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Reviewed by Elisabeth Moore (West Virginia University)
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Scholars of the Appalachian region have often prioritized correcting the reductionistic, problematic, or overtly inaccurate representations of the region and its history in film. Netflix’s recent adaptation of J. D. Vance’s Hillbilly Elegy (2016) has rightly renewed the anger of many of these regional scholars. John Inscoe, professor emeritus of history at the University of Georgia, seeks to provide a slight corrective to this tumult of scholarly frustration in his newest book Movie-Made Appalachia: History, Hollywood, and the Highland South. The book aims to highlight the array of beneficial, nuanced, and informative representations of the region that American filmmakers have produced. Inscoe recognizes that the American film industry has earned the criticism it has received, but he also emphasizes that he does not seek to contradict works such as Jerry Williamson’s seminal Hillbillyland (1995), which provided robust analyses of the role of Hollywood in perpetuating problematic narratives about the region. Inscoe does argue that, for all that Hollywood has gotten wrong, Hollywood has gotten a few things at least partially correct.

Movie-Made Appalachia is organized thematically with chapters based on film portrayals of the region’s Civil War experience, struggles over land ownership, race and race relations, feuding, the impact of the coal industry, and the perspectives of women missionary workers at the turn of the century. Inscoe’s work succeeds most as a teaching resource for Appalachian scholars looking to utilize film in the classroom. The book also succeeds as an introductory survey meant to highlight and evaluate the most nuanced portrayals of Appalachia in film. Inscoe analyzed nearly two dozen films produced during a broad period of time. These films included some of the earliest silent films from the early twentieth century through films produced during the early 2000s. Movie-Made Appalachia is not a comprehensive survey or thorough analysis of Appalachian films. Instead, Inscoe carefully selected a handful of films that contain insightful themes or nuanced portrayals of one of his primary fields of inquiry. Movie-Made Appalachia impeccably summarizes the key aspects and plot points of each film in a coherent and concise manner. Throughout the book, Inscoe also successfully unpacks the themes in each film that he believes will provide the viewer with a particular insight into the region and its history.

While Inscoe’s work is meant to highlight the achievements of each film, the author still finds the space to point out the various historical inaccuracies or misrepresentations present in various films.
Inscoe simultaneously points out how even small inaccuracies can still reveal instructive broader historical realities of mountain society for viewers. Inscoe’s analysis of the portrayals of slavery and race in Appalachia prove to be particularly valuable. This analysis is of even greater importance given Appalachia’s mythos as a region that, in both film and literature, has been inaccurately portrayed as entirely white and bereft of racial conflict. Inscoe’s discussions of The Journey of August King (1995), Sommersby (1993), and Matewan (1987) are rich with insightful analysis that deftly illustrates the many successes and instructive aspects of each film. Inscoe provides readers with a strong analysis of the complexities of antislavery sentiments presented in The Journey of August King. The work also includes a strong treatment of the use of African American strikebreakers in Matewan and the experiences of Dan Chain, a black miner who became famous in the Paint Creek-Cabin Strikes of 1912. While Chain was not actually present at Matewan, the director of the film chose to write the character of Few Clothes into Matewan’s script. Inscoe demonstrates that this slight historical inaccuracy enabled one of the most poignant representations of the interracial dynamics of the union movement in West Virginia on film.

Inscoe simultaneously points out the many weaknesses and inaccuracies present in each film throughout the chapter and does not shy away from pointing out the limitations of these films. Inscoe critiques the prominent white savior narrative emphasized in most of the films, the Lost Cause-related themes in some of the Civil War-related films, and the almost routine deference given to the concerns of white characters throughout almost every plot. The chapter on feuding in Appalachia, a pivotal aspect of mischaracterizations of the region, is also very well done. Inscoe expertly utilizes Altina Waller’s formative Feud (1988) in order to analyze the strength and weaknesses of film portrayals of the Hatfield and McCoy conflict throughout the twentieth century. Inscoe’s coverage of film-related portrayals of the coal industry’s impact on the region is also strong. In addition to analyzing various American portrayals of coal mining, including the celebrated Matewan, Inscoe also analyzes three films of European origin. Once again, Inscoe’s analysis of Matewan is particularly strong.

The work as a whole would have benefited from a more overt analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the portrayals of company towns, unionization, and collective bargaining in film. These themes are certainly present throughout Inscoe’s chapter on coal. However, analysis of these themes remains secondary to the chapter’s overall emphasis on the coal industry more broadly. Movie-Made Appalachia could have also benefited from a deeper analysis of film portrayals of gender in the region. Appalachia has, all too often, been portrayed as overwhelmingly masculine in both film and literature. Many of the films which Inscoe analyzed contain poignant gender-related themes. Inscoe does pepper brief and insightful analyses of the portrayal of womanhood in Appalachia throughout the book’s varied chapters. The book also contains a chapter on film portrayals of the female missionary workers who visited the region at the turn of the twentieth century. Still, Inscoe could have emphasized and evaluated these themes more deeply, further contributing to the book’s strengths. These two minor criticisms do not, however, detract from the scholarship. Overall, Movie-Made Appalachia will provide a useful examination of film portrayals of Appalachia for film studies scholars and historians alike. Born out of Inscoe’s own experience as a practiced college professor teaching Appalachian history through film, the work shines most as a valuable teaching resource, especially for college professors and teachers at the high school level. The work will undoubtedly assist instructors in their efforts to engage students with some of the most important themes of Appalachian history through a handful of Hollywood’s verified successes.
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