Filmish: A Graphic Journey Through Film

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Edinburgh-based cartoonist Edward Ross uses comics to illuminate the ideas behind our favourite films. In Filmish, Ross's cartoon alter-ego guides readers through the annals of cinematic history, introducing us to some of the strange and fascinating concepts at work in the movies. Each chapter focuses on a particular theme - the body, architecture, language - and explores an eclectic mix of cinematic triumphs, from A Trip to the Moon to Aliens. Sitting within the tradition of bestselling non-fiction graphic novels like Scott McClouds Understanding Comics and the Introducing...series, Filmish tackles serious issues - sexuality, race, censorship, propaganda - with authority and wit, throwing new light on some of the greatest films ever made.

Filmish: A Graphic Journey Through Film Details

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From Reader Review Filmish: A Graphic Journey Through Film for online ebook

Mateen Mahboubi says

I'm not sure who this is for. The actual film criticism is pretty basic and surface-level. I did enjoy the breadth of films referenced in the drawings, but found myself frustrated that quite a few of them were used multiple times throughout the book. Ultimate, I enjoyed quickly reading through the book but I can't say that I came out with any new insights.

Cuiet says

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Stewart Tame says

This was an interesting book, an introduction to film theory in graphic novel form. Ross has a pleasant clear-line style that serves the material well. The book is divided into chapters, each dealing with a different theme--"The Eye", "The Body", "Sets and Architecture", etc. His examples are well chosen, and his footnotes at the back of the book add further details and suggest even more films for the curious. The book is, perhaps, a touch on the light side--think of it as Film Theory 101--but it's definitely an interesting read, even if you think you know the subject in detail already.

Vasilis Giannopoulos says

More than a comic, Filmish is an illustrated essay on cinema. Don't read it if you just like comics; read it if

you like reading about cinema regardless of your opinion on the comic book medium. Now, if you like both comics and cinema, just as I do, then it's a must buy!

The book is divided in seven chapters (the eye, the body, time, architecture and sets, voice and language, power and ideology, technology and technophobia) all dealing with how cinema has involved and how it affects human society. Although I do not agree with all the opinions expressed by Ross and he has interpreted some movies way differently than I, this book is extremely interesting and my to-see list has grown a lot. Ross's drawing is not great, not bad just not great, but serves its purpose right, it complements the text adequately.

In the end of the book there are the author's notes (and there are plenty of them!) along with a detailed filmography and bibliography.

Suad Shamma says

This was a fantastic journey through film divided into 7 chapters exploring the following aspects of film: The Eye; The Body; Sets & Architecture; Time; Voice & Language; Power & Ideology; Technology & Technophobia.

I've always been interested in film history and the art of film making and cinema, and this was indeed enlightening and quite educational as well. The graphics are beautiful, and I loved the different illustrations of films and characters that we've known and seen our whole lives and are instantly recognizable. I loved how he took different films and studied them, not only mentioning them once, but mentioning them again whenever it applied throughout the different chapters. Films like The Shining and 2001: A Space Odyssey and Jurassic Park and A Clockwork Orange and King Kong and Die Hard and The Matrix are just a fraction of the movies mentioned and used as examples to showcase different aspects of film making throughout history.

It is very interesting, and highly entertaining, and many films I hadn't yet watched have been added to my "To Watch" list with a new outlook on how they're made.

Excellent book for all lovers of film. More books like this need to be made. I would love a version of this book made about music for instance.

Johnny says

Imagine taking a film class by graphic novel. That would be the perfect conceit for *Filmish* by Edward Ross. Ross builds a de facto history of cinema via the cinematic lexicon of: eye, body, space, time, voice and language, power and ideology, and technology and technophobia. His examples of the uses of each of these areas are useful, but it seems as if his writing style is similar to that of a college student who over-annotates and, at the same time, relies too strongly on a few sources [This is particularly visible in the first two chapters which repetitively use a book by Laura Mulvey cited on pp. 17, 19, 20, 22, 28, 33, 42, and 54, as well as another by Francesco Casetti cited on pp. 9, 13, .28, and 29.]

Another problem is that both Ross and his sources seem to look for discrimination at every turn. For

example, p. 137 reads: "In *The Jungle Book* (1967), racist dehumanization manifests literally in the orang-utan King Louie, whose African-American-sounding voice sings about wanting to be 'human, too.'" But Louie Prima, the actual voice of King Louie, was Italian-American. If there was anything African-American about the performance, it was the influence of another Louie, Louie Armstrong, which is heard in Prima's gravelly voice and trumpet-playing years. One page earlier, Ross suggested that Belle of *Beauty & the Beast* was a typical Disney princess, needing to be rescued and longing for marriage (p. 136). But, Belle is something of the village's intellectual, always reading books, and she spurns the "prize catch" of stereotypical manhood early in the film.

Similar problems appear when Ross criticizes Hollywood for letting the military review scripts before the military commits equipment and personnel to assist in a film (p. 142). Horrors! The next thing you know, Disney-Lucasfilm would want to review every action figure or toy manufactured by Hasbro, every article printed in *Star Wars Insider*, and every collectible manufactured to look like a light saber or a Darth Vader helmet. Oh, wait! Disney-Lucasfilm *does* require that review, as did Warner Brothers over all Harry Potter merchandise and Looney Tunes merchandise.

Then, after talking about the insidious power of media to sanitize criticism of those in power or support some establishment agenda from pp. 131-148, Ross reverses direction when he writes about censorship and fervently states that any relationship between media violence and real-world violence is unfounded (p. 149). He does back off any causal connection on p. 150, but still asserts that film and media contribute to Islamophobia, homophobia, and genocide. Hmm! Like it both ways much?

Similarly, in the final chapter, Ross cites a source as stating that H. G. Wells' fascination with a ruling intellectual elite (remind anyone of Plato's "philosopher kings?") and the utopian possibilities of technology are a thinly veiled advertisement for fascism (p. 150). That would be startling news to the author of *The Time Machine* where the power of technology runs amok in a dark future full of Morlocks or that same author who gives humankind a warning about the abuse of technology driving one insane (*The Invisible Man*).

So, despite clever comic art representations of famous scenes from famous films and despite a useful and attractive bibliography, *Filmish* was not the joy I thought it would be. It is more about ideology than cinematography.

Lauren says

Filmish exceeded my expectations. In this graphic form, Ross introduces film theory and history through seven different lenses (heh), or graphic essays: The Eye, The Body, Sets and Architecture, Time, Voice and Language, Power and Ideology, and Technology and Technophobia.

From the "Time" chapter

The narration and style reminded me of another graphic history that I really enjoyed a few years back, Out on the Wire: Uncovering the Secrets of Radio's New Masters of Story with Ira Glass, with the author/illustrator serving as guide through history or the process. So glad to see more offerings of this type - solid enough for a textbook, but very readable.

Great concept, great book!

Bernard O'Leary says

Charming wee introduction to film criticism

Rod Brown says

This plays out like a short introductory college course on film history and film theory, with the lecturer and his PowerPoint presentation adapted to graphic novel form and each section of the book coming off as a separate class session. There is nothing in-depth here, but it is a decent overview.

I have a quibble that as an artist Ross can barely pull off the likeness of the celebrities and actors around whom the book revolves. Fortunately, he provides endnotes that include identifications of most of the people portrayed in the artwork.

On a broader note, the book highlights a sort of catch-22. By justly disparaging the dominance of white males in the film industry throughout its history and drawing attention to underrepresented peoples here and there throughout the book, Ross made me conscious of how many of his examples for film concepts then do come from movies made by white males. I'm not shaming or blaming, but instead wondering how inclusivity effects how histories and analyses of this nature can be balanced when dealing with times that were so unbalanced.

Karimi says

I can tell the author doesn't understand Nollywood or intersectionality. Wish they covered more films created, directed, and or starred by people of color. They missed a great opportunity to talk about indigenous filmmakers, to explain the colonial uses of film propaganda, or to even mention women of color.

They also need to work on drawing Black people lol

Overall, a good book for a beginners guide to film theory and film history. It's just not as woke as it thinks it is.

Thom says

Film theory as graphic novel, with excellent references. Seven short chapters cover aspects of film as a discussion, with the narrator sometimes costumed for the role. Most are iconic and recognizable, with the exception of Tom Cruise in Top Gun. Recommended.

Sean Kottke says

I thought this was going to be a "Film History/Art for Beginners," in the way that Scott McCloud's non-fiction graphica explores the vocabulary of comics. Wrong! It's more like "Advanced Film Theory for Beginners," in a McCloud style. Each chapter is a graphic essay on a particular aspect of film that permeates the whole history of film, equally distributed between arthouse cinema and blockbuster Hollywood product. It seems at times that presenting this material as graphica is a labor intensive way of avoiding seeking permission from the studios for reproducing images, and the work it takes to reproduce those images in graphica excuses the author from more deeply exploring the issues addressed in each chapter. Perhaps, but the claims are legit, and the films cited are good exemplars for each phenomenon explored. The endnotes provide ample references for the layperson to encounter deeper discourse.

Ricky Longley says

 Disclaimer: I read this book in its Russian translation*. So perhaps some of my discontentment stems from the fact that the Russian title translates as 'How films work. Theory and History of Cinematography.'

*(For this reason, my quotations from the book may not be exact.)

However, I strongly believe that this book could've been called anything and my general impression would be the same.

If I had to guess the title of this book based on its contents these would be my guesses:

'White Hetero Men and Why They are to Blame'

'Transphobia and the Patriarchy — The USA is bad!'

'Ban muscular men from the big screen!'

'MY Political Views down YOUR gullet! Also: maybe something concerning some
motion pictures I once saw.'

This is not a book by a film director, writer, or even critic. In fact, I suspect as to whether it's even written by someone who loves movies. All that I /can/ say about Edward Ross, judging by this book, is that he's seen a lot of films. As to whether or not he's qualified to talk about these movies is a matter of opinion.

Ross believes that Aladdin promotes hate against Arabs when all the main protagonists (Abu excluded) are of Arab descent.

Ross claims that Back to the Future's view on time travel is fatalistic as opposed to Terminator's "you are the master of your own destiny" viewpoint.

Back to the Future Part 3, end of the film, I quote:

Jennifer Parker: Dr. Brown, I brought this note back from the future and - now it's erased.

Doc: Of course it's erased!

Jennifer Parker: But what does that mean?

Doc: It means your future hasn't been written yet. No one's has. Your future is whatever you make it. So make it a good one, both of you.

Marty McFly: [Marty wraps his arm around Jennifer] We will, Doc.

So much for research.

In the chapter 'Ideology and Power' Ross first examines how transphobia, sexism, homophobia, racism, etc. inhabit the most innocuous of films. In the same chapter, Ross talks about how violent films shouldn't be banned because the modern audience doesn't interpret everything they see at face-value. He cites facts about how children who've witnessed on-screen violence show no signs of an increased tendency for violence.

The crescendo of this double-think comes at the end of the chapter: Ross states that we still can't deny the power of film, and although films can't incite violence, discrimination, islamophobia, and genocide, they play their role in forming our worldview and strengthening the status quo.

So which is it?

* * *

I was expecting information that would help me better understand the art of motion pictures, some sort of theory that would help me understand the art of cinematography on a deeper level.

Instead, this book is brimming with heavy-handed, self-contradictory and closed-minded political correctness that made me want to throw away the book on more than one occasion.

Ross goes so far as to explore the topic of 'Male Objectification'. The opening quote to this line of thought is a quote from Steve Neil 'Where a woman is regarded, a man is tested.'

Sure. Okay. However, the spin Ross puts on this quote, in my understanding, is that men shouldn't be tested.

"The demonstration of a man's body doesn't interrupt the narrative"

Well, it bloody well shouldn't, otherwise, we'd either be here all day.

"[A man's body] is always shown in action, with an emphasis on physical power and dexterity."

What exactly do you want?! 120 minutes of uninterrupted tea sipping and chitchat between five obese geriatrics?

(More importantly, what do you think the general audience wants? Because I'm willing to bet that heroic

displays of physical prowess get a lot of people excited.)

"From Westerns to Superhero films, the male body takes a hit so that others do not suffer."

This is heroism. Stories are about heroism. Joseph Campbell's ever-spinning corpse shall be the foundation for a perpetual motion machine that shall power the male objectification power plants of the world.

* * *

But I persevered, god did I persevere, in the vain hope that there would be light at the end of the tunnel, that this was all just some mad fever dream and we'd soon skip over the author's radical political views and get onto something substantive. But, in the words of Smash Mouth's 'All-Star'

> 'They just keep coming
> And they just keep coming.'

Ross addresses his views on women, people of color, and all other genetically inferior individuals* that clearly can't stand up for themselves. Clearly, these sub-humans, need to be protected and victimized by the double standards of a white dude. It is without an iota of doubt that these poor, disabled people that constitute about 80% of the world's population need a strong and deceitful voice to protect them from the harms of the White Devil.

(*I'm being sarcastic, don't lynch me, please.)

In my opinion, the problem with Ross' political correctness is that it doesn't inhabit one chapter but permeates the whole book. It leaks into every theme, derailing whatever was being discussed into neo-Marxist, post-modernist ideas that I strongly disagree with.

Ross pushes forward ideas that ride the self-righteousness of hardcore liberalism all the way to the top of the horseshoe, where it meets the fascism the book itself reviles. He's so drunk on the notion of open-mindedness and the superiority that it supposed guarantees that he's practically given himself papal infallibility.

It's like Ross simultaneously wants a police state directed against the majority of the USA and a communist utopia for the minority. Ross's ethos goes against treating people differently and segregationist ideology, but he goes against his own words and treats Hollywood with a great deal more criticism than he does Nollywood.

Ross briefly heaps praise on the Nigerian film industry, although I'm willing to bet that there's plenty of muscly men, objectified women, and conservative ideals.

Times like these, I foster suspicions that radically left spokespeople are more racist than any centrist or conservative. Underlying Ross's treatment of women, people of colour, etc. as fragile glass objects that should only be praised is perhaps the assumption that these groups of people are somehow inferior, and are of such low status, intellect and capabilities that they cannot defend themselves or make their own case, that Nigerian film-makers are so infantile and vulnerable that even one word of criticism would be sacrilege.

Conversely, by blasting so much flak at Hollywood, the subtext is that Western Culture is strong enough to take it.

I may be reading too far into this, but the implications of this twisted worldview are chilling.

Admittedly, there are moments of respite, when the author mentions some interesting themes worth considering. But any actual theory of deconstruction or what makes a film good* is well beyond the scope of this book.

*(Though there are myriad examples of what constitutes a bad film.)

At its best, this is a glorified '100 movies you should see!' list. Except half of them are brought up as examples of patriarchal Hollywood white-man evil.

With all this said, I will begrudgingly admit that Ross makes some good points. The facts behind the Pentagon's subsidizing Hollywood are thought-provoking. But these aren't the kind of things I expected to read about in a book placed on the same pedestal as Scott McCloud's 'Understanding Comics'.

I forced myself to see this book to the end because I thought it beneficial to expose myself to a worldview radically different from mine. I gave this book a fair chance, *several* fair chances and it never failed to disappoint.
The book's saving grace is that the art is nice and clean. This does little to save the content.

Final rating: 1 star. Avoid.

 Addendum: I apologise to Edward Ross if my review seems antagonistic or hateful. I bear the author no ill-will. It's my understanding that a lot of work went into this, as with any work of literature.

Ross has a right to his opinion and, likewise, I have a right to mine. The crux of the problem is that I spent 19 dollars and several hours on this book and the end result was strongly unenjoyable.

I see that a lot of other readers really enjoyed this book and more power to them. Explained above is my experience with this book, my opinion of it and the reasons for which it is largely negative. If you're short on time and my reasoning seems fair, avoid this book. If it seems that I've made a poor case of my opinion, who am I to stop you?

Edit (later today): I've just started reading Jordan Peterson's '12 Rules...' in which I found this quote that perfectly encapsulates my experience with 'Filmish':

> "And so we arrive at the second teaching that millennials have been bombarded with. They sign up for a humanities course, to study greatest books ever written. But they're not assigned the books; instead they are given ideological attacks on them, based on some appalling simplification. Where the relativist is filled with uncertainty, the ideologue is the very opposite. He or she is hyper-judgmental and censorious, always knows what's wrong about others, and what to do about it. Sometimes it seems the only people willing to give advice in a relativistic society are those with the least to offer."

Dov Zeller says

Edward Ross takes readers on an affectionate, intelligent tour of film history with quite a bit of analysis and cultural theory. He makes his ideological stances clear, offers up context and rhetorical questioning, also makes clear his great and nerdy love of film.

While I wouldn't mind seeing a similarly themed book written by a number of people (through more than one man's eyes), and though at times it struck me as a bit dry or the atmosphere a little too controlled somehow, I enjoyed "Filmish" and learned a lot from it. I've read a bit about film history and theory and am familiar with many of the ideas in here, but I loved seeing it all unfold in comic form. Ross Ross narrates in a way that reminds many readers of McCloud's book about comics. I suppose it's more McCloud than Pekar, but Ross uses the comic medium to keep the tone conversational even when it could have a more lectury feel to it, and he uses comics to clarify his analyses and to bring iconic film moments and introspective characters to life. Well, sort of. He has the characters speaking on his behalf, really, which is a little annoying and gimmicky, but still sometimes entertaining.

The book is broken up into parts: The Eye, The Body, Set and Architecture, Time, Voice and Language, Power and Ideology, and Technology and Technophobia. In this way he is able to organize his exploration thematically without being confined to chronology though the still does a fine job of contextualizing some of film's transitional moments, shifting identities and influences.

This would be a great book to go along with a film or media/cultural studies course. Would also be fun to make a list of films mentioned in the book and start watching them as a way to be in conversation with "Filmish" (speaking the language is half the battle?) Maybe this will open the door for conversational theoretical books on film whose scopes are smaller and whose conversations go deeper.

Maggie Gordon says

Star rating: 2.5

Filmish is an introductory text on film studies, so if you want a very broad, but shallow overview, this book will probably fill your needs. However, despite not being much of a film studies buff, I found myself bored by Ross' explanation of the field. Since he is covering so much, he does not have a lot of time to expand on the concepts that he's talking about. Unfortunately, this made it hard for me to really engage with the ideas.

The art is competent and quite reminiscent of Scott McCloud's comic theories. If you enjoyed that series of technical books, you may like Filmish as well.