

The Hollywood Studio System: A History. By *Douglas Gomery*. London: British Film Institute, 2006. vii + 333 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, photographs. Cloth, \$27.95. ISBN: 1-844-57064-9.

Reviewed by Eric Schaefer

The Hollywood studio system's fortunes have changed greatly over time. In its heyday during the 1930s and 1940s, it occupied the same status as a widget factory, churning out a uniform product on a predictable timetable. By the 1960s, critics regarded it as an obstacle around which independent-minded directors had to navigate deftly in order to bring their distinctive cinematic visions to the screen. Since the late 1970s, film historians have adopted another perspective, reframing the system as a delicate balance between commerce and art. Douglas Gomery's *Hollywood Studio System* began life as a trim volume published in 1986, at a time when studies of the studio system were reaching maturity. In that form, its pithy studio histories, useful tables, and succinct detailing of facts provided a handy overview of an industry during its golden age. Twenty years later, the author has revised and expanded the book, bringing his account of the studios up to the present. Curiously, his approach is very much rooted in the past. In 1985 Gomery coauthored, with Robert C. Allen, the influential *Film History: Theory and Practice*, which stressed the use of primary sources. In that book, they advocated "realist" history, an approach that is less concerned with an event itself than with the cause of the event, and that recognizes complexity in the historical explanation of any phenomenon, including "the movies." In its new form, *The Hollywood Studio System* hardly deals in complexity; instead it largely promotes the thesis that the studio system depended on a small group of visionary executives.

In almost every respect, the book is a throwback to "great man" historiography. In exploring who owned and controlled the corporations that made movies and analyzing their economic conduct, Gomery claims to employ "industrial analysis" as an antidote to scholarship that focuses on "mid-level executives," who, he contends, had no "true" power (p. 3). He chides scholars for substituting "one auteur (the producer) for another (the director) when actually the studios were run by leaders so little known that their names were often misspelled" (p. 3). But Gomery is equally guilty of performing a

switcheroo, nominating studio heads like Adolph Zukor of Paramount, Nick Schenck of MGM, and Lew Wasserman of MCA/Universal as the new heroes of the system. Perhaps it's not surprising to find this volume giving credit for almost every innovation and accomplishment to these largely invisible executives. We live in an era of chief-executive stars like Jack Welch, Bill Gates, and Meg Whitman. Just as the chief executive of the nation is likely to get the credit, or the blame, for every triumph or failure on his watch, so, analogously, the chief executive of a company receives praise or censure according to his firm's prosperity or decline. Kenneth Lay, Dennis Kozlowski, and Bernie Evers serve as symbols of miscalculation and greed, the dark counterparts of people like Welch, Gates, and Whitman. If nothing else, the revision of *The Hollywood Studio System* is a product of its time.

What Gomery has lost sight of is the fact that the Hollywood studios constitute a *system*, in which power and authority are exercised at various levels. The closer an individual is to the final product—the films or television shows—the greater the influence he or she has on it. Gomery never succeeds in linking the upper-echelon executives to that final product. Throughout the book, he often claims that an executive had “final say” on any number of issues, although the nature of that “final say” is never explored. Does it involve active decision-making? Or does it represent rubber-stamping decisions made by subordinates? In discussing *Casablanca* (1942), for example, Gomery asserts that “all decisions [were] approved by Harry Warner” (p. 137). But he drops Warner Bros. Pictures from his account of the film's production and is ultimately forced to admit that the movie “was the result then of the collaboration of the best instincts of a large group of talented and diverse people” (p. 139).

Gomery is so committed to valorizing the executives that he often skews his facts to bolster his position. For instance, he writes, “Scholars do not care that Warners [*sic*] lacked financial success. Instead, they typecast it; they see it as a studio with personality.” He contends that Harry Warner hated the company's social exposés, such as *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932), and gangster films, such as *Public Enemy* (1931), because they contributed to the studio's \$30 million losses, and he holds that Warner Bros. much preferred the “star-laden conventional genre films,” such as *The Bride Came C.O.D.* (1941), *Christmas in Connecticut* (1945), and *Johnny Belinda* (1948)

(p. 130). Yet Warner Bros., like every studio except MGM, faced crippling losses during the Great Depression. The films that Gomery claims were failures during the 1930s must be considered successful: they made money despite the dismal economic climate in which they were released. Those films that Gomery singles out as box-office winners were issued during the wartime—and immediate postwar—economy, when the studios were racking up unprecedented profits. Thus, he is literally comparing apples and oranges.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the book is that it appears to be motivated by a desire to right perceived wrongs and settle old scores. While his reverence for certain figures, notably Zukor and Wasserman, verges on the fawning (the author confides that as a graduate student he annually sent birthday cards to the aged Zukor), Gomery is dismissive of much of the scholarship that has been done on the studio system. He credits very little of the research published in the last twenty-five years, and while reliance on primary sources is commendable, to suggest that he developed this revision in a vacuum is disingenuous. Some of the best work (e.g., Thomas Schatz's *The Genius of the System* and Christopher Anderson's *Hollywood/TV*) is acknowledged only for the purpose of deriding it. *The Hollywood Studio System* is frequently uncharitable, and in many instances it is downright petty and narcissistic. Hampered by typos, many small errors of fact, and dubious historiography, *The Hollywood Studio System* is an example of a book that would have been better left unrevised.

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