

James Harvey. *Movie Love in the Fifties*.
Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2001.

Hollywood: A State of Reaction

Participation in a world war influenced the way Americans viewed their daily lives. Although the Allied Forces destroyed the Nazi party, the ever present threat of the new enemy, Communism, loomed in the back of many American minds. This age of political awareness triggered a shift in how Americans regarded their entertainment. The medium of film which had bloomed in the glamorous eras of the thirties and forties experienced its own metamorphosis from prewar glitz to postwar realism. Americans seemed less interested in the fluff of the past and more in the authenticity of the here and now. The films of the late forties and fifties evolved around this idea of realism and ran with it, constantly struggling to maintain the standards set by the American public but not always succeeding.

James Harvey explores Hollywood's reaction to this public demand by examining the films produced throughout this postwar era through the end of the fifties. During this time, the huge power studios lost ground and grasped at a market rapidly dissipating with the birth of a new medium, television. The American audience forced studios to comply with their specific needs. The people wanted realism. The studios produced realism, often failing to restrain themselves from forcing the subject and, in the end, losing their audience anyway.

Harvey divides the work into four sections: women, men, movies and moviemakers. His passion, however, clearly belongs with the women. His description of the great femme fatales of the forties is marked with a zeal lacking in the other three sections. His anger at the "dumbing down of the American heroine" (59) is clear and unrelenting. Apparently a feminist, the author praises the strength of early postwar heroines and berates the frailty of the "Doris Day on

lithium” anti-fatales of the mid to late fifties. He laments the success of Marilyn Monroe at the expense of her self-respect. It seems as though, according to the author, the American public needed the “reality” of male strength over female strength in the aftermath of war. Americans needed to feel protected from the enemy of afar and apparently needed to see that in the form of male domination and power.

It is interesting that Harvey analyzes the men of the postwar film with slightly less excitement than the women. The men, of course, stepped up to the plate and provided America with the astute maleness they demanded. Just hearing their names evokes the American male template in our minds even today - Brando, Dean and Newman. The author emphasizes that America needed male heroes after the war to bring a sense of comfort and protection into their daily lives. Consequently, Hollywood provided them. The writer sees the elevation of men over women in films necessary to the American public. He asserts, “Women . . . inspired too much ambivalence; the quality that makes them ‘starry’ can also make the audience nervous about them in the end” (122). The Brandos and Deans provided America with a symbol of all that was “strong and reliable and solid” (122). Security became more important to the American public than the excitement and danger present in the film noir movies of the early forties.

The men of postwar film exuded a trend that became important to the American audience, the fear of the phony. Americans wanted to have real heroes, not men who were “acting” like heroes. Brando and Dean both evoked this feeling in people. They constantly apologized for their acting inability and questioned their own success because of this inability. This, a new phenomenon developed – the Method formula. Actors wanted to appease the public by not displaying a sense of acting on screen but by portraying a real, and not a stage, persona. According to Harvey, this revolution continues today. We see it in the performances of actors like Pacino, Nicholson and DeNiro.

Harvey states that the demand for realism and the decline of unrealistic movies like the film noirs and their femme fatales provided a substantial stage for the method movies that ruled the American cinema in the fifties. The “anti-generic” (141) motivation behind these films became a standard in Hollywood because of their dedication to not becoming a standard. The public quickly condemned the method movies that came across as method movies, complaining they lost their sense of reality by attempting this sort of realism. According to the author, it is this irony that set the method movie up to fail.

The American public strung along Hollywood movie studios during the fifties. Harvey cites Nicholas Ray’s *Bitter Victory*, one of the late fifties’ war movies, as a prime example of America’s control and fickleness. The demand for reality hit a little too close to home in this film that portrayed the war from a more neutral standpoint. Ray proposed the unimaginable – that our violence might just equate the contemptibility of *their* violence. This movie suggested a first, “that command [of an army] as a personal situation [for the commander] had its personal advantage” (194). The American public flinched at this insinuation and subsequently shunned the film for the same realism they demanded of it.

The movies of the fifties reflected Americans’ reactions to a worldwide abhorration – war. According to Harvey, “The war was the big even we had grown up with” (216); and believing in our own “national innocence” (216) became important. This desire to prove something to ourselves launched a more specific type of reactionary film – this one involving civil rights of black Americans. From *Home of the Brave* (1949) to *Imitation of Life* (1957), these movies put the issue of civil rights in the faces of Americans young and old. The writer neglects these movies for the most part, only giving them a mention in a couple of chapters. This is unfortunate for a critique of postwar cinema, but perhaps a decision that kept the book on its original course. Civil rights touched on a realism of which the American public was still wary.

Harvey astutely reflects on a time in American cinema where the public was more in charge of film content than any other time in cinematic history. By analyzing dozens of pre and postwar American films, he determined that Americans became quite demanding after the war, knowing what they did and did not want to see. For them, realism emerged as their genre of choice; and the studios granted them this one postwar wish basically because American audiences forced their hand. Movies suffered the competition of television in the fifties and had to adapt. While television concentrated on an idealized postwar America, a higher standard became expected of films. Harvey adequately relates this give and take between movie studios and the American audience. His sources remain the movies that evidence his assertions about the heroines of the day and the heroes that protect us from daily harm. The author does not use the criticism of others or any political documentation to prove his theory that, after WWII, Americans demanded a certain kind of cinematic escape. He verifies his assertions with the only proof necessary, the box office hits we still recognize today.

Harvey carries his thesis consistently, with several tangents here and there but nothing detrimental, through four hundred pages and proves his point. He could have, however, successfully proven his point in less than two hundred pages, but we cannot fault him for his obvious love of the movies he describes in such excruciating detail. It is this love of the details that makes Harvey's critiques of American films in the fifties real to an audience reading about them in the twenty-first century. In the years since the world wars, film has taken on a decidedly different tone. The advent of science fiction films and fantasy films like *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Harry Potter* made the American people appreciate the surreal and allowed for an escape from the daily grind, not the embracing of it that Harvey's audiences of the fifties required.