

***Celluloid Saviours: Angels and Reform Politics in Hollywood Film*, Emily Caston. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010 (207 pages). ISBN: 978-1-4438-2269-5.**

A Review by Mithuraaj Dhusiya, Hans Raj College, University of Delhi

The emergence of the term film *blanc* as a category for Hollywood films is a relatively new development. Peter L. Valenti was one of the first film scholars to use this term in 1978 to describe those Hollywood films that “show contemporary Americans successfully negotiating a return to the real mortal world after a trip to the twilight region between life in the physical world and either death or an altered state of existence in another, spiritual world” (295). Almost a decade later, Lyn and Tom Davis Genelli broadened the scope of this term by including psychological perspectives: “Just as the ‘film noir’ shows the dark, cynical underside of human motivation, oriented toward death, ‘film *blanc*’ portrays the ‘override’ or human nature, our profound attraction to the Transcendent” (10). While a plethora of critical works exists about ghosts in horror films and, to an extent, about apparitions (godly or otherwise) in horror-comedies, film scholarship, with few exceptions, has largely bypassed film *blanc* with the result that there has been no consistent theoretical formulations about the films that fall into this category. Emily Caston’s *Celluloid Saviours: Angels and Reform Politics in Hollywood Film* is a pioneering work in that it is the first book-length exploration of Hollywood film *blanc*. For Caston, film *blanc* includes a wide corpus of US films “in which a saviour with extraordinary powers suspends the ordinary, known, laws of time and space in order to allow one or more ordinary human characters to reform themselves in life-changing ways” (1). Caston undertakes an extensive historical survey of a specific type of Hollywood film *blanc* that depicts “narratives of angelic intervention”, ranging from *Gabriel over the White House* (1933) to *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004). Caston’s analytical probing locates these films within religious and socio-political developments in American democracy, arguing that, historically, film *blanc* relates to the rise and fall of Democratic social reform policies. Premising that human nature is a “tabula rasa”, Caston persuasively demonstrates how these films mirror America’s efforts to move beyond the Protestant conception of predestination, choosing instead to reach out to the distant vision of America as the promised land of a new world order.

Caston’s own experience in media production—with over two hundred short films, documentaries, TV dramas and music videos for the UK and US markets—is visible in some of her methodological assumptions, particularly her refusal to consider film *blanc* as a distinct genre, choosing instead to explore this category of film as a mix of several old and new generic classifications. Caston argues that this group of films should not be seen belonging to a new genre at all, since it manifests a variety of older traditions such as “the Faust tradition, the Christmas-Scrooge story, Victorian Valentine kitsch, and nineteenth century children’s fiction (with Islamic influences), and, most importantly, the post-Exilic

Hebrew narrative tradition” (156). Caston isolates two major cycles in the history of film *blanc* production: the first cycle includes films released in the period 1933–1956; then, after a gap of almost two decades in which very few films featuring angels were made, the second cycle of the corpus extends from post-1978 releases to the present. This neatly divides her book into two major parts—while Chapters Two to Six deal with the first cycle, arguably the boom period of film *blanc* productions, Chapters Seven to Nine focus on the second cycle.

Caston posits the existence of four types of angelic interventions in the first cycle of films: the “radical spirit”, the “troubled soul”, the “angel in the house” and the “Christmas spirit”, devoting a chapter to each. Relying primarily on plot constructions and characterisation, Caston analyses how the different types of “interventions” in these films were necessitated by political crises in America. The “radical spirit”, for example, was one that would descend on earth to bring into effect a series of radical changes in American society through the figure of the hero, as the spirit of Abraham Lincoln does in *Gabriel over the White House*. The radicalness of this “hero-redeemer” figure, Caston argues, was needed in a country badly hit by the Great Depression even as it anticipated the much-awaited New Deal welfare reforms of Roosevelt, who assumed office three weeks after the release of the film. Another form of angelic intervention is accomplished by “the troubled soul” archetype, who returns to earth from purgatory to complete unfinished business that in turn would secure his release from purgatorial tortures. Films like *The Scoundrel* (1935) articulate such a narrative wherein a corrupt and sinful character is given a second chance to redeem himself within a limited time-frame in order to escape eternal damnation. Such an intervention, Caston posits, was consonant with the progressive Liberal policies of the Democrats in America. The focus of attention shifts from the public to the private with the third type of intervention—that of the “angel in the house” narrative. Often sent to earth to reform wayward men or women, the spirits in the process of reforming their intended audience inevitably raised pertinent issues related to changing gender roles in American society of the 1930s and 1940s. For example, *Angel on My Shoulder* (1946) depicts conventional tough-guy masculinity in trouble, while *Death Takes a Holiday* (1934) portrays a non-normative active femininity. The writer suggests that such gender-related themes mirrored ongoing debates between liberals, communists and conservatives about new, emerging masculinities and femininities. The last category of angelic-intervention film in the first cycle is exemplified by films like *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) that portray guardian angels appearing during the Christmas festivities to teach mankind the joy and importance of distributing gifts to the needy. This, according to the author, was Hollywood’s way of critiquing the Protestant ideals of utilitarianism and individualism. Caston says that this cinematic didacticism, as it were, springs from the widespread belief in the 1930s and 1940s that Hollywood, with its mass popularity, could actually mobilise public opinion for a better America; such a mobilisation was also one of the major aims of the Hays Code.

Caston’s analysis of the second cycle of films, although limited to a smaller number of films, involves more detailed and exhaustive close readings of the text. This cycle, particularly in films produced during the 1980s and 1990s, reveals a preoccupation with financial crises, small town life, fallen angels and the more secular nature of the redeemer figure. Once again, the larger view of American history provides the backdrop for the films’ narratives: for example, Caston argues that unease with the Reagan administration (1981–89), which was mired in several financial scandals throughout the country, is substantially reflected in films like *Trading Places* (1983). The brutality with which the two millionaire brothers in the film get an opportunity to alter the fates of their lesser privileged

acquaintances by virtue of their wealth is a shocking reminder to American citizens of the hazards of selfish individualism and materialism. Borrowing from J. Rosenberg's theorisation of a "type-scene" in Biblical narratives, where the audience experiences an unusual twist in the plot in an otherwise conventional narrative, Caston identifies certain spaces like "the bridge" as strategically important in achieving such an effect in these films: "*the bridge* functions as a place on which the individual enters and exits community in Hollywood film, and, therefore, as the generic location for an angelic intervention to occur" (108). In *The Truman Show* (1998), for example, the tutelary intervention takes indeed place on a bridge. This film is about a young man, Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey), who suddenly discovers that his entire life, right from his childhood, has been a part of a reality television show called "The Truman Show". The bridge can thus be interpreted as a linking point between his real and imagined world, which in turn can be metaphorically understood as the liminal barrier, the margin that separates the real America from an imagined one. Furthermore, as is usually the case with such films, a small-town location becomes central to the action of the film. The small town in the film's narrative is part of a make-believe grand set constructed by crewmembers of the show to dupe Truman. Caston makes a valid observation when she points out that most films in the second cycle consist of fallen angels, which might be literally so, as in the case of Azazel in *Fallen* (1998) or, more metaphorically, as in the form of the very mundanely evil doctor-scientist Howard in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. This secular redeemer, she argues, is never shown to be the protagonist or the hero of such films; and while the secular redeemer might have the power of angelic (or non-angelic) interventions, events in such films are usually triggered by other sources. Thus, in *Eternal Sunshine*, it is the female protagonist Clementine (Kate Winslet) who starts a series of chain reactions through her impulsive nature. Caston emphasises that the uniqueness of the film *blanc* category in the history of Hollywood film production lies in its constant endeavour to promote happiness, optimism and equality in American society through its themes of "life after death, and fulfillment through community and welfare economics" (145).

Caston's book is an exciting new addition to film criticism, taking the little known category of film *blanc* and providing a socio-cultural analysis of the redemption trope over eight decades of Hollywood film. Her exploration of the heterogeneity of "angelic" figures is indeed a very significant contribution to scholarship: just as film noir has many shades of grey, Caston's analysis identifies film *blanc* as an exposition of shades of white, her critical observations about the selfish motives of some of the redeemers being a case in point. She also establishes well-researched and well-documented points of difference between the theological conceptualisation of the angelic or redeemer figure versus its Hollywood-constructed prototype. Caston shows further areas for development in film *blanc* scholarship in her inclusion of non-angelic secular redeemer figures in her study. Perhaps her greatest contribution lies in looking at these films through the prism of religious and political movements, especially the oscillating fortunes of the liberal Democrats in American politics. Her rationalisations, however, do generate significant problems: for example, in the context of *Gabriel over the White House*, Caston casually mentions that Roosevelt took office three weeks after the release of the film, but does not explicitly establish any connection between the historically significant figures of Lincoln and Roosevelt. A more political analysis would perhaps have been a much more productive reassessment of the link between cinematic theme and historical reality, but Caston does not pursue such a line of inquiry. A similar problem of sidestepping politics occurs in relation to minorities: apart from the occasional mention of the existence of minorities such as African Americans, Caston does not consider whether and how these films speak for all of America, since sections of the population such

as ethnic minorities or people of non-heteronormative sexualities seem to be entirely missing from this account, even though it is commonly acknowledged that economic and other downturns often have a sharper effect on these populations. One final line of questioning that would have enriched this study is the relevance and/or impact of stardom to film *blanc*, especially in the last two decades, where Jim Carrey seems to have featured in several films under this rubric. A discussion of pertinent issues, such as how Carrey's star persona contributes to the characters he plays, particularly in terms of the masculinities and the anxieties within these masculinities that these films generate, unfortunately, does not materialise in the course of the study. Sins of omission of another kind should also be mentioned: the work seems to have been proofread in haste as several spelling errors, missing words and sometimes repetitive citations from other sources have persisted into print. These shortcomings notwithstanding, Caston must be commended for a truly pioneering and often very educative study of angelic intervention narratives. Caston's work is recommended for both film scholars and film enthusiasts: while film scholars will certainly be inspired to use it as a launching pad for future research into the category of film *blanc*, the average cinephile will also find much enjoyment in the retro-pictorial collage that Caston assembles.

Works Cited

- Angel on My Shoulder*. Dir. Archie Mayo. Perf. Paul Muni, Anne Baxter and Claude Rains. Vci Videos, 2003. DVD.
- Caston, Emily. *Celluloid Saviours: Angels and Reform Politics in Hollywood Film*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010. Print
- Death Takes a Holiday*. Dir. Mitchell Leisen. Perf. Frederic March, Evelyn Venable and Guy Standing. Universal Pictures, 2010. DVD.
- Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Dir. Michel Gondry. Perf. Jim Carrey, Kate Winslet and Kirsten Dunst. Focus Features, 2004. DVD.
- Fallen*. Dir. Gregory Hoblit. Perf. Denzel Washington, John Goodman and Donald Sutherland. Turner Home Entertainment, 1998. DVD.
- Gabriel Over the White House*. Dir. Gregory La Cava. Perf. Walter Huston and Karen Morley. MGM, 2010. DVD.
- Genelli, Lyn and Tom Davis Genelli. "Between Two Worlds: Life After Death at the Movies". *New Realities Magazine*. January/February. 1988. Print
- It's a Wonderful Life*. Dir. Frank Capra. Perf. James Stewart, Doana Reed, Lionel Barrymore and Henry Travers. Paramount, 2006. DVD.
- The Scoundrel*. Dir. Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur. Perf. Noel Coward, Julie Haydon, Stanley Ridges and Lionel Stander. Paramount Pictures, 1935. Film.
- The Truman Show*. Dir. Peter Weir. Perf. Jim Carrey, Laura Linney, Ed Harris, Noah

Emmerich and Natascha McElhone. Paramount, 1999. DVD.

Trading Places. Dir. John Landis. Perf. Dan Aykroyd, Eddie Murphy, Ralph Bellamy and Don Ameche. Paramount, 2002. DVD.

Valenti, Peter L. "The 'Film Blanc': Suggestions for a Variety of Fantasy: 1940-45." *Journal of Popular Film* 6.4 (Winter 1978). pp. 295-303. Print.

Mithuraaj Dhusiya is Assistant Professor in Department of English, Hans Raj College, University of Delhi. Currently, he is pursuing his PhD on Indian horror films in the Department of English, University of Delhi.