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THE HISTORY & ART OF CINEMA

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Dangerous Dreams

Essays on American Film and Television

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Introduction

In the documentary *Celluloid Closet* (1995), actress Susan Sarandon said films are "important—and they're dangerous—because we're the keeper of the dreams." Her statement about the role of the film industry and the impact of individual productions is difficult to discount. Those drawn to this study already are convinced of the significance and impact of film and television texts on American culture; therefore, this collection of essays simply underscores the obvious: visual media hold a powerful sway. In short, the influence of popular culture on attitudes about class, ethnicity, gender, politics, race, religion, and sexual orientation cannot be overstated.

Part of the impact of film and television images occurs, of course, because of the one-on-one engagement that film and television viewers experience with the text. Even if we screen a television situation comedy or sports event in our living rooms with 20 others present, the experience is quintessentially individual. We watch the screen—expecting to be affected—and the actors appear to perform for and talk directly to us. "You go into a little dark room and become incredibly vulnerable," said Sarandon. "On one hand, all your perspectives can be challenged—you could feel something you couldn't feel normally. It can encourage you to be the protagonist in your own life. On the other hand, it can completely misshape you."

Dangerous Dreams: Essays on American Film and Television is the culmination of research that began in 1990. The single-authored collection employs aesthetic, feminist, historical, Marxist, psychoanalytic, semiological, and sociological criticism to explore five decades of film and television texts that have captivated audiences. From *Ordinary People* (1980) to *Shutter Island* (2010) and from *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962–1971) to *Men of a Certain Age* (2009–2011), the study is divided into four sections, each comprised of several chapters that explore the effects of narrative and visual texts. Sections include "The Influence of Literature on Film and Television"; "Portrayals of Class, Race, and Sexual Orientation"; "Portrayals of Class, Race, and Ethnicity"; and "Portrayals of Women in Film and Television."

Each section features first the most recent literary and media texts, followed by earlier ones with historical and sociological import.

The Influence of Literature on Film and Television

Section One features both the screenplays that were drawn from literature and the literature than enriches conversations about film and popular television programs. Instead of dealing with how a story is adapted into film in the tradition of studies such as *Now a Major Motion Picture: Film Adaptations of Literature and Drama* by Christine Geraghty, two of the chapters in Section One describe the original text and the film version without making aesthetic judgments. The other three chapters argue that themes inherent in literary classics such as short stories by Edgar Allan Poe and Flannery O'Connor or novels by Herman Melville, Robert Louis Stevenson, Thomas Hardy, and others inform the films that followed them and enrich the discussion of those films.

As noted, the chapters in each of four sections appear in reverse chronological order based upon the release dates of the films and television programs themselves. Section One includes both references to and in-depth analysis of films as diverse as *Shutter Island* (2010), *The Door in the Floor* (2004), *Secret Window* (2004), *Swimming Pool* (2003), *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988), *Masquerade* (1988), *Betrayed* (1988), *Criminal Law* (1988), *Black Widow* (1987), *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *No Way Out* (1987), *The Morning After* (1986), *Jagged Edge* (1985), *Betrayal* (1983), *Terms of Endearment* (1983), *Sophie's Choice* (1982), *Still of the Night* (1982), *On Golden Pond* (1981), and *Ordinary People* (1980). *Murder, She Wrote* (1984–1996) is the focus of the only chapter in the group that deals primarily with literature and television.

The first chapter, "*Shutter Island:* Martin Scorcese's Allegory of Despair," suggests that Martin Scorcese's 2010 film is not a horror film in the traditional sense. Instead, the dark and twisting hallways of a mental institution and the paths along the bluffs of the island represent the labyrinths of the human mind. With water that drips hauntingly on the stone walls of the hospital wards and an eerie light that illuminates the faces of those trapped within, *Shutter Island* elicits a different kind of terror.

Reminiscent of the endlessly twisting tunnels of Franz Kafka's *The Trial,* the dank catacombs of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado," and the evocative bell tower of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo,* the images that characterize both the novel by Dennis Lehane and the film include barbed wire fences, a cemetery, jagged cliffs, and a Civil War fortress that stands

watch over the resplendent (and incongruous) flower gardens below. Drawing us into a microcosm of human cruelty and depravity, Scorcese creates an allegory of despair.

Although the film is drawn from a novel by the same name, the thematic center of the chapter that follows "*Shutter Island:* Martin Scorsese's Allegory of Despair" does not address the literature that inspired particular films but focuses upon the role of the narrative voice in the films themselves. Acknowledging that the intimate connection between authors and their works has always captivated readers, "When Fiction Becomes Reality: Authorial Voice in *The Door in the Floor, Secret Window,* and *Swimming Pool"* deals with the function of the imagination in storytelling, with the distinctions between genius and madness in the creative process, and with meta-fiction, or the way in which literary and visual texts about language and images comment upon themselves.

The three films in "When Fiction Becomes Reality" feature protagonists who have lost their way and who hope fiction will save them. Ted Cole (Jeff Bridges) considers himself "an entertainer of children," although his book *The Door in the Floor* is an exploration of the horrors that lie beneath us as we move unsuspectingly through life. Cole is dealing with the death of his sons and the dissolution of his marriage by escaping into alcohol, drawing, promiscuity, and writing. In the second film, *The Secret Window,* an accomplished writer named Morton Rainey (Johnny Depp) is accused of having plagiarized one of his stories, "Sowing Season." As he tries to unravel the mystery of authorship, he goes slowly mad. Finally, in *Swimming Pool,* Sarah Morton (Charlotte Rampling) struggles to produce a manuscript different from the mystery novel series that has earned her the respect of her publisher and her readers and ultimately blurs the lines between her own life and the lives of her characters.

The chapter in the section that deals with television is "The 'Very Simplicity of the Thing': Edgar Allan Poe, Jessica B. Fletcher, and *Murder, She Wrote,"* which explores similarities between Poe's detective stories and the formula behind the popular television show. The chapter identifies the central concern of Poe's semiologist C. Auguste Dupin and Jessica Fletcher (Angela Lansbury)—never to miss what Poe repeatedly calls in "The Purloined Letter" the "very simplicity of the thing." Also, each detective—although involved in an occupation that requires solitude—discusses each case with a close friend, thereby allowing the reader or viewer to keep pace with the discoveries; each detective compiles data after sorting through the accounts of multiple witnesses, irrelevant observations, and misleading signifiers; each detective is treated as if he or she were a bungler who—in spite of an established reputation—must earn the respect of the law enforcement

officials he or she seeks to help; and each detective attests repeatedly to his or her astute reading of people, who are the subtexts in the phenomenological nightmare of crimes and murders.

Poe's fantastical tales give way to the real life nightmares that afflicted the nation during the 1980s in "Changing Faces: Dr. Jekyll, Mr. Hyde, and Films of the 1980s." Faced with controversies involving Jim Bakker, Gary Hart, Oliver North, Jimmy Swaggart, and other military, political, and religious leaders, Americans were drawn to a succession of films that allowed them a temporary sense of control over their lives. Films featuring betrayal and human misperception either reassured moviegoers that they could spot fraud and deception when they encountered them or left them in a maelstrom of anxiety and doubt, mitigated by the fact that they were engaging fictional texts.

Films of the 1980s startled audiences by transforming and upending what they considered familiar. Both Flannery O'Connor and Vladimir Nabokov argue that one responsibility of an artist is to jolt readers into new understanding. "Changing Faces" focuses upon a literary prototype for duplicitous behavior—Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886)—and alludes to tales about villains, seductresses, rogues, and tricksters from the Bible to early American literature to music videos and song lyrics.

The final chapter in this portion of the collection is "Displaced People and the Frailty of Words: Communication in *Ordinary People, On Golden Pond,* and *Terms of Endearment*." The longing for words that will do justice to one's feelings and beliefs too often remains unsatisfied, as we discover through a brief study of problematic dialogue in *Ordinary People* (1980), *On Golden Pond* (1981), and *Terms of Endearment* (1983). In the conversations central to these films, parents and children are unable to hear one another when, for example, one of them addresses core relational issues and the other talks about the mundane. The chapter deals with the fabric of human conversation and the longing for understanding and connection in these three representative and immensely popular films.

The title of the chapter alludes to a short story by Flannery O'Connor entitled "The Displaced Person," a tale about an immigrant, a landowner, and a priest, all of whom struggle to deal with the failure of communication and with inevitable misunderstandings within a fictional text. When the stakes of missed communication are high—as in parent-child or romantic relationships—the failure is especially excruciating. A young man and his mother strain to reach one another in *Ordinary People;* a young woman desperately tries to understand her critical and withholding father in *On Golden Pond;* and a young woman in *Terms of Endearment* must address the emotional

chasm that lies between her and her self-protective son, between her and her philandering husband, and between her and her overly protective mother.

Portrayals of Class, Race, and Sexual Orientation

The second portion of the collection includes chapters about depictions of class, race, and sexual orientation and an analysis of how differences between us are portrayed in popular film. Texts are as varied as *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Rising Sun* (1993), *Come See the Paradise* (1991), *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991), *Pacific Heights* (1990), *Ski Patrol* (1990), *Black Rain* (1989), *Gung Ho* (1986), *Karate Kid II* (1986), and *The Color Purple* (1985).

The first chapter, "Working Man Blues: Images of the Cowboy in American Film," relies upon literary, regional, and sociological scholarship about the American West and challenges popular myths. The cowboy is a national treasure, a stereotype both embraced and reviled. Filmmakers, authors, and songwriters glorify him and appear to celebrate what he represents: manual labor, the raising of cattle for human consumption, and rural life. There is much to admire. The cowboy works hard, is loyal to his friends, lives close to the land, and depends upon animals for his identity as well as his livelihood. He represents freedom and stands in stark opposition to a settled, domesticated life. However, his self-sufficiency depends upon the seasons, upon the availability of employment, and upon the financial stability of those who pay his wages. In short, the cowboy is often isolated and poor, facts that are too often obliterated in the national obsession with legends about men who brand and herd cattle, chase outlaws, shield women and children from harm, and wield Colt revolvers. Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson are probably correct: mothers shouldn't let their babies grow up to be cowboys.

"Working Man Blues" emphasizes the labor that sustains the cowboy and the films that portray a more realistic—albeit still iconic—figure. Although it is impossible to discuss all of the films listed here, blue-collar cowboys appear prominently in these and other narratives: *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Little Big Man* (1970), *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), *Silverado* (1985), *The Milagro Beanfield War* (1988), *Young Guns* (1988), *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *Unforgiven* (1992), *Tombstone* (1993), *Legends of the Fall* (1994), and *Wyatt Earp* (1994). Others are *Lone Star* (1996), *The Missing* (2003), *Open Range* (2003), *An Unfinished Life* (2004), *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005), *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007), *3:10 to Yuma* (2007), *No Country for Old Men* (2007), *Appaloosa* (2008), and *True*

Grit (2010). Spanning five decades, these celebrated films have garnered numerous awards. Among them, *Dances with Wolves* was nominated for 12 Academy Awards and won seven; *Unforgiven* and *Brokeback Mountain* each were nominated for nine and won four.

The sheer number of films suggests that the Marlboro man is as much a part of the national psyche as Aunt Jemima and the Pillsbury Doughboy. Acknowledging the importance of the cowboy in American mythology, this study alludes to the romantic, realistic, and revisionist Westerns that have defined the American cowboy and analyzes two films that powerfully disrupt earlier portrayals—*Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *No Country for Old Men* (2007). Directors such as Ang Lee and the Coen brothers, respectively, both challenge and reify portrayals of the blue-collar cowboy and provide new understanding of a historical and significant national icon.

The next two chapters employ queer theory to better understand the gay experience in America. One of the films is set in the American West and challenges prevailing myths about masculinity; the other is set in the Deep South and explores historical and prevailing images of women. With the release of *The Kids Are All Right* (2010), Hollywood screenwriters, producers, and directors renewed their interest in the gay issues that were addressed in the documentary *The Celluloid Closet* (1993) decades before. *The Celluloid Closet* concludes with a compelling analysis of the contributions made by landmark films such as *Philadelphia* (1993), which casts Tom Hanks as an attorney dealing with AIDS. "From the Wilderness into the Closet: *Brokeback Mountain* and the Lost American Dream" deals with a film and the short story from which it is drawn and argues that we do *Brokeback Mountain* a disservice by calling it "the gay cowboy film." Both Annie Proulx's short story and the screenplay by Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana succeed for reasons that are largely unrelated to sexual orientation; in fact, class issues are equally as compelling for protagonists Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) and Ennis del Mar (Heath Ledger).

The short story and film succeed not only because they challenge preconceptions about gender identity but because they force us to contend with the fears and limitations that make our being able to choose a richer, more passionate, more imaginative life impossible. Chances for a rich, restorative, and expressive life in the Wyoming wilderness come to nothing; instead, in the final scene of the film one of the central characters stands silently in the closet of his trailer. *Brokeback Mountain* disturbs and unsettles us, not simply because it suggests that love between two men is as valid and as viable as love between a woman and a man but because it demands that we confront the lives we could have lived if we had crossed the invisible divides that separate us from ecstasy and the fulfillment of our deepest desires. Like

American literary classics such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby, Brokeback Mountain* demands that we consider the societal paradigms that help us to define ourselves at the same time that they limit, constrain, and often immobilize us.

Like the chapters about the literature and culture of the American South included in Section Three ("'American Life Is Rich in Lunacy': The Unsettling Social Commentary of *The Beverly Hillbillies"* and "Grits and Yokels Aplenty: Depictions of Southerners in Prime-Time Television"),"What Happened to Celie and Idgie?: 'Apparitional Lesbians' in American Film" deals with the historical and literary legacy of a region starkly different from the rest of the United States. The chapter is appropriate for this section because it features lesbian figures whom readers met in novels by Alice Walker and Fannie Flagg but who had in the film versions (perhaps not so mysteriously) all but disappeared. Relying heavily upon ideas introduced by scholars such as John Howard and Terry Castle, "What Happened to Celie and Idgie?" deals with lesbian characters in *The Color Purple* and *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* as they are portrayed in films by the same name. The chapter analyzes the relationships between Celie (Whoopi Goldberg) and Shug Avery (Margaret Avery) and Idgie (Mary Stuart Masterson) and Ruth Jamison (Mary-Louise Parker) and suggests ways that the screenwriters, producers, and directors transformed lesbian desire into friendships that were presumably more acceptable to the public. Substituting the romantic love in the novels with the near-platonic love in the films may ultimately, however, have made the subversive themes more obvious.

Following three chapters about the American West and the Deep South is "Litigating the Past: Portrayals of the Japanese in American Film," which addresses the legacy of World War II and United States internment camps and the impact of history on popular culture. It traces the hostility expressed by Japanese authors and politicians toward American workers and highlights responses by American filmmakers during the 1990s and beyond. Most recently, Clint Eastwood's *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima* again attempt to bridge the racial and ethnic divide. Misunderstandings and mistrust are inevitable in a society struggling to come to terms with the vestiges of World War II, the changing economic landscape, and the profound differences in customs between the two worlds. Films such as *Come See the Paradise, Karate Kid II*, and *Letters from Iwo Jima* are attempts to portray Japanese culture honestly, but they are only a beginning. In *Karate Kid II,* Noriyuki (Pat) Morita states: "Never stop war by taking part in one." The wounds from Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki remain.

Although only the final chapter in Section Two deals explicitly with race and ethnicity, the topic remains central to the third and fourth sections of *Dangerous Dreams*. In "Fatherhood, Fidelity, and Friendship: Owen Thoreau Jr. and *Men of a Certain Age"* and *"Frank's Place:* Coming Home to a Place We'd Never Been Before," for example, African-American and Latino issues again are addressed. Although issues of particular importance to gay audiences are central to the chapters about *The Color Purple, Fried Green Tomatoes,* and *Brokeback Mountain,* the fourth section of the collection addresses gender issues as they relate to straight women in chapters such as "The Lady Is (Still) a Tramp: Prime-Time Portrayals of Women Who Love Sex" and "From *Great Expectations* to *The Bachelor:* The Jilted Woman in Literature and Popular Culture." These chapters depend upon cultural icons in *The Golden Girls* (1985–1992), *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), *Desperate Housewives* (2004–2012), and other popular prime-time programming.

Portrayals of Class, Race, and Ethnicity

Section Three begins with "Fatherhood, Fidelity, and Friendship: Owen Thoreau Jr. and *Men of a Certain Age"* and *"Frank's Place:* Coming Home to a Place We'd Never Been Before," which feature African-American actors as fathers and business owners and which remained on the air only two years and one year, respectively. Along with "'American Life Is Rich in Lunacy': The Unsettling Social Commentary of *The Beverly Hillbillies"* and "Grits and Yokels Aplenty: Depictions of Southerners on Prime-Time Television," these chapters analyze the portrayal of middle- and working-class African Americans living in Southern California or New Orleans, poor whites transplanted from the Ozarks to Beverly Hills, and middle-class whites living in rural communities in the Deep South.

Men of a Certain Age (2009–2011) introduced three men nearing 50 in various stages of relationships and in pursuit of the American dream. One owns his business and is divorced and a father of two. Another is single and struggles with career choices. A third works for his father and deals with the demands of marriage and three young children. All rely upon one another and meet regularly; in this way, they mimic the friendships made famous by *The Golden Girls* and *Sex and the City*.

Owen Thoreau Jr. (Andre Braugher)—the heavyset African American whose father calls him "an embarrassment" but who is adored by his wife and children—is at the center of "Fatherhood, Fidelity, and Friendship." Relying heavily upon studies such as *The Myth of the Missing Black Father,*