

BOOK REVIEW:

Richard Abel, *Motor City Movie Culture, 1916-1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), 308 pp. \$38.00 (Paperback).

Reviewed by Jeffrey Klenotic, University of New Hampshire, USA

Citation: Klenotic, J. (2020) 'Book Review', *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*. doi: [10.1177/1748372720943978](https://doi.org/10.1177/1748372720943978).

This is the preprint version of a book review published in the online first edition (23 July 2020) of the *Journal of Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* (Sage). The published version is found at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1748372720943978>. The preprint below is for personal reference only; it is protected by copyright and reuse is restricted to non-commercial and non-derivative uses. Jeffrey Klenotic

With *Motor City Movie Culture*, Richard Abel both narrows and broadens the scope of his impressive body of research on American silent cinema history. Unlike prior works that explore the development of cinema across the national landscape up through 1916, Abel here painstakingly reconstructs 'movieland' culture as it developed in a much more specific site of historical geography - Detroit, Michigan, including the independent cities of Highland Park and Hamtramck that were enfolded within Detroit's urban boundaries - beginning in 1916 and carrying into early 1925.

The broad arc of American cinema's social, cultural, and economic development during the latter half of the 1910s and first half of the 1920s is well known, as are many of the major national and international events and trends that shaped this era, such as the

Great War, the influenza pandemic of 1918-19, women's suffrage, the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, and the Americanization movement, among others. For its part, *Motor City Movie Culture* takes readers on a somewhat different journey through this period. While the book is duly attentive to the larger historical dynamics that played out within its object of study, its main objective is to contribute to an understanding of 'local/regional cinema history,' and its primary aim is to explore Detroit as a largely 'unexamined metropolis' that can serve as a 'revealing example of the rich variety of American movie culture then emerging' during 'this crucial period of American cinema history' (1-2). A secondary rationale for studying Detroit is that it 'has received almost no attention from cinema historians' and remains overlooked 'as an important center of early twentieth-century motion picture distribution and exhibition and a more than minor site of production' (1).

The period covered by the book was one of dramatic growth and industrial expansion not just for Hollywood, but for Detroit as well. The city became the fourth largest metropolis in the United States. Its land area nearly tripled to 79.6 square miles (206.2 sqkm) owing to a program of aggressive land annexation intended to accommodate a population that more than doubled between 1910 and 1920 to reach just under one million residents. This rapid increase was driven by an influx of workers drawn to Detroit factories, particularly those serving the automobile industry. The new workforce was predominantly comprised of Polish, Italian, Hungarian, Slavic, and Russian Jewish immigrants and black migrants from the American south; it was also very masculinized, giving the city an unusually high ratio of men to women. Over four chapters and six entr'actes, Abel uses his characteristic methodological rigor and exacting

attention to historical detail to build a compelling case study where evidence mounts slowly, steadily, and persuasively to advance the book's central argument that 'class, ethnic/racial, gender, and religious differences had particular pertinence in the development of Detroit's movie culture' (2).

Motor City Movie Culture immerses its readers in wide-ranging sources from the period. Many of these are familiar to film historians, such as the use of city, neighborhood, and ethnic or foreign language newspapers, and national film industry trade papers, but others are quite fresh and new. These include a relatively large cache of *Weekly Film News* (the house news and promotion organ supplied to patrons of John Kunsky's theater chain, one of the largest and most successful in all of southeast Michigan), the regional trade journal *Michigan Film Review*, which Abel posits may have been one of fewer than ten regional trade journals in the United States during the silent era, and hundreds of surviving albeit discretely digitized stories from a locally produced newsreel, the *Detroit News Pictorial*, produced by the Metropolitan Film Company in conjunction with one of the city's major newspapers. Deftly marshaling layer upon layer of detail from national as well as locally embedded historical sources (many representative samples of which are presented in the book's ample use of figures), Abel immerses readers in Detroit's discursive environment and invites them to imagine the city's movie landscape as it may have been perceived and navigated by those participating in its development and witnessing its growth. 'As these pages of columns, photos, and ads accumulate,' Abel observes, 'they produce the "thick description" of a tantalizing, ever-changing palimpsest of the magical space and time of "movieland"' (200).

The book's four main chapters are well aligned with the author's central aim to construct a detailed understanding of Detroit's movie culture as the product of a 'cultural network defined largely in terms of relations among rental exchanges, exhibitors, nonfiction producers, newspaper writers, and movie fans' (2).

Chapter one's thick description of Detroit's exchanges and exhibitors maps the city's movie culture by tracing the evolving business infrastructure for the circulation of films as it was formed through networks of relations between distribution and exhibition that were forged and inscribed within the discursive locus of the *Michigan Film Review* and other contemporaneous trade and newspaper sources. Such relations shaped where and when films reached audiences in different communities and spatial locations throughout the city. Rather than approaching distribution and exhibition as separate branches of the industry, Abel explores their nexus as a site for organizing and regulating the circulation of movies in ways that could follow and create cultural patterns and hierarchies. Here, for example, the book describes how Detroit's 'unusually large Polish population may well have enhanced the appeal of the "exotic" European star, Pola Negri' (49) so greatly that 'First National opened *One Arabian Night*, her third Lubitsch-directed film, at the Adams [Theater]' in September 1921 'for its "first showing anywhere in the United States"' with the film then proceeding to a wider Detroit 'circulation that encompassed many theaters beyond those in the Polish neighborhoods' (48). The chapter also illuminates the growing circulation of old and re-issued films. These were part of an expanding secondhand film business that had an especially important role to play for local/regional distributors and exhibitors competing for films and audiences as major

national film companies such as Paramount, Fox, and First National increasingly exercised their power to shape Detroit's movie market, particularly in the first run.

In chapter two, the focus shifts from reconstructing the infrastructure of the city's movie business to detailing the programming practices enacted upon stages and screens among nearly 200 theaters built upon this infrastructure (entr'acte two presents a complete listing of these theaters that includes names, addresses, seat capacities, and sporadic opening and closing dates). The chapter opens asking, 'What would Detroit moviegoers expect to find in their picture theaters between late 1916 and early 1925' (84)? While Abel prudently finds that 'Detroit theaters do not offer a clear-cut answer' to settle many longstanding arguments about whether it was the pictures or the social and artistic presentation of these pictures by exhibitors that most attracted moviegoers (95), he does conclude that all the available evidence clearly demonstrates that 'picture theaters overwhelmingly put on a full "evening's entertainment"' and the 'variety show, consequently, was characteristic of nearly every kind of theater' (125). The chapter affords insights far too many to recount, but suffice to say that readers will find a wide swath of programming practices including promotional tie-ins with local retailers, musical acts, personal appearances by Hollywood stars, scenic-musical prologues and preludes, lobby dances, vaudeville acts, and more. As part of this discussion, there are new and valuable discoveries about how picture theaters precisely ordered and organized each program's schedule of films and live performances into 'acts,' each of which might be listed with specific start times that 'allowed patrons to manage their own moviegoing' and decide 'at what point they might even plan to enter and/or exit the theater' (107).

As mentioned earlier, part of the book's rationale for Detroit as a case study is that the city was an important site of production for nonfiction films and newsreels. Chapter three covers this theme in depth and detail. Some of these films, such as those made for the *Ford Animated Weekly* and *Ford Educational Weekly* produced in the Motion Picture department of Detroit's Highland Park factory of Ford Motor Company, are relatively well-known, covered broad topics, and were circulated nationally. Others, such as those made for the *Detroit Free Press Film Edition* and the *Detroit News Pictorial*, had much more local coverage and were screened primarily within city limits, functioning largely 'as a form of "boosterism," continually promoting Detroit's industrial growth; the civic-mindedness of its population; and the wide range of social cultural, and sporting activities on offer' (185). The chapter includes a section that analyzes a 'rare treasure trove' of hundreds of stories that were cut in discrete units from full-length newsreels of the *News Pictorial*. This section yields interesting methodological reflections and produces insights on the range of local subjects and topics covered by the films. There is also discussion of the 'mode of representation' employed in the stories that turns up potentially interesting connections to the 'kinds of attraction so characteristic of the earliest *actualités*' (179).

The book's final chapter investigates how the discourse produced in the movie-related 'menus' found in each of Detroit's four main newspapers shaped their readers' 'sense of the movies ... as a more or less routine part of daily life' (199). Within the context of a wide-ranging examination of the interface between movies and fans as mediated through items relating to stars, movie-related puzzles and contests, industry news, Hollywood job opportunities, local theater construction news, scandals and

censorship, and educational pieces on technical terms of film aesthetics, this chapter explores issues of gender most centrally as a crucial context for analyzing Detroit's movie culture. Abel discovers that unlike 'many large and mid-sized cities during this period, [where] women writers often edited pages and wrote columns and reviews devoted to the movies,' in three of Detroit's four newspapers, 'not one woman was named or, except for a few syndicated writers and a local reporter or two, even visible' (200). The exception was the *Detroit Journal*, where first Marjorie Daw and then Ann Greene appeared as authors and editors of the paper's movie pages in 1919-20. Despite few women writers, newspapers engaged actively with women readers as fans and young women were encouraged to explore opportunities in the film industry, such that 'this extensive newspaper coverage ... cut through Detroit's overtly masculinized landscape to produce a kind of parallel fantasy universe ... of the city's effervescent "movieland" culture' (243).

There are many insights that stem from *Motor City Movie Culture's* rigorous and highly focused approach to analyzing and describing the various layers that were woven together to create the fabric for 'movieland' culture in Detroit. This approach does also come with a few limitations. While the book spends much time discussing the spatial distribution of ethnic and racial communities in Detroit, and how movie culture circulated among these social configurations and was adapted to them, it doesn't create much of a sense of what the experience of community was actually like in the city's diverse neighborhoods. There is little in the way of oral history or other types of sources that might stretch beyond the frame of 'movieland' culture to delve more deeply into the textures of everyday life and how the cinema experience was grafted onto the social

experience of those who formed its audiences. For example, the book does not delve into the experience of life in 'Black Bottom,' which was home to Detroit's largest community of African-Americans. While it notes that a map of city neighborhoods 'with percentage density of black population' is available for further study, this map and the information it contains is not presented as a context for the experience of cinema in Detroit (270).

Similarly, it is noted that additional research is necessary to know if Detroit had 'laws that segregated or even excluded black residents from picture theaters, as they did from many dance halls until after midnight' (270). The book is not, then, a social history or an ethnographically influenced cultural history of cinema and everyday life, but is a 'movieland' history with the strengths and limits that come with that approach.

Nonetheless, the book does a fine job identifying the limits of its approach as crucial areas for additional study, and countless questions are generously posed throughout the book, and in its afterward, that should provide endless research opportunities and ideas for graduate students and other scholars to pursue for many years going forward. Such work may in time be melded to the layers of information and exhibition data found in *Motor City Movie Culture* to contribute to the accumulation of knowledge in the palimpsest of research on the social and cultural history of Detroit.

One small critique that might be made of the book is that its map figures could be used much more deliberately and productively. The maps do not add much to the content of the book, and can even become distracting as little guidance is given on how (and where) they may correspond to the body of the argument. One must sometimes puzzle out how the maps relate to or illustrate information conveyed in the text. Readers

unfamiliar with Detroit may find online map services to be of some help in terms of gaining orientation to the different neighborhoods and streetscapes of the city.

As with the rest of Richard Abel's exemplary oeuvre of scholarship, *Motor City Movie Culture, 1916-1925* rewards the active, careful, detail-oriented, and patient reader with an abundance of information and countless insights. Perhaps foremost among these insights is the book's powerful reminder that movie theaters during this period were environments for a rich multimedia and intermedial experience where performers on stage were just as important as those on the screen. This work will be of great value to students and scholars of silent cinema history, theater history, urban history, and Detroit history, and also has much to offer those interested in the history of newspapers, advertising, and promotion.

Jeffrey Klenotic

University of New Hampshire