

## Obzor

## Something Big This Way Comes

Sheldon Hall – Steve Neale, *Epics, Spectacles and Blockbusters: A Hollywood History*.

Detroit: Wayne State University Press 2010, 363 stran.

The recent publication of a major piece of scholarship like Sheldon Hall and Steve Neale's *Epics, Spectacles and Blockbusters: A Hollywood History* serves as a timely reminder of the huge amount of research that needs to be conducted when it comes to unravelling the complex activities of the companies that comprise the ever-shifting contours of the American film industry. For, at a point in time at which research-driven industry-focused Hollywood historiography has become, to some extent, marginalized in Anglophone Academia, yet still sees its findings cited routinely in film scholarship of various other stripes, *Epics, Spectacles and Blockbusters* blows out of the water two emergent myths that have been gaining considerable power in film studies circles. First, is debunked the fallacy that the "Hollywood story" already has been told in full. Also dunked is the equally misguided notion that a reading of Kristen Thompson and David Bordwell's textbook *Film History: An Introduction* (wonderfully informative as it is), combined with the ability to recall industry publicity rhetoric that is circulated through popular media channels, suffices to make an expert on Hollywood history.<sup>1)</sup>

By chronicling the changing production, distribution, and exhibition strategies employed to bring to American audiences, what the book describes as, "large scale, high-cost" motion pictures, and by combing analysis of primary archival documentation and of secondary sources such as trade and popular press coverage, *Epics, Spectacles and Blockbusters* provides, what is, to date, the most comprehensive account of the shifting and complex character of big-budget movies and the economic logic and commercial strategies that have been employed to maximize the profitability of this high-risk business activity. The scope of the book is inclusive, beginning with the dawn of commercial film distribution in 1894 and concluding over a century later with discussion of the release of the biggest hit of the twenty first century, James Cameron's *AVATAR* (2009). Developments that unfolded across the 115 years that separated these landmark events are presented across eleven chronologically ordered chapters, each of which is divided into sub-sections that deal with key trends and case-studies of particularly influential films and important paradigm shifts that took place during the respective periods being covered.

The richness, depth, and detail of Hall and Neale's contribution to Wayne State University Press' ongoing "Contemporary Film and Television Series" is such that it requires multiple readings truly to appreciate its contribution to American film historiography and to understandings of American film history, chronicling, as it does, across a long time scale, a wide range of events and shifts –

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1) Kristin Thompson – David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill 2009.

many of which will be largely unknown to even experts on the particular eras in which they took place or unfolded. Accordingly, mapping briefly the content of the book must come with an apologetic caveat regarding those fascinating and important aspects that go unmentioned. Thus, the book begins by focusing on the bill-topping shorts of early cinema; the attention-grabbing boxing films and passion plays that were major draws in the cities, towns, and nickelodeons around which they were moved. From there the advent of multi-reel feature film and the emergence of roadshow epics are examined through case-studies of Italian-made imports such as *QUO VADIS!* (1912), and their American counterparts, most notably the films of D. W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille – *BIRTH OF A NATION* (1915), *JOAN THE WOMAN*, and *INTOLERANCE* (both 1916). Close attention is paid in chapter three to what were known in their day as “Superspecials”; lavish, budget-busting productions of a longer than average duration exemplified by the epic westerns and epic war films of the mid-to-late 1920s. Chapter four summarizes the roles technology played in the first thirty-five years of high-end movie-making and exhibition, as it looks at colouring processes, large and wide screens and, of course, sound, the widespread use of which is examined in chapter five, as Hall and Neale show how musicals and animated features played key roles in Hollywood’s depression-era operations. Chapter six concentrates on the war- and post-war years, with an examination of the distribution of *GONE WITH THE WIND* (1939) – in real terms still, by a wide margin, Hollywood’s highest ever earner – occupying, unsurprisingly, a key place in the chapter. Hollywood’s response to the Paramount decrees is the subject of the next chapter, as the commercial forces behind, and the aesthetic influences of, updated technologies including 3D and widescreen are scrutinized by way of discussion of such films as *HOUSE OF WAX* (1953), *AROUND THE WORLD IN EIGHTY DAYS* (1956), and *BEN HUR* (1959). What Hall elsewhere has dubbed the „Roadshow-era“<sup>2)</sup> is the focus of chapter eight, in which historical epics including *SPARTACUS* (1960) are discussed alongside lavish musicals à la *THE SOUND OF MUSIC* (1964). The industry turmoil brought about by the unprofitability of other films of this sort, Hollywood’s subsequent turn to youth-market fare like *THE GRADUATE* (1967), literary adaptations like *THE GODFATHER* (1972), disaster films like *THE POSEIDON ADVENTURE* (1972), and prestige horror – 1973’s *THE EXORCIST* and 1975’s *JAWS* – as well as the shift away from roadshowing to saturation releases are investigated in chapter nine. Moving into the “Super blockbuster” era of 1976–1985, Hall and Neale’s tenth chapter splits its focus between heavily marketed musical films such as *A STAR IS BORN* (1976), special effects driven science fiction films in the vein of *STAR WARS* (1977), and prestige dramas like *THE DEER HUNTER* (1978). The final chapter brings us up-to-date with a summary of the last quarter of a century of top-line film product, as issues of globalization, synergy, and digitalization take centre-stage amid discussion of the rise of independently produced and released blockbuster hits such as *PLATOON* (1986), major studio epics like *DANCES WITH WOLVES* (1990) and digitally enhanced product like the new *STAR WARS* trilogy (1999–2005).

One could be critical of *Epics, Spectacles and Blockbusters* based on its lack of an overarching argument, but that would seem to miss the point of the book. Hall and Neale’s approach is one that embraces the contradictions and differences in play at any particular historical juncture, reflecting the multi-dimensional character of their subject and the periods of time they examine rather than cherry-picking those examples which support neat yet simplified patterns. As a consequence,

2) Sheldon Hall, Tall Revenue Features: the Genealogy of the Modern Blockbuster. In: Steve Neale (ed.), *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*. London: BFI 2002.

reductive notions of epochal breaks and era-defining moments that have posited a break between roadshowing and saturation releases at the moment of JAWS' release in 1975 are revealed to be highly misleading as Hall and Neale detail that these two methods of distributing and exhibiting high-cost film have both been part of industry conduct for much of the last hundred years. Similarly, the prevalent notion that, what we today would call, calculated blockbusters, are invariably mindless thematically impoverished showcases for spectacle and excess is also challenged, as is the equally reductive notion that such films are invariably flashy genre product aimed at narcotized hordes of teenagers and easily-satisfied children. Similarly, the fallacy that budget-busting films are a wholly American phenomenon is revealed to be inaccurate. With *Epics, Spectacles and Blockbuster*, two of the UK's leading historians of the American film industry have produced an intimidatingly well researched, well organised, and well written account of the high-end product of the American film industry, one which revises existing accounts and which will provide an invaluable resource for scholars who are invested in shedding new light on the most powerful movie business on the planet, as well as those who wish to draw upon their findings.

Invariably, *Epics, Spectacles and Blockbusters* reflects something of the scholarly backgrounds of its writers, with Neale's background as one of the godfathers of film genre theory and study leading to the book's strong focus on film types,<sup>3)</sup> and the book's emphasis on distribution/exhibition patterns reflecting a prominent strand in Hall's previous output.<sup>4)</sup> And, while by no means a criticism, the emphasis placed on these threads may mean that readers looking to see significant new light shed on the roles stars, corporate personnel, and filmmakers have played historically in big-budget films might need to look elsewhere. While the phrase „more work needs to be done“ has, as Jason Mittell so wisely pointed out,<sup>5)</sup> become a somewhat ubiquitous and hallow statement in the conclusions to scholarly writings, *Epics, Spectacles and Blockbusters* demonstrates that the phrase still holds true with respect to exploring and to understanding the history of the American film industry. In much the same way as Neale and Hall go about making important correctives to our understandings of the production, distribution, and exhibition of high-cost film, so too has the time come to re-approach lower cost areas of Hollywood's repertoire, as well as that of the various independents that have operated in the shadow of the majors over the years. The enormity of such a project, or, more accurately, projects, cannot be underestimated and becomes readily apparent when one takes the time simply to skip through the pages of a leading trade paper like *Variety* only to be confronted by a seemingly unstoppable avalanche of “lost” patterns, trends, developments, and events. Coming close to a decade after the release of the last volumes in Schribner/University of California's series of silver-covered “History of the American Cinema” encyclopaedia,<sup>6)</sup> *Epics, Spectacles and Blockbusters* hopefully will lead the way in re-invigorating

3) See for example, Steve Neale, Questions of Genre. *Screen* 31, (1990), č. 1, s. 45–66; týž, Melo Talk: On the Meaning of Use of the Term „Melodrama“ in the American Trade Press. *The Velvet Light Trap* 32 (1993), s. 66–89. týž, *Genre and Hollywood*. London: Routledge 2000.

4) Např. Sheldon Hall, Tall Revenue Features; týž, *Zulu: With Some Guts Behind It – The Making of the Epic Movie*. Sheffield: Tomahawk Press 2005.

5) Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons*. New York: Routledge 2004.

6) Charles Musser, *The Emergence of The American Cinema: The American Screen to 1907 (History of the American Cinema, Volume 1)*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1990; Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907–1915 (History of the American Cinema, Volume 2)*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1990; Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915–1928 (History of the American Cinema, Volume 3)*. Berkeley: University of

historical research into the American movie business, encouraging other scholars not only to question the cornerstones of contemporary understanding in the area but prompting them to illuminate the countless areas that have fallen victim to the selective traditions that unavoidably are a product of scholarly endeavour but which point to the fact that when it comes to American film history much new work does genuinely need to be done.

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California Press 1994; Donald C r a f t o n, *The Talkies: American Cinema's Transition to Sound, 1926–1931 (History of the American Cinema, Volume 4)*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1999; Tino B a l i o, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930–1939 (History of the American Cinema, Volume 5)*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1993; Thomas S c h a t z, *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s (History of the American Cinema, Volume 6)*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1999; Peter L e v, *The Fifties: Transforming the Screen, 1950–1959 (History of the American Cinema, Volume 7)*. Berkeley: University of California Press 2003; Paul M o n a c o, *The Sixties, 1960–1968 (History of the American Cinema, Volume 8)*. Berkeley: University of California Press 2001; David A. C o o k, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970–1979 (History of the American Cinema, Volume 9)*. Berkeley: University of California Press 2000; Stephen P r i n c e, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood under the Electric Rainbow, 1980–1989 (History of the American Cinema, Volume 10)*. Berkeley: University of California Press 2000.