

BOOK REVIEW

"Hollywood's and Broadway's methods of manufacturing certain excitements and emotions may possibly be artistic, but their only use is to offset the fearful boredom induced in any audience by the endless repetition of falsehoods and stupidities. This technique was developed and is used in order to stimulate interest in things and ideas that are not in the interest of the audience." Bertolt Brecht, 1944.

MS. in its April '74 copy has an article, "What Movies Have Done to Women — Or, How the Movies Have Made Women Smaller Than Life." The article is by Marjorie Rosen, author of *Popcorn Venus; Women, Movies and the American Dream*. (\$10.95, Illustrated. 416 pp.).

About the same time *Women and Their Sexuality In the New Film*, Joan Mellen, (\$10. cloth \$6.95 paper. Illustrated. 255 pp.) appeared. Also on the scene at the same time *From Reverence to Rape. The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, by Molly Haskell. (\$11.50 cloth, Illustrated. 388 pp.).

Rather than review these items myself (being a mere male) I asked Joan Vinnall Cox to review the last item for *Cinema Canada*. Readers who are interested in reviews of the other books are directed to the New York Times Book Review/March 14, 1974.

Women & Film-La Femme & Le Film. International Festival 1973. (Notes) is still available from 4 Maitland St., Toronto M4Y 1C5 for 25¢. A magazine *Women & Film* is also available. Published in Berkeley California it is now preparing its fourth issue. Readers are also directed to *Take One's* special issue on women and film.

From Reverence to Rape

The Treatment of Women in the Movies by Molly Haskell — Holt, Rinehart & Winston

As a social critic from another country often perceives the idiosyncrasies and basic premises of a society more clearly than a native, so Haskell's voyaging through the almost exclusively male territory of film-making and film criticism has a richness and novelty of perceived truth that is almost frightening. It will certainly be disparaged by those who need to cling to the security blankets of traditional cultural values — those who still function in the Elizabethan view of the ordered Cosmos — who posit, as Haskell mentions, "God, Man, Woman, and Child in descending order of importance". It may antagonize doctrinaire feminists for Haskell is nothing if not unconventional in her feminism. The quality that makes Haskell a critic of significance and her book an important one is the way she goes far beyond feminism to a sense of film as the most complex and most simple of arts. "I consider myself a film critic first and a feminist second . . . I feel an obligation to the wholeness and complexity of film history" she says and this attitude, plus Haskell's scholarship make *From Reverence to Rape* essential reading for film devotees. Her basic conception of film is as both art and fantasy, that is, as a combination of skilfully crafted portions that create a whole greater than its parts and as the most viscerally evocative art form humanity has yet created.

From Reverence to Rape is divided into eight sections and an introduction. The seven sections entitled, "The Twenties", "The Thirties", "The Women's Film", "The Forties", "The Fifties", "The Europeans", and "The Last Decade" flesh out her ideas. These contain impressive and entertaining expansions and documentations of her basic thesis. Her knowledge of movies is formidable.

The bones, the basic concepts, are in the introduction and

the section titled, "The Big Lie". Here is where Haskell's insight proves most valuable. She comprehends and clearly delineates the complex relationships of director, author, star, studio, sociology and history that unite to produce the incandescent, or sometimes less brilliant, results. Carole Lombard, as Haskell says, was "at the right studio at the wrong time, and others, like Marilyn Monroe, were at the wrong studio at the right time. If Lombard, a classy Paramount comedienne in a decade of oversupply, had been at the same studio in the forties instead, her wistfully zany style might have been turned to better advantage by directors like Preston Sturges and Billy Wilder. Conversely with Monroe (who was nothing if not fifties), at a studio other than Fox . . . her image might have taken on the spiritual contours of a real woman (as Harlow's did) instead of constricting into a joke".

She refers also to the total difference of the performances of Bogey and Bacall when they work with different directors. *To Have and Have Not* by Hawks presents a very different Bacall from John Huston's *Key Largo*. The difference, Haskell suggests, comes more from the directors' attitudes toward women, men, and the use of the action genre. "With Hawks' characters, we watch people behave better, rather than worse, than we do, people who are still struggling with a superego; in the case of Huston and most modern filmmakers, we come out of the theatre feeling we have a slight edge in grace and sanity over the characters in the movie." This differentiation applies particularly to women. As Haskell says, "whether in the European or the American film, whether seen as sociological artifact or artistic creation, women, by the logistics of film production and the laws of Western society, generally emerge as the projections of male values."

Haskell does fall down somewhat. "The Big Lie" is bristling full of thought-provoking concepts but unless one understands some of the forces behind the use of the images of women in art (as H. R. Hays describes so lucidly in *The Dangerous Sex*) it is too big a mouthful for one gulp. Haskell has almost used a shorthand of the steps behind the feminist viewpoint despite substantially documenting the factual reasons for her occasionally difficult-to-follow perceptions.

Initially, Haskell examines the emotional, the visceral, responses of the audience and/or critic to the stars. The reaction to the star is distinctly different depending on your chemistry. She quotes the gushing and less than critical reviews of some (male) critics on their favourite actresses and mentions Andrew Harris' eighty-five viewings of Vivien Leigh in *That Hamilton Woman*. This is not, as Haskell is aware, a critical response to acting ability.

Some sex reactions, however, have quite a different basis. Here the choice of favourites tends to be controlled by a psychologically based identification-process. As different men respond differently to the images of John Wayne and Cary Grant, so the choice between Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburn is weighted for women. To complicate the study even more, we are blessed with selective memory — we remember certain images and scenes that impress us and forget others. We see, as Haskell notes, "Bette Davis surrender her independence at the altar in *June Bride* but we remember her "as the aggressive reporter and sometime-bitch".

Haskell speaks passionately from the female viewpoint but she never sinks into self-indulgence. Her passion infuses but doesn't overwhelm her ideas. She knows from experience strained through the mesh of intelligent examination the effect of and the use of woman as a symbol, that is as an icon of social mores and social structure. In a society where sexual

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activity is "the supreme defining quality of the self" if you are female; the movies document these attitudes and narrow the definition of women's roles to the virgin "a primal, positive figure, honoured and exalted beyond any merits she possessed as a woman" and "the whore, Americanized into the good-bad girl . . . publically castigated and cautioned against — and privately sought by men." Men especially should be grateful to be given this glimpse through eyes that have been forced to sort out the paradoxes of an existence based on widely different symbols and reality.

The male stereotypes are simple, straight-forward and active. All complexities, mysteries and fear-evoking concepts have accrued to the stereotypes of women. Haskell also examines these images of women as a function of historical sociology and takes some pot-shots at ideological feminist interpretations. "A soapbox feminist can excoriate Hitchcock in *The New York Times* for the rape in *Frenzy*, ignoring point of view, context, style, the complex interplay of misogyny and sympathy in Hitchcock and the equally complex interplay of fear and desire by which women respond to the image of rape."

The final page of "The Big Lie" is the clearest, most concentrated classification of the images of women various directors project that I have ever encountered. It is a book so rich and complex that it demands not just one, but many readings.

A lot can happen before you get it in the can

Your casting is perfect, your cameraman the best around, all is ready to shoot . . . then your lead breaks his leg or your film stock is faulty or the weather turns bad or the lab messes up and you're in trouble . . . But that's the film game, isn't it? It is, unless you play it smart and protect yourself

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Let's discuss it.

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