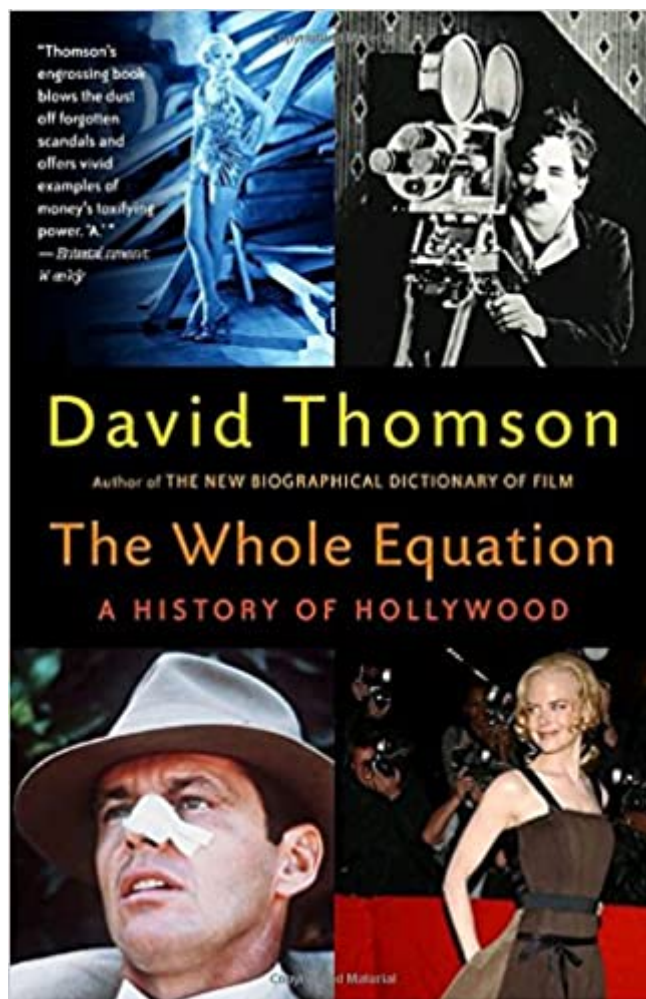


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# The Whole Equation: A History Of Hollywood



## Synopsis

With the same style and insight he brought to his previous studies of American cinema, acclaimed critic David Thomson masterfully evokes the history of America's love affair with the movies and the tangled history of Hollywood in *The Whole Equation*. Thomson takes us from D.W. Griffith, Charlie Chaplin, and the first movies of mass appeal to Louis B. Mayer, who understood what movies meant to America and reaped the profits. From Capra to Kidman and Hitchcock to Nicholson, Thomson examines the passion, vanity, calculation and gossip of Hollywood and the films it has given us. This one-volume history is a brilliant and illuminating overview of "the wonder in the dark" and the staggering impact Hollywood and its films has had on American culture.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Reading David Thomson's new book, *The Whole Equation: A History of Hollywood* is like listening to a favorite older uncle reminisce about his Hollywood career; it's full of interesting stories of yesteryear, lots of valuable insights, and probably good for you--even if some sections go faster than others. Thomson is an accomplished critic who has written for *The New York Times* and *Salon* (among others), and is also the author of several books on the subject of show biz, including *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*. In *The Whole Equation* (a reference to F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel about Hollywood, *The Last Tycoon*), he attempts to cover "the history of American movies," and "the history of America in the time of movies." To do so, he brings in finance, film theory, and just plain gossip. (For those who haven't heard how Jean Harlow died, prepare to watch the facade

of glamour crumble as never before.) It's an ambitious project to say the least, and the movie business is probably too complex a subject to sum up in 350-plus pages. Often a reader can start a chapter, purportedly on one topic, and find themselves completely off the grid--or at least buried under a lot of words--a few pages later. Like that favorite uncle, Thomson isn't necessarily quick to make his point, nor afraid of straying from his main subject. Nevertheless, many parts of the book are enjoyable and valuable--particularly for those who really want to learn about the history of American filmmaking, and wouldn't mind finding out what Brando got paid for *Last Tango in Paris* in the process. --Leah Weathersby --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

The "whole equation," a phrase borrowed from F. Scott Fitzgerald's unfinished Hollywood novel, *The Last Tycoon*, refers to the balancing of financial acumen, artistic aspiration and sociological savvy that movie moguls needed to keep Hollywood flourishing during the Depression. It's also what Thomson (*The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*) aims to achieve in his idiosyncratic chronicle of American filmmaking. He explores personalities (Louis B. Mayer, David O. Selznick) and specific films (von Stroheim's *Greed*, Spielberg's *Jaws*) to explain the 20th century's shifting sensibilities. Thomson addresses seminal effects from the last 100 years--from the ramifications of sound and color to the chilling consequences of the McCarthy hearings--to explain the culture of moviemaking. His writing is lyrical, but his pronouncements hyperbolic. (His ire against psychiatry, manifested in a dislike of Method acting, is particularly pronounced; its influence on an acting style, claims Thomson, "could yet destroy a society.") Thomson is considerably frustrated with current films and what he sees as moviegoers' lowered expectations. His melancholy metaphor for survival in Hollywood is the 1974 film *Chinatown*, where "the lone seeker of truth is told to shut up at the end." This fascinating, sometimes frustrating love letter to Hollywood doesn't shirk from exposing the blemishes on Thomson's inamorata. 23 photos. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Thomson's book is a great read despite (maybe because of) the idiosyncracies of the author. (We have to remember that Hollywood fashions fantasies and Thomson's wordy, often hard-to-follow ruminations throughout the book are themselves often the fantastical and unedited by-product of those fantasies he watches on the screen; and why should that be off-putting? Thomson, after all, has earned the right by his incisive criticism of film in earlier books to ruminate all he likes, hasn't he?). But I think his strictures against psychiatry and its practitioners' rush to Hollywood to score a killing with the well-heeled (who are themselves condemned for being selfish and self-absorbed and

narcissistic for their reliance on the craft) is silly, even delusional. After all, Thomson spends a lot of time in his history establishing how the place can drive sane people crazy...Therefore, it's not surprising that Thomson gets the date of the publication of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* wrong; it was 1899, not 1895. By the way, the criticisms above on were unusually thoughtful and helpful. In particular, they helped me understand the meaning of the book's title, as well as the justice of blaming Thomson for being too fast and loose with blaming HUAC solely for the awful results of putting Hollywood dissenters in jail and the subsequent blacklist. As was well said, the studios and the judiciary have a lot of the blame to share also.

*The Whole Equation* shouldn't work. It's written in a rambling style that is at times pompous, at times overly dismissive, and almost always self-indulgent. Additionally, Thomson tends to place much more importance on certain themes (like Nicole Kidman's performance in *The Hours*) than they deserve, thus bogging down the flow of the book. And yet, *The Whole Equation* does work. Once one gets accustomed to the style, it's very clear that Thomson has married an intellectual's knowledge of the medium with a film lover's experience to create a history that is both informative and challenging. Particularly important are Thomson's ruminations on societal issues that motion pictures have impacted; like the increase in divorce rates, the power of celebrity, and the ease with which violence is seen as a viable (if not the only) option for dealing with disagreement. These ruminations make it clear that the strange mix of pretension and greed that fuels a movie's creation may not produce results that are beneficial to society. In the end, I was glad that my frustration with the writing style didn't overwhelm my appreciation for the book's themes. This book certainly isn't for everyone. But, for those looking for a new perspective on this topic, *The Whole Equation* will prove to be a worthy guide to that strangely powerful form of modern expression known as the motion picture.

An erudite, implicitly well fileted of what Hollywood is and what it has meant to and for society in America and abroad. This is NOT your usual vicarious Hollywood "expose" genre documentary. This is a serious examination of Hollywood influenced filmmaking at the upper-division level. It IS quite thought provoking at times a may leave the reader in contemplation in all future TV or theatrical movie films one sees. I liked it overall.

I was looking for a book about the history of the Hollywood film industry. This book is unnecessarily vulgar and trashy with some disgustingly explicit descriptions of sex acts, totally irrelevant to the

content. It's clearly written by a hack who thinks a great deal of his own voice and very little of his reading audience.

THE WHOLE EQUATION reads more like separate observations than anything that coheres. David Thomson, so good in his WHO's WHO, seems to be in his own little world in a book that I desperately wanted to like, but found nearly impossible to read. The best parts are about CHINATOWN, Howard Hawks, and his trashing of TITANIC and EASY RIDERS. But, having read his other material, that's old news. The addition of sound in the 30s brought pictures forward, but moving away from black and white robbed them of something--again, old news from Thomson. In the end, I had to put it down because it was going nowhere.

I had such expectations upon ordering this. Usually, I make pretty good selections to read from the various book review sources I use. In this case, I was duped. This book epitomizes high brow pretentiousness, i.e. 372 pages of pure psycho-babble. Too many pages are devoted to his obsession with the movie Chinatown, and his idol worship of Nicole Kidman. He can barely write a paragraph on cinema history without derailing into the meaning of life or some such. Somehow, I can see Mr. Thomson completing a page a day and having his wife read them back to him as he stared into a mirror... This is one that I plowed through thinking it could improve and I'd miss the salient points if I put it down early. The only thing I lost were hours I'll never regain.

Unfortunately, many reviewers here seem to be disappointed that this is not a standard history book---the author (or more likely, the publisher) perhaps bears some responsibility, given the subtitle. But it is not really fair to give a negative review to a book because it isn't the book you wanted it to be. (Admittedly, even paid reviewers in newspapers and magazines make this mistake often enough, but it is considered bad form.) Thomson is well-known as a man with strong opinions that are worth thinking about, even when you disagree. He has complex---and not easily summarized---ideas about what has driven the history of Hollywood, and anyone who has an interest in movies and their influence on our culture should consider reading this book.

Rambling but excellent, incisive historian who gets down to facts and opinions

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