furore and local authorities in Marshall, Texas attempted to censor it, on the grounds that the film would “incite racial conflict” (48), but the Supreme Court declared this unconstitutional. Yet this indication of a turning tide was not an unambiguous triumph and Cinematic Identity concludes on a somber note. Intimating that the emergence of identity politics may well have been as unhealthily divisive as it was politically necessary, Patton notes that Hollywood empathetic liberalism “allowed white viewers to avoid conceding their racism” by “recognizing Black people as repositories of rights without recognizing themselves as conduits of structural racism” (109). One only has to look to the self-congratulation without recognizing themselves as conduits of structural racism” by “recognizing Black people as repositories of rights without recognizing themselves as conduits of structural racism” (109). One only has to look to the self-congratulation evident in Paul Haggis’s Crash (2004), a notable heir to the post-war problem films, to start to agree with the author’s assertion that no matter how demonstratively it confesses, America still refuses to testify to the full reality of its racial history.

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BOOK DATA


MICHAEL ARONSON

Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing
ed. Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley

If, in 1995, you had asked a group of film historians to lay stakes on which would be published first, a book on early exhibition practices in Manhattan or one on moviegoing in America’s small towns, without a doubt the resulting wager would have been heavily lopsided in favor of the metropolis. I know all my money would have been on the city that never sleeps. But with the release of Hollywood in the Neighborhood, a smartly conceived and sorely needed anthology devoted to the first fifty years of moviegoing in the “less-metropolitan” environs of rural America, I am happy to say I would have lost that bet. Let’s consider this review payment in full.

1995 is not just an arbitrarily chosen moment in the short history of film history, for it marks the year in which a “lively debate” (as this book’s introduction diplomatically describes it) began in the pages of Cinema Journal between Ben Singer and Robert C. Allen. Their sharp exchange of textual blows specifically targeted the accuracy of each other’s analysis of New York’s nickelodeon theaters, their owners and assumed audiences. The intensity of the dispute highlighted the growing importance of exhibition and moviegoing history within film studies, but its most constructive impact was the widespread recognition that a “Gothamcentric” approach offered only a modest piece of the much larger and complex geography of American movie culture. Clearly, more work could be done on other periods and other places, particularly those located in the country’s less populated, less cosmopolitan communities. However, acknowledging the need to attend to a more varied landscape was the easy part. For the Big Apple battle also prompted a set of tough reflexive questions about how best to construct an “accurate” history of exhibition and audiences; about the nature of evidence when the subject is a social structure not a filmic one; and about whether a film historian can make (wide-ranging) interpretive claims based on (purposefully narrow) empirical findings.

It is this last puzzle that scholars of the local often find the most problematic to solve: how to take the results of sometimes years of painstaking research, whether dealing with exhibition in a small town or big city, and craft out of it a hypothesis with a use value that productively extends beyond that individual settlement’s residential boundaries. There is an inherent paradox built into this type of highly localized work; the best, like that found in this collection, is intently focused and meticulously specific. But this very purposeful confinement of subject, limiting one’s conclusions about moviegoing to Placerville, Des Moines, or Wilmington often disallows for the speculative (and bookselling) power of generalization. No master narratives are written about Wilminton, no grand theories are derived from Des Moines, and, it seems safe to say, there will likely never be a well-cited “Placerville thesis.”

But there is, of course, something that has come to regularly be referred to (most often by those attacking it) as the “modernity thesis,” a loose but influential conglomerate of ideas that situates the social and stylistic power of early cinema within the fractured, whirling experience of urban modernity. Although you would be hard pressed to find a proponent of this phenomenal definition of “modernity” who would claim its exclusivity, it is certainly true that the collective emphasis by influential film scholars on the speed, shock, and disorientation of industrialized metropolitan life has resulted in too little work to understand the movies within a less urban milieu. It is this historiographic deficiency of a rural modernity that Robert C. Allen (again) and Ronald G. Walters take up explicitly in the two essays that bookend this anthology. Together they argue that, purposefully not, the predominant focus on the movies as part of big-city life has
distorted the understanding of early cinema’s exhibition and reception. Allen takes Ben Singer to task again, but his more important contribution is to remind us how the very classifications of “urban” and “rural” are historically determined, noting that in 1910 the U.S. census defined a “city” as an incorporated center of only 2500 people. For Allen and Walters, the majority rules, and they compellingly highlight how little we still know about our social middle, the big towns, small cities, and wide swaths of unincorporated villages, in which most Americans have lived their lives and gone to the movies.

If these two are convincing in their arguments, it is because the proof of their claims is sustained by the cumulative labor of the book’s other important contributors, including Greg Waller, Anne Morey, and Richard Abel. These three along with several others provide detailed studies that foreground the often delicately balanced, multivalent functions that small-town theaters and their owners were required to play in the everyday existence of their communities. Exhibitors were most often local businessmen (and occasionally women too) but the product they sold necessitated constant complex negotiation to achieve a profitable equilibrium between native and national concerns, indigenous and mass-produced culture, urban films and rural customers. However, even when the small-town exhibitor expertly enacted his role as social middleman, larger forces beyond his control, whether a snowstorm, the depression, or the increasingly consolidated power of the Hollywood studios, frequently buffeted him. The result often was, for theaters at the geographic and economic periphery, as Kathy Fuller Seeley aptly illustrates, that a “hit” film like Gone With The Wind (1939) could cause more problems than it solved. A film that makes sense in the big city, fails in the small town. The reasons are complicated, but that, of course, is why this anthology is so essential.

Offering a wealth of original research and analysis Hollywood in the Neighborhood greatly enriches our still limited geography of American moviemaking, contributing substantially to film’s existing history. If the book leaves me at all unsatisfied, it is only because it succeeds in making visible how vast that history needs to be, and how far we still have to go in mapping the movies. And, of course, I’m still waiting for a book on New York City. Want to bet?

MICHAEL ARONSON is an assistant professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of Oregon. He is the author of Nickelodeon City (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), a history of early moviemaking in Pittsburgh.


Nikolodeon City makes a fine contribution to the growing local history of movies in America. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, when movies are supposed to have settled decisively into their institutional and discursive forms, Aronson argues, the great transition happened less quickly and totally than dominant narratives insist. Nickelodeons hung on in Pittsburgh and places like it, while distributors and exhibitors relied on mixed programs and on “stunts” and other tactics for “pushing” these programs. These tactics allowed them to compete successfully well past the moment when feature films and centralized means of distribution are supposed to have taken over. In the end, however, though Aronson labors mightily to make that argument, his book tells the story of a delay in, more than an alternative to, that transition.

Nevertheless, Nickelodeon City offers many rewards to students of movie history. It is quite readable— briskly written and amply illustrated. Its first few chapters Nicely set the scene, showing why industrialized Pittsburgh, a transportation nexus and the home of thousands of immigrants with a few nickels in their pockets, became an important regional hub in the evolving movie business. The author limns the characters and narrates the careers of the doughty Harry Davis, and his sometime partner John Harris, along with a small army of fellow entrepreneurs (including the Warner brothers), who built theaters, large and small, and exchanges, local and regional. Concerning the latter, Aronson makes a strong case that they played no less anauthorial role than did exhibitors in shaping movie programs, and, therefore, the experience of moviemaking. Together, these entrepreneurs, although they sometimes grandiosely spoke of the cultural mission of the movies, more often gave the growing working-class (and increasingly middle-class) audiences what they wanted: cheap and varied entertainment. These merchants of leisure were “showmen,” whose methods and sensibilities reached back to the dime museums and perhaps (although Aronson does not make this link) forward to YouTube and the freewheeling world of the Internet. Even after the rise of studios and chains, some of them kept tightly focused on those locals and continued to make moviemaking the sort of active experience of community formation and reinforcement that it had once been more regularly.

Nickelodeon City is, like its subject, something of a smorgasbord. The chapters are a series of interrelated but distinct explorations into moviemaking, showing, and viewing, based rigorously on local records—especially fruitfully on the under-