

Cinema and the Wealth of Nations: Media, Capital, and the Liberal World System

Review Number: 2286

Publish date: Thursday, 11 October, 2018

Author: Lee Grieveson

ISBN: 978-0520291683

Date of Publication: 2018

Price: £24.90

Pages: 492pp.

Publisher: University of California Press

Publisher url: <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520291690/cinema-and-the-wealth-of-nations>

Place of Publication: Oakland

Reviewer: Jonathan Stubbs

Lee Grieveson's bold historical analysis of the relationship between media and capital is nothing if not timely. As I write, a new wave of consolidation among traditional telecommunication and media companies in America is concentrating unprecedented wealth and power in the hands of an ever-narrowing elite. Concurrently, a new generation of technology companies led by Google and Facebook have established themselves as lucrative and persuasive gateways between the public and the world around them. The inequalities created by these concentrations of wealth have become unimaginably vast. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, whose estimated personal fortune of \$150 billion derives in large part from media distribution, recently declared 'the only way that I can see to deploy this much financial resource is by converting my Amazon winnings into space travel'.⁽¹⁾ But while Bezos shoots his money at the moon, Amazon's median full-time salary is a dollar below America's national living wage.⁽²⁾

Grieveson makes a compelling case that this dominant form of political economy, and the particular role of the media within it, took shape during the inter-war period. It was at this time, he argues, that 'a corporate media industry was established, and then synchronised with finance capital and other large technology and telecommunications companies, as part of a corporate-dominated consumer economy' (p. 1). In 500 densely printed pages, he maps out the entrenchment of this industrial system while also examining specific ways in which mass media (particularly cinema) has been pressed into the service of corporations and states. Critical to this project is the broader but largely overlooked history of cinema's use as a practical, pedagogic tool. It's widely accepted that that Hollywood entertainment films function in ways which influence behaviour and promote American commodity culture. However, it's less often remembered that didactic, non-fiction media was once a crucial instrument for corporations and states who wished to expand influence over apparently impressionable populations. Following this line of thought, and building on recent collections such as *Useful Cinema* edited by Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson and *Films That Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media* edited by Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau, Grieveson deepens the scholarship on cinema's social role beyond the dominant art and entertainment paradigms.⁽³⁾

An excellent example of cinema's usefulness to major corporations emerges from Grieveson's discussion of the Ford Motion Picture Department in chapter six. Established in 1913, Ford's film production arm was

among the most highly-capitalised and technologically advanced of its era. At its peak, the company's non-fiction output was made available to around one seventh of the US cinema-going public (p. 119). Early productions such as *How Henry Ford Makes 1000 Cars a Day* (1913) had a clear marketing function, but as Grieveson argues, their energetic depiction of mass assembly processes also articulated ideas about productivity and citizenship. In this way, the consumption of movies was linked to the 'shaping of new modalities of "useful" consciousness and conduct for the working-class and immigrant groups which would form populations fitted to the new era of mass production' (p. 120). Ford's pioneering use of film also illustrates the dovetailing of corporate and government interests during the inter-war period: a later Ford production, *The Road of Happiness* (1924), was made in association with the Bureau of Public Roads and featured an appearance from Calvin Coolidge. Governmental and corporate forces thus combined to 'enable market expansion and the incorporation of rural America into an emergent consumer economy' (p. 127).

The expansion of American capital and the growing influence of its media were met with anxiety among British elites. In chapter eight, Grieveson addresses the development of state-sponsored non-fiction film in the British Empire during the 1920s and 1930s, particularly the work of the Empire Marketing Board. The material in this chapter will perhaps be more familiar to many readers than other parts of the book, not least because Grieveson has dealt with similar topics in two fine collections edited with Colin McCabe.⁽⁴⁾ However, his emphasis on the alignment between filmmaking and government policy, which aimed to protect the imperial economy from the intrusion of American businesses, sheds new light on the subject. The Empire Marketing Board may have promoted its work as the 'Projection of England', to borrow the phrase of founding secretary Stephen Tallents, but this act of projection also entailed the intermeshing of cultural production with state economic goals (p. 179). In this way, Grieveson suggests, documentary film was 'born directly of liberal imperialism and the imperative to maintain imperial order and economic primacy in the global capitalist system' (p. 7).

Having established the relationship between media and state/corporate governmentality during the inter-war period, Grieveson proceeds to examine the concurrent development of academic thought on the social and psychological effects of media. In the early 1920s Walter Lippmann drew on the wartime use of propaganda to outline ways in which a well regulated mass media could be used to 'manufacture consent' for a new political order (p. 225). Similarly, the work of Edward Bernays suggested that the 'conscious and intelligent manipulation' of the masses was a vital element in a democratic society, offering great power to the 'invisible government' who held the levers of power (p. 229). Thus, the masses were increasingly seen by the intellectual elite as ripe for manipulation, for good or ill effect, by the growing mass media. However, this model of unfettered influence through media control was highly unpalatable to Hollywood studios, who spent much of the early 1930s repelling pressure to introduce government regulation of their activities. Instead, the studios promoted research which purported to show that movies do not have a direct and harmful effect on their audiences (p. 242). More generally, Hollywood companies worked to promote the notion that film was 'essentially nonpurposeful and apolitical, being at its worst simply harmless entertainment and at its best a form of art' (p. 243). Partly as a result, attention to Hollywood film, whether academic or popular, has tended to focus on movie content rather than the thornier question of how it encodes or projects corporate power. This account allows Grieveson to advance a critique firstly of modern film studies, which he sees as being constrained by its emphasis on apolitical aesthetic 'appreciation', and secondly of media studies, which in his view pays too little attention to ideas about media effects. As a result, he argues, necessary debate concerning the political dimensions of media ownership and influence has been marginalised (p. 245).

In chapter 11 Grieveson offers a provocative revision of film history during the late 1920s. Citing Mae Huetting, he suggests that the production of films was not really an end in itself for the major studios but rather a means exercise control over the lucrative American theatre market (p. 257). It was their ownership of valuable real estate that attracted investment from major finance firms, which in turn funded the entrenchment and worldwide expansion of the American film industry. 'The history of cinema is rarely written as a history of property', he suggests, 'but the fact that the ephemeral pleasures of the silver screen were anchored in the materiality of property ... was significant to finance capitalists' (p. 247). Grieveson

points to the introduction of sound, a familiar landmark in the history of American cinema, as a decisive moment in this process. The huge costs of installing sound equipment in thousands of cinemas required massive external investment, and highly capitalised corporations such as AT&T, General Electric and RCA were able to provide access to it. The arrival of synchronised sound was thus ‘a crucial step in the consolidation of both the large corporations that produced, distributed and exhibited film and the banks that supplied capital for them to do so’ (p. 285).

Grieveson’s overall achievement is immense. The scope and originality of his research is laudable, and the book is remarkably coherent considering the amount of territory it covers. A few criticisms seem appropriate. Some readers may feel that Grieveson leans too hard into some of his interpretations. For example, he suggests that corporations used mass media to ‘construct new ideals and enactments of subjectivity and allegiance to support emergent economic and political realities’ as part of a ‘shared imperative’ (p. 115). But this would require, in practice, a degree of inter-corporate complicity and ideological synchronisation which strikes me as improbable. The overwhelming focus on the American political context (the exception being the chapter on British Empire cinema) is also limiting. The relationship between media and capital during the inter-war period developed quite differently in Western Europe or the Soviet Union, for example, and although the impact of American media has been felt globally, its influence has not been absolute. More generally, Grieveson’s model of the role played by media in society is highly top-down, a fact he acknowledges, and this focus on corporations, banks and the (American) state affords little attention to instances where their power was either consciously or unconsciously resisted. For example, instructional films may have played a significant role in the ‘socialization of populations in to liberal capitalism’ (p. 114), but their effect on heterogeneous audiences was surely not uniform.

Grieveson concludes his book by offering a prescription for the study of media, a subject which he rightly points out has been ill-served by most historians. Highlighting the urgent need for a clearer understanding of media’s role in the ‘orchestration’ of a grossly unequal global political system, he argues that scholarship should focus above all on ‘questions of power and the intersecting axes oppression’ (p. 334–5). More broadly, his book demonstrates the value and indeed the necessity for the politically engaged, historically situated study of media industries and the enormous social role which they have assumed over the past century. It strikes me significant that this book should appear at a time when a bellicose, disingenuous form of media criticism has become rallying cry for America’s president and his enablers on the political far-right. In this book, Grieveson shows how the historical explication and critique of media power can instead be aligned to more progressive causes.

Notes

1. Mathias Döpfner, ‘Jeff Bezos reveals what it's like to build an empire and become the richest man in the world’, *Business Insider*, 28 April 2018 <www.businessinsider.com/jeff-bezos-interview-axel-springer-ceo-amazon-trump-blue-origin-family-regulation-washington-post-2018-4 [2] > [accessed 20 August 2018].[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Annie Lowrey, ‘Jeff Bezos’s \$150 Billion Fortune Is a Policy Failure’, *The Atlantic*, 1 August 2018 <www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2018/08/the-problem-with-bezos-billions/566552/ [3]> [accessed 20 August 2018].[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *Useful Cinema*, ed. Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson (Durham, NC, 2011); *Films That Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media*, ed. Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau (Amsterdam, 2009).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *Empire and Film*, ed. Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe (London, 2011); *Film and the End of Empire*, ed. Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe (London, 2011).[Back to \(4\)](#)

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2286>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/298101>

[2] <http://www.businessinsider.com/jeff-bezos-interview-axel-springer-ceo-amazon-trump-blue-origin-family-regulation-washington-post-2018-4>

[3] <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2018/08/the-problem-with-bezos-billions/566552/>