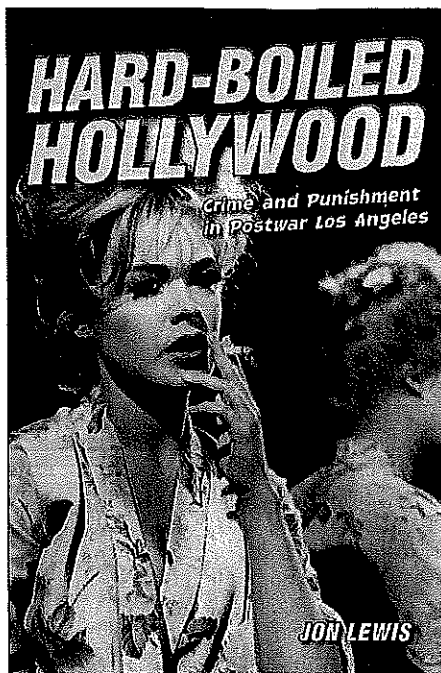


mild corrective to Anger's enduring, appalling lifestyles-of-the-rich-and-famous exposé. Instead of simply being hypnotized by the spectacle of celebrities behaving badly, Lewis pays tribute to a handful of sad, foreshortened lives on the margins—starting with Short, whose introduction to the world as what John Gregory Dunne famously (and insinuatingly) termed “a pair of legs sticking out from a bush” is the subject of the first chapter, and extends to a series of similarly victimized women.

That *Hard-Boiled Hollywood* is bookended by the death of Marilyn Monroe and features a key cameo by a supine Lana Turner (not dead but unconscious after a much-publicized fainting spell at a swank studio party) is in keeping with Lewis's stated ambition to write a book about “dead bodies left by the side of the road in postwar Los Angeles.” This setup sounds glib, but reveals itself in time as an exercise in empathy—a gesture of recognition to the wrong-place-at-the-wrong-time victims sacrificed on the altar of earnest aspiration. In contrast to Anger's celebratory voyeurism, which basically boils down to “there's no business like show business,” Lewis frames Short's killing as the primal scene of a larger transition. “The public's fascination with the [murder] accompanied a new Hollywood narrative,” he writes. “The city of dreams and dreamers had become the site of a new American nightmare.”

The Black Dahlia was the slashed, distorted face of that nightmare, and the revelation that Short had harbored dreams of making it as an actress added posthumous pathos to her fate (the De Palma film restages her auditions as heartbreaking exploitation). It also raised serious questions about the milieu in which she had been entangled in the weeks before her murder. The sheer pileup of potential subjects, none of whom were ever definitively fingered for the crime, indicated that sunny Los Angeles was a far more shadowy place than its official chroniclers had previously let on. Not only that, but the obsession with these dirty details was such that they started to infiltrate the movies themselves. The noirs of the 1940s had radiated a certain pessimism—and cast capitalism's promises in a dim light. Lewis identifies a wave of nastily self-reflexive post-noirs that transposed the genre's bleak worldview to Hollywood itself. In a dazzling little fillip of film criticism, he lines up *Sunset Boulevard*, *In a Lonely Place*, and *The Big Knife* as three spiritually sympathetic movies haunted by the presence of the Black Dahlia—all three deal in some way with the discovery of a dead body, and all reflect the collapsing old-school studio system that produced them.

Hard-Boiled Hollywood takes pains to explain how behind-the-scenes impropriety of all kinds contributed to an across-the-board institutional restructuring: it's a picture of a paradigm shift encompassing the



Paramount antitrust case, the rise of television, and an insatiable public appetite for sensation. The Hollywood it tours isn't just hard-boiled, but cracking at a foundational level. Lewis lavishes extended attention on the intersection of studio hierarchies and gangland power broking. “By the mid-1930s,” he writes, “mobsters, moguls and movie stars co-mingled frequently and often carelessly,” and the peril that came with the new order is persuasively connected to the introductory material about the Black Dahlia. Even leaving aside conspiracy theories that Short's death was a mob hit (which get duly inventoried here, along with even wilder postulations drawn from crime reports of the era), the focus on encroaching criminality at every level of Hollywood—including the mob's infiltration of the labor sector via the Teamsters—makes the case that by the late 1940s, a pervasive, implacable corruption, already present but largely repressed, had taken hold.

Because the dramatis personae of this period are so vivid—starting with Bugsy Siegel and Mickey Cohen and also including Turner's ne'er-do-well lover Johnny Stompanato, who would himself be reduced to a chalk outline—*Hard-Boiled Hollywood* peaks in the long section dedicated to their misadventures. Here, Lewis doesn't impose judgments (moral or otherwise) on his subjects, whereas in the follow-up chapter, “Hollywood Confidential,” about the fallout from the Red Scare, he adopts a more opinionated voice (one of sympathy, if not overt solidarity, with fellow travelers). The risk that the author runs by rerouting his pulp-fictional narrative toward politics is considerable, especially since there is no shortage of books about the Hollywood Blacklist. But the angle of approach is nevertheless novel and successful.

The major figure in this section is Hedda Hopper, who has recently had a renaissance of sorts in popular entertainment, portrayed (quite brilliantly) by Judy Davis in FX's *Feud* (2017), by Helen Mirren in *Trumbo* (2015), and also in thinly veiled form by Tilda Swinton in the Coen brothers' *Hail, Caesar!* (2016). Lewis depicts her as a rigid ideologue whose gossip column was a means of exercising control over her subjects. He also blames her (not solely, but directly) for tipping the scales of “the weight of celebrity in postwar America,” riling up her readership to care deeply about (and in turn resent) the private lives—and political beliefs—of famous people previously placed on pedestals.

In the final chapter, “Hollywood's Last Lonely Places,” Lewis juxtaposes the familiar details of Marilyn Monroe's final days with the story of the B-movie actress Barbara Payton, who drank herself to death in 1967 at the age of thirty-nine; his rhetorical gambit of saying that these two women “began their careers at the very moment that [Elizabeth] Short ended hers” is less successful than his deft maneuvering of them into the “rift between illusion and reality.” This metaphysical space is *Hard-Boiled Hollywood's* true staging ground, and Lewis's book respects its fundamental instability even as it maps it down to the millimeter.

—Adam Nayman

Opening Wednesday at a Theater or Drive-in Near You:

The Shadow Cinema of the American '70s

by Charles Taylor. New York and London:
Bloomsbury, 2017. 208 pp. Hardcover: \$27.00.

With its proclamation that “the 1970s remain the third—and to date, last—great period in American movies,” this book knows its target audience. No argument here about the magnificent Seventies, but readers might wonder if there is room for another book about Hollywood's Last Golden Age. Certainly there is, but in any event *Opening Wednesday at a Theater or Drive-in Near You* neatly sidesteps such reservations by focusing, as its subtitle suggests, not on the usual oft-celebrated suspects but on the unsung pleasures of the era. These were movies steeped in the ethos of the New Hollywood: tough stories, compromised protagonists, with endings ambiguous at best—dozens of fine films that have receded from memory because, as Charles Taylor observes, in a decade when there was “great work to acclaim—or argue over—week in and week out, you can't exactly blame” critics and audiences for failing to dwell on the merely very good. And so his book offers something

like an overlooked film festival of the 1970s. With occasional exceptions, Taylor does not oversell these films, which do not rank alongside the all-time greats for good reason, but which, as he notes, nevertheless look positively Shakespearean in comparison with the blockbuster franchises polluting today's multiplexes.

Indeed, many of yesterday's discards would populate year-end "top-ten" lists today. Worth the price of admission alone is the opportunity to revisit four 1972 releases *Opening Wednesday* sets out to rescue from (relative) obscurity: *Prime Cut*, *Cisco Pike*, *Ulzana's Raid*, and *Hickey & Boggs*—each of which are given close attention in relatively long, thoughtful chapters.

Prime Cut, a "report from the battle being waged to define what America was" (think Nixon's silent majority versus pretty much everybody else), features a clash between slave trader Gene Hackman and Chicago Mob enforcer Lee Marvin—and as it's a Seventies film, contract killer Marvin is more or less the "good guy" in the picture. Set in the bucolic American heartland (whose denizens and rituals are observed but not ridiculed), director Michael Ritchie was in the midst of his most fertile stretch; coming off *Downhill Racer* (1969), he would follow *Prime Cut* with *The Candidate* (1972) and *Smile* (1975)—two more Seventies films with something to say about the American Dream. Here, with reference to a Hitchcock-worthy sequence, Taylor observes that "The amber waves of grain are populated by killers or wheat threshers trying to mow down a runaway girl and her protector."

Cisco Pike, the debut effort of writer/director Bill Norton is a film that is at its best in moments of understated conversations and subtle glances, and features an impressive cast: Kris Kristofferson, Gene Hackman, and Karen Black (supported by nifty turns from players that include Harry Dean Stanton, Roscoe Lee Browne, and Allan Arbus). Taylor astutely looks past the nominal plot (a drug scheme involving corrupt cop Hackman extorting past-his-sell-by-date musician Kristofferson) to instead observe deeper affinities between this film and others like *Klute* (1971) and *Performance* (1970). If anything, I wanted to hear more about *Pike*, which, despite collapsing at the finish line, is even better than *Opening Wednesday* suggests.

The chapter on *Ulzana's Raid* is the strongest in the book. Taylor assesses the contributions of screenwriter Alan Sharp, who would go on to write the script for Arthur Penn's brilliant *Night Moves* (1975), and director Robert Aldrich, best known for the late-noir classic *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955). Aldrich ultimately shot five-plus films that would fall into this book's sweet spot, including the downbeat policier *Hustle* (1975), featuring Bert Reynolds, Catherine Deneuve, and a chilling Eddie Albert. *Ulzana's Raid*, a Burt Lancaster vehicle, is

among the best of the period's revisionist-Westerns/Vietnam-allegory pictures. Its distinguishing strength is that while (de rigueur for the subgenre), it critiques the myth of the civilizing West, it also plainly rejects the then-fashionable-in-some-circles romantic vision of both the Vietcong and their Native American on-screen stand-ins. As with the Vietnam War, in *Ulzana's Raid* noble purpose is absent, atrocities are as common as streetcars, and any victories are surely pyrrhic. But Taylor does pile on here in chastising the naive left, taking a few easy shots and extending some arguments beyond the breaking point, as if seeking to earn his stripes for political even-handedness.

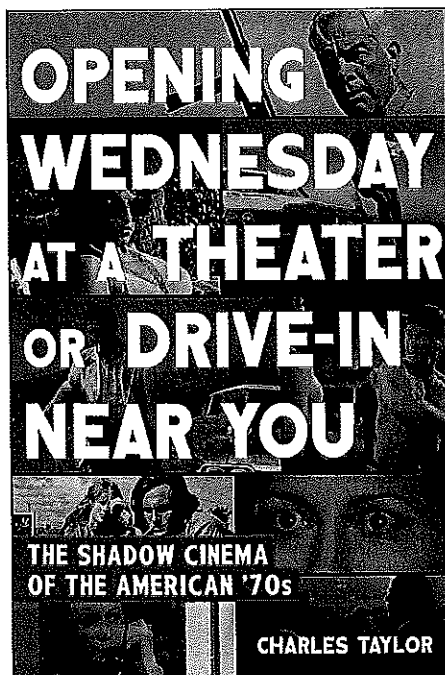
It is a particular pleasure to spend time in the company of *Hickey & Boggs* (1972). Directed by Robert Culp (reunited on screen with his *I Spy* partner Bill Cosby), and written by Walter Hill, it is one of the buried treasures of the decade. And, as mumbled twice by Cosby, Hickey's lament, "It's not about anything," is one of the key lines of the Seventies. Taylor has much to say about the relationship between the two characters, the desperation of their threadbare private-eye outfit, and the considerable strengths of Culp's direction, which, as he notes, is especially laudable for its willingness to show the weakness of his own character (a routed alcoholic), and his generosity in focusing on Cosby's silent reactions during one crucial two-handed scene. Fine observations all, though I was looking for some scrutiny of Boggs's sexuality as well. Taylor notes the transaction, but the gender of the prostitute Boggs leaves cash for is ambiguous, and that entire scene has a melancholic pall; there is also that moment when Hickey's wife matter-of-factly refers to his "fag partner."

Opening Wednesday is an enjoyable read, but its prose flirts with too-cool-for-school hipsterism—a professional hazard even for the finest journalistic writing—an approach that favors the clever turn of phrase over less catchy but more careful considerations, and, as a result, Taylor often hits and runs when making points that could be more fully developed. This is more than an issue of style: in general, the commentary on the films could be more ambitious, the criticisms more analytical than personal, and at times Taylor merely skates over the surface of some movies under consideration. (It helps if you've seen the films, which might be asking a bit much of readers not already on board with the book's central premise.) And a book that is happy to splash around the shallow end of the Seventies pool will inevitably linger on both hits and misses. The chapter on *Hard Times* (1975) is yet another strong point, especially with its excavation of underlying economic themes and appreciation of Charles Bronson's taciturn, almost silent-movie performance.

On the flip side, it is hard to see *Vanishing Point* (1971) treated as a peer of fellow road movie *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971). Without doubt, champions of the latter often mythologize and oversell that film. But Taylor makes too much of *Vanishing* and not enough of *Two-Lane* (though he does drop this great line: "[James] Taylor is so convincingly hard, so scowling and unfriendly, you begin to wonder whether his troubadour routine was just shtick"). And it seems like a missed opportunity not to talk more about director Monte Hellman beyond the one-line acknowledgement of his other efforts that might have been candidates for this book, *Cockfighter* (1974) and *China 9, Liberty 37* (1978), both starring Warren Oates.

Of course, one reader's treasure is another's trash, and Taylor shares Pauline Kael's position that really good trash has its place at the movies. That can forgive many things, but not *Winter Kills* (1979), an incoherent wreck of a movie with more wasted talent than your favorite installment of the *Airport* franchise. It is not surprising to learn here that production on the film was halted three times—it shows on the screen. Taylor introduces this one, generously if accurately, as a "baroque snipe hunt" and the discussion that follows is peppered with references to other conspiracy thrillers (a Seventies sweet spot), each introduced as "a much better movie." That sounds about right.

Winter Kills is not worth taking seriously, but *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* (1974), and its writer/director, the great Sam Peckinpah, are. Taylor goes to bat for *Garcia*, and it is here where a good book invites a great argument. A film with a mixed-at-best reputation, *Opening Wednesday* closes with a rousing attempt at its rehabilitation: "A masterpiece waiting to be acknowledged as



such.” That may prove a tough sell—as Taylor notes, “Those who had long championed Peckinpah were just embarrassed” by the film at the time of its release, and for good reason. Some sequences are indeed “brilliantly executed,” but it is Peckinpah’s obvious talent that makes the movie even less forgivable. Close to self-parody, *Garcia* is equal parts gratuitous violence, dyed-in-the-wood misogyny, and a nihilism that the movie boasts but does not earn. Ultimately, most of Taylor’s herculean efforts to defend the film fall short, such as his re-reading of (yet another) Peckinpah rape scene, and gymnastic claims such as “sometimes a movie’s coherence is less narrative than thematic”—appeals that inadvertently only call attention to the movie’s glaring flaws and limitations.

But having such arguments is one of the main reasons to pick up a book like *Opening Wednesday at a Theater or Drive-in Near You*. And Taylor is a convivial guide, with a good ear for music (essential for understanding the films of the Seventies), and a sharp and appreciative eye for the crucial contributions of cinematographers. One reaches the conclusion of this short book thinking perhaps a bit more could have been done with the material at hand. But if you like this sort of thing (and I certainly do), then this book will be the sort of thing that you will really like.—Jonathan Kirshner

We'll Always Have Casablanca: The Life, Legend, and Afterlife of Hollywood's Most Beloved Movie

by Noah Isenberg. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2017. 275 pp., illus. Hardcover: \$27.95.

Celebrating its seventh-fifth anniversary this year, Warner Bros.’ *Casablanca* has long been considered one of the iconic films of classical Hollywood cinema. Upon its release in 1942, *Variety* praised its “fine performances, engrossing story and neat direction” and concluded by calling it “an A-1 entry at the b.o.” In *The American Cinema* (1968), Andrew Sarris called it one of Hollywood’s “happiest accidents,” perhaps “the most decisive exception to the auteur theory” he championed. (Director Michael Curtiz had no place in Sarris’s “Pantheon.”) In 1985, Robert Ray made it a centerpiece in *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930–1980*, labeling it “Classic Hollywood’s most representative film.” On the fiftieth anniversary of its release, Aljean Harmetz published the definitive production history of the movie, *Round Up the Usual Suspects*. Yet fascination with the movie remains high, as evidenced by the publication of Noah Isenberg’s *We’ll Always Have Casablanca* earlier this year.

Given the ways that *Casablanca* has embedded itself in the American cultural imagination, I wondered whether there was much new to say about the film. Isenberg shows us there is. Before this book, the author was best known for his writings on the B-film director Edgar Ulmer: a monograph on Ulmer’s *Detour* (BFI Film Classics, 2008) and a critical study about the director himself, *Edgar G. Ulmer: A Filmmaker at the Margins* (University of California Press, 2014). In his introduction, Isenberg tells us that his new book “is an attempt to capture the story of not just how this most remarkable movie was made—and of the indispensable role that refugees from Hitler’s Europe had in making it—but to explore how and why *Casablanca* continues to live on in our collective consciousness, as affecting to our hearts and minds now as it was from the start.”

The book deftly divides into seven chapters, each titled by a phrase closely related to the film—often from specific lines of dialogue. Chapter 1, “Everybody Comes to Rick’s,” discusses the play the film is based on and the context within which the co-authors worked. “Usual Suspects,” Chapter 2, examines how the principal roles were cast. The third chapter, “I Stick Out My Neck for Nobody,” explores the social context of Warner Bros. Studio and the political implications and significance of the movie. The widespread presence of European immigrants and refugees in Hollywood and in *Casablanca* provides the focus of Chapter 4, “Such Much.” Chapter 5, “We’ll Always Have Paris,” concentrates on the film’s romance between Rick and Ilsa, especially the difficulties the screenwriters had in satisfying the dictates of Joseph Breen’s Production Code Administration. “Play It Again,” the sixth chapter, discusses the attempts of

Warner Bros. to capitalize on the movie by making films with the similar cast and focus, like *Passage to Marseille* and *To Have and Have Not*, as well as the many revivals of the movie and attempts to remake it or draw on it in significant ways, as in Woody Allen’s *Play It Again, Sam*. The final chapter, “A Beautiful Friendship,” highlights the continuing legacy of the movie, not only in the testimonies by critics and fans who celebrate the film’s continuing power (including fan Errol Parker, who claims to have seen the film more than six hundred times), but also in the many parodies and homages to the film in popular culture, from the Bugs Bunny *Carrotblanca* (1995) to several parodies on *The Simpsons* to a list of dozens of films and TV programs that have tipped their hat to the movie.

The book exhibits many virtues; I’ll emphasize three. First, it’s thoroughly researched: Isenberg generously acknowledges Aljean Harmetz’s book, indicating that the interviews she did were particularly helpful to him, since so many of those involved in making the film had passed on before Isenberg began his work. Nevertheless, he also interviewed many more people, including family members of those who worked on the film, like Anya Epstein, granddaughter of co-screenwriter Philip Epstein. Besides interviews, Isenberg cast his net widely in drawing on the extensive commentary the movie has elicited over the years. (He even quotes Rainer Werner Fassbinder on the Leuchtag couple’s halting conversation as they practice English, which the German director called “one of the most beautiful pieces of dialogue in the history of film.”)

In addition, Isenberg is familiar with the best books on American movies during the depression and World War II that provide the context for the film, and he often finds insightful gems from less familiar sources, like the autobiography of S. Z. Sakall (who plays the waiter Carl in the film) and the biography, written in German, of Curt Bois (he plays the pickpocket who, while pilfering Herr Leuchtag’s wallet, warns the couple that there are “vultures everywhere” in *Casablanca*).

Second, the chapter on the play upon which *Casablanca* is based was the best account of that work I’ve ever read, and it convincingly undercuts co-screenwriter Howard Koch’s assertion in 1973 that the play provided “little in the way of story adaptable to the screen.” We learn that playwright Murray Burnett, then a high-school English teacher, based the play in part on a European trip he took with his wife in the summer of 1938. After they were convinced to visit Vienna to help relatives get money out of the country (the Anschluss and German occupation had just recently happened), Burnett was able to observe first-hand the cruel effects of anti-Semitic laws and the anxious efforts of victims to leave the country. The spine of *Casablanca*, then—the desire of refugees to flee Nazi

