



The Whole Equation: A History of Hollywood

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With the same style and insight he brought to his previous studies of American cinema, acclaimed critic David Thomson masterfully evokes the history of America's love affair with the movies and the tangled history of Hollywood in *The Whole Equation*.

Thomson takes us from D.W. Griffith, Charlie Chaplin, and the first movies of mass appeal to Louis B. Mayer, who understood what movies meant to America—and reaped the profits. From Capra to Kidman and Hitchcock to Nicholson, Thomson examines the passion, vanity, calculation and gossip of Hollywood and the films it has given us. This one-volume history is a brilliant and illuminating overview of “the wonder in the dark”—and the staggering impact Hollywood and its films has had on American culture.

The Whole Equation: A History of Hollywood Details

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Michael Rivera says

I started reading this book in September 2005, and made it to the 3rd chapter - while on a cruise. Theoretically, I am still currently reading. However, I really don't know that I will have the gumption to finish the book. It was rather dry and not real interesting to me - but perhaps that is just me. It seems to me to be difficult to write the history of Hollywood in one book. The subject should be more specialized. There's too much to write about Hollywood to cover it thoroughly.

Tim Pieraccini says

Absolutely not what I expected, not having read Thomson before, but a fascinating and rewarding read.

Jonathan says

A great personal take on the movies. Don't let the subtitle "A History of Hollywood" fool you, this is no history book. Rather it, rightly, melds history, apocrypha and criticism to piece together the story of film. I love Thomson's voice here. It feels a bit incomplete and ultimately harried, though. If I had to guess I'd bet Thomson fills in the blanks in his latest, *Moments That Made the Movies*. Still, Thomson's deconstruction of the Edward Hopper painting, *New York Movie*, shows a true original voice who sees well beyond the movies. This is a book about America and the world, told through the movies and then some.

Correction: Above I mention *Moments That Made the Movies*. The book I meant to mention was *The Big Screen: The Story of the Movies--and What They Have Done to Us*.

FrankH says

Quite an interesting read, with an intuitive, ambitious premise -- Hollywood helped create pop culture, but in turn was itself influenced by the tides of 20th century American history and the unique personalities of the early moguls like Mayer and Thalberg, often in ways that were unpredictable. For a book that has such a rambling anecdotal feel to it, Thomson does successfully convey pieces of American cinema 'Equation'. It's an impressionistic style -- tell the story of Myron Selznick to depict the rise of the powerful Hollywood agent and its impact on the financial calculus of what kinds of movies get made; analyze and speculate on the quality of Edward Hopper's 'New York Movie' as a way to highlight the arrival of sound in the movies, 'this half-magical, half-sinister beckoning to be part of the glowing room and romance'. I especially liked his coverage of 'noir' and the HUAC hearings -- never quite understood that Frank Capra was a turncoat. Still, readers new to the history of American cinema probably would benefit with a more orderly, chronological presentation of the film stars, the rise of the studios, the changing movie-going public -- i.e. all the elements in the 'Equation' -- before picking up Thomson's book. Could have used a time-line of events as well.

Lisett says

"...there isn't a sight in movies as momentous as shots of a face as its mind is being changed. And only movies have allowed that."

Brilliantly written. This is a very a personal history - and thanks to that, it is never dry, and yet manages to cover nearly a hundred years of the story of film, all the way from the brothers Lumière to *Matrix Reloaded* (quite a journey, that one!)

Thomson's style of writing is highly engrossing, mostly because it veers into unexpected territory every once in a while. Consider the following quote, about studio boss Louis B. Mayer:

"He was also the constant advocate of family virtues, on-and off-screen, who could also, any afternoon he dreamed, in his cream-coloured office, have some hopelessly hopeful young woman swallow his grey cum and call it cream..."

So definitely worth a read - whether to get to know Hollywood a little better, or just to get to know Thomson.

Toby says

David Thomson tells the history of American cinema with enthusiasm and wit, loaded with sass and bile he still manages to convey a great love for the medium despite being painfully aware that it has always been a place for hucksters and conmen to screw over everyone it can in the never ending hunt for a quick buck.

In Thomson's Hollywood nothing is straightforward, everybody has an ulterior motive and nobody gets away clean. His love of noir and especially Chinatown is apparent in this approach. He readily reveres the legends of the business and their skill in giving birth to "an American artform" that is at the same time a business that runs itself contrary to those principles that make their so-called great country but is willing to acknowledge that all men are fallible; it is these weaknesses, this fallible nature, that provide the ingredients for an interesting story well told, the juxtaposition with the fantasy world of good overcoming evil, beauty being mandatory and instant gratification they strive to inflict upon the world as the only right way to behave is not lost on the author or the reader.

His metaphors are colourful and playful and occasionally borderline offensive, witness the way he talks about Louis B. Mayer et al screwing over Joan Crawford for example, *"Joan Crawford swallowed her share of cum, and her lips shone in close-ups. How do you think lip gloss got invented?"*, it's less about the sexual acts Crawford is said to have performed for money pre-fame and more about the way the industry used and abused people. Well I'm taking it as a deliberate button-pushing metaphor anyway.

Anecdotal in nature he tries to tell not just the story of the town and the business but the way the art and the business, the producers and the audience, the country and the society that allowed it to flourish are intrinsically linked, he doesn't quite manage to tie it all together in a neat package but he gives it a damned good shot and leaves you with the thought *"Why does so much in American films supports the worst views held of us in other parts of the world: that we are combat-ready, aggressive, adolescent, greedy, sensationalists without humour, depth or imagination, rampant devotees of technology (as opposed to enlightenment?"* which is an entirely accurate statement both on American cinema and the way the country is seen, and in looking back over this excellent, absorbing and ideosyncratic history of Hollywood you'll realise the answer has been apparent from the moment moving pictures were invented.

Alan says

The Whole Equation was a doomed enterprise from the very start, of course, at least in a way... one man, one volume, could not hope to encompass the whole of Hollywood's history from its inception in the 19th Century to the 21st. Yet David Thomson's discursive musings are a great success in another way, for they do provide an evocative and, I daresay, valid sense of the sweep of that history, or at least of its early years.

Thomson is a guy who is utterly enthralled by the cinema. He was born in Britain in 1941, and hence grew up during that country's most austere period, during and just after WWII, when the national mood was gray and the great movie houses were just about the only places where gaudy extravagance was not only to be found but to be expected. That contrast made an indelible mark on the young Thomson, and he makes no pretense of detachment when it comes to the movies that came out of Los Angeles. He loves them, even though he knows them well. And although he has often been betrayed by Hollywood (as have we all), just like any mature lover Thomson sees and accepts the flaws in his beloved, without forgiving them blindly... he remains able to cast a critical and, at times, savage eye on films and film history.

Thomson has his quirks. He seems to see the advent of color filmmaking as a devolution (except of course for the bygone glory of true Technicolor), and bears an inordinate (albeit freely admitted) attraction to Nicole Kidman, for example. But these idiosyncrasies only lend spice and vigor to his work. The Whole Equation focuses on the earlier years of Hollywood, becoming much sketchier as it draws closer to the present, and that is perhaps more of an indictment.

Still and all, if you've ever given a thought to how those flickering images came to capture so much of our time and money... this book is an important, influential, entertaining and even essential resource.

Kevin Cecil says

It is frustrating how well David Thompson writes about film considering how little he seems to respect it. Film through Thompson's lens seems a bit dirty, in both the kid in the mud, and Larry Flint way. He looks down on film, constantly lauding literature and other arts as superior. Which is fine, hell I share the same condescending view towards video games - only I wouldn't bother to write a page on them, much less a book. Thompson gets the title from Fitzgerald's THE LAST TYCOON, his final, unfinished novel about Hollywood. THE WHOLE EQUATION here is one which takes into account the combination between art and business, as well as the audience's contribution to both.

Thompson is a wonderful writer, whose words flow with such intelligence and wit that the underlying condescension feels natural and right. But it isn't. Mark Cousins tells a similar cinematic history in his documentary *THE STORY OF FILM*, and he is equally critical towards the excesses of industry; but his is a true love story. Thompson's story of film is a jilted lover's take - a look back at an ex to find what the hell he saw in the first place. Cousins' explores the history as one would with a life-partner, exposing the flaws only because they are part of the beloved whole.

Actually, Thompson seems to feel towards cinema the way I feel towards his book: appreciative for the moments of truth, beauty and entertainment, while frustrated at the cynicism blocking the artistic potential.

T Fool says

Even reviews by Pauline Kael – those classics – don't have much impact anymore. It's hard to say how many books have handled Hollywood seriously. Thomson's has. You'd expect some of what's in here: chronology, celebrity, the grit beneath the glitz. But in no small awe you'll be by his deriving of the 'equation' and how he shows it to apply.

Yes. Culture, Hollywood-delivered, begins as popular gadget-entertainment, mass cheap delight. That tradition, one of technical innovation and wonder, continues. Piggybacked upon it rides monetary incentive. Early artistry gets trumped again and again by accounting acumen, financial invention, business arrangement.

But Thompson's strength goes beyond 'following the money'. The key part of his equation – or formula – is viewer psychology. For years we've taken as true that viewers have a love affair with the Big Screen. Thomson takes us there, into that dark audience staring up at the beautiful face, listening to the emotive words. Unseen.

Movies allow us to experience someone else's ostensibly deep emotion, to be intimate – physically up close – but at no cost. The screen demands nothing of us but our stare. We give attention – after all, it's the only bright thing drawing our vision. And, as we so behave, we become, somewhere inside ourselves, silently irresponsible, a bit obsessed.

It's that quiet addiction, driving the stardom, profiting the productions, generating the technology, that serves as a patent cure for the modern age. Um. Purely medicinal.

Michael Lisk says

A very entertaining history of the rise and fall of Hollywood and American movies.

Adam Dickson says

Part genius, part monkey on a long leash.

Ryan says

This book was very different from what I initially thought it would be. Although it claims to be "A History of Hollywood", it really is more a personal musing about film that uses Hollywood as a framework. It took some getting used to, as Thomson's style in this book is very colloquial, with lots of parenthetical flights. But once I got onto his wavelength, I found it be quite a good book. He brings up philosophical questions about film (as opposed to say, books) that I hadn't ever thought about, and there are a number of overarching themes to follow through the story. If you are seriously interested in film, this book is worth checking out.

Buck says

David Thomson is in love with movies, which is not surprising in itself, given his profession. Luckily (for us, not so much for him) his is the bitter, exasperated kind of love that an intelligent man might conceive, against his will, for a brainless little skank. It's this ambivalent quality that gives his criticism its torque, propelling it beyond the naïve boosterism of the standard *Entertainment Weekly* puffery.

But I'm not here to talk about Thomson's many virtues because, for me, the flaws in *The Whole Equation* are a lot more arresting. What got my back up right away was the tone of the book, which runs the gamut from sour to cynical (props to Dorothy Parker, apologies to Hepburn). Thomson is so eager to play the undeceived truth-teller about Hollywood that he goes in for some major intellectual thuggery, as in this stunning cheap shot: 'Joan Crawford swallowed her share of cum, and her lips shone in close-ups. How do you think lip gloss got invented?' What the - ? Not that I find this offensive, but isn't it just a wee bit gratuitous? Worse, it's not even funny.

Thomson's aggressiveness also leads him into some really clunky, ill-considered imagery:

This was still the nineteenth-century, when no one had any notion of what a film director might be, when movies seemed like a wild craze scooping up the momentary appearance of things, like a blood sample at a crime scene.

Am I being excessively literal, or on what metaphysical plane could a 'craze' do anything so strenuous as 'scooping'? And while I'm stomping around in my grammar-Nazi jackboots, I have to wonder about that self-cleaning blood...

Okay, all of us have had bad things happen to our good similes, so I'll cut him some slack there. But I'm less inclined to forgive his methodological sins, which include setting up some pretty dubious contrasts between film and literature. A typical gambit: he'll tell you what filmmakers were up to in, say, 1917 (*The Birth of a Nation*, most significantly), and then, in order to do the dirty on cinema, he'll survey what was happening in the world of literature around the same time (Conrad, Joyce, Woolf – the 3-4-5 hitters of Modernism). See, he'll say, practically in tears, just look how coarse and stupid Griffith is in comparison. What can the silent era offer to equal the richness and sophistication of *Ulysses*?

Now being more of a book guy than a movie guy myself, I'm fairly sympathetic to this line of argument, but in the end even I have to acknowledge its unfairness. In 1917, film was still a bawling infant, while the European novel had centuries of tradition to draw on. And besides, is it even legitimate to compare two completely different art forms in this way (it's like asking, which is better, architecture or ballet? See what I mean?)

Well, to be honest I've isolated a few incidental defects in an otherwise solid, sometimes enlightening book (though until now I've been polite enough not to bring up Thomson's most notorious quirk: his hopeless, drooling infatuation with Nicole Kidman – but that's a whole other kettle of psychosexual fish). For whatever reason, Thomson irritates the hell out of me, so I tend to magnify shortcomings that I'd simply pass over in another writer.

But at least I never said he swallows.

Eric says

I picked up this book because I love David Thomson; I bought it because of this line: 'Charlie Chaplin fucked like a very wealthy man with an utterly private life.'

Terry Clague says

In which David Thomson talks at meandering length about the "movies". The style is what Rob Langham would call "talking in statements" and others might label "highly irritating", "self-indulgent" and/or "pretentious". There are some interesting sections to be sure, but it feels cobbled together. The less said about his sexual obsession with Nicole Kidman, the better.
