

## Jump Cut: Hollywood Politics and Counter-Cinema

Peter Steven (editor)  
Toronto: Between the  
Lines 1986

These two pamphlets offer a compact summary of the choices which are now before us. On the one hand, the proponents of Star Wars appeal to a familiar well established set of values. For them America's superiority in the work is an unqualifiable good. The enemy of freedom is external -- the Soviet Union. The nature of the enemy makes the struggle for nuclear superiority a noble aspiration. Star Wars represents the moral and technological climax of our civilization. On the other hand, Thompson and others argue that SDI represents a psychotic vision of the future. Superficially plausible, SDI rests on assumptions which have no basis in reality. Star Wars, Thompson argues, is the apocalyptic vision of a bankrupt militaristic ideology which threatens to destroy the world. While the one ironically exposes the insanity of the cold war confrontation, the other soberly sketches out the chance for alternatives. Together with the rest of the literature born from the Nuclear Age, they dramatize the need for a deeper understanding and for broadening the base of collective action.

David Kraft

**The** rise of the New Left around the non-communist world in the late sixties brought with it a resurgence in progressive and explicitly left culture. Informed by and integrated into political activity, this culture developed a large body of work. In part it was based on the immediacy of those events that would lead to "revolution," or so those of us who were involved at the time believed. The rest took other oppositional weapons to "bourgeoise" culture. (Bourgeoise - such a nice word, especially when you spit the "wa" at the end, but so difficult to spell.) This battle against the dominant culture, which we saw as the "prime carrier" of ideology (specifically the odious disease of "false consciousness"), took place in the streets, in the cinemas, and on the printed page.

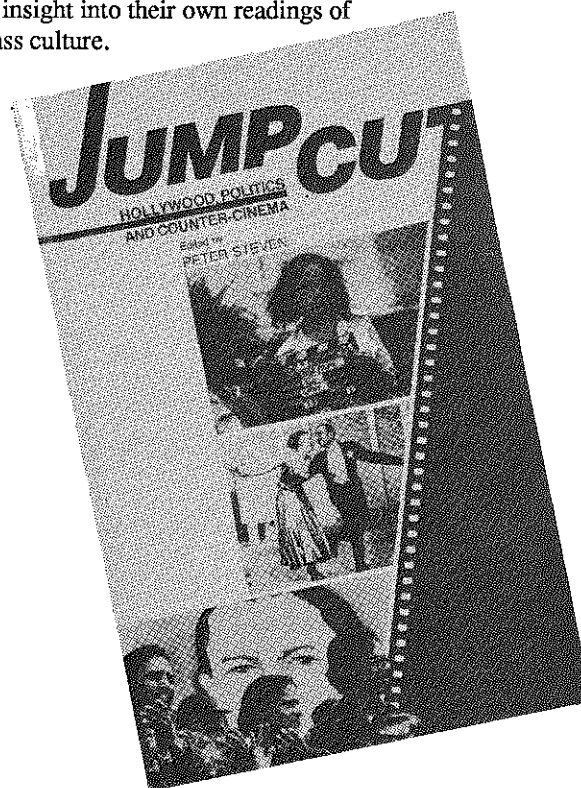
We recognized that one of the most powerful ideological media is film, and developed our own films both as tools of the "struggle" and as attempts to define and critique the dream factory. We also developed our own literature about films. One place where the propagation of a new culture in film joined with major critiques of mainstream, Hollywood films was the critical magazine, *Jump Cut*. Founded in 1974, *Jump Cut* quickly established itself as a journal of the independent left. With a decidedly non-academic tabloid format -- text set on a typewriter and printed on newsprint pages which yellow with age -- it has published some of the best analytical writing on film inconsistently ever since. (It has as unpredictable a publishing schedule as *borderlines*.) Now, Peter Steven, an associate editor of the magazine, has selected some of the best articles from over ten years of *Jump Cut*, and *Between the Lines* has published them as a book. *Jump Cut*, the book, will not yellow on your bookshelf, although it may become grubby from your repeated thumbings through in the years to come. The transformation from tabloid to book is quite remarkable. Those who have struggled with the tabloid's design (or lack of it) will find the book a pleasure to read. More than that, the book stands as a remarkable introduction to the film criticism and analysis that *Jump Cut* has provided over the years.

Designed very much as an introductory text for those about to jump simultaneously into the worlds of film and politics, *Jump Cut* is a welcome addition to the growing number of texts on film theory that are both politically radical and accessible to those with a certain kind of "intermediate-level" academic language (like me).

The book is divided into five parts. The first section, "The Dominant Cinema" offers carefully constructed critiques of the contradictory nature of our (sometimes guilt-ridden) experience of Hollywood's ideologically loaded pleasures. The article "Shirley Temple and the House of Rockefeller" by Charles Eckert contrasts Hollywood's Pollyanna visions of the Depression with the lived realities of poor and working-class children. This piece is good ammunition to use to debunk the alarming consistency of the "nostalgia market," which has sold "stars" like Temple as the cutesy representatives of some a-historical never-never land.

Jane Feuer's "Hollywood Musicals: Mass Art as Folk Art" describes further the contradictions between the escapism of the movies and the realities of everyday life. According to Feuer, that most American of institutions, the Hollywood musical, initially gained its enormous popularity because it used the work of (mostly) ordinary people, some of whom became stars later. But behind the musical's images lies an industrial apparatus that rivals GM -- an ideological factory which erases all indications of its production. The classic "rehearsal" scene -- frequently a part of the musical -- is the most blatant example of what Feuer call "creation and erasure." The rehearsal is the site where real sweat and labour are transformed and edited into a seemingly effortless, seamless product, sans sweat, sans labour.

The final essay on Hollywood is a series of interviews grouped under the title "Hollywood Transformed: Interviews with Lesbian Viewers." It gives insight into the range of perceptions that the audience brings to the cinema. The questions of audience identification with the movie's characters which the women raise, afford for most heterosexuals, I'm sure, an insight into their own readings of mass culture.



Part Two, "Independent Filmmaking in North America," is rather less satisfying. Although *Jump Cut* is an American magazine, Peter Steven is a Canadian and the publisher, BTL, is Canadian. Yet only one article deals specifically with Canadian film, and knocks off its obligations to both Canadian and Quebec film by reviewing only the joint Quebec/Ontario production of *A Wives Tale*. *Jump Cut* -- the magazine and the book -- exhibits a certain chauvanism in its concentration on American and Third World film. Canadian film gets its nod, but European independent film is totally absent. *Jump Cut* is already quite fat, and it is never possible to deal with everything in one book, but I would make this request to *Jump Cutters* (the magazine, anyway), "We want more/and we want in now."

The other problem with this section is the absence of new material. The most recent article is Clyde Taylor's fine piece "Decolonizing the Image: New U.S. Black Cinema," first published in 1984. But it is focused on an even earlier period of Black cinema. What is going on now in independent cinema? What have been the changes in form and content under the influences of feminism, gay and lesbian politics, eh? This isn't to say that the book doesn't deal with feminism or homosexuality, but it removes it from the discussion of independent filmmaking.

The placement of two peices of feminism together in Part Three, "Women's Counter-Cinema," is a recognition of the diverse interpretations within feminist positions. In "the Politics of Positive Images," two articles argue the old questions of what is a positive image? And whom does it address? These unresolved questions inhabit both film creation and film criticism, and carry over into the debate on form which has been one of the major discussions in feminist film circles. B. Ruby Rich's "In the Name of Feminist Film," is a cogent overview of the debate. Her distinctions revolve around the "American model," the so-called "sociological approach," and the British "methodological approach." These approaches are further elaborated by Rich within the context of (American) phenomenology and the European use of Freudian and Lacanian models of linguistic analysis. The final article in this section, "The Perils of Feminist Film Teaching," by Michell Citron and Ellen Seiters, is a very practical piece of advice to those teaching film. It defines some of the social and economic obstacles women face when they enter the world of film.

Tom Waugh introduces the argument that tokenism and stereotyping are not the exclusive practice of the dominant cinema, but that they also afflict the pocitical left and its films. Waugh makes a convincing case that in a homophobic culture it is necessary to evaluate the tokenism that exists within progressive culture, and warns against the "euphoria of 'ghetto liberation'."

In the section "Gay and Lesbian Cinema," Peter Steven has assembled what can only be described as a primer for a complex and often painful attempt to re-educated hetros. A discussion between Tom Waugh in the Gay and Left corner and Chuck Kleinham in the Straight and Left corner, introduces the section. The three other articles in this section help establish both a critique of Hollywood and a brief introduction to the best known (American) films by lesbians.

The final section of *Jump Cut* contains some of the best writings of the book. "Radical Third World Cinema" offers Clyde Taylor's overview of the production and use of Third World cinema. He makes the important point that "Third World cinema" is a first-world description (or ghetto); not one which the filmmakers use to describe their own work. Teshome H. Gabriel contributes a detailed and succinct reading of *Xala* and the films of Ousmane Sembene, which is extremely valuable for its insight into the cultural codes of Semebene and his countrymen. Two peices on Cuban cinema are valuable simply because they give a perspective on the value of film to revolutionary cultures, especially those that are within the broadcast distance of the big "A", Amerika. Rounding out this section is a piece that reflects the editor's concern that activists use film and film criticism. Julia Lesage's plug "For Our Urgent Use: Films on Central America" is appropriate and timely.

What else can I say? I'm for *Jump Cutting*. By the way a jump cut is (1) an abrupt transition between shots that jars the viewers sense of continuity; (2) the violation of the cannons of spatial, temporal, and graphic continuity to disorient the spectator; (3) a magazine; and (4) now a book.

*Glen Richards is an independent film producer with Indignant Eye films.*

## Confessions of an Albino Terrorist

by Breyton Breytenbach  
London: Faber and Faber, 1984

## Victorian Prison Lives: English Prison Biography, 1830-1914

by Philip Priestly  
London: Methuen, 1985

**Prison** is such a demeaning, sickening, inhuman experience that the question 'why read prison accounts?' often seems like asking why any new reading would do more than say, yet again, that prison is demeaning, sickening, inhuman.

Some stories are told and told again and some experiences are lived afresh each generation. Whatever social structures we think of, there are none which have not sent people away to a place that was beyond everyday routines of society, places to which people were confined because they were considered to be immoral, or feckless, or mischievous, or anti-social or incompetent, or just plain wicked (and all of these sentences vary in their meaning from society to society). Thus reading prison literature contains within it an exercise in understanding the various societies that have created prison as a solution to their own problems of marginality. And it is an important aspect of the literature of incarceration. We read to understand the commonality of discourse or the occasions for a discourse which would allow Socrates or Genet or Gramsci or Wilde or St John the Divine or Jack the Ripper or Caryl Chessman to have anything to say to each other. Whatever reason people had for getting there, the shock of recognition of the space that has to be inhabited is common to all. Prison denies sociability -- rather, it imposes a false sociability -- it stops us in the tracks of an everyday routine, it forces us to confront the others with whom we would never otherwise choose to be associated. If there is any objective, universalistic ethic in the world, it is the universalism of incarceration -- much stronger than class, or religion or race, it forces the recognition that we were/are *there*. Francoise Villon or Boethius, Victor Serge or Solzhenitzyn, Angela Davis or Vaclev Havel speak the same language of finitude, of decimation -- of escape? But if there is a common language, rhetoric, ambience, then the real question relates to how do we make sense of the different telling of the stories (because clearly the stories are told differently)?