

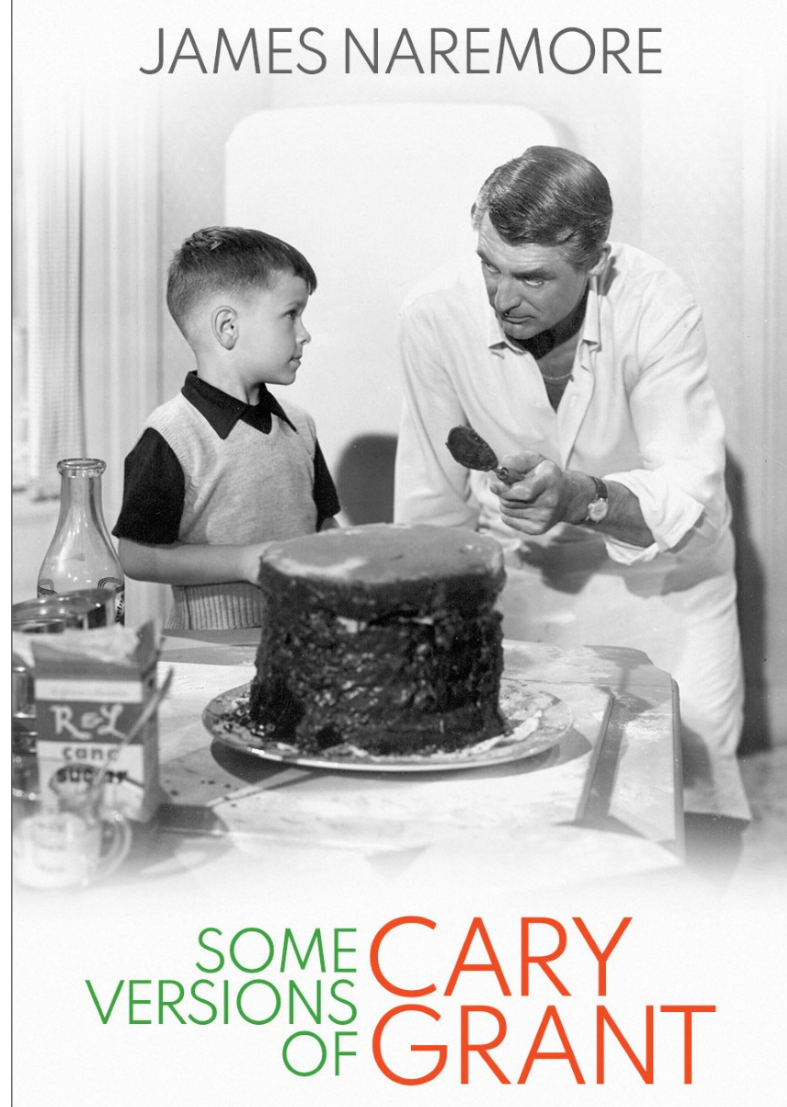
A Short Interview With James Naremore

By Tamar Hanstke

There is something about the Golden Age of Hollywood that seems to attract many of the best and brightest scholarly minds in the film studies field, and I am so grateful that one of them generously donated his time to contribute to this issue of *Cinephile*. Dr. James Naremore has made a name for himself, in part, by writing a variety of books about the Golden Age of Hollywood, including *The Magic World of Orson Welles* (1978); *The Films of Vincente Minnelli* (1993); *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (1998); and, most recently, *Film Noir: A Very Short Introduction* (2019) and *Some Versions of Cary Grant* (2022). Alongside writing books, Dr. Naremore enjoys a position as Chancellors' Professor Emeritus at Indiana University, and has provided a number of written essays and audio commentaries to the Criterion Collection's home media releases. What follows is a brief interview I conducted with Dr. Naremore over email, covering some of his accomplishments and his unique perspective on our theme of "New Lenses on Old Hollywood".

Tamar Hanstke: Firstly, thank you so much for contributing an essay to this issue of *Cinephile*, and agreeing to take part in this short interview! Your book *Acting in the Cinema* (1988) is one I initially encountered during my undergraduate degree, and your writings about the simultaneous pleasures and challenges of analyzing an actor's performance in written form are ones that have stuck with me ever since. Your insights in this book, in tandem with your many works on Golden Age filmmaking and personalities including *Film Noir*, Vincente Minnelli, Orson Welles, and Cary Grant, make me very excited to hear some of your thoughts on the specific topic of this issue of *Cinephile*: *New Lenses on Old Hollywood*.

To begin, I am curious about your early experiences with viewings from the Golden Age of Hollywood. I learned from some past interviews linked on your website (<https://jamesnaremore.net>) that you benefited from growing up in an era of truly great filmmaking—particularly the French New Wave—and that



SOME VERSIONS OF CARY GRANT

Figure 1. James Naremore's most recently published book.

you had easy access to these films at various college campus screenings. I was wondering about how you came to delve more deeply into the Golden Age of films that were so influential on these French New Wave filmmakers, and what were some films or stars that particularly struck you during this early viewing period?

James Naremore: Yes, I still bear the lipstick traces of the critics of the French New Wave, along with the writings of Andrew Sarris, who formed my taste for classic Hollywood. My earliest writing and teaching of film was devoted to Alfred Hitchcock and Orson Welles. I'm still an auteurist and have a fondness for many of the old guard—Hawks, Lubitsch, Ophuls, and Tourneur especially. But I'm ambivalent about Hollywood and as time went on my writing increasingly showed this. We should remember that Hitchcock became famous in Britain, Welles made half his films in Europe, and Kubrick, about whom I also did a book, became a kind of self-exile, moving to England. I recently did a book about Charles Burnett, who

was never a Hollywood director. Still, I remain a fan of the old pictures on Turner Classic Movies. I've always liked a remark by Welles: "I love movies but I hate Hollywood."

Tamar Hanstke: Turning to the very literal nature of this issue's topic "new lenses", I am interested in some of your experiences working as an academic in the field of classical Hollywood studies. You published your first books on the Golden Age in the 1970s, and you are still writing about this period today, with your recent publication *Some Versions of Cary Grant*. Congratulations on that, by the way! As a result of your long-spanning career, I imagine you have seen many changes in this field over the years. Has your own approach to writing about the classical Hollywood era changed as a result of larger shifts in your field over time? In a similar vein, are there any topics or "lenses" you wish were more prevalent in scholarly writing on this era today?

James Naremore: I began at a moment of world-wide cinephilia, which was immediately challenged by left high theory. Auteurism came under heavy attack, and classic Hollywood was considered ideologically pernicious. My politics have always been of the left, and I've tried to reconcile my politics with my aestheticism, which I hope is apparent in everything I've done. But I still admire classic Hollywood filmmakers and think they deserve close formal analysis. Cultural studies made things easier for me, as I hope is apparent in my little book on Minnelli. Where I think I differ with contemporary trends is in my belief that personal enthusiasm, artistic evaluation, and formal analysis, not simply reception study, is crucial. Without evaluation, there is no politics. I also try to make my writing of interest to non-academics.

Tamar Hanstke: Forgive me, this next question is quite personal to my own interests and past engagement with your book *Acting in the Cinema*—however, it is a curiosity I have held for a long time, and am very interested in your thoughts. In the introduction to your book, you describe the challenges of analyzing acting performances thusly:

Unfortunately, the attempt to describe some [aspects of performance] in writing is rather like wrestling with Proteus . . . actors use analog techniques; their movements, gestures, and inflections are presented in gradations of more and less—subtle degrees of everchanging expression that

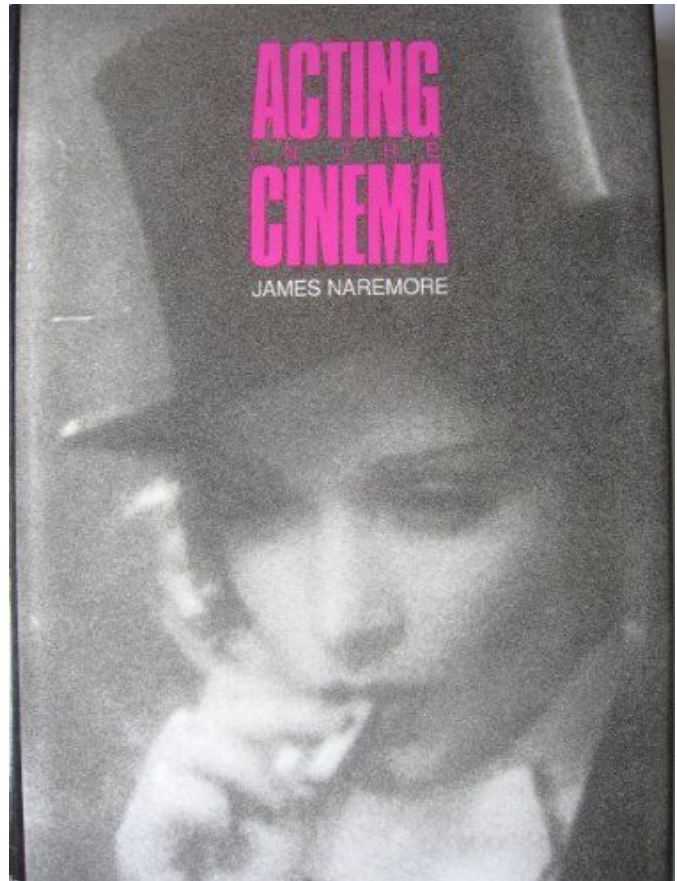


Figure 2. One of James Naremore's classic publications.

are easy to comprehend in the context of a given film but difficult to analyze without falling back on unwieldy tables of statistics or fuzzy, adjectival language.

I have read that this book is one you have mixed feelings on, partly due to the difficulties you describe in the above quotation. I am personally interested in star and performance studies, and have lately become more engaged with the academic trend of using the video essay format to examine acting performances. I'm fascinated by how this format opens up the possibility for an audience to appreciate the original film text and the scholar's analysis simultaneously, in a way that cannot be achieved in written form. I saw that you recently recorded a commentary track with Jonathan Rosenbaum for the Criterion Collection's 4k box set release of *Citizen Kane*, and I know that Criterion is particularly invested in video essay criticism, with a couple of video essays even appearing in that specific box set. I was wondering if you have any thoughts about the video essay trend, and if you personally see merit in this medium as a new form of academic analysis, particularly in the realm of acting and performance studies?

James Naremore: You're right. The video essay is indeed an important development for critical analysis of performance. The problem in the past was that there was no way for writers of books or essays on film to actually quote. A literary critic can quote a poem and analyze it, but with movies we were limited to frame enlargements. I'm currently working on a video essay with a former student (now a professor at Northwestern) in which we analyze the way actors use objects.

Tamar Hanstke: Switching gears now to the wonderful essay you provided for this issue on *His Kind of Woman*, I really appreciate your personality and warmth in describing this film. One of the prompts I had written for the call for papers for this issue was the idea of Golden Age cinema as a kind of "comfort food", and your essay is a lovely engagement with this concept of loving films that, as you say, "nobody would list as masterpieces". I am sure that everyone who will later be reading this issue has at least one beloved film that would fall under this category! I am interested in how you first encountered *His Kind of Woman*, and in hearing a bit more about whether you believe the inconsistencies of the film—which have led many to overlook or discredit it—are a large part of what actually make it so special. You have mentioned in other interviews that it is frustrating when scholars try to overly constrain what *Film Noir* is or should be, and this film often seems to play with such expectations, as you elaborate on in your essay. Given that you in particular have spent so much time researching *Film Noir*, is part of the "personal pleasure" of the film the way it diverges from other, similar films in this 'genre'?

James Naremore: I have at least five old movies that I return to often, and I'm sure many people do. In my case the choices probably have something to do with my age. I first saw *His Kind of Woman* in a theater when I was a kid, and it stayed with me. As I indicated in the introduction to my book on noir, I think I have a deep attachment to movies of that kind made in the 1940s and 1950s. I wouldn't say that *His Kind of Woman* has "inconsistencies," it just has a wayward charm, both sinister and romantically amusing. For me that doesn't make it better than *The Maltese Falcon* or *Double Indemnity* or *Laura*—it's just different.

Tamar Hanstke: To conclude, many of the authors for and readers of this issue are graduate students or recent post-graduates who are just beginning their foray into classical Hollywood studies. As a veteran of the field, do you have any advice or recommendations for

those who are just now entering it?

James Naremore: I've been retired from teaching for a long time, but if I were still doing it, I would stress that grad students need to see as many films as possible and read good critical books. There is less a generally agreed canon of films nowadays, but ten-best lists such as the *Sight and Sound* poll, which gives you the choices made by individual critics and filmmakers, is maybe a place to start. Canons should never be fixed, but one should see movies that cinephiles and cineastes recommend.

Thanks for inviting me,
Jim.

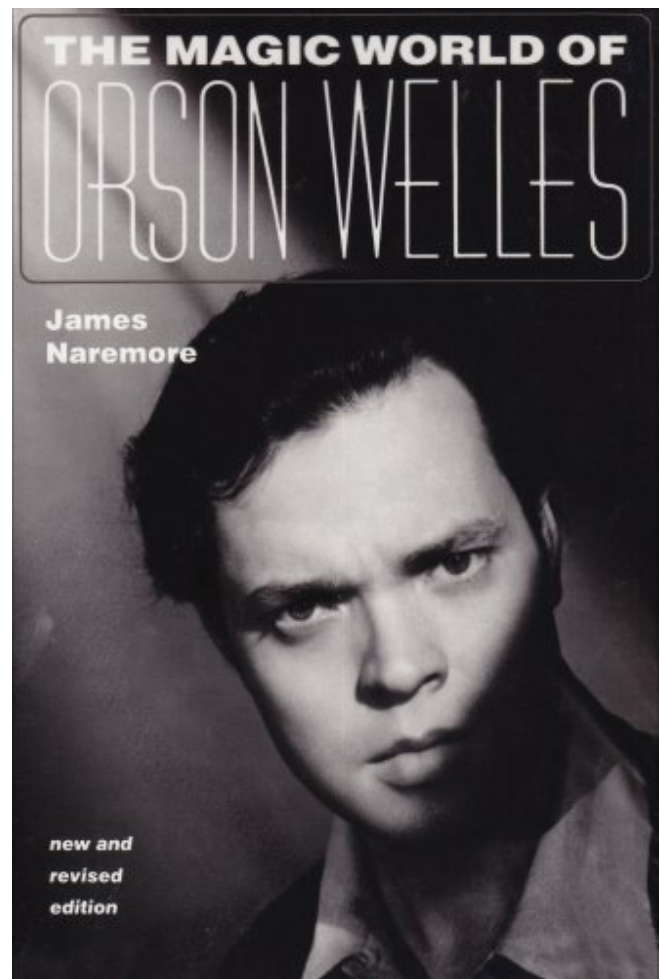


Figure 3. Another of James Naremore's classic publications.