
*Overview:* Leo Braudy’s “*The Hollywood Sign: Fantasy and Reality of an American Icon*” highlights the importance of the iconic Hollywood Sign in the development of the American West and American culture. Through the telling of tales of the American West before its history became commercialized and glamorized, Braudy identifies how important the resurrection of a sign can be in enabling the carving out of a niche and the defining of a place. More so, through his employment of metaphors, Braudy successfully correlates the dilapidation and perseverance of the Hollywood sign with the steadfastness of individuals who flocked to the west in pursuit of a better life. In his prologue, Braudy identifies the “American-ness” of the Hollywood sign in saying, “the sign represents the earthly home of that otherwise ethereal world of fame, stardom and celebrity – the goal of American and worldwide aspirations to be in the limelight, to be, like the Hollywood sign itself, instantly recognizable,” (1).

The most interesting chapters, in my opinion, are “Hollywood Becomes Hollywood” and “From Eyesore to Icon”. Within “Hollywood Becomes Hollywood” the reader is transported back to the early days of filmmaking in Hollywood. In the days of Charlie Chaplin and the Keystone Theater, Hollywood, both the sign and the location, was an American bigwig of popular culture. Braudy argues, “this self-conscious sense of place included as well a virtually unique self-consciousness about the filmmaking process along with a desire to put that process on film unparalleled in other national film industries,” (46). The establishment of Hollywood as the epitome of glamour and the home of the film industry lent itself to the exportation of another American product- American popular culture. Braudy argues in this chapter that American life, as it was depicted on the big screen in theaters...
across the globe, was Hollywood’s way of sharing a piece of itself with the rest of the world. Films allowed a certain view of America to be experienced abroad and these experiences were all created in Hollywood.

In his chapter, “From Eyesore to Icon” Baudy unpacks the importance of the Hollywood sign on American culture by placing it within a socio-cultural and political framework. Braudy explains that while the Hollywood sign had achieved notoriety, what it came to embody “[has] become an abstraction, a metonym that seemed to refer to everything about the movies except for the town that supposedly gave them birth,” (146). Baudy calls attention to problems surrounding the dilapidation of the sign and how its decay represents the fading of something that had once inspired so many millions of Americans to follow their dreams. Interestingly enough, Braudy’s inference to an undefined place with external and internal importance reflected some of the important ideas in Benedict Anderson’s “Imagined Communities”. Through a system of political agreements, the sign and the area around it became modernized, a cemented place and icon, a destination to which people would continue to flock and, through their visiting, further define the sign as important and iconic.

*How this work can be applied to American Studies:* What I enjoyed most about “The Hollywood Sign: Fantasy and Reality of an American Icon” was Braudy’s ability to convey the importance of the Hollywood sign both domestically and abroad, the importance of America creating it’s own icon, and the symbolism behind a single word and place. The book would be beneficial to an American Studies syllabus, as it not only serves as a historical account of Hollywood, a place that assumes responsibility in creating most of the popular culture consumed today, but also as an exploration of America as it developed a new glamorized persona both within its boundaries and outside of them.