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## Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties, by Peter Biskind

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## CHRISTOPHER SHARRETT

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Peter Biskind, *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1983. 371 pp. \$10.95 paperback.

## Review by Christopher Sharrett

At first glance *Seeing is Believing* appears to be another social history of the movies, in this case an attempt to correlate the popular cinema of the 1950s to the decade's political climate. One is immediately prepared for a discussion of HUAC, the A-bomb, McCarthy, and their relation to the reaction and paranoia that saturated fifties culture. While Peter Biskind does touch on these rather predictable topics and while his work sometimes fails to sidestep the errors of "impact" and "influence" theories of art and society, his approach is more intelligent (and ideologically sophisticated) than many other works covering the same ground.

Biskind argues, in contrast to conventional Marxist approaches, that artworks do not uniformly reflect the dominant ideology of the historical periods in which they are produced. Biskind states that Hollywood films often express contradictory ideological positions, the principal criterion being whether or not the film is safe enough to "play in Peoria" (earn money at the box office). This is not to say that Hollywood in the fifties did not sustain a specific political outlook: it is Biskind's thesis that fifties ideology, contrary to much scholarship, was predominantly centrist, pluralistic, and "corporate-liberal." The concept of the "vital center," elaborated by such intellectuals as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., supported debate, persuasion, and collaboration over repression and control. According to Biskind, fifties ideology attempted to spurn the right wing (or pretended to do so) while nevertheless supporting a very uncritical, conformist view of the status quo. Hence, the popular cinema of the period advocated a view of democracy that constantly attempted to recoup the importance of the state, debunking all tendencies toward non-conformity, much less radical change.

At the same time fifties cinema recognized the impulse toward rebellion and frequently offered films presenting left- or right-wing attacks on "the system" and the values of the American political establishment of the postwar years. Biskind cites Lang's *The Big Heat*

as an early example of right-wing vigilantism in the genre film; Aldrich's *Attack!* is viewed as a leftist criticism of the military. Westerns like *Broken Arrow* can portray the plight of the Indian while *The Searchers* continues to belittle and degrade minorities while romanticizing the tradition of the American Loner. Intellectuals, always viewed with suspicion by official art, take on new roles in the fifties. The scientist is the representative intellectual of fifties cinema, a character obviously foregrounded in science-fiction, one of the decade's most popular genres. *The Thing* shows a contempt for science and extols the common sense approach of the army; *Them* and *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* present the scientist as a kindly, persuasive, mediating force. In all of the examples cited the key point is to reaffirm the centrist position: both the soft-spoken intellectual and the rabid vigilante are either sacrificed or reintegrated into society. Reformism is recognized only as it reinforces conformism.

In some respects the book appears naive (this is suggested in the title), as if critics and audiences have not already been exposed to ideological critiques of movies. On the other hand the book may be seen as a kind of primer for political criticism, a layman's introduction to such analysis minus any academic jargon. Still, a bothersome aspect of the book is the author's vagueness in his approach to his subject: we are not made fully aware of the value of ideological criticism, nor are the connections between ideology and the art product made sufficiently clear. Biskind seems to want his own ideological position to remain a little cloudy, perhaps to make the book as accessible to the mass audience as possible (copies have already appeared in shopping malls). The introduction suggests that the book will show simply how political ideas (of various sorts) crop up in movies; clearly the book must be read not only as a critique of fifties centrism but of capitalism itself.

The main problems with the book are methodological. Biskind's criteria for selecting films are not stated; he ranges across mainstream cinema (*Giant*, *The Court Martial of Billy Mitchell*) and obscure genre works (*Red Planet Mars*). If Biskind views the film simply as cultural product, irrespective of its genre or production circumstances, this is not so enunciated. More important, Biskind's view of the artwork's relationship to society is never developed beyond "movies

influence manners, attitudes, and behavior." It is also problematic that Biskind regularly quotes Schlesinger, Daniel Bell, Daniel Boorstin, and other theorists whose ideology he debunks while ignoring the intellectuals who provided the tools for the political analysis of art: Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, *et al* are notable in their absence. The search for ample evidence somehow caused the omission of methodological sources.

Most problematic of all is the issue of interpretation. Biskind is often very single-minded in the application of his centrist theory, causing questionable readings of individual works. He holds that *Giant* is essentially about the affirmation of domestic virtues (seen in Elizabeth Taylor's Leslie Benedict) over right-wing jingoism and racism (Rock Hudson's Bick Benedict). It is true that domestic tranquility (read: pluralism, liberalism) holds sway in this film and fifties cinema overall, but a reading of *Giant's* political unconscious must recognize the struggle of Jett Rink against Bick Benedict, of the pragmatic *nouveau riche* against the landed gentry; the most compelling ideological point of this film is how the poor-white entrepreneur begins an ascendancy by internalizing the values of the oppressor and enforcing them with a vengeance. Similarly, Biskind sees *The Searchers* simply as a straight-out representation of traditional rightist ideology attacking the center, rather than the start of Ford's "dark" period; enough has been written about Ethan Edwards as a borderline psychotic, as the frontiersman-as-mercenary, to raise some debate about Biskind's analysis.

Criticism of Biskind's interpretations does not necessarily invalidate his thesis; rather, it should raise questions about ideological criticism of film in general, given the subjectivity of the viewing experience. Biskind acknowledges that what might be called "dominant ideology" is a multi-faceted thing, but this feeling does not always resonate within his individual critiques. Biskind's conclusion deals with the breakup of the "vital center" in the 1960s. During this period the previous social consensus failed, giving rise to strident works on the left (*Dr. Strangelove*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Easy Rider*) and the right (the James Bond films, *Dirty Harry*). At this point questions about Biskind's readings of films must confront squarely his notion of progressive ideology. He speaks of *Psycho* as a clarion

call for the right, attacking women, patriarchy, and the androgynous male-lead popular in the fifties. *Psycho* is regarded as a right-wing challenge to the domestic values of centrism. This reading ignores completely a more "traditional" view of Hitchcock's film as a harbinger of a truly critical cinema, a first step in the development of a new form of the *fantastique* geared to undermine both traditional narrative line and bourgeois notions of social normality. Hitchcock may be a conservative, but *Psycho*'s political function seems altogether different from the one Biskind ascribes to it. Also, in his citation of the emerging leftist cinema of the sixties Biskind seems to forget his earlier comments about films such as *Attack!* and *Paths of Glory*.

Obviously the reader must decide whether or not Biskind has developed an original theory of the fifties. Certainly in the age of Reagan (with its own peculiar attempts to revive the fifties) it is hard to believe something called "centrism" ever existed. In truth, however, centrism and corporate liberalism have constituted the dominant ideology of American power from pre-World War II to the present; the right wing has gained ascendancy (temporarily) during the panic of post-industrialism. Hollywood in the eighties is not so different, ideologically speaking, from the fifties: it offers various left, right, and centrist views of society, few of which have anything to do with transforming a political/economic system.

This considered, Biskind's work is sprightly and intelligent, his method in keeping with the more realistic, flexible methods of current political criticism. The principal contribution of this book may not be a new and innovative view of fifties culture, but an entertaining demonstration of ideological criticism available to the non-academic reader.