

Review: *The Other Hollywood Renaissance*; Dominic Lennard, R. Barton Palmer and Murray Pomerance

Chris Horn

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The Other Hollywood Renaissance

Edited by Dominic Lennard, R. Barton Palmer and Murray Pomerance

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Reviewed by Chris Horn, University of Leicester

The “Hollywood Renaissance” (or more commonly New Hollywood) is a much-loved era in American cinema, a brief instance of the Hollywood studios actively fostering experimental, intellectually challenging and ostensibly non-mainstream cinema made by a new cadre of cine-literate auteurs. The period, from the late 1960s to the mid-late 1970s, continues to fascinate historians and scholars, this volume being the latest in a long line to engage with its films, directors and historical context. Whereas much of the recent work has moved away from the filmmakers who had originally tended to dominate discussions, this latest contribution gravitates back towards auteurism, and towards individual directors. The premise of this edited collection is that the rollcall of auteurs commonly considered to be key to New Hollywood is too narrow, which in turn has led to a marginalisation of the contribution of many of the period’s most interesting and creative filmmakers. The editors, Dominic Lennard, R. Barton Palmer and Murray Pomerance, assert that “the critical consensus, with minor exceptions” only focuses on six privileged names: Robert Altman, Francis Ford Coppola, Stanley Kubrick, Arthur Penn, Martin Scorsese and Steven Spielberg (1). The collection therefore focuses on twenty-three “other” directors whose films are “worthy of respectful remembrance [and] have been unjustly neglected” (19). The essays cover a wide selection of disparate filmmakers, ranging from those firmly associated with the Renaissance (for example Peter Bogdanovich, Hal Ashby and Paul Schrader), established directors not commonly thought of as Renaissance auteurs (Sam Peckinpah, John Frankenheimer, John Boorman), and a smattering of more obscure, largely forgotten filmmakers (Jerry Schatzberg, Peter Yates, Joan Micklin Silver).

The designation here of Arthur Penn, certainly in terms of name recognition, as one of the “charmed circle” rather than, for example, Ashby, Bogdanovich, William Friedkin or Brian

De Palma, is debatable (6). Further, the existing literature which Lennard *et al.* cite as the justification for what is, and what is not, within the book's remit is questionable. While no-one would dispute the centrality in the Renaissance of the six auteurs excluded here, the definitive manner in which they are positioned appears to be based solely on the names studied by Robert Kolker in *A Cinema of Loneliness*.¹ In order to justify the collection's overarching premise about which directors tend to be included or excluded from Renaissance scholarship, other sources are proffered but none of these apart from Kolker actually back up the editors' thesis that there is universal agreement about the identity of the "agreed-upon major players" (7). For example, the editors reference Diane Jacobs' key early work, 1977's *Hollywood Renaissance*, yet two of her chosen five filmmakers are actually featured in this present volume (John Cassavetes and Paul Mazursky) (6)². Later on, several of the contributors return to Kolker and couch their arguments in a way that again assumes that his choices are a representation of the entire critical consensus. *A Cinema of Loneliness* (now in its fourth edition) is undoubtedly a seminal work, but its author never makes any claim that his *personal* selection of modernist directors is meant to be definitive. Linda Badley begins her essay on De Palma by arguing against Kolker's criticisms of her subject (102) while Nancy McGuire Roche, on the basis of *The Graduate*'s status as one of the Renaissance's founding texts, claims that "it seems a glaring omission that Kolker's book does not include [Mike] Nichols", proceeding to use up rather too much space emphasising the point (236).

Of course, there are also filmmakers for whom a case might be made for inclusion (or at least a mention) as this type of volume will always throw up such debates. The directors featured here, we are told, were chosen by its contributors and a short list is provided of filmmakers for which the editors have not been able to find room. Not included even in this supplemental list are three directors whose most well-known films or authorial identity are central to common conceptions of the era: original "Movie Brat" John Milius is omitted

entirely, perhaps because of his notorious right-leaning tendencies (apart from a single word on his role as a producer in the Schrader chapter [349]); Dennis Hopper, although *Easy Rider* (1968) gets a brief mention, is not specifically cited as one of the era's directors and there is no mention of his historically important, if contentious, *The Last Movie* (1971); the same might be said about Monte Hellman and *Two Lane Blacktop* (1971).

However, all such issues about selection and canon are relatively unimportant in assessing the overall value of the collection. The standard of individual essays is mostly high, providing assessments of the directors' contributions to the Renaissance that are scholarly and wide-ranging. In the sense that the span of films made by these directors goes from the very well-known to the almost completely unknown, the book does provide a "shadow" or "other" history of the Renaissance by dint of the absence of the big hitters like Coppola, Scorsese and Kubrick. Approaches to chapters are varied, with no overarching definition provided for what constituted the Renaissance in terms of dates, subject matter or style. Most of the writers work to the parameters of 1967-1980 (from *The Graduate* to *Heaven's Gate*) to frame their discussions, with a couple of exceptions who extend a little into the early 1980s (De Palma and Schrader). Some contributors take a fairly conventional approach in discussing important, well-known films and taking the reader carefully through their chosen auteur's work of the era, but the most original and interesting contributions are those that take a less obvious route. These fall roughly into three categories: those that are more elliptical in approach, those that explore particularly obscure films, and those that highlight well-known directors or films that are not typically associated with the Renaissance. One striking chapter that manages to combine all three is Daniel Varndell on John Frankenheimer, a seasoned director not commonly associated with New Hollywood. Varndell examines the images in what he calls "little death" scenes that he argues are "key to understanding the power of Frankenheimer's moral questioning in his 1970s films" (135). Elsewhere, chapters are especially welcome which bring forward the work of

directors whose names and work have been somewhat forgotten (rather more so, in fact, than Paul Mazursky, whose chapter by Lester Friedman is titled ‘The New Hollywood’s Forgotten Man’). These include Maya Montañez Smukler on Joan Micklin Silver where she focuses on Silver’s experiences negotiating the divide between studio and independent filmmaking, and Steven Rybin’s perceptive take on Alan Rudolph that focuses on his two 1970s films that “position [him] among the unacknowledged masters of the New Hollywood Renaissance” (298). However, the rounded nature of the collection means that there is also scope for the analysis of some of the Renaissance’s most iconic films, such as *The Last Picture Show* (Bogdanovich, 1971), *Five Easy Pieces* (Bob Rafelson, 1970) or *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973). Dealing with such recognisable titles alongside those barely remembered in popular memory is one way that the volume seeks to foreground how these films are more famous and admired individually than as part of authorial discourses.

A few errors have slipped through: Friedkin followed *Sorcerer* (1977) with *The Brink’s Job* (1978) not *Cruising* (1980) (156); Jon Finch is not Peter Finch’s son (336); and the *New York Times* seems to have been confused with the *New Yorker* when the editors state that Bosley “Crowther was summarily replaced by Pauline Kael” (11). However, these are minor quibbles, and it is a strong collection of different perspectives that succeeds in its intention to “overcome the conspicuous silence” about so much of the work discussed, even if one might dispute the extent to which all the filmmakers covered were really “outside of the New Hollywood ‘A List’” (20).

¹ Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness* (London, Oxford University Press, 1980, 4th Edition, 2011). Of the six directors specifically excluded from *The Other Hollywood Renaissance*, Kolker dropped Coppola and replaced him with Spielberg for the 2nd edition, (1988). For the 3rd edition, he also added Oliver Stone and then David Fincher for the 4th.

² Diane Jacobs, *Hollywood Renaissance: Altman, Cassavetes, Coppola, Mazursky, Scorsese and Others* (London: The Tantivy Press, 1977).

