

## CARRIE RICKEY

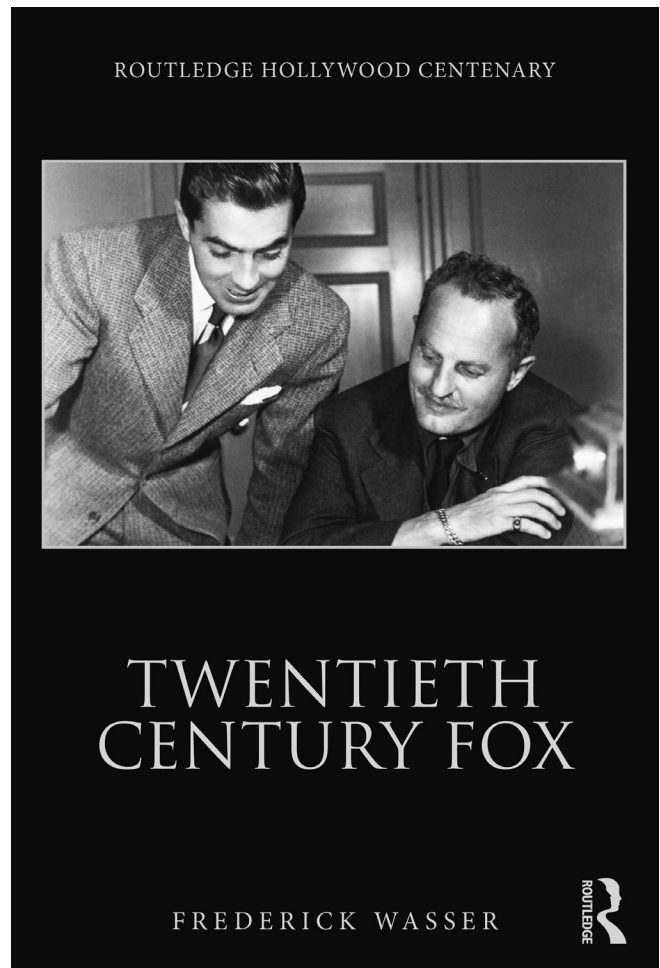
*Twentieth Century Fox* by Frederick Wasser

*Twentieth Century Fox* is the third in Routledge's eight-volume "Hollywood Centenary" series chronicling the creation of the film-production entities born as stand-alone movie studios and their evolution into the entertainment divisions of today's transnational corporations. Fox was born a few years before Hollywood became the American film capital and would, by the time of its 2019 acquisition by Walt Disney, outlive the century for which it was named.

Given its focus on colorful figures like William Fox, Darryl F. Zanuck, and Rupert Murdoch, the book promises dramas of hubris, Oedipal complexes, and political intrigue. Disappointingly, it lacks all three. Instead, the biggest surprise in this workmanlike book from Frederick Wasser is how much of the studio's century—especially its commitment to movie palaces, newsreels, and wide-screen production—was put in place in the 1920s by founder William Fox (born Fuchs), Hungarian immigrant and onetime *schmatta* dealer.

In 1904, a garment-industry associate, Sol Brill, approached Fox about pooling their savings to buy an arcade in Brooklyn's Bushwick neighborhood. On its second floor, amid the penny amusements, was a rudimentary theater showing one-reelers for a nickel. After their purchase, the crowds that Fox and Brill saw when they originally toured the property had disappeared, and Fox suspected that the seller had planted them (11). Fox upgraded the theater space, but the foot traffic remained slow. So he tried out the ballyhoo of the time, hiring a sword swallower who performed on the ground floor to get onlookers to follow him upstairs to the theater. Before long Fox, who would soon buy out Brill and the partners who had since joined them, had fifteen theaters across the five boroughs. He called his company Box Office Attractions (BOA).

Fox got an education in which movies worked with audiences. (His, he insisted, were mostly immigrants like himself.) He got an education in city bureaucracy and learned how to push back when New York's mayor didn't want movies showing on Sunday. Most of all, he got schooled



in the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC), learning how Thomas Edison and his cohorts elbowed other American filmmakers and exhibitors out of film cameras, projectors, and filmmaking by claiming patent infringement. In 1911, the MPPC targeted BOA, attempting to do away with Fox by buying and liquidating his company. Fox resisted. First, he won an injunction forcing the MPPC to continue supplying him with films to show. Then he challenged the MPPC's actions as a violation of the Anti-Trust Act. The government agreed to litigate the case. In an out-of-court settlement, the MPPC paid damages of \$300,000; that money financed Fox's entry into the production end of the movie business.

The timing was propitious. With the MPPC no longer a constant nuisance, film studios had started making serious money on feature-length films such as *Queen Elizabeth* (Henri Desfontaines and Louis Mercanton, 1912) with Sarah Bernhardt. It was distributed in the United States by

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Adolph Zukor, later a founder of Paramount Pictures, who coproduced *The Prisoner of Zenda* (Hugh Ford and Edwin S. Porter, 1913), the first American feature film.

Unlike Zukor, who looked to the theater for properties to adapt, Fox was drawn to the real-life “sex, scandal and blood” of the New York City tabloids (19). To this end, he hired Winfield Sheehan, once a writer for Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York Evening World*, who had also served as secretary to the city’s police commissioner. Sheehan helped film executives such as Fox thread their way through New York City regulations.

“The newspaper industry was discovering visuals, graphics and pictures at the same time the cinema was emerging,” says Wasser, in “a generational redefinition of the industry for an audience of old and new readers” (19). His implication is that from the beginning of Fox’s self-named studio, incorporated in 1915, the mogul was out for a mass rather than class audience. I am not convinced that is strictly true, as Fox was also the guy who imported expressionist filmmaker F.W. Murnau from Germany to make *Sunrise* (1927).

What does seem to be true is that Fox had learned from exhibition that it’s the ballyhoo and not the movie that gets butts into seats—a lesson that led him from the start to have one of the industry’s most resourceful publicity departments. For *A Fool There Was* (Frank Powell, 1915), the company’s first blockbuster, Fox’s flacks transformed Theodosia Goodman, daughter of an immigrant Jewish tailor, into the man-eater Theda Bara, touting her name as an anagram for “Arab death.” “It was the theatrical side of Fox’s growing company that selected [her] for the role of the ‘Vamp,’ and it was the news side that built her Vamp image before the public” (22). Wasser characterizes this as an early instance of the importance of a film’s paratext.

Equally important for Fox was the context in which patrons saw the studio’s films. Even before he began making movies, Fox had liquidated his storefront theaters and hired architect Thomas Lamb to build his first cinema showplace, the City Theatre, on 14th Street near Lüchow’s. Lamb would build many more movie palaces for Fox nationwide, including the Audubon Theatre and Ballroom in Manhattan’s Washington Heights, where, famously, Malcolm X would be assassinated in 1965.

While Fox wasn’t the first North American film entity to control the production, distribution, and exhibition of its films (Pathé and the MPPC had also pioneered vertical integration), William Fox was “among the first new ‘Hollywood’ generation of moguls to vertically integrate” (25). By 1916 he and his lieutenant, Sheehan, went to Southern

California to acquire other studios and build a beachhead for Fox in the emerging movie capital.

As Paramount touted its “famous players in famous plays” and before the newly consolidated MGM promoted its emerging stars, Fox distinguished its priorities by creating a newsreel division, a distant forerunner of today’s Fox News. The studio used the Fox News Company synergistically: the division often shot the hard-hitting establishing sequences of its feature films and cast its own actors in Hollywood-based news stories.

After its founder was removed as studio head in 1930, Fox enjoyed a reputation as “Hollywood’s Gentile studio.” Prior to that, however, during the 1920s, William Fox had been a prime target of Ford Motors founder Henry Ford, then waging an anti-Semitic campaign against Hollywood and its Jewish moguls. According to Upton Sinclair, who wrote a biography of Fox in 1933, Ford had “assembled a grand lot of material concerning [Fox’s] business methods and the moral character of his pictures” [34]. After Fox wrote back to Ford that his newsreel men had lots of auto-accident footage involving Ford cars and that he would pick out the most dramatic ones to put into the Fox newsreels, “Henry sent word back to William that he had decided to stop the attacks on the Jews” (34).

Wasser credits Fox with launching the career of John Ford, who directed his first major film, *The Iron Horse* (1924), for the studio, foreshadowing his career as a movie storyteller of the American West. Wasser mistakenly ascribes to Fox management a progressiveness in hiring female screenwriters such as Frances Marion; perhaps he is unaware that most scholars agree that there were probably more female screenwriters, and certainly directors, in Hollywood before 1920 than after. Wasser does, however, make an important point: the rise of nativism in the United States in the 1920s, when quotas were adopted and fewer immigrants were admitted, contributed to the ethnic stereotyping of the “Eyetalian” and Irish immigrants in *The Iron Horse* (41). He does not speculate on how Fox, himself an immigrant whose first patrons were mostly immigrants, might have felt about this.

As Wasser tells it, Fox was literally and metaphorically more of a big-picture guy than his peers. Reacting to the rise of radio, Fox wanted the studio to pioneer sound technology. “Unlike Paramount and Warner, Fox did not seek to invest in the emerging broadcast networks. Instead, he reacted to radio by focusing on the new technologies of making movies” (40). And when Fox beheld the wide-screen sequence in the final reel of Paramount’s *Old Ironsides* (James Cruze, 1926), he saw how it could revolutionize the

movies. Paramount didn't continue wide-screen production in that era, but Fox immediately developed "Grandeur," an early wide-screen technology.

Warners may have won the initial battle to bring sound to the movies, but it was the Tri-Ergon process owned by Fox that triumphed—but too late for William Fox. He had successfully led the studio and its enviable chain of showplaces for more than fifteen years but overleveraged himself while growing his theater chain and developing sound and wide-screen processes. Shortly before the stock-market crash, he struck a secret deal with Nicholas Schenck of Loews (parent company of MGM) to acquire a controlling interest in its theaters. When news leaked, the attorney general informed him that this violated antitrust law. Ironically, the very same legislation that Fox had used against the Edison cartel (the MPPC) now was used against him. It unmade him. Yet the company he created would flourish for another ninety years. This may be because he had a "bigger vision" than his peers and one that, as Wasser writes, "anticipates contemporary media empires" (54).

After Fox's exit in 1930, Sheehan managed the studio until 1933, reporting to New York stockholders, as did his counterparts Louis B. Mayer at MGM and Harry Cohn at Columbia. In 1935 Darryl F. Zanuck, a former executive at Warners, was named vice president when Fox merged with the indie Twentieth Century, creating Twentieth Century Fox.

When Zanuck enters, clad in jodhpurs and wielding a riding crop, the book comes alive, as does its storytelling. At this point the biggest star on the studio payroll is Shirley Temple, age seven. Zanuck hired others—notably, Alice Faye, Tyrone Power, and Henry Fonda. Wasser cites Thomas Schatz to the effect that the Fox house style during Zanuck's early years is not immediately recognizable. I would argue that it is recognizable more in narrative theme than in a film's look or sound. Zanuck made biopics of the heroes of capitalism—for example, *Lloyd's of London* (Henry King, 1936), about the founding of the insurance giant, and *Suez* (Allan Dwan, 1938), about the canal's financing and creation. On the other side of the economic spectrum, he liked movies of working-class struggle, like *The Grapes of Wrath* (John Ford, 1940) and *How Green Was My Valley* (John Ford, 1941), and though John Ford despised Zanuck, he did some of his best work for him.

Zanuck served in the army from 1941 to 1943 while Fox's documentary division chronicled battles in both the Pacific and Atlantic theaters. Even before the war was over, documentary aesthetic and techniques were absorbed by the studios, more so at Fox than elsewhere. The move from what Wasser calls "the old delight in artifice to the new

interest in authenticity" (106) manifested itself in Zanuck's recruitment of Elia Kazan and other social-realist stage directors from Broadway and by promoting newsreel man Louis de Rochemont to head a unit making movies ripped from headlines.

For Fox, Kazan directed social-problem films about poverty, anti-Semitism, and racism—notably *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1945), *Gentlemen's Agreement* (1947), and *Pinky* (1949), all based on best sellers. De Rochemont produced documentary-style spy thrillers shot on location, like *The House on 92nd Street* (Henry Hathaway, 1945) and *Call Northside 777* (Henry Hathaway, 1948). Thus did Twentieth Century Fox forge "its own unique and somewhat pioneering path in the mix of realism coming out of the war" (107). While *Gentlemen's Agreement* and *Pinky* look dated today, not so the de Rochemont films.

To compete with the many extracinematic challenges the studios faced in the postwar period (the rise of TV, HUAC hearings, antimonopoly legislation, and the population shift to suburbs without movie theaters), Fox committed to Cinemascope, a wide-screen process of the sort that Fox had developed twenty-some years prior. The first 'scope films were released in 1953.

In 1956, Zanuck decamped from the studio to live in Paris, rising capital of art cinema, as an indie producer. Wasser credits him "with an unconscious instinct for the zeitgeist" (138). Fox would coproduce *The Leopard* (Luchino Visconti, 1963) and *Zorba the Greek* (Michael Cacoyannis, 1964). In 1961, Zanuck offered to produce *The Longest Day* (Ken Annakin, Andrew Marton, and Bernhard Wicki, 1962), a D-Day epic in the documentary style showing the events from the views of the British, American, French, and German people, filmed by three directors in four languages—with subtitles! Due to runaway costs on *Cleopatra* (Joseph Mankiewicz, 1963), in 1962 the Fox board fired Spyros P. Skouras, who had presided since 1942, and rehired Zanuck, this time as studio president. In turn he hired his son, Richard, as production chief. "The enduring story about *Cleopatra* is that it almost destroyed the company. But the true story is that its release along with *The Longest Day* made money for the studio" (152).

For a time, the two Zanucks successfully negotiated the cultural generation gap by offering a slate of TV programs—*Daniel Boone* and *Batman*—and movies—*The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965) and *Our Man Flint* (Daniel Mann, 1966)—that counterbalanced traditional genre movies with hip genre send-ups. The elder Zanuck "push[ed] for late '60s versions" of the socially engaged films he had made in the 1940s and announced a biopic

of *Malcolm X* that did not materialize (166). The younger Zanuck pushed for *Patton* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1970), based on a deliberately ambiguous screenplay from Francis Ford Coppola that made the general look like a war hero to World War II vets and a warmonger to Vietnam War protesters. Coppola thought that for a film to succeed, it had to unite a fractured audience.

Despite its successes, Fox was losing money. In 1970, the elder Zanuck forced his son's resignation. Four months later, the elder Zanuck was out. In 1973 Alan Ladd Jr., son of the actor, became the vice president of creative affairs. It would be a crucial hire, as Ladd prevailed over the board when it nixed a sci-fi fantasy called *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), which cost \$11 million and made \$307 million in domestic box office alone. Fox was the first of the majors to allow its movies to be made available on video and, with its *Star Wars* profits, bought the video company Andre Blay.

Ladd was eased out in 1979, and studio president Dennis Stanfill sought to take the company private, making it vulnerable to a hostile takeover. Rupert Murdoch acquired Fox in 1984 while Barry Diller was chairman and in the midst of launching Fox Television. Diller remained with Fox until 1992. It was the first in a tsunami of studio takeovers by media companies. Soon Warners would be bought by Time, Paramount by Viacom, and Columbia by the television and VCR manufacturer Sony.

"In the Murdoch-era, Twentieth Century Fox was no longer a film company. At this time, its major impact on world civilization was as part of a media conglomerate" (209). Wasser spends 80 percent of his book on Fox's eventful first sixty years and 20 percent on its last forty-five, which are equally eventful, but more complex to write about, because TV is not the same animal as film. Reading the last chapters is like watching a PowerPoint presentation at hyperspace speed.

The complexity of Fox's diversifying and expanding media network is evinced in the ways in which Fox Television differentiated itself from the legacy networks. Wasser notes that, whether Fox programs were reactionary or progressive, they fostered a "background of a nihilistic cynicism" as its "cable news division had become, in effect, the propaganda arm of the American Republican Party" (216). While Diller created the fourth TV network, theatrical film became an afterthought. Nonetheless, in 1994 the studio got into the indie-cinema business, founding Fox Searchlight. More recently, "[t]he Marvel Comics phenomenon of the first decade of the new millennium was actually innovated by Twentieth Century Fox" (243) with *X-Men* (Bryan Singer, 2000) and its sequels.

Wasser does not pursue an obvious through line here: that of America's inconsistent rulings on monopolies, which were permitted for a period during Edison's and Murdoch's day(s), but prosecuted under the leadership of Fox and Zanuck.

In 2017, Murdoch sold the film side of the company to Walt Disney, which was eager to hold copyright to movie franchises and the Fox film library. For Wasser, the sale marks an "end of history where one can ask: Is the final corporate vision of filmmaking as just another profit center a betrayal of its origin?" (250).

To that I would answer "Yes, but" and invoke the adage that he who pays the piper calls the tune. And would add that, in a global economy, moviemakers with the democratic sociopolitical concerns of Zanuck have become rare.

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## TOM KLEIN

### *Mary Ellen Bute: Pioneer Animator* by Kit Smyth Basquin

The advent of sound on film was a moment in animation history dominated by *Steamboat Willie* (Ub Iwerks, 1928). This landmark Disney cartoon still evokes the end of silent cinema, but it also occludes other visionary approaches that emerged just after this paradigm shift. One such vision was that of Mary Ellen Bute. Although the iconography of Mickey Mouse stamped its mark across both commerce and pop culture, Bute's vision was the more daring mainstream entertainment. In Bute's hands, the short-form spectacle of a moving image did not just synchronize to music, it vitalized it. She was inspired by modernist painters, not filmmakers. As a teenager growing up on a Texas ranch, she saw Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912) reproduced in a magazine and was transfixed. Its successive poses showed the liminal spaces that filmic art could occupy. The story of how this young woman then moved east and established herself as a leading figure of abstract animation is as transfixing as it is revealing.

Kit Smyth Basquin's biography, *Mary Ellen Bute: Pioneer Animator*, provides the first book-length study of M.E. Bute's life and work. Its early chapters allow the reader to travel the winding path that led to her first film. Bute had pursued other studies, but in time she realized she was