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New Deal Cinema and the Politics of Sympathy

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In her insightful new book *Hollywood Melodrama and the New Deal*, Anna Siomopoulos explores how 1930s and 1940s US popular cinema mediates popular anxieties about the unprecedented expansion of federal power during the New Deal. Deftly moving between readings of *Gabriel over the White House* (1933), *Bullets or Ballots* (1936), *Fury* (1936), *Stella Dallas* (1937), *The Emperor Jones* (1933), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), and *The Killers* (1946) and expositions of welfare-state theory by 1930s intellectuals and public figures, her work offers a compelling and precisely contextualized account of how state policies shape cultural productions and vice versa.

At the book’s heart is Siomopoulos’s careful delineation of a homology between New Deal presidential rhetoric and Depression-era cinema. On the one hand, much of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s popularity rested on his use of melodrama to generate sympathy for the Great Depression’s victims and support for New Deal programs. This rhetoric helped “offset the advanced rationalization of new government bureaucracy and . . . justify the encroachment of the state into the private lives of U.S. citizens” (2). On the other hand, Depression-era films gave expression to public fears and fantasies about FDR’s policies; their melodramatic conclusions,
however, ultimately endorsed New Deal ideology. In particular, both FDR and 1930s and 1940s cinema used melodrama to affirm a conventionally liberal individualism in ways that helped undermine public support for more radially redistributive social policies.

In developing this argument, Siomopoulos enters into a long-standing debate about the ideology of melodrama. For Lewis Mumford and other mass-culture critics of the 1930s, melodrama was a conservative form that reinforced existing social hierarchies. In the past forty years, beginning with the work of Peter Brooks, critics have challenged this assessment. Brooks highlighted melodrama’s origins in the French Revolution, describing it as a potentially revolutionary genre; more recently, critics like Linda Williams have argued that melodrama plays a crucial role in establishing sympathy for marginal social groups. Siomopoulos’s position more closely approximates Mumford’s than Brooks’s or Williams’s. Drawing her subtitle (“public daydreams”) from Mumford’s work, she argues that “Hollywood melodramas of the ’30s and ’40s maintained their resemblance to private daydreams—individual fantasies with no public valence—at the same time that the melodramatic conventions of these films consistently supported New Deal public policy” (4). For her, the politics of sympathy that Williams discovers in Hollywood melodrama is precisely the problem with these films; both presidential rhetoric and Depression-era cinema draw on the language of sympathy in order to perpetuate individualistic solutions to economic crisis. Both FDR and Hollywood melodrama focus on “private individuals rather than public movements and on private solutions to public problems” (5). In criticizing this politics of sympathy, Siomopoulos draws on Hannah Arendt; compassion, she complains, “is not a critical or rational enough emotion upon which to base social justice because it responds to suffering with simple, self-evident solutions” (66–67). Sympathy promotes individual acts of charity rather than systemic social change.

Unlike Mumford, however, Siomopoulos carefully highlights the ideological contradictions that run through her chosen films. Her readings all follow a similar pattern; she shows how the films mediate Depression-era dissatisfaction with the New Deal but then affirm New Deal policies in their final, melodramatic scenes. Gabriel over the White House, for instance, released shortly after FDR’s first inauguration, registers public fears that FDR would expand the powers of the presidency for corrupt personal gain. The film draws a series of analogies between an ineffective president (Judd Hammond, played by Walter Huston) and
his arch nemesis, a mafia crime boss; both are equally ruthless and equally dedicated to private consumption. However, after a Road-to-Damascus-style conversion, President Hammond learns to channel his gangster-like energies toward the public interest, morphing into a benevolent dictator who increasingly resembles FDR. Interestingly, Siomopoulos suggests that this filmic tension between critique and affirmation of New Deal ideology and policy becomes more strained as the US welfare state evolves. The 1940s insurance noir, in particular, uneasily shifts between celebrating and punishing individual rebellion against the public sector–corporate sector fusion that the federal government promoted during World War II. Each time the federal bureaucracy grows, Hollywood melodramas strain harder to affirm New Deal policy.

Because of her interest in linking Hollywood melodrama to New Deal ideology, Siomopoulos tends to read films allegorically, drawing connections between characters and settings and specific federal laws and policies. These connections are sometimes ingenious. For instance, she reads Dudley Murphy’s film adaptation of Eugene O’Neill’s 1920 play The Emperor Jones, not as the scathing critique of Marcus Garvey’s Black Nationalism envisaged by O’Neill but as a commentary on New Deal policy toward African Americans. Emperor Jones—a Pullman porter turned despotic leader of a West Indies island—is a stand-in for FDR, and his melodramatic apology at the film’s end embodies a “fantasy of a quasi-president repenting for the mistreatment of blacks in both the present and the past” (86). Siomopoulos makes the persuasive case that this fantasy helps to explain the film’s popularity amongst 1930s black audiences, as opposed to their indifference or hostility toward earlier productions of O’Neill’s play. Sometimes, this style of reading risks becoming narrowly topical, as in the case of Siomopoulos’s analysis of Double Indemnity, director Billy Wilder’s noir classic about an insurance salesman who tries to defraud his company by murdering and collecting the policy of a wealthy client. Siomopoulos argues that Walter Neff’s job dissatisfaction parallels public disappointment over the government’s failure to enact full employment legislation.

However, even as Siomopoulos’s allegorical approach leads to her best insights, it also signals a central weakness of her book: her readings are largely plot-driven and eschew formal analysis. Siomopoulos does not do much with the visual rhetoric of her films; she says more about the visual composition of advertising posters than about that of the films themselves. One cannot help but feel a sense of lost
At times, Siomopoulos’s readings are also marred by an overly monolithic account of what she calls “New Deal liberalism.” She distinguishes between the “liberalism of progressivism,” which is “concerned with protecting communities from corporate power,” and “New Deal liberalism,” which “resembles classical liberalism in that it defends a market economy, free enterprise, and private property” (91). In the New Deal, classical liberalism makes a comeback, veiled by an ostensibly community-oriented rhetoric of sympathy toward the Depression’s economic victims. FDR’s administration, however, was marked by a series of internal contests between different kinds of liberals—many of whom championed nationalization of major industries and other so-called socialist policies. FDR himself changed positions several times over the twelve plus years of his presidency. While the “New Deal liberalism” that Siomopoulos associates with melodrama is definitely consistent with the Keynesian version of the welfare state that FDR inaugurated after the 1937 Recession, it is not consistent with other liberal ideas that circulated within the administration throughout the Great Depression.

Lastly, while Siomopoulos persuasively argues that film historians have failed to explore connections between New Deal ideology and 1930s and 1940s cinema, her work...
would have benefited from a more sustained engagement with literary and cultural critics who have explored these connections—occasionally with reference to some of the same films that Siomopoulos reads in her book. Beginning with the publication of Michael Szalay’s *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State* (2000) and Sean McCann’s *Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* (2000), cultural critics have used the New Deal as a crucial point of reference for historicizing Depression-era culture. While Siomopoulos nods toward Szalay and McCann’s books in a footnote, she could have done more to avail herself of both writers’ spadework. McCann, who explores the constitutive connection between New Deal liberalism and some of the noir novels whose film adaptations Siomopoulos reads, would have been an especially useful interlocutor.

Overall, *Hollywood Melodrama and the New Deal* is a welcome addition to cultural histories of the 1930s and 1940s. The book’s approach is challenging and persuasive, and many of its readings should become touchstones for future discussions of this crucial era in American filmmaking.

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