

Journal of American Studies, 50 (2016), e9. doi:10.1017/S0021875815002534
Graham Cassano, *A New Kind of Public: Community, Solidarity, and Political Economy in New Deal Cinema, 1935-1948* (Boston: Brill, 2014, \$28.00). Pp. 215.
ISBN 978 9 0042 7519 5

Published online by Cambridge University Press: 1 February 2016

http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0021875815002534

Book review by Mark Wheeler

Graham Cassano's book contends that a new type of American audience was sought out by Hollywood filmmakers in the 1930s and 1940s. He argues that this reconfigured United States "public" had emerged from the governmental intervention of the New Deal, the inequities of the Great Depression and the radicalization of working-class consciousnesses. Most especially, the proletarian values of such a politically aware audience had been advanced by the anti-Fascist Popular Front movement and by the tectonic labour struggles that occurred between the US workforce and the reactionary capitalist elite. Therefore this radicalized public was receptive to a range of films that would critically investigate the causes of the Depression. Moreover, these filmic narratives, by propagating new types of political community, provided an alternative discourse to the mainstream representations of the economic calamity.

To construct this thesis, Cassano employs a set of analytical tools drawn from Marxist critical theory. He demonstrates how the films' narratives affected a symbolic conflict between a dominant class ideology and a radical vision of proletarian solidarity. In this respect, Cassano rejects the functionalist arguments of Adorno and Horkheimer which focussed on the dominant power of capitalist practices. He argues that such a deterministic approach fails to consider the contingencies of history and ignores the spaces for political contestation. Instead, he contends that the tensions and contradictions within the Hollywood cultural apparatus can be more fully appreciated through an interpellative interpretation in which the popular demands for a new type of a political economy intersected with the calls for a greater degree of social justice.

Consequently, Cassano deploys a post-structuralist analysis to explain the "New Kind of Public's" working-class solidarity and receptiveness to the radical potential of the films that come under his critical consideration. He shows how, in movies including *Black Fury* (1935), *Riff-Raff* (1936), *My Man Godfrey* (1936) and *Swing Time* (1936), the issues of dispossession, exploitation and inequality were explicitly addressed. Most especially, he provides a detailed analysis of several Ginger Rogers star vehicles and considers the work of the preeminent "auteur" of the era, John Ford, with reference to films such as *The Hurricane* (1937) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). Throughout Cassano's analysis, he contends that these films both refracted and infused working-class identities amongst US audiences to provide an anticapitalist response to the dislocations inaugurated by the Great Depression. Most especially, he applies the British Marxist historian E. P. Thompson's concept of "radical traditionalism" to Ford's films to explain how they were remade by their times and contributed to the formation of a proletarian consciousness. However, in concluding that these forms of solidarity were qualified by such a symbolic form of traditionalism, Cassano contends that the opportunities for real change remained transitory. Moreover, he indicates how the legitimate articulation of the voices from a radical, politicized workforce would later be undermined by the inequities of the state-fuelled paranoia of the Cold War.

In developing a subaltern, Marxian approach to Hollywood films during the 1930s and 1940s Cassano provides a sophisticated analysis concerning the intersection between popular culture and political reform. There is much to admire in his solid grasp of the underlying causations concerning the economic, political and cultural relations within the New Deal era. In tandem, Cassano discusses the specific contingencies in the films themselves by including detailed analyses of their content in relation to the prevailing social conditions. Yet the book might have benefited from some greater commentary upon the interpellative relations between left- and right-wing actors within the Hollywood polity itself. For instance, in the 1930s the political divisions between Hollywood trade unionists and the moguls came to a head in relation to the labour struggles which occurred to ensure the legal recognition of the “abovethe-line” guilds and “below-the-line” craft unions in line with the 1935 National Labour Relations (Wagner) Act. Therefore it would have been useful to have known the extent to which these industrial tensions played themselves out in shaping the radical values which Cassano claims are evidenced within the films he surveys. Overall, however, Cassano’s monograph makes a significant contribution to film, media, cultural and historical studies as a conceptually informed critique of the some of the most compelling political fictions which emerged from Hollywood during its golden age.

Mark Wheeler
London Metropolitan University