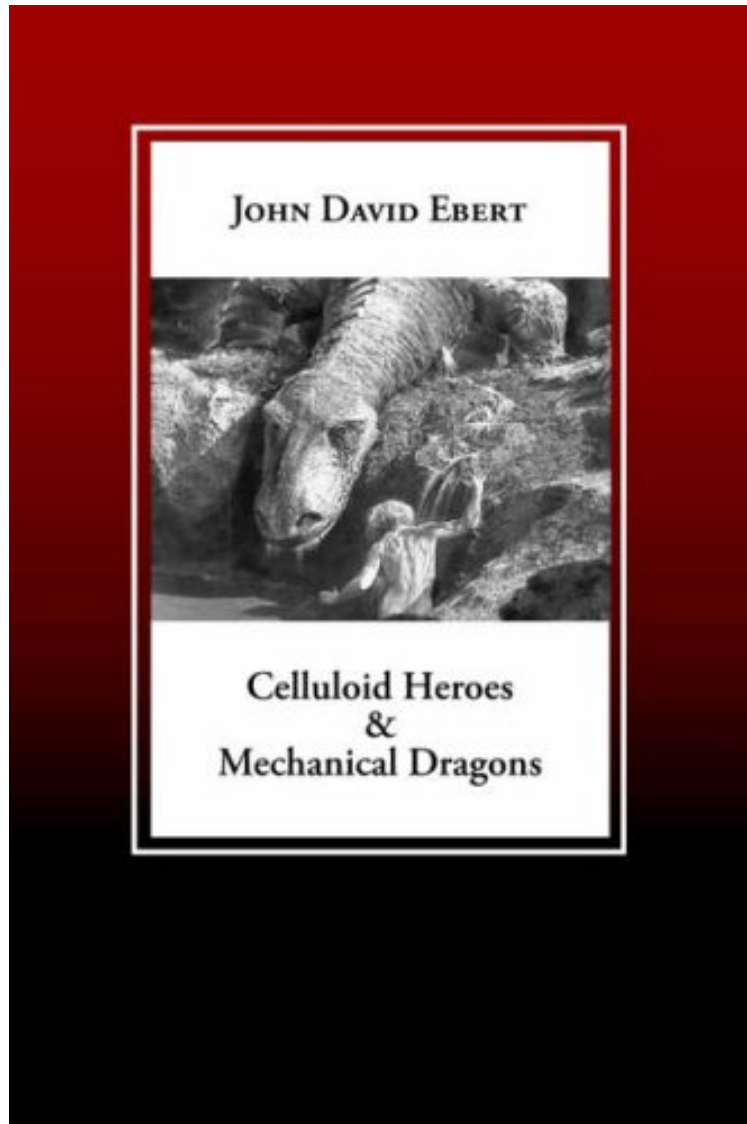


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## Celluloid Heroes Mechanical Dragons: Film as the Mythology of Electronic Society

*John David Ebert*

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**John David Ebert : Celluloid Heroes Mechanical Dragons: Film as the Mythology of Electronic Society** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Celluloid Heroes Mechanical Dragons: Film as the Mythology of Electronic Society:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. The Next Step By Stu Grimson Although Joseph Campbell died in the mid-80's, his greatest formative influences came when he was a young man, in the forms of luminaries such as Joyce

and Mann in literature, Spengler in history and culture, Picasso and Klee in art. His greatest work, the four-part *Masks of God* series, was written in the 1960s. Although in his later years, perhaps with onset of his own late age and approaching death, Campbell became more interested in the evolution and structure of consciousness through time, and entertained more speculative and mystical answers to many of the questions he had wrestled with in the past, he was nevertheless an instinctual conservative and product of his time, his time being the positivistic years of the early 20th century. His Spenglerian view of Western high culture being in decline combined with his inherent conservatism to keep him from exploring many of the important forces at work in the second half of the 20th century. For although he himself thought Spengler rang the death knell of Western culture a few years too early, and failed to recognize the important contribution of modern art, he himself only ever saw two films, both by invitation. In a late 70s lecture I once heard, he still referred to them as "talkies". And so as a great fan of Campbell, I often find myself wondering what Campbell would have said if he had been able to read Jean Gebser's magnum opus, *The Ever Present Origin*. Or if he had seen the evolution of his mythological theories not only in *Star Wars* (one of the two films he ever saw, along with Kubrick's *2001*), but through the works of Kubrick, Spielberg, Aronofsky. Or if he could have read the works of the post-modern critical theorists Baudrillard, Virilio, Badiou. Or what he would have to say about zombie films and the fear of death. Or the internet and new media. Mr. Ebert is taking the next step down the trail that scholars like Joseph Campbell have blazed. Campbell, Spengler, Mumford... in their day, these men were still concerned with categorizing facts and identifying historical patterns and forces, then elucidating them to the rest of us. It is hard to fathom today that it was not long ago that it would have been preposterous to claim to have identified historical patterns that applied equally to the social life of white European culture in the industrial age as to the pre-Aryan Dravidians of the Indus Valley, or of mythological motifs that governed the experiences of American Christians taking communion as well as Meso American Aztecs sacrificing humans. Today, this point of view is pervasive and common, but a hundred years ago this was not the case, and so many of our best minds were engaged in mapping the ground and naming the territory. It is only today that our scholars are in a position to look at trans-historical global motifs in the diverse arenas of human action and comment on how they are at play in contemporary life. And this is precisely what Mr. Ebert does. He is one of the few scholars I know of who is doing this from a perspective other than the outdated (though still occasionally useful) Marxist one. Although his disappointment with the eroding force of materialist capitalism is apparent, I suspect he would share Adorno and Horkheimer's (as well as Spengler and other traditionalists from the right) pessimism about the cultural leveling and obliteration of value resulting from standard Marxism and multiculturalism (although that is me reading into his work). Mr. Ebert is a man who has read, taken in, and to a great degree understood the traditional, classical learning of Western culture AND the modern and post-modern critical theory that deconstructs and comments on that culture. And so, like a good psychologist can listen to a patient's unique situation and identify common patterns playing out, we have an author here who is able to see universal motifs playing out in our most popular literature (film), and who can see in our reactions to 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina very expected reactions of a society at a particular phase in its development. This book, in particular, is built around what Mr. Ebert sees as the central struggle of modern man. We have spent centuries building a machine to care for us and keep us safe in a dangerous and chaotic world - a machine that includes not only technological devices, but ordered governance, regimented lives, civil infrastructure, etc - but we now find ourselves enslaved to our creation, feeling like none of us, not even all of us together, can control it. We could rise up and attempt to destroy it - though it will fight back, and probably win, for we seem to have been clever enough to have built it with powerful immune systems - but taking control back in order to put it to conscious ends simply seems impossible. More and more, we find that the machine seems to be self-aware and malevolent, even as it turns us into something like automatons. For example, it is almost universal in our free country (the USA) that a perfectly law abiding working man or woman will tense up and become nervous when he sees a police car in the rearview mirror. Our pulse increases and our vision narrows, our body goes into the same mode it would if we were confronting a bully or enemy, despite the fact that the police officer in fact exists specifically to serve the law-abider and keep him safe. Turn on the news on a random day and you are sure to see a report of some law-abiding citizen, somewhere, getting drooped or tazed by an officer for what turns out to be a breakdown in communication or misunderstanding. The cop is not a swastika-adorned goosestepper; he is just a man going home to his family that night, same as the schmuck he tazed and threw in a cage. Both the citizen and the officer are simply acting out their roles, both are confused and insecure and afraid of the other. The machine turns us into its robot slaves acting out our parts even as it seems to act with more intention and consciousness than we do. We have spent centuries building it, only to realize that we have built it from the inside and are now trapped. Like any prison, we alternate between periods of bored anxiety and awkward or violent interpersonal relations. Most people don't know their hatred and fear of the machine, can't name it. But it bleeds out neurotically, in our dreams, international relations, and personal lives, as well as in our popular literature (primarily movies). The book is about the broad issue, but uses the narrative vehicle of reviewing several classic films from this perspective in order to get its point across. Mr. Ebert deserves a wide audience. It should be clear that I'm a big fan. His books and website are, it's true, a little like liveblogging the apocalypse. It's a tough job, but I'm glad someone is doing it.

4 of 5 people found the following review helpful. A Treatise on Visionary Film By Ray Grasse John Ebert's book is essential reading for anyone even slightly

interested in "visionary" film-- that genre of film that explores the imaginative and mythic possibilities of film, pioneered all the way back with George Melies, and carried on by such modern proponents as Kubrick, Coppola, Lynch, etc (where Ebert's focus predominates). He offers his keen scholarly insight into the mythic and sociological undercurrents of this still-evolving trend, which I found to be fresh and original. While one will inevitably disagree with some of his assessments ("The Matrix" as garbage?), that's actually some of the fun--and value--of works like this, since it forces one to formulate one's own views in response more clearly, and stimulate one's thinking in ways that straight consensus wouldn't. There are a few notable omissions from his overview--horror films and experimental cinema surely deserve an seat at this visionary table--but then, a work covering every conceivable facet of this subject would have required a series of volumes rather than just one, so that may actually be a blessing in disguise. All in all, an important work on the premier art of our time--cinema.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Had this book recommended to me by a friendBy Norman W. Kirk IIHad this book recommended to me by a friend. It was not a disappointment. It was not only interesting but so well written that it was enjoyable as a read.

John David Ebert's *Celluloid Heroes Mechanical Dragons* examines how movies since the late 1960s have developed a "myth of the machine" for our contemporary society. Modern technology, Ebert argues, has created a new environment which raises problems that our modern myths, in celluloid form, attempt to resolve by presenting a number of possible scenarios ranging from "demolition" of the machine, as in *The Lord of the Rings*, to "symbiosis," as in the *Star Wars* films. Ebert examines films such as *Apocalypse Now*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Videodrome*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and *A.I.* for answers to the question how modern man can retain his humanity while living in a society which is increasingly dominated by the technology he has created.

"a profoundly erudite look at the deeper meanings of cinemaEbert weaves a tale as engrossing as the films he analyzes." --Leonard Shlain, author of *The Alphabet vs. The Goddess*From the PublisherFrom the Foreword by William Irwin Thompson John Ebert has found a very interesting way to track the transformation of Western Civilization that sneaked up on us while we were looking at television.About the AuthorJohn David Ebert is an independent scholar who is the author of *Twilight of the Clockwork God: Conversations on Science and Sprituality at the End of an Age* (Council Oak Books, 1999). Formerly, he was an editor with The Joseph Campbell Foundation, and he has published numerous articles and essays in periodicals like *The Antioch* and the *Utne Reader*. Currently, he resides in the Southwest.