



The Dream Life: Movies, Media, And The Mythology Of The Sixties

J. Hoberman

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In what the *New York Times*'s A.O. Scott called a "suave, scholarly tour de force," J. Hoberman delivers a brilliant and witty look at the decade when politics and pop culture became one.

This was the era of the Missile Gap and the Space Race, the Black and Sexual Revolutions, the Vietnam War and Watergate—as well as the tele-saturation of the American market and the advent of Pop art. In "elegant, epigrammatic prose," as Scott put it, Hoberman moves from the political histories of movies to the theater of wars, national political campaigns, and pop culture events.

With entertaining reinterpretations of key Hollywood movies (such as *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Wild Bunch*, and *Shampoo*), and meditations on personages from Che Guevara, John Wayne, and Patty Hearst to Jane Fonda, Ronald Reagan, and Dirty Harry, Hoberman reconstructs the hidden political history of 1960s cinema and the formation of America's mass-mediated politics.

The Dream Life: Movies, Media, And The Mythology Of The Sixties Details

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Mark says

I need to come back to this one in a less busy time... interesting examination of the history & politics of the 1960s through the lens of the films of the period.

I got about halfway through before it needed to go back to the library.

Matthew says

A fascinating look at "the decade when politics and pop culture became one," by one of the greatest film critics writing today.

Rupert says

Despite the interesting subject a bit of a snooze.

Craig Werner says

Mixed bag. On one hand, this is as good a book as I've been able to find about the relationship between film and what was happening during America during the Sixties. Hoberman tracks the historical arc from the Kennedy years through Vietnam, the counterculture and Black Power to the sad collapse of the Nixon years. I like his typology of film archetypes that come into play as the story unfolds: The Hollywood Freedom Fighter (represented in different forms by Spartacus and John Wayne in The Alamo); the Secret Agent of History (the Manchurian Candidate refracting Lee Harvey Oswald); The Righteous Outlaw (the Easy Riders, Bonnie and Clyde); the Legal Vigilante (Dirty Harry, Joe); and The Sixties Survivor (Shampoo). The book's filled with interesting juxtapositions between movie production, release and what was happening politically.

Despite the strengths, I found the book slightly unsatisfying. Part of it has to do with Hoberman relentless American (and to an extent, English) focus. While it's true that the logics of American moviemaking and politics were locked in a strange dance with Hollywood and a few independent films, there's now way to make sense of cinema in the Sixties without paying attention to Bergman, Godard, Fellini, and Kurosawa, to mention only the most obvious cases. And there are some huge gaps even in Hoberman's American filmography. He glosses over The Graduate, Midnight Cowboy, MASH, They Shoot Horses Don't They, several of which would seem to work well with his typology. In addition, he's obsessed with westerns--treating almost every release as an important political event--and some movies that don't, to my mind, deserve the extended attention, particularly Shampoo.

Worth the read, but not definitive.

John says

"This is the way the the 1960s end. December 1969 reeks of blood and the memory of blood."

"Who controls the Reality Studio? Whose fantasy is projected onto the screen? What does the nation decide to remember and what shall it agree to forget?"

Graham Carter says

Cinematically in the sixties the action was happening overseas with the French, Italians and Polish, and later the Germans and Czechs... but J Hoberman reminds me that in the United States the gold was rare, but what gold there was was extraordinary, such as 'Medium Cool.' But more interesting, it puts a new light on a stodgy studio film like 'McClintock!' (exclamation mark part of title).

Hoberman is interesting to me as he is more historian than film critic, and when writing about a chaotic decade such as the sixties it is helpful to place the movies in their era. Broadly the book covers history from the election of Kennedy through to the deposing of Nixon... a time of rebellion, violence and nihilism. Warren Beatty features large in the narrative, largely through the fact that 'Bonnie & Clyde,' 'The Parallax View' and 'Shampoo' comfortably track the political mood as it happened. The focus on Westerns I initially found surprising, but it ended up illustrating very well Americas bi-polar rebelliousness / conservatism; and finally helped me understand the love of guns as political belief.

Interestingly I started reading Norman Mailer's 1973 'Marilyn' (he pops up in The Dream Life a few times), and his story contains the passage "...what a jolt to the dream life of the nation that their angel died of an overdose..." interesting because I hadn't really come across the phrase The Dream Life before. Highly recommended.

Noah says

Simply put, the best book I have ever read about the US in the '60's-early 70's. I will go into greater detail in the near future, but I want to gather my thoughts so I can do justice to this amazing book. One thing I can say: this book will terrify you & destroy any ideas you may of had about what the US is as a nation & an idea.

John Newhall says

This book is pretty bad. It contains historical inaccuracies and does not present a convincing argument. Thanks for trying Hoberman, it was a valiant attempt.

Todd Stockslager says

Review title: Parallel timeline of movies and politics

This is essentially an extended critical review of a selection of movies roughly bracketed by the 1960s, wherein J. Hoberman attempts to show how movies mirrored (or drove; the cause/effect linkage is never clearly defined) the politics of the time. Hoberman anchors the time in the latter part of the 1950s, citing a few movies to show the normalcy of the era, and the abruptness and sharpness of the transition to the 1960 election--and the explosive change in movies that would occur starting then and continuing throughout the decade.

This decade is a propitious choice. Politics were literally explosive--Vietnam abroad, civil rights rallies and anti-Vietnam riots at home, assassinations of the Kennedys and King, violence in the street, generational violence in the home, sit-ins and shutdowns in the schools. And the changes in movies were also explosive--the end of the star system, the rise of the anti-hero, the increase in violence, sex, and realism (to some; vulgarity to others) on the screen.

So Hoberman tracks the parallel timelines, with the awkward and frequently annoying attempt to relate every significant date on one track to an event in the other. We get the point, and in fact a graphical timeline showing rough synchronicity would have been a better device to prove his point, instead of forced comparisons of events at specific dates.

Because the other issue I have here is that Hoberman merely presents his data, but makes no attempt to identify key linkages. Did movies drive politics, or merely reflect them? What were the specific mechanisms? What was the chronology? I found myself confused that at times, to maintain his chapter organization Hoberman had to refer to movies out of release order, which was confusing as I thought that Hoberman had been trying to show how the movies built on one another along with the political events they tracked, and losing that sequence completely befuddles any cause/effect relationship that Hoberman might have established.

The idea is an interesting one, and the connections between the movies and the politics are unquestionable (and indeed no longer even unquestioned by us now living 50 years into the media age). And there sure were some bad movies made in that decade, perhaps because movie makers (directors, actors, writers) were working with political purposes--although Hoberman never really argues that clearly. He's more interested in the movies as a critic of the art of movies, not as a historian of either movies or politics.

If you are a fan of movie criticism, particularly of movies from the 1960s, this might be of interest to you. Otherwise, this is probably a pass.

Michael says

My kind of apocalyptic politi-tainment paranoia as cultural criticism concerning my favorite era of American history, but often selective in its analyzed texts and clustered and confused heading into the home stretch (the Ford and Carter administrations are barely alluded to). Also, the long passages detailing the production histories of films like *Myra Breckinridge* and *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* are largely unnecessary.

Bryan Cebulski says

Excellent and entertaining. Love the idea of telling history through pop culture representation. Unfortunately saturated with unneeded footnotes, but at least they're easy to skip.

Nora says

Fairly interesting, but also hard to follow because the chronology skips around, even within chapters. I'll just keep reading Hoberman's reviews.
