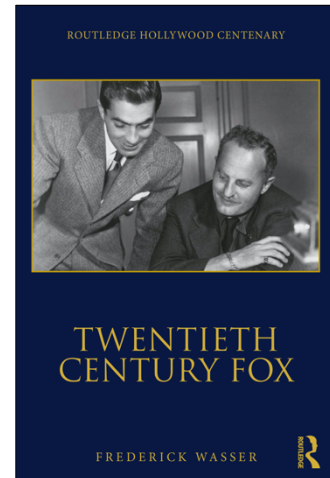


Frederick Wasser, **Twentieth Century Fox**, London, UK: Routledge, 2021, 283 pp., \$38.61 (paperback).

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In the concluding chapter to *Twentieth Century Fox*, Frederick Wasser's detailed industrial history of the Hollywood studio, the author writes, "The company started by William Fox after he got the government to break up a trust, has come full circle to Fox becoming part of a dominant oligopoly" (p. 250). This is a succinct moment of history writing, highlighting how the Fox Film Corporation's story is bookended with monopolistic business practices, first as resistance and, then, decades later, again as acquiescence. This is a story, the author demonstrates, of film executives and their business decisions, rooted in a deft understanding of the markets and moviegoing culture as much as petty grievances and vendettas. As Wasser explains in his introduction, there were many ways to tell the story of Fox's history: as a series of technological developments or in relation to major historical events, for example. Wasser's choice to tell Fox's story through its many executives and their differing visions for the studio illuminates how strongly economics have shaped the form and content of motion pictures since their invention.



There is so much rich material from libraries and collections like the University of South Carolina's archive of Fox Movietone reels and the Margaret Herrick Library's cache of production files and personal papers that it is hard to believe *Twentieth Century Fox* is the first book-length scholarly study of the studio, which began in 1904 when James Stuart Blackton and William Fox pooled their money in order to purchase an amusement arcade in Brooklyn. As a reader who is already familiar with Hollywood's industrial history, I was nonetheless compelled by Wasser's account. His focus on executive decision making as a frame for the history of Fox offers new perspectives on the same technological stories told over and over in the field. For example, Hollywood's conversion to sound frequently centers on Warner Bros. and their gamble on the new technology and the consequent release of *The Jazz Singer* in 1927. But Wasser's Fox-focused approach to film history highlights how "the company shaped the sound revolution just as decisively as the Warner brothers" (p. 47). The studio was an early collaborator with sound-on-film inventors Theodore Case and Earl Sponable and was the first studio to pair the recorded voices of news subjects with their Movietone newsreels. Although Warner Bros.' purchase of Vitaphone "grabbed the attention and the initial profits" (p. 50), it was Fox's Movietone that ultimately won "the sound format war" (p. 51). What is key about all of these historical threads, developments, and figures is that they appear as supporting characters in the primary story about the life and times of Fox studios. By offering a fixed point from which to stand, Wasser's book provided a new perspective on this story, one anchored to a single studio as it was passed from executive to executive.

Much like Thomas Schatz's *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*, Wasser's history takes the reader into "the room where it happens," citing interstudio memos, letters penned by executives, and on-set anecdotes to explain how and why Hollywood studios became all-powerful monopolies, as well as why those studios dissolved and reformed into a complex series of media conglomerates

with interests and intellectual properties woven through film, television, music, and now, streaming platforms (p. 8). He positions this history of Fox as the history of a century of American popular culture, which, of course, it is. Like Neal Gabler's *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*, Wasser offers detailed background on the key architects of the studio system and how their backgrounds as immigrants and, more specifically, as Jewish immigrants, impacted the stories their studios told.

One hundred and fifteen years of motion picture and, later, television, history is formidable ground to cover in a single volume, and the author admirably maintains the through line of Fox's historical narrative as the story of one studio's attempts to stay afloat. In particular, the chapters devoted to Fox's infancy in the early silent era and its growth as one of the majors during the height of the studio system are impeccably researched and peppered with fascinating anecdotes about studio heads, directors, writers, and stars. In particular, Wasser's deep dives into the lives and careers of pivotal Fox stars like Theda Bara (nee Theodosia Goodman), Shirley Temple, Will Rogers, and Elizabeth Taylor alongside major directors like John Ford, Elia Kazan, and George Lucas, offer a fresh lens for understanding these figures.

For example, Wasser draws parallels between the character of Cleopatra, as portrayed by Elizabeth Taylor in the 1963 big-budget costume drama, with part of Theda Bara's "Vamp" legacy, first crafted at Fox with the 1917 silent version of the same story property. Likewise, while the multimedia blockbuster *Star Wars* franchise has been discussed and analyzed at an exponential rate due to its proliferating platforms and unprecedented fan engagement, Wasser's retelling of the film's origin, rooted in its identity as a Twentieth Century Fox production, contextualizes the studio's goal of creating a film experience through the use of "high stakes visual representation" (p. 193). These moments of historical resonance make Wasser's monograph an excellent way to learn about Fox for the first time, or to learn about major innovations, artistic achievements, performances, and the artists themselves in a new light. Wasser's clear, jargon-free writing style means it will also appeal to a wider audience of Hollywood film buffs, who will also enjoy the details on Fox's industrial history as much as the documented squabbles between studio heads and those in their orbit. This book could easily be assigned to graduate as well as undergraduate courses focusing on American film history, media industries, and star studies.

The book's biggest strength—its retelling of the history of Fox from the beginning until the end—is also one of the only quibbles I have with it. Specifically, it may not be possible to effectively cover the entire history of Fox in a single volume without giving some eras short shrift. The first seven chapters (covering 1904–1984) were rich with detail but the last two chapters of the book, "Twentieth Century Fox as Murdoch's Global Conglomerate (1984–1997)" and "Fox Outlasts the Twentieth Century by 20 Years (1998–2019)," were scantier by comparison. As with the other chapters, the final two are structured in terms of the various business decisions made by Fox's owner, the inimitable or infamous Australian media tycoon, Rupert Murdoch. Like Fox and Darryl Zanuck before him, Murdoch's shadow looms large over the studio and its evolution.

However, Murdoch's tenure also coincides with Fox's full transition from a sole concern with film to other media, most prominently television, and the creation of the Fox TV Network in 1986, as well as FOX News in 1996. This makes Wasser's thematic through line messier and more difficult to follow, as it necessitates pivoting between discussions of TV, then film, then back again. The history of Fox (both as a TV network and as a cable news channel) is complicated and deserving of a book-length study in its own right (see for example,

Kristal Brent Zook's *Color by Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television* and Gabriel Sherman's *The Loudest Voice In The Room*, to name two excellent examples) so its presence, here, as the endpoint of a series of marketing decisions, felt rushed. This content never felt fully integrated into the larger history of the studio, perhaps because Fox is so much more than a producer of movies in the 21st century. Herein lies the challenge of writing the history of film studios after the collapse of the studio system, when they become something *other* than film studios. I finished those chapters wanting to know more about Murdoch, but also the programming decisions made by the Fox network and Fox News. But this is a minor complaint about an otherwise thorough and fascinating history.

At a time when it is difficult to tease apart the inner machinations and continually shifting borders and alliances within and among modern media conglomerates like Hearst Communications and The Walt Disney Company, Wasser's *Twentieth Century Fox* offers a singular path through the history of mass-produced American visual culture from one-reelers projected in converted store fronts, to costume dramas screened in motion picture palaces, to VHS tapes played in living rooms across America. Indeed, this history of Fox Film Company "from the beginning to the end," doubles as a history of a century of American popular culture; it is a deep dive into how the studio system, as an industrial structure, developed, acclimated to changes in audiences, economies, and technologies, and finally, dispersed across multiple platforms and business models over the course of the last century (p. 1).

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