

The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy

Robert B. Ray



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Here is a mystery: in 1939, when the Hollywood Studio System, at the peak of its power, produced such films as *Gone with the Wind*, *Ninotchka*, *Stagecoach*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and *Wuthering Heights*, the movies' number-one box-office attraction was not Gable, Garbo, Wayne, Garland, Stewart, or Olivier. In 1939, 1940, and 1941, the most popular performer in the American cinema was Mickey Rooney, who owed his success primarily to a low-budget MGM series that concentrated on his character, Andy Hardy.

Here is another mystery: at some point in the past decade, film studies, once the most innovative of the humanities disciplines, began to harden into a catechism of predictable questions and answers. By committing itself exclusively to rational critique, film studies left itself overmatched by the enormously popular, seductive, and enigmatic representations that constitute the movies. And by eschewing experimentation with the forms of criticism, film studies ironically cut itself off from the new methods of research and writing prompted by the twentieth century's revolution in communications technologies.

Robert Ray's book about Andy Hardy proposes that alternative ways of thinking and writing about the movies can be derived from the humanities' equivalent of science's pure research--the avant-garde arts. Drawing on the Surrealist tradition, with its use of games, chance, fragments, anecdotes, and collage, Ray invents for film studies new forms of research that imitate the cognitive habits encouraged by photography, computers, and the cinema itself. In doing so, he reveals that even the Andy Hardy movies, a routine product of the Hollywood Studio System, were, after all, rich and mysterious.



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