FILM ON PAPER

Odes to the cinema that was

By RICHARD SCHICKEL

Michelangelo Antonioni

Seymour Chatman

Taschen: 192 pp., $19.99

Film Noir

Alain Silver and James Ursini

Taschen: 192 pp., $19.99

Movies of the 70s

Edited by Jürgen Müller

Taschen: 736 pp., $39.95

BEAUTIFUL picture books about the movies are a little bit like beautiful movie starlets; after you've enjoyed the packaging it's hard to believe it when they start carrying on an intelligent conversation with you.

Mostly, of course, they don't. Typically, illustrated film books deal in airhead glamour or pretty nostalgia, very often at the same time. They're nice to look at, once or twice, and some of the images do linger in memory. But they tend to induce reverie, not engagement — certainly not critical engagement — which makes these exceptions, all from Taschen, so, well, exceptional. Two are new to a series about major directors and significant genres, one is from a group undertaking decade-long surveys of recent film history. All of them offer gorgeously reproduced stills, and in the case of "Michelangelo Antonioni" and "Film Noir" wonderful behind-the-scenes photos. (My favorite is of an endless ladder, with a grip mounting it to paint some trees white for a shot that didn't work out in "The Red Desert.")

But what has to win the cinephile's heart are their texts. These are, of all things, serious and detailed critical essays — knowing, passionate and persuasively argued. All three are excellent, though, by a narrow margin, Seymour Chatman's "Michelangelo Antonioni" is the best.

That's possibly because Antonioni is, of the world's great filmmakers, the one most in need of renewed attention. He will be 92 next month, rendered virtually mute by a stroke. His greatest films — "L'avventura," "La Notte," "The Eclipse," "The Red Desert" and "Blow-Up" — are roughly 40 years old and have been, at least in the United States, art house rather than popular favorites. One way or another, they are all mysteries — about people getting lost, missing connections or just feeling the weight of a gnomic universe pressing heavily down upon them. As Chatman says, Antonioni was the anti-Hitchcock; he created unease by substituting silence — better make that ennui — for problem-solving bustle and misleading conversation. Sometimes, as in "Blow-Up," an actual crime seems to have been committed, but the movie is not about solving it. It is about its essential insolubility.

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Taschen

FREE FORM: *Antonioni's 1966 "Blow-Up," with Vanessa Redgrave, is an art house favorite.*

A lot of people hated these movies for their indeterminacy, for the way they all sort of dwindled out in existential shrugs. But if you cared about movies at all in the 1960s, they were beautiful in an unprecedented way, with their impeccably framed actors deployed, a point Chatman stresses, less as dramatic players than as elements in the director's ever-elegant compositions. It seemed to me then (and now) that Antonioni was trying to cut film off from its traditional roots in novels and plays by using purely cinematic means to convey thought, character and narrative. Film's resources in this regard are severely limited compared with those at a novelist's disposal. On the other hand, great images have both an immediate impact and an ambiguous resonance — an ability to haunt us — that the written word only rarely attains.

I doubt we would "like" the movies as much as we do if they all freed themselves, Antonioni-style, from conventional meaning and "rooting interest." But the austerity of his artistry is exemplary, if only as a signpost on the road that film has yet to take but needs to remember.

Remembering is, of course, all that is left to us of classic film noir. Some of its tropes and mannerisms persist in neo-noir, but it was essentially a product of the gray scale, which the black-and-white illustrations in Alain Silver and James Ursini's "Film Noir" — fog, shadows, rain-slicked streets — gloriously prove. The authors' strategy is to offer close readings of nine subgenre masterpieces: "Double Indemnity" (the "perfect" crime going wrong), "In a Lonely Place" (the psychotic male), "Gun Crazy" (a couple on the run) and so on. These essays, with their side glances at other noir titles, are very demanding but rewarding in their illuminations of major themes (they're very good on noir's obsessional drives) and minor nuisances (they're never going to make me like the plug-ugly "Kiss Me Deadly," but their good try is worth reading).

The essays are somewhat betrayed by the book's designer, who seems to care more about the look of each spread than he does about establishing organic relationships between its pictures and the text running alongside them. It also seems that if anyone is ever going to solve the mystery of noir's intense but fairly short-lived dominance of our screens, it will have to be Silver and Ursini, who have written many invaluable books on the subject but have yet to solve that central enigma.

They take a stab at it here, suggesting that Hollywood's more radical leftists, with their natural sympathy for the urban underclass, had a lot to do with it, when these directors and writers came to prominence in post-World War II Hollywood. There's doubtless something in that, but what about the audience, suddenly taking an avid shine to cruelly manipulative females and the often passive males who populate the mean streets (and maniacally twisted plots) of film noir? There is some disconnect between postwar America — sunny, suburbanizing, prospering — and these tough-talking, doom-ridden antiheroes and heroines that still needs to be explained.

The 18 contributors to "Movies of the 70s" are of a slightly more marginal breed than Silver and Ursini. They are Europeans (mainly German) of the sort who pursue their cinematic passions in obscure publications and the dimmer reaches of academia. Their book, and their tastes, are going to seem, at first glance, more than a little odd to U.S. readers. It's not that the 120 movies that editor Jürgen Müller has chosen to represent the 1970s are particularly exotic. Most of them are, in fact, products of the mainstream and intended for mass consumption. But most of them are violent and transgressive and, where these writers are concerned, happily so.

The tone is set by Müller and Jörn Hetebrügge in their introduction, which suggests that Stanley Kubrick's "A Clockwork Orange," by forcing us to be voyeurs of violence and ironically proposing that it is a necessary component of a good society, is the decade's crucial film. This is a thought thoroughly subversive to the uplifting liberal pieties by which most of moviegoing mankind sets its course. But by the end of a book that includes reflections on movies as apparently unaspiring as "Soylent Green," "Supervixens" and "Death Wish" and as obviously aspiring as Antonioni's "The Passenger," Louis Malle's "Lacombe Lucien" and Luis Buñuel's "That Obscure Object of Desire," this point has been implicitly made: A movie culture that refuses to discomfit our comfort, as our present one does, is essentially useless to us.

What we gain from this idiosyncratic book — it even has thoughtful words for one of the most hated films of the decade, "Cruising" — is a sense that our secret lives are much more interesting than our public ones and that once, not so very long ago, it was the business of the movies to make manifest, in some tricky, metaphorical way, the things we didn't really want to talk about and in some ways denied. All three of these books direct our interest inward, toward, as it were, the most obscure objects of our desires. But in some ways "Movies of the 70s," which initially looks like just another jaunty syllabus for a survey course, is the most disturbing of them — its handsome, often sexy, pictures provoking dark, wistful longings for a cinema that recently was but no longer is. ■

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