

Book Reviews

Screening a Lynching: The Leo Frank Case on Film and Television. By Matthew H. Bernstein. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2009. xv + 332 pp.

Bernstein's book compares how media have represented the 1913 trial and subsequent lynching of Leo Frank outside of Marietta, Georgia, in 1915. Comprising two sections, the book first covers film, then television. Not a historical examination of the case itself, the work analyzes popular memory of the case. Historical representation of it has proven both flexible and durable enough in dramatization to speak to any number of modern-day controversies throughout the twentieth century. Had clarity and consensus emerged from this iteration of America's already shameful legacy of lynching, distinguishing between actuality and dramatization would have posed enough challenges. However, certain ambiguities further clouded by unresolved and fractured politics of class, race, and gender perpetuate the Leo Frank case as cultural lightning rod. At the very least, popular attention devoted to the lynching of a single white man—a Jew, at that—seems striking when compared to the 2,500 lynchings of African-Americans that took place between 1880 and 1930, a number Bernstein notes is roughly equivalent to a weekly occurrence over a fifty year period.

Initially recapping known facts, Bernstein refers readers to Leonard Dinnerstein's classic *The Leo Frank Case* (1968) and Steve Oney's *And the Dead Shall Rise: The Murder of Mary Phagan and the Lynching of Leo Frank* (2003) but wisely recounts the basic chronology. Leo Frank supervised the National Pencil Company in Atlanta, Georgia. A night watchman found an employee, thirteen-year-old Mary Phagan—this was before child labor laws—beaten and strangled. A month-long trial in August sentenced Frank to death, based largely on testimony from Jim Conley, an African American with a criminal record. Meanwhile, publisher Tom Watson waged an anti-Semitic tirade against Frank in the press. After a jury sentenced Frank to hang, Georgia governor John M. Slaton commuted his sentence to life imprisonment. On 16 August 1915, a mob abducted and lynched Frank with the help of sheriff's deputies, businessmen, and civic leaders.

Nearly 100 years later, the varied aspects of the case, including race, racism, sexuality, ethnicity, black-Jewish relations, press sensationalism,

post-Confederate nationalism, and child labor, are enough to make one's head spin. As the book shows, these ambiguous and unsettling details drew filmmakers to the case. For African-American filmmaker and author Oscar Micheaux, the subject became lifelong inspiration for numerous films and novels. If the case was this influential, Micheaux film scholars should reappraise the director's work, particularly since Bernstein persuasively argues that audiences at the time immediately recognized allusions to the case. In offering detailed analyses of Micheaux's films as well as the additional film *They Won't Forget* (Warner Bros., 1937), Bernstein shows how closely their narratives paralleled actual trial testimony yet crucially diverged from certain events. While these films implicitly invoke the case without mentioning anti-Semitism, Bernstein shows how Frank's lynching was key to the films' reception.

Bernstein's close readings also help make some broader connections. Contrasting Micheaux's role as Hollywood outsider against the studio system that produced *They Won't Forget*, the book uses archival materials from Hollywood's Production Code Administration. As an independent, Micheaux was free of industry self-censorship. Bernstein nonetheless explores the Code's nuanced influence over the 1937 "social problem" picture, noting self-censorship's creative role in the process. If anything, the first half of the book might go even further explaining this industrial context. Not every reader knows how difficult it was to make a film outside the studio or about the relative freedom that came with being an outsider.

The second section of the book considers television. That break highlights the tumult of the postwar era, including Hollywood's wane and television's rise, and an emergent civil rights movement. The chapter on a 1964 television episode devoted to Governor Slaton, part of a series inspired by John F. Kennedy's book *Profiles in Courage*, is a model of media history. Bernstein makes expert use of television producer Robert Saudek's papers, identifying a formidable roster behind this early instance of "quality television."

Turning to the 1988 miniseries *The Murder of Mary Phagan*, Bernstein relies on extensive oral interviews conducted with the NBC miniseries creative team. The chapter highlights how much had changed to allow "the most nuanced and fullest account" of events (250). Facing the erosion of its household audience by cable, networks relied upon high production values and special events embodied by the miniseries to deliver an elite but diminishing audience segment to advertisers. Where networks could uphold *Profiles in Courage* as "public service" in the days before PBS, *Mary Phagan* shows how they relied on "quality demographics" to keep advertisers happy. One of the last of the television

miniseries, *Mary Phagan* today seems closer to a made-for-HBO movie than a network show.

While the book invokes shifting historical contexts within both popular media and culture at large, it could go further. At times, comparisons between the actual record and the dramatized risk overwhelming attention to what the cultural implications of this divergence might be. In its focus, for example, the book misses the undeniable resonance the 1937 film would have had with 1930s concerns over the rising tide of Nazi anti-Semitism. The book ultimately notes “a remarkable consensus” in these representations, and while that consensus does consistently downplay the role of anti-Semitism, Bernstein’s work implicitly highlights divergent meanings for different audiences across varied cultural climates (251). For anyone interested in studying historical representations on film, there are notable insights into popular culture embedded within solid analysis and research of the Frank case. Bernstein’s scholarship lays groundwork for future research to more fully explore some of the larger cultural resonances that the book unearths.

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Mitzvah Girls: Bringing Up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn. By Ayala Fader. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. xvii+260 pp.

In *Mitzvah Girls*, Ayala Fader provides a fascinating and nuanced view of a little-studied population, Bobover Hasidic women and girls. Fader’s ethnographic study demonstrates that language, including content and syntax, can be rich source material for scholars studying culture and society. Her findings challenge previous scholarship’s conceptions of women in traditional religious communities.

Fader conducted fieldwork in Boro Park, Brooklyn, observing Hasidic women and girls at home, school, and informal education classes. While her research is solidly grounded in ethnographic theory, Fader presents her findings in jargon-free language that scholars of any discipline can appreciate. In each one of the thematic chapters, Fader applies a strong gender analysis, a necessity when studying a society in which gender influences almost every aspect of life.

Fader discusses how Bobover women, in their roles as teachers and mothers, socialize the next generation of girls into proper Hasidic womanhood. She pays close attention to subtleties in the language women