

Collected Interviews: Voices from Twentieth-Century Cinema

Wheeler Winston Dixon, Editor

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Technology transforms the present into the future, sometimes luring the willing into new realms of capability, often yanking the reluctant into new means of productivity. In the entertainment sector, the strength of technology is particularly evident in film. As the young century begins to take cultural shape, filmmakers choose among a variety of cutting-edge tools to make their statements, while academics turn back to the last hundred years—from the birth of the medium to the present—to trace its evolution.

Informed by a future-focused sensibility, the editor, a film scholar, has gathered interviews with figures from the past century of film into a book that offers recollections of yesterday and predictions of tomorrow. Many of the people (mostly men) interviewed were journeymen filmmakers, members of the American or British studio systems famous for churning out “quota quickies” in incredible volume. While American readers may not be immediately familiar with the subjects themselves, they will recognize the movies, the directors, and the actors discussed.

Dixon is a serious scholar, but this collection is an enjoyable read rather than a heavily jargoned analysis. Movie gossip—gaffes, blunders, excesses—is an inevitable component of film interviews and lends a welcome narrative element to the book. Bryan Forbes relates a tale of immoderation from just after WWII. A filmmaker for whom Forbes was working cleared “miles of forest and timber” to construct a fake POW facility, in spite of the fact that Europe was filled with hundreds of authentic, abandoned camps. Roger Corman, the prolific director and early promoter of such talents as Coppola and Nicholson, discusses the time he shot a movie about integration in the South. William Shatner played a segregationist and locals played the small-town Southerners. The townspeople, who expressed honest emotion when cheering the line “This country shall be free and white,” were sorely disappointed when they later discovered that Shatner was the bad guy, not the hero.

Anecdotes such as these enliven the discussions of the merits of various film technologies, the differences between the British and American film industries, and the preferred approaches to directing. Dixon’s choice of subjects allows him to cover an amazing breadth of material, from Army documentaries to *The Ten Commandments* to *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. The end result is a wide-ranging, entertaining, and educational wander through 20th century film.

SUSANNA BAIRD (January / February 2002)

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