however, these books avoid arguing for their significance outside of film history circles. I suppose this is simply being realistic about the likely market for readers. *Museum Movies* is assured a well deserved place in film history, and is likely to find an equally deserved place in film studies more generally. Readers approaching from Art History, Sociology, or Communications will have to do some interpretive work, but it will be worth it: the book offers a superb analysis of art in society.

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STAGE-BOUND: FEATURE FILM ADAPTATIONS OF CANADIAN AND QUÉBÉCOIS DRAMA

André Loiselle

Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003, 260 pp.

Reviewed by Bruce Barton

André Loiselle's *Stage-Bound: Feature Film Adaptations of Canadian and Québécois Drama* is an ambitious, near-comprehensive, and meticulously analyzed study. Beginning with Melburn E. Turner's treatment of Hilda Mary Hooke's *Here Will I Nest* (play, 1938; film, 1942) and concluding with Jean-Philippe Duval's version of Alexis Martin's *Matroni et moi* (play, 1995; film, 1999), Loiselle offers an extensive survey of English- and French-language film adaptations of original stage plays in Canada. Through the application of a wide and eclectic array of theoretical approaches, he constructs an elaborate and persuasive (if, at times, overly restrictive) analytical frame, discovering a high degree of commonality amongst the works discussed, in terms of both preoccupation and strategy. If Loiselle's analysis occasionally strains beneath the strong determination of the book's global thesis, the results are nonetheless consistently insightful, evocative, and illuminating.

Loiselle's study is divided into chronological sections, beginning with "Stage-Bound since 1942," which lays out the structure for the rest of book. This section also provides the theoretical basis upon which Loiselle builds the comparative analysis that follows, and, despite my considerable admiration for the accomplishments of *Stage-Bound*, I feel compelled to note two reservations about the author's approach to his material. Relying on a century of solid, but distinctly essentialist media theory, Loiselle proposes a "fundamental distinction between drama, which centres on a confined *locus dramaticus* closed off from the reality that it reproduces, and film, which can capture the wide vistas of actual landscapes...." Loiselle draws on Neil Sinyard's contention that "in some ways, the two forms are antithetical: theatre is artificial lighting and illusion, and cinema is open-air and realism; theatre is verbal, cinema visual; *theatre is stasis, cinema is movement*." By extension, Loiselle argues, "[T]he plays best corresponding to the demands of the hybrid medium that cinematized drama constitutes are those presenting a dialectical composition that pits coercive, centripetal pressures against explosive, centrifugal forces."

The essentialist constraints of such an argument—manifested in the concept of "cinematized drama"—are clear here, and they occasionally lead Loiselle into apparent assumptions of "fundamental" properties, media characteristics, and related issues of aesthetic convention. For example, Loiselle contends,

[A]lthough *Being At Home with Claude* and *Possible Worlds* are not as conspicuous in their references to theatricality, both films are intensely *dramat-*