

J. Hoberman.

The Magic Hour: Film at Fin de Siecle.

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Entertainment Jamboree

According to cinemaphotographers, the “magic hour” occurs just before dusk and bathes everything in a special, late afternoon lustre. It’s an apposite image for J. Hoberman, the senior film critic of the *Village Voice*, because, despite his hyperactive outlook, he is a late afternoon man at heart, singing the song of a falling world.

For Hoberman, films as they were understood in the last century, with what he sees as their balance between “modern and mass appeal”, are no longer specific cultural artefacts. Instead, they are turning into just one more ingredient in the virtual reality soup. The distinctions between the product and the hype surrounding it are breaking down. Everything is merely a reflection of everything else, and even politicians are joining the entertainment jamboree.

This book is a collection of journalism taken from Hoberman’s work during the 1990s, so these points are made only in passing and in two extended essays at the beginning and the end. Otherwise, it’s a themed kaleidoscope of reviews (Hollywood and international film), longer meditations on the relationship between film and history, and articles tracing how the Clinton years contributed to the development of the “Entertainment State”.

As so often with collections of journalism, the effect is both too fragmented and too breathless. These pieces were designed to be hand grenades of language tossed into the lap of the easily distracted newspaper reader. Transposed to a book, they still thunder and explode, but they are a little too energetic for one package.

Nevertheless, this is an outstanding achievement, compelling, in fact. One of the main sources of fascination is Hoberman’s ability to convince you of the significance of films that you had previously dismissed as junk. Often this significance lies in the context rather than in the show itself. For example, he sees *Star Wars: Episode One – The Phantom Menace* as a perfect instance of the new virtual hall of mirrors. The point of the film was the audience’s relationship with the advance publicity, not the lumbering bore that eventually crept on screen: “*The Phantom Menace* is simply a billboard for itself. Anyone who sees it will be experiencing it for the second time. The hype was not about the movie; it was the movie.” Likewise, *Jaws* was a Disneyland of the mind, reflecting, and contributing to, the nightmare quality of the United States in the Seventies.

At times, this enthusiasm for all things post-modern can lead to a souped-up style, which is too inflated for the content. *Starship Troopers*, we are informed, offers “the visceral excitement of all-out, hand-to-tendrill interspecies warfare – most spectacularly in the sensationally animated, artfully corpse-splattered, nerve-wracking attacks of the scuttling, screaming crustacean-spider hordes”. Steady on, Hoberman. Adjectives don’t grow on trees.

The writing does steady, in fact, when the film under discussion is straightforward art house. There is an excellent article, for instance, on Terence Davies’s *The Long Day Closes*, excellent not just because of its insights (“For Davies, the projected shaft of light is a divine form of radiance”), but because, as a journalist, the writer had the gumption to realise that it was a noteworthy film that *Village Voice* readers should make sure they see. Also, he has a sharp eye for nonsense. The article on *Eyes Wide Shut*, in particular, is a subtle demolition job on the inflated reputation of Stanley Kubrick.

The shifts in tone and outlook indicate a tension that lies within the whole book. On the one hand, Hoberman is half in love with what Raymond Durgnant called “the wedding of poetry and pulp”, the kind of filmmaking that made Quentin Tarantino the darling of the Nineties. On the other hand, he has a traditional taste for films that leave out the pulp and concentrate on the poetry. Some of the best reviews concern visionary work like Jim Jarmusch’s *Dead Man* or Alexander Sokurov’s *Mother and Son*.

These two impulses exist in perfect proportion in some of Hoberman’s historical essays. His investigation into the decline of the western, for example, is a terse, eloquent gem, holding together history, politics and culture in a confident grasp. He is wonderful, too, on 1950s television, on the *Twenty-One* quiz show scandal that was the inspiration for Robert Redford’s film, and on *Point of Order*, a compilation of McCarthy TV footage. The barnstorming of these sessions, Hoberman argues, which were watched by a wrapt nation, “demonstrates the way that television inevitably recasts news as entertainment, subsumes politics into personality, elevates anecdote to history, and in the final analysis, substitutes its own flickering image for collective memory”.

This is first rate writing, and first rate journalism. Indeed, Hoberman’s strengths are journalistic: you can imagine a whole academic book being spun from that one sentence. Yet his qualities aren’t simply a matter of brevity; there is the nature of his outlook, too. Like a good reporter, he doesn’t just study his material; he lets it happen to him; he writes as if he had experienced a sudden rush of caffeine, or a pang of loss, and was compelled to tell you what it was like. In this sense, he is as good in his way as James Agee, another

writer who is so gripped by moving images, so eager for them to be better, that his style threatens to overheat with the effort of communicating the message.

Depressingly, Hoberman's final essay suggests that the game might be up for this kind of criticism. If films aren't films as we used to understand them, he says, then we have to find new ways, using the language of the medium itself, to tackle the problems of "total film". He has a point, but it would be a shame if the great American tradition of film criticism went the way of Francis X. Bushman and Mary Miles Minter. *The Magic Hour* can infuriate and exhaust, but, for all that, it's the best film book to have come my way since, well, the end of the last century.

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