

Head On

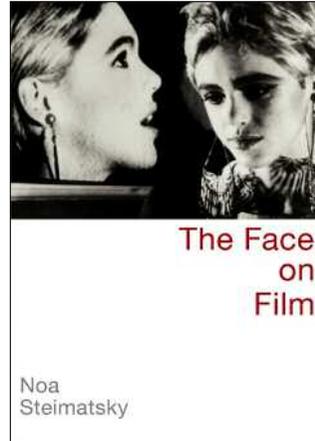
The Meaning of Miens
BY MICHAEL JOSHUA ROWIN

The Face on Film By Noa Steimatsky
Oxford University Press, \$45

DESPITE ITS GRAND TITLE, *THE FACE ON FILM* IS NO BUBBLY celebration of the beautiful countenances that comprise the history of big-screen glitz and glamor. Rather, UC Berkeley professor Noa Steimatsky investigates the ontological repercussions of capturing the human face via motion picture photography, and does so by surveying canonical film theory and criticism. In the process, Steimatsky delves into the strange dichotomies and paradoxes of human appearance as imprinted on celluloid. A face on film, after all, is never just a face: it can be an image, an expression, a mask, an archetype, a performance, and the trace of a real person immortalized by a technological instrument, sometimes all at once.

Tending toward art cinema, Steimatsky's study nonetheless

ranges wide, from Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* ("inevitably," she admits) to *Funny Face*, from *The Wrong Man* to an obscure Antonioni short ("Il provino," from a 1965 omnibus film notably titled *The Three Faces* centered on the former Princess Soraya of Iran), from Warhol's screen tests to *Diary of a Country Priest* and *Au hasard Balthazar*. She reads these films through, and builds her insights upon, the work of Balázs, Eisenstein, Bazin, and Barthes, among others, and considers the many challenging ways a face can be portrayed on screen. By the time she gets to Bresson



in the book's last full chapter, Steimatsky posits that through his penchant for placing impassive, or "reticent," faces on the same level as everything else, the French director converts the entire world into a face. Even surveillance comes into Steimatsky's purview: one of the book's most compelling chapters concerns *The Wrong Man's* depiction of the individual's face as identified/scrutinized by state and public anthropometric mechanisms.

At times Steimatsky attempts so many connections that her central object of study becomes temporarily obscured. Such is the case in the second chapter, "Roland Barthes Looks at the Stars," and especially its subsection "Excursus on the Face in Language." Here the author parses the semantic difference among the French words "visage," "figure," and "face," the first two from the title of a Barthes essay that lays out the legendary theorist's ideas about iconicity and mythic resonance in early screen stars like Valentino and Garbo. Steimatsky first discusses the ancient Hebrew etymology of "face" as it applies to the Torah's prohibition against looking upon God, before moving on to the class issues Barthes saw covertly represented in Dutch group portraiture and "the sheer exteriority and frontality of the spectacle" common to wrestling, cabaret girls, and wax-museum effigies.

What does all of this have to do with "the face on film"? Quite a lot, as Steimatsky shows how the usually demythologizing Barthes championed the mythic aura of the early film stars who, with their iconic mask-like faces, forestalled the individualizing detail brought out by film photography. In order to reap the rewards of Steimatsky's analyses, then, readers must exercise patience (as well as a proclivity for academic writing). And they will be rewarded: though at moments I wished Steimatsky had considered some of the more fundamental issues concerning filmic faces (the artistry and evolution of makeup, actors' faces as



The Art of Selling Movies
By John McElwee
GoodKnight Books, \$39.95

Decades' worth of yellowing movie ads pack historian John McElwee's new volume with lurid, eye-seizing drawings and

feverish copy. Such is the legacy of the many theater owners who in years past commissioned ads made solely to push product, whether through sex, star power, FOMO bullying, technological gimmickry, live (yes, live) pony giveaways,

appearances by quintuplets, and all-around hysteria.

McElwee celebrates the work of the "folk artists" tasked with creating something grabbing (and sometimes beautiful) in a small box. Fatty Arbuckle is trumpeted as

By explicating the more banal elements of Renoir's personal and professional life, Pascal Mérigeau empowers himself to issue bracing statements that distill the causes and effects that undergird Renoir's industrial art.

compared to those of the celebrities and historical figures they've played, the rich history of ugly or "ruined" faces), I still found her observations insightful, well-argued, and poetically expressed. Especially wonderful is the chapter on the multitudes contained in Warhol's deceptively, eerily minimalist portraits of Edie Sedgwick, who emerges "as a sensitized, impressionable, and responsive face-body surface . . . a medium for images that, in the space-time of her image-multiplication, counters and transfigures the technological apparatus."

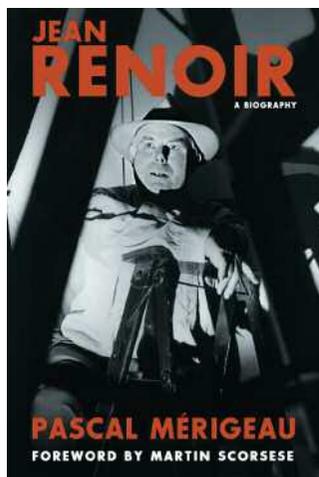
Beyond Illusion

A definitive look at *le patron* comes to English
BY MADELINE WHITTLE

Jean Renoir: A Biography By Pascal Mérigeau
Translated by Bruce Benderson, Running Press, \$35

ROUGHLY HALFWAY THROUGH PASCAL MÉRIGEAU'S NEW biography of Jean Renoir—in 1940, just a year after the release of *The Rules of the Game*, and three years after he achieved international acclaim with *Grand Illusion*—the then-46-year-old filmmaker is mustering the resolve and the means to leave France for Hollywood. We learn that Renoir would later describe, with more than a touch of drama, how he was courted by "Frenchmen working for Nazi cultural organizations," who urged him to agree to "work within the framework of the New France." In Renoir's account, such pressures were what eventually tipped the scale, inducing him to flee his beloved motherland for the American studio system. Yet, as Mérigeau observes, "historical truth is something else." He continues: "Beginning in 1940, Renoir tried to gamble on two tables at the same time, striving to make it possible to leave while also preparing for the failure of this plan."

Unvarnished authenticity is an effect that past Renoir biographers have largely failed to render, and Mérigeau explicitly contrasts his project with its two most notable predecessors: Renoir's own memoirs, and André Bazin's posthumously published writings. Awarded the elite Prix Goncourt upon



"the best known fat man on Earth." *A Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* plug covers all the bases: "Great! Rotten! Fine! I Don't Get It! What's It All About?" Ad copywriters further tweaked their tone to match national or local tenor.

Of course, the illustrations are the draw here, with sensational copy (1917's *Cleopatra* promises exactly "1,000 Marvelous Scenes") sharing space with massive faces like a cut-out Norma Shearer shouting "I Can Take Care of Myself In Your

its 2012 publication in France and appearing now in a fresh translation by Bruce Benderson, Mérigeau's richly researched and fluidly crafted text sets out to tell a definitive version of the great cinéaste's life story. The volume's 900-page bulk rests on the respected critic's principled attention to detailed anecdote, assembled into a chatty yet scrupulously grounded rendering of the fabric of Renoir's life—from the grand forces that shaped his idyllic childhood and young adulthood, as his family crisscrossed France in thrall to his renowned father's domestic preferences, to the landscape of fellow artists, institutions, and world events against which his mature mastery (and personal shortcomings) emerged.

If the book sometimes falls short of his goal of a more objective reading—most troublingly in Mérigeau's efforts to explain away allegations of anti-Semitism—the project as a whole is genuinely clarifying. By explicating the more banal elements of Renoir's personal and professional life—the mechanics of financing and recruiting for his films, in France and in Hollywood; the social and economic fallout from multiple failed marriages and business arrangements; the reception of each film, and its effect on subsequent productions—Mérigeau empowers himself to issue bracing statements that distill the causes and effects that undergird Renoir's industrial art.

Renoir himself was prone to recasting his life's stories with a degree of apocryphal self-aggrandizement, and sometimes just played to an audience expecting a myth. Across a linear narrative, which closely attends to the lived, day-to-day experiences of its subject, Mérigeau traces the origins of that larger-than-life image, and what it reveals and obscures about the man and his actual legacy. Immersed in the book's storytelling, you feel as if you're sitting beside an old friend of the great filmmaker's, listening to him recount events that he witnessed firsthand. In translating, Benderson, also an essayist and novelist, may err on the side of syntactical literalism but he lets the biographer's warm, supple language—infused with the author's clear-eyed affection for his subject—shine through.

Mérigeau refers to scores of private letters, news reports, and other archival sources, but one of the book's most notable contributions is its deep-dive into the largely unpublished letters and production files stored in the Jean Renoir Papers at UCLA, and in the Archives Jean Renoir at ECPAD in France. These citations—augmented by the author's frank conversations with Jean's son Alain and other surviving friends of the filmmaker—add descriptive texture and heft. As a creative work, the biography is deeply invested (if not uniformly successful) in deconstructing the legend of Jean Renoir the artist, and bringing it into contact with Jean Renoir the man. ●

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Man's World!" in the liberated *A Free Soul* (1931), or the painstakingly rendered visages of Gable, Lugosi, and Kong.

McElwee runs the lovable blog Greenbriar Picture Shows, likewise devoted to what he calls cinema's Classic Era

(generously stretching from the earliest silents to the mid-'60s), and his brisk commentary here has the same folksily wry color. The rich survey is often funny, never dull, delivering "Sights and Thrills You May Never Behold Again!"
—Justin Stewart

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