

HOLLYWOOD HYBRIDS: MIXING GENRES IN CONTEMPORARY FILMS

Ira Jaffe. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008, 160 pp.

In *Hollywood Hybrids: Mixing Genres in Contemporary Films*, Ira Jaffe takes on the subject of genre mixing in films, or what he calls “hybrid cinema,” and attempts to draw a comparison between classical Hollywood and contemporary Hollywood, saying that the former has “not yielded hybrid generic forms . . . as radical as those in other [artistic] traditions that have responded to modern life’s distinct complexity and indeterminacy” (24). Some contemporary Hollywood films, on the other hand, according to Jaffe, “faithfully reflect as well as influence contemporary life” (6). Overall, he writes, “Diverse stylistic and generic currents intersect in more glaring and anarchic ways than in the past” (26). If this seems vague, it is at least consistent with the rest of the book, which examines this “phenomenon” (26), as the author calls it, in a rather disorganized manner.

The book is arranged into an introduction and five chapters titled “Fact and Fiction,” “Gangster and Warrior,” “Melodrama and Teen Romance,” “Tragicomic Accidents,” and “Global Parallels.” The chapter titles give some idea of Jaffe’s wide scope, a scope that accounts for much of the vagueness of the book. Jaffe starts out with a comparison that one might reasonably tackle in 160 pages—classical Hollywood genre mixing versus contemporary Hollywood genre mixing—and then immediately departs from it by looking at documentaries in chapter 1.

Despite the many thoughtful points, overall, there are too many eras represented here, too many kinds of films: not only classical Hollywood and documentary, but also international, independent, and avant-garde films, among others. By taking a tour across film history, Jaffe actually makes the opposite point: that the way in which contemporary films handle genre is

not so different from films of the past. And this is without even stating the obvious, which is that some of the most famous films from the classical era, from *Citizen Kane* to *It’s a Wonderful Life*, are unclassifiable hybrids that mix a number of genres.

Better-defined categories would have helped. Many of the films that Jaffe lumps under “Hollywood” are made by directors such as David Lynch, Richard Linklater, Quentin Tarantino, Jim Jarmusch, and Todd Haynes, directors whom most film scholars and even casual fans would link to independent filmmaking. Though most of them have worked in Hollywood (and Jaffe is careful to name films distributed if not produced by major studios as Hollywood), they nonetheless made their names in the independent golden age of the late 1980s and early 1990s, a time when these films were clearly trying to set themselves apart from Hollywood’s aesthetic. Genre mixing in the independents was not only common but even a selling point. To really make his case that contemporary Hollywood films mix genres differently than their predecessors and are more “sensitive to modern circumstances,” Jaffe needs to have used more mainstream examples. Alas, beyond *Fargo* and *Three Kings* (again, by directors who have their roots in independent filmmaking), there are not many such examples here.

Jaffe is better at summarizing histories and analyzing styles than he is at making arguments. Individual strands of sharp description and analysis jump out all over the place. His breakdown of the films of Stan Brakhage, for example, is an excellent summary of both the form and purpose of the filmmaker’s work; his writing on *Pulp Fiction* in terms of genre, identification, and pop cultural allusion is among

the best in the book; and he brings a generous knowledge in comparing Todd Hayne's *Far from Heaven* with Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*.

Too often, though, these isolated strands of analysis, however incisive, fail to connect to a larger point or flow from an explicit purpose. Jaffe is obviously a film lover, and he has clearly watched these films carefully, but he often provides too much blow-by-blow description of the films without the careful, consistent analysis that would contextualize them and bring the author back around to an argument. Sections and chapters end without summing up or even concluding anything in particular. Not that every piece of writing need to be wrapped and ribboned, but here the result is at the other extreme—bits of analysis either dwindle away or are never made clear enough in the first place.

Jaffe begins his introduction, for example, with a long analysis of the *Kill Bill* movies (he likes Tarantino), which, though discussing them in terms of style and genre, relies heavily on plot summary that is not underscored by a clear analytical point and only tenuously leads into the body of his introduction. Later, his chapter 2 discussion of *Fargo* makes a number of disconnected points before finally concluding with a discussion of the humanity present (or not) in the characters and in the filmmaking. He writes, "In *Fargo*, humanness is tenuous, its qualities and dimensions ever shifting, and consequently it needs ongoing attention, needs to be revisited, reworked and revitalized more than any film genre does." This is a nice sentiment, but it is far removed from the stated topics of the book. One or two such digressions would be tolerable. Jaffe has dozens of them. *Hollywood Hybrids* needs more simple, cogent synthesis to tie its points together.

Finally, Jaffe never gets a firm handle on his subject. He writes, "Hybrid cinema defies critics and artists who for centuries advocated a contrary aesthetic stemming from Aristotle's *Poetics*; works of art should include only what is likely and necessary . . . Such stress on necessity, logic and causality has been challenged increasingly—in theatrical and other arts as well as in film—as false to life, which art is supposed to mirror, and to the creative process" (109).

It is hard to know what to make of such a statement. On the one hand, it is far from the book's declared topic of comparing Hollywood and contemporary genre mixing; it seems to actually lump all film together, with the only time marker being the extremely vague "increasingly." Second, it seems to infer that hybridity is a recent phenomenon, that genre mixing has emerged to act as a metaphor for modern and postmodern society. Although perhaps the pastiche of styles, tones, and genres featured by some contemporary films may be new in their particularity of combination, Shakespeare, Dickens, and Conrad, among many others, might take exception to the idea that genre mixing as a form or approach is in any way new.

Movies have always been hybrids—of forms, arts, technologies, and genres. Because Jaffe concedes this early and often in *Hollywood Hybrids*, he ends up stating the obvious. His analysis—some of it extremely knowledgeable and sharp, some of it contradictory and lacking context—does not bring much that is new or revealing to the subject.

MICHAEL GREEN
Arizona State University