

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Neal Gabler. *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998. 303 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-679-41752-1.



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In *Life the Movie*, Neal Gabler begins by showing how unique social conditions and the absence of a dominant religious denomination led to the rise of a “Republic of Entertainment” that first became evident during the Age of Jackson. Gabler weaves in a number of important strands, including a good discussion of the Astor Place Riot of 1849 (a landmark event in terms of American cultural nationalism) and an excellent section on the role of nineteenth century journalism in developing an entertainment culture. Gabler then moves to what Daniel Boorstin has called the “Graphic Revolution” and a discussion of the rise of the motion picture. The best part of the book is found in Gabler’s discussion of 20th century celebrity, a subject that he pursued with greater focus and depth in his 1994 book, *Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity*, and his framing of the celebrity narrative in terms of Campbell’s theory of the heroic monomyth is illuminating.

Life the Movie is not without weaknesses: the thesis is far from original, and to those who are well-versed in cultural criticism, much of Gabler’s book will seem all too familiar. And while the use of Campbell’s monomyth is inventive and valuable, it gets the author into the bind that generally results from the combination of myth criticism (stressing the universal) with a historically specific argument (stressing the unique qualities of a given pe-

riod). The contradiction here is one that Gabler does not probe or refine, as does Richard Slotkin in his work on American culture. Further, some may feel that Gabler covers too much in too few pages, with the result that the book starts to feel like a general overview of American popular culture. (Although in fairness it must be noted that Gabler did not intend to present a focused monograph here; he has already demonstrated his mastery of that form in his two previous books). It also must be said that Gabler does a first-rate job in terms of integrating the most important events in entertainment culture in a lively and interesting manner, and he also avoids the tired and largely unproductive binary that separates the “culture industry” school (i.e., popular culture as a form of oppression) and that of “cultural populism” (i.e., popular culture is audience-driven, and that audience is often aware of the absurdities of popular narrative even as they use them for their own pleasure). Gabler wisely refuses to situate himself in one camp or the other. Finally, his integration of the most significant works of cultural criticism, from Veblen to Leers and Slotkin, and many others, is truly admirable.

I think this book, while of limited use to those who have mastered this body of criticism, is an excellent introductory work, and I would recommend that those of us who teach introductory courses in popular culture con-

sider adapting it for the classroom. To the uninitiated, the book would be an eye-opener, and it presents the kind of cohesive overview narrative that is generally absent from college anthologies.

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