

H-Net Reviews

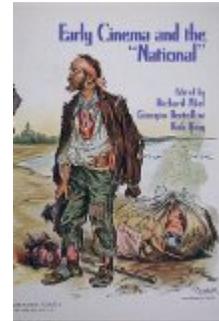
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard Abel, Giorgio Bertellini, Rob King, eds. *Early Cinema and the "National"*. New Barnet, Herts: John Libbey, 2008. vi + 354 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-86196-689-9.

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Published on H-German (March, 2010)

Commissioned by Benita Blessing



Visualizing Something Like the Nation on the Early Silver Screen

It may come as no surprise to learn that turn-of-the-twentieth-century American moviegoers liked popular science films about electricity, while their counterparts in France appreciated snail movies. But this volume also reveals that serial films about crime in New York City could promote French nationalism, and that Norwegian movies about India prompted debate about patriotism in Germany. Given the breadth of the thirty-four essays here and the extensive index, this book serves in part as an encyclopedia of cinema's impact on different societies. The editors and contributors do a fine job of using the common theme of early cinema—from its 1896 start through World War I—to study two slippery notions: the nation and the national. The narrow temporal focus makes for deeper analysis than that offered in other, broader collections.[1]

The papers stem from the Ninth International Dominator Conference, a biennial conference on early cinema named after one of the proposed terms for the motion picture projector. The 2006 conference at the University of Michigan explored concepts of the "nation" and "national" in early cinema, as well as the many ways in which movies functioned transnationally. Those filmmakers producing silent films envisioned international, cosmopolitan audiences, yet many scholars in the Western world believed these films also expressed national characteristics. Likewise, this era represented the high-water mark for Western imperialism. As a growing mass cultural commodity, cinema reflected and shaped these various developments. The essays here take cues from

discursive understandings of "nation" and "national," especially those articulated by Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha.[2]

This collection may appear only nominally interesting to H-German readers: only four essays touch on Germany. But that view would subscribe to the reductionist perspective against which this volume argues. Indeed, these analyses of cinema's function in local, regional, national, and transnational contexts will be valuable for scholars of all things German, given recent attention paid to regionalism and transnationalism.[3] Moreover, nuanced studies of what was becoming the mass consumer culture *par excellence* will be welcomed by those interested in twentieth-century consumption.

The tight essays (from five to fifteen pages in length) are nicely organized into six sections. The editors' introduction articulates common questions and spells out areas of agreement and tension in the collection. Above all, the book explores "the nation" and "national" as "dynamic rather than static categories," illustrating the complexity of cinema's place in early twentieth-century Western society (p. 2). And while the authors avoid teleological readings, they do help explain the explosive power of the cinema in the decades that followed.

The first group of essays—"Interrogating the 'National'"—addresses terminology and overarching questions. Here we especially see scholarly variance (or disagreement). Tom Gunning's bird's-eye view of early cinema's encyclopedic scope argues that film shadowed im-

perialism and global capitalism, merging entertainment with control of knowledge. On the other hand, Jonathan Auerbach insists that early films expressed distinctly national meanings. Still others in this section go further to show that local contexts (e.g., regional variations of electrification) drove cinema's global development as much as national assumptions did. Frank Kessler, for instance, follows Nanna Verhoeff's useful distinction between "national," "nationalist," and "nation-ness" to describe diverse readings of early nonfiction films.[4] Torey Liepa's study of D. W. Griffith's 1915 *Birth of a Nation* reveals a "chorus of voices"—producers, consumers, screenwriters, directors—"that circumscribed American filmmaking, culture and society of the 1910s" (p. 59).

That claim raised this reviewer's eyebrows and highlights one of my concerns with this collection by mostly film studies scholars: some of the essays draw broad conclusions about "culture and society" from reading just one or a few films. Like the "rewarding convergence" of film studies and cinema history that Jeffrey Richards has praised, I found these contributions most constructive when theorizing about cinema's function, suggesting possible meanings, or digging deeply into specific contexts in which movies were viewed.[5]

The second group of essays does some of that theorizing and contextualizing by studying the ways in which colonialism/imperialism informed early cinema, as well as the effect of cinema on a Western imperialist vision of the world. Frank Gray and Ian Christie's essays look closely at the contexts in which films were shown during the Anglo-Boer War to reveal both the hegemonic and ambiguous function of patriotic entertainment. Nico de Klerk and Panivong Norindr describe film's use in recruiting colonists, touting imperialism's benefits, recording its brutality, and even providing some voice for local subjects. Others explore the way elites used film to "teach" immigrants or emigrants.

The essays in part 3, "Locating/Relocating the 'National' in Film Exhibition," dig most deeply into specific screening contexts, generating some of the best conclusions about the function of early cinema. Joseph Gancarz's study of Germany encourages us to study consumer demand rather than producer supply and argues that "national cinema" actually grew out of transnational tastes forged through travelling Kino before the 1910s. Paul Moore similarly demonstrates that Canadian national cinema originated in exhibition and reform trends rather than film production. Other essays place moviegoing in various locations (Turkey, Italy, Spain, Norway)

and explore the impact of ideologies (nationalism, modernization, globalization, religious conflict, urbanization) on early cinema.

Part 4, "Genre and the 'National,'" turns back to the movies themselves. As the introduction points out, these essays employ Claude Levi-Strauss's and Bhabha's ideas to ask, "how might we trace the accents of national particularity" in developing film genres (p. 5)? The contributors shun reductionist readings, however. Instead of asserting what is particularly "American" about slapstick or tramp comedies, for instance, Amanda Keeler and Rob King point out how such films projected certain assumptions about modernity, domesticity, and race. The movies themselves in this section thus become media through which various groups—filmmakers, exhibitors, politicians, and consumers—attempted to construct a "national" vision, often at odds with each other. Wolfgang Fuhrman's study of early German ethnographic films draws from Glenn Penny's work on museums to illustrate especially well the important role that institutions and individuals played in imagining both "Germans" and colonial subjects.[6]

The book closes with two paired essays under the headings "Gender and the 'National'" and "Memory, Imagination, and the 'National.'" The gender studies explain the importance of individual film stars in forging notions of masculinity, femininity, race, and patriotism. Andrea Haller's study on German fandom during World War I, in particular, offers a rich reading of a 1917 debate in *Illustrierte Filmwoche* on whether it was more patriotic to "adore" a sexy Norwegian film star playing a maharaja or, yes, General von Hindenburg. The last two essays trace the immaterial, imagined function of movies.

On balance these case studies tackle effectively the large questions at stake about the relationship between early cinema and the "national." The constant use of quotation marks around "national" drives home the book's major point about the constructed nature of this idea. The collection also raises a fundamental question: if "national" is a constructed notion that is related to the "nation," how exactly does film mediate citizens/subjects' relationship with that political entity? That query is generally beyond the scope of these essays, although some contributors point to tentative answers. But the fact that this collection raises as many questions as it answers testifies to its value.

Notes

[1]. For example, Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie,

eds., *Cinema and Nation* (London: Routledge, 2000).

[2]. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991); and Homi Bhabha, "Introduction: Narrating the Nation" in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990).

[3]. Touchstone works for the importance of local and regional constructions of nation remain Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); and Alon Confino, *The Nation as Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and national memory, 1871-1918* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). The H-German 2006 forum (http://www.h-net.org/~{}german/discuss/Trans/forum_trans_index.htm) and featured ad-

dresses at the German Studies Association by Michael Geyer (2006) and Sara Lennox (2008), for example, have articulated the value of transnationalism in German historiography. Randall Halle, more specifically, describes the place of "German" film in "German Film, *Aufgehoben: Ensembles of Transnational Cinema*," *New German Critique* 87 (Autumn 2002): 7-46.

[4]. Nanna Verhoeff, *The West in Early Cinema: After the Beginning* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 22.

[5]. Jeffrey Richards, "Rethinking British Cinema," in *British Cinema, Past and Present*, ed. Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (London: Routledge, 2000), 21.

[6]. H. Glenn Penny, *Objects of Culture: Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

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Citation: David Imhoof. Review of Abel, Richard; Bertellini, Giorgio; King, Rob, eds., *Early Cinema and the "National"*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. March, 2010.

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