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# REVIEWS

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*"The Studio System."* Directed and produced by Chris Rodley. *"Film Noir."* Directed by Jeffrey Schon. Produced by Sasha Alpert. *American Cinema.* BBC / Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 1994.

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The episodes "The Studio System" and "Film Noir" in the *American Cinema* series, currently being distributed on videocassette, are both useful introductions to these topics for an introductory undergraduate and general public audience. The topics covered and the questions raised by these episodes are the ones an academic film historian would expect to find addressed. Thus, the value of these episodes lies in their usefulness as teaching tools, and certainly not in their groundbreaking or innovative approach to film history.

"The Studio System" episode begins with an introduction by John Lithgow which emphasizes the economic historical approach that the show will take, led by the two prominent industrial film historians in contemporary media studies: Thomas Schatz and Douglas Gomery. This strategy both gives the episode a needed coherence, but also produces its most problematic facet, the adoption of a much too uncritical perspective on the Hollywood studio system.

In his introduction, Lithgow argues that it was "the genius of the system" that led the classical Hollywood studio system "to produce some of the best pictures ever made." The episode builds its coherence around this purported "genius of the system," a concept borrowed from Schatz's book of the same title, which in turn was borrowed from Andre Bazin. In two separate places, Gomery emphasizes the terms of this genius: in his refutation of the Fordist factory model for understanding the Hollywood production system, and in his explanation of how Hollywood came to thrive even after temporarily crippling economic effects of the Paramount Decree.

There is, of course, nothing inherently wrong with many of the conclusions drawn out of this formulation of the genius of the Hollywood system. The studio system did enable a number of films that could simply not have been made under any other economic and cultural conditions. However, the existence of other models for understanding the Hollywood studio system are overwhelmed by this genius approach, which is clearly complicit with the funding and informational

sources of the *American Cinema* series itself. That is to say, the series was funded by the likes of Steven Spielberg, and draws its attraction by having many Hollywood insiders (Michael Eisner and Charlton Heston, in this episode, for example) agree to comment on camera about their industry.

Even though the episode spends a few minutes discussing gender and workers' rights issues within the classical Hollywood studio system, this problematic area of Hollywood's history is sandwiched between Gomery's aforementioned defense of the genius of Hollywood's ability to move beyond a Fordist factory model and Schatz's discussion of the "sophistication" of Paramount's studio style. The screenwriter Meta Wilde's lament that women had no standing in the economics of Hollywood thus gets lost within the episode's intense love affair with the accomplishments of a clearly patriarchal industry.

The entire episode is in general complicit with this institutional misogyny: the documentary privileges the experiences of male stars like Harrison Ford and Charlton Heston, relies on the criticism of male scholars Schatz and Gomery, and quotes Hollywood insiders like Michael Eisner and Edward Dmytryk. Nowhere is this implicit marginalization of the gender-based critique of Hollywood more clear than when Wilde's comment about Hollywood's misogyny is followed by a clip from *The Last Tycoon* in which the producer, played by Robert DeNiro, berates an actor, played by Jack Nicholson. Through the use of *The Last Tycoon*, Wilde's gender-specific critique is transformed into a general critique of Hollywood's crass commercial nature. Ironically, the patriarchal triumvirate represented by the case of *The Last Tycoon* — F. Scott Fitzgerald, Robert DeNiro and Jack Nicholson — testifies directly to the point that Wilde, but not the documentary, is trying to make: that the gendered nature of the economics of Hollywood is a problem that needs to be analyzed, and it is not acceptable to convert this into a general critique of the crass commercialism of Hollywood.

To its credit, the "Film Noir" episode does grapple with issues of gender much more convincingly. Director Kathryn Bigelow, film noir actress Marie Windsor, and feminist critic Janey Place offer compelling analysis of the femme fatale and other topics germane to noir, complementing the more traditional ideas forwarded by Richard Widmark, Martin Scorsese, and Edward Dmytryk. Through these commentators, the episode covers most of the typical topics in noir criticism: the effect of World War II on American genre cinema; noir's literary sources in Cain, Hammett, and Chandler; the femme fatale; noir's lighting strategies; and the representation of the city in film noir.

While most of these topics are covered compellingly, I found the episode's ending gesture — the examination of noir after the classical period — poorly done.

The question of whether noir can exist after its post-war incarnation is debated through sound bites offered by directors Lawrence Kasdan and Paul Schrader. Schrader takes the position offered in his essay, "Notes on Film Noir," that noir was a historical phenomenon, and thus died out after 1958's *Touch of Evil*. Being the director of *Body Heat* and other neo-noirs, Kasdan obviously has some reputational stake in the matter, and consequently suggests that refusing the noir label for contemporary thrillers is just playing a game of semantics.

It is here that my critique of "The Studio System" episode can be brought to bear on the "Film Noir" episode. By the end of the "Film Noir" episode, the critical perspective on noir has all but been lost, replaced by a series of directors commenting on their own work. This is most annoying in the episode's use of Martin Scorsese, who positions his film, *Mean Streets*, as film noir made authentic through his insistence on putting on film what gangsters were really like in his neighborhood.

Kasdan equally appeals to such authorial authenticity, arguing that *Body Heat* is really about what his friends at the time were attempting, to make "the big score." The episode's willingness to let this sort of self-aggrandizing criticism stand unchallenged is what I would consider its largest drawback. As in "The Studio System," the producers' seemingly all-encompassing desire to please an audience and commentators enamored of Hollywood film overrides a critical perspective needed in analyzing any cultural phenomena. In a culture already overly attached to the romantic genius of the film artist, this is the last thing we should be teaching our undergraduates about the history of cinema. ✱