Twenty-First-Century Hollywood: Rebooting the System, by Neil Archer. Wallflower Press, 2019, 117 pp.

Alexander Christensen

Hollywood has always been a loaded term, one with multiple meanings including a studio system, a standardised form, a global industry, and arguably a national cinema. It connotes film stars and directors, genres, and questions of equity and representation. It is an easy and popular scapegoat for many of the issues facing contemporary culture. Though demonstrably the most prevalent (and therefore widely accessible) cinema in most parts of the globe, critically approaching Hollywood cinema is an increasingly difficult endeavour for myriad reasons, chief of which is its vastness. Programming at American multiplexes continues to be dominated by mid-to-high-budget Hollywood films, meaning that audiences seeking international or independent works must often turn elsewhere. Similarly, Hollywood cinema is largely taken for granted in popular, and even critical, discourses—low-art valuable for entertainment more so than analysis. While this view has been largely contested through scholarship championing the cultural significance of mainstream cinema, as well as through academic studies of cult audiences and fan cultures, it remains difficult for new scholars to critically approach such a popular and familiar cinema. Furthermore, it is a cinema constantly in flux due to several ostensibly competing ideals and practices: profits versus art; theatres versus streaming; auteurs versus studios. These false dichotomies inevitably reduce Hollywood to the most simplistic and largely unproductive terms, but they nonetheless reflect some of the key tensions that define its surprising impenetrability. Indeed, how does one best approach a moving object?

Neil Archer's *Twenty-First-Century Hollywood: Rebooting the System* offers several avenues of approach. The relatively concise book, a recent instalment in Wallflower Press's Short Cuts series, provides a sophisticated introduction to contemporary Hollywood by highlighting four distinct trends that help shape it. The four chapters comprise audience and franchise logic; how the Marvel Studios superhero franchises alter our understanding of franchise, seriality, and narrative; "transnational" Hollywood and the immigrant auteur, with Alfonso Cuarón and Taika Waititi as case studies; and the prevalence of animated family films as some of the highest-grossing films each year and some of the underrated implications of this trend. Though several pressing issues are understandably exempt from the book, Archer's richly detailed studies strike an excellent balance between industrial and aesthetic concerns across a handful of topics.

The introduction, titled "Rebooted?" opens with a brief discussion of the box office earnings of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (Rian Johnson, 2017) and *Avengers: Infinity War* (Anthony

Russo and Joel Russo, 2018), two recent instalments of billion-dollar franchises. This is not an unnecessary attempt to prove Hollywood's cultural and economic significance, but to raise the questions that serves as the crux of this book: why does Hollywood cinema continue to be such a hegemonic force over a century after its inception? What aesthetic, economic, and industrial constants and changes have not only preserved, but continuously elevate its global dominance? "Rebooted?" highlights and then pacifies a number of perceived threats to Hollywood dominance, including video games (their revenue may be capable of surpassing that of cinema's, but their cultural influence has not yet done so), streaming services (these services producing and releasing their own original films reflects the success of Hollywood's model of filmmaking), globalisation (more a major shift than a threat, but one that ostensibly ought to disrupt Hollywood dominance), CGI, changes in film criticism, formal and aesthetic shifts, and more. Archer introduces a dialectic that accounts for much of Hollywood's longevity, one of known quantities and cautious innovation, which he labels the "reboot" (7). Beyond serving as a buzz word to describe the countless franchise sequels, revivals, and remakes Hollywood produces, "reboot" is a particularly apt term to employ when approaching twenty-first century Hollywood. As Archer states, it "implies a form of starting over" while the "hardware, above all, is still the same" (7).

The book is aimed at students and educators, as well as keen general viewers looking to better understand the relationship between industry, technology, and form in popular cinema. It is truly accessible to a wide range of readers, regardless of their expertise in film, media, or culture studies. This is due in large part to the immense popularity of the texts Archer covers, ensuring a high number of readers will have probably previously encountered these works in some form or other. Nonetheless, the book offers thorough context for each chapter and the relevant films, avoiding the temptation to rely on their popular reputations and instead delicately dissecting their form, their politics, and their place in the modern canon.

Archer's first chapter, "Why Can't Hollywood Rely on Flying Saucers? Industry, Audience and Franchise Logic", opens with a crucial observation: much of the recent analysis of Hollywood cinema incorporates the language of business as much as of art. It seems that popular and online discourses have followed suit. Just consider the wide-spread use of "I.P." (intellectual property) and "content" to refer to media texts, terms that once primarily belonged to board rooms and corporate executives. From this perspective, the chapter attempts to account for the success of several long-running, high-grossing film franchises' recent instalments, including *Star Wars* (1977–2019), *The Fast and the Furious* (2001–21), and various Marvel series as well as a handful of slightly older franchises such as *Lord of the Rings* (Peter Jackson, 2001–03) and *Harry Potter* (2001–11). He roots the trajectories of these series in practical contexts shaped by marketing, fandom, and media convergence rather than in trade stories or urban legends. This is where the French term *OVNI*, meaning "from nowhere," or UFO (the flying saucer in the chapter's title) comes into play (18). The original *Star Wars*, for example, is regularly presented as a UFO, springing from a difficult production and becoming an unprecedented success against all odds, as in the way that Peter Biskind depicts it in *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*. Archer works to disrupt this myth by highlighting the tie-in merchandise that preceded *Star Wars*, namely Lucas's novelisation of the film and a Marvel comic book series, to generate audience anticipation. Its ultimate success remains impressive and noteworthy, but less surprising and organic than it may have been. Archer compares this to the business-savvy New Line Cinema and its *Lord of the Rings* series. He details how the studio's decision to produce all three films at once saved costs by allowing them to reuse

already constructed sets and studio spaces, immediately contract actors for three films, and hold on to post-production facilities. The films quickly became a global phenomenon, and this top-down approach to franchise filmmaking, along with a pre-existing fanbase from the novels, ensured as minimal a risk as possible for the studio. Returning to the dialectic of Archer's "reboot"—familiar parts mixed with incredibly calculated innovation—we observe why these decades-spanning franchises (in cultural legacy if not in actual film instalments) often, but not always, pay off for studios.

This section also grapples with a shift in how audiences perceive and relate to movies, using the "disappointing" returns on Roland Emmerich's *Godzilla* (1998) as a model. Archer contrasts *Godzilla*, in both its American remake form and as a late-period instalment in a long-running Japanese franchise, with other ready-made or pre-existing franchise films, noting a major contrast: *Godzilla*'s marketing characterised the film as "the event" itself, whereas other marketing campaigns such as *Star Wars*' offer other media and products for fans before the film begins *and* after it ends (novels, games, toys, etc.). This helps account for not only the proliferation, but legitimisation and mass appeal of fan-centric news sites. To this end, Archer references actors from the *Lord of the Rings* series giving exclusive interviews to the fan-centric genre film website Ain't It Cool News (23). The superfan, or the "geek", is no longer a marginalised figure but now a part of the mainstream, an audience whose size requires it be taken seriously. A superficial analysis of the role of franchises in contemporary Hollywood rightly acknowledges the rampant commercialisation at play, but Archer moves beyond such a simple critique to explore the broader and increasingly mainstream fan desire for further opportunities to interface with the media they consume.

The second chapter, "What Does Hollywood Really Like About Comic Books? Structure and Style in Marvel's Cinematic Universe", continues to interrogate this trend, seeking to identify the factors behind the extensive success and fandom of Marvel's mega-franchise, now over twenty films strong. Firstly, it contrasts Ang Lee's *Hulk* (2003) against the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU)'s *The Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier, 2008), examining how the films relate to and even reference one another despite the latter essentially rebooting the Hulk franchise (with a new director, a new cast, and new characterisations). This comparison proves quite effective, again juxtaposing the stand-alone *event* blockbuster with an entry in a franchise (albeit a very early one in the grand scheme of the MCU). The next sections focus on what Archer dubs "complex continuity" best described as the films' overwhelming tendency to reference one another (34), particularly films outside their respective sub-series (e.g., *Captain America: Civil War* [Anthony Russo and Joel Russo, 2016] serving as a semi-sequel to both *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* [Anthony Russo and Joel Russo, 2014] and *Avengers: Age of Ultron* [Joss Whedon, 2015]). Archer posits that the MCU poses a "challenge to the integrity of the 'standalone' movie as a viable entity" while also confusing our conventional notions of sequels and franchise logic (39). Whereas Ang Lee's *Hulk* may have inspired fans of the character to purchase comic books or toys featuring the character, or the film's tie-in novel and video game, *The Incredible Hulk* features a cameo from Robert Downey, Jr. as Tony Stark, simultaneously referencing the already-released *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008) and teasing the then-upcoming *Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012) crossover movie, which features both Iron Man and Hulk. Later MCU instalments reference each other even more liberally, heavily encouraging without outright requiring fans to seek out other films in the mega-franchise to ensure they have the necessary context for upcoming instalments.

The third chapter, "Is Hollywood Saving the World, or Is the World Saving Hollywood? Industrial Authorship and Experimental Blockbusters", transitions away from franchise logic to consider the role of the international auteur in Hollywood cinema through the careers of Mexican director Alfonso Cuarón and New Zealand director Taika Waititi. Archer first analyses how the figure of the auteur fits into the world of franchise filmmaking through Cuarón's *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004). This film, and the instances in which Cuarón's authorial style is apparent throughout it, are contrasted with Chris Columbus' first two *Harry Potter* films (2001; 2002). The chapter interrogates a few challenging tensions, particularly Cuarón's, Waititi's, and Guillermo del Toro's simultaneous insider/outsider status in Hollywood, given that their careers consist of a mix of franchise studio blockbusters and mid-budget original films (many of which are rather innovative and successful). The international/Hollywood dichotomy indeed proves worthwhile to consider in tandem with the industry/authorship relationship, yet the latter reads as the chapter's more pressing concern. Furthermore, Hollywood has always employed immigrant directors. While it is significant that these directors hail from increasingly diverse countries, Archer does not attempt to trace what international cinematic movements, traditions, and figures influenced these international auteurs' Hollywood output.

What is perhaps a more crucial matter regarding Hollywood's relationships with global cinemas is how globalisation has altered film production, especially in the twenty-first century. Countless blockbuster films are shot, at least in part, abroad: the *Lord of the Rings* series in New Zealand, *Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol* (Brad Bird, 2011) in Dubai, and countless American films and TV shows are filmed in Canada—nowhere near Los Angeles. It is inevitable that a book of this scope will contain prominent omissions, but the absence of this topic altogether in the context of a chapter on a globalised Hollywood is a missed opportunity. Though a proper analysis of the logistics of international film production, such as Kay Dickinson has done, does not conform to the introductory aspect of the Short Cuts, at least referencing the ways in which Hollywood has expanded and travels beyond American borders should be dealt with as a crucial concern for Hollywood scholars.

Finally, the book's concluding chapter, "Why are the Most Grown-Up Films Made for Children? Ways of Playing in the Family Film", undertakes a unique critical approach to its genre. Archer argues that films like *Wall-E* (Andrew Stanton, 2008) and *The Lego Movie* (Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, 2014) demonstrate a surprising maturity in their themes and in "the possibilities for imaginative and playful representations" within their highly-commercialised framework (83). Archer goes so far to argue that these two films, and others like them, are in fact capable of pulling against said framework and thereby resist their own commercialised nature. Though this claim is a significant one with which some readers may take issue, it is correct in that these films indeed raise difficult and important questions for adults and children alike. On a formal and technical level, Archer details Pixar's innovative approach to animation, which upon its debut marked a radical departure from the decades Disney's longstanding use of two-dimensional hand-drawn animation. Of course, it is naïve to argue Pixar's style of animation remains experimental considering the ways in which 3D animation has become a dominant practice, but the studio nonetheless continues to develop its technology in impressive and unparalleled ways as an industry leader. Disney-Pixar serves as another example of the "reboot" dialectic that underscores the trends covered throughout the book, as does the family film genre as defined by Archer.

To express the challenges of tackling Hollywood cinema, its fluidity, and its constant shifts, I previously raised the question: "how does one approach a moving object?" It seems that by charting said object's trajectory and the factors that inform it, certain observable patterns become apparent. As suggested in its introduction, *Twenty-First-Century Hollywood* will likely prove most useful as an introductory text to students and scholars beginning to approach modern Hollywood, but it is crucial to stress that there is nothing elementary about Archer's analysis or conclusions. The book is wide-ranging without ever stretching itself thin. Its greatest strength is its commitment to seriously approaching popular texts, without succumbing to naïve "poptimism" or uncritical cynicism. Though easy to imagine potential chapters that a book like this ought to include (Hollywood filmmaking abroad, the proliferation of streaming services, etc.), the topics Archer has selected create a thorough and compelling survey of contemporary Hollywood.

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Alexander Christensen is an MA student in the Cinema and Media Studies programme at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, BC, Canada. He researches Hollywood representations of the Global South and the perpetuation of Orientalist concepts and imagery, as well as how various media forms allow audiences to experience and interface with fictional recreations of distant peoples and places.