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Book review of: Sound technology and the American cinema

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Publication Details

Yecies, B, Book review of: Sound technology and the American cinema, Screening The Past: An International, Refereed, Electronic Journal of Visual Media and History, 14, 2002.

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James Lastra. *Sound technology and the American cinema* (Film and culture ser.). Columbia UP, 2000.

ISBN: 0 2311 1517 2

270pp

US$18.50 (pb)

(Review copy supplied by Columbia University Press)

Uploaded 25 July 2002
618 words

Sound technology and the American cinema makes an exciting contribution to the fields of film history, film theory, and cultural studies. It offers an in-depth, multi-sourced study of the development of representational technologies, including photography, phonography, and the cinema; each had a convergent role in the permanent adoption of sound into the Hollywood film industry. James Lastra intrigues the reader by constructing a technological genealogy, which connects the ideas and sensibilities of an American culture on the brink of modernity. In doing so, he brings to life a material history of this century's "most influential audiovisual form-the classical Hollywood sound film" (9).

The book's six chapters are organized into two sections. The first section (Chapters 1 and 2), focuses on the hyperbolic machinations of a motley crew of scientists and non-scientists, and their obsessions with "capturin*g* phenomena that were previously fugitive or ephemeral" (46). Lastra painstakingly documents the public discussions and debates surrounding novel technologies used for making pictures and recording sounds. He illustrates how these inventions and innovations worked, and assesses their impact on "a culture coming to grips with…the boundary between the real and the represented" (66). This section is particularly valuable because it reveals some of the early ways scientists, inventors, industry technicians, movie audiences, and the general public thought about representational technologies. Early technologies were often seen as both extensions of the human body and imitations of nature.

The second section (Chapters 3-6) concentrates on questions concerning the institutional, practical, and discursive devices within the classical mode of Hollywood filmmaking. Lastra begins this section with an intriguing discussion of the intersections between silent and sound cinema. He pays special attention to issues of sound accompaniment and synchronization, and their dynamic effect on the filmmaking process. Between 1925 and 1934, there were far more sound experiments and atypical practices than were previously believed. In fact, "the

mode of representation understood to be characteristic of the very technology of sound was likewise up for grabs" (121). Next, Lastra delves into a theoretical account of sound recording and sound editing. He raises epistemological questions about originality, realism, authenticity, and their impact on maintaining classical continuity. Finally, Lastra offers a fascinating discussion of sound editors and technicians who became virtual auteurs of a plurality of sound perspectives and notions of fidelity. Ultimately, the book's explorations of the boundaries of good sound practice are helpful in gaining a better understanding of the technical and aesthetic challenges studios faced while sound cinema was spreading and becoming permanent.

One of the book's most impressive achievements is its inclusion of a breadth of significant sources. Lastra's rigorous research is evidenced by the book's extensive endnotes. Sources, dating back to the late eighteenth century, range from recreational literature, popular periodicals, scientific journals and trade magazines to books written by key film, art history and cultural studies theorists. Lastra weaves all of these primary and secondary sources together in a way that offers a phenomenological examination of representational technologies while concentrating on the development of film sound recording. A variety of anecdotal accounts throughout the book add to the enjoyment of reading the text. More importantly, the book makes a key contribution to film theory and cultural studies with its definition and application of a host of theoretical terms, which Lastra uses to draw connections between technology, perception, and modernity.

Both scholars and visual culture enthusiasts interested in sound theory and the broader history of technologies will find *Sound technology and the American cinema* an important addition to their libraries.

Brian Yecies