



**Richard Abel.** *Americanizing the Movies and "Movie-Mad" Audiences, 1910-1914.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. xv + 373 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-24742-0.



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**Published on** H-SHGAP (June, 2007)

### Movies, the Masses, and the Search for Order

Richard Abel's new work continues the examination of the first two decades of American film that he began with his book, *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910*. Abel organizes his material using the style introduced in his 1999 work. Each chapter opens with a short quotation from a primary document, normally from a film magazine. Abel then discusses the subject of the chapter, relying heavily on material from newspapers, film magazines, trade journals, movie distribution records, and, of course, screenings of the films, themselves. Each chapter closes with a primary document that further makes the author's argument for that section. Between chapters Abel presents an *entr'acte*, or interlude. The interlude provides Abel an opportunity to mention possible topics for further research that do not quite fit into the narrative of his book, but that he wishes to bring to the attention of the reader, such as the era of the illustrated song.

Abel concentrates his attention on four subjects: film distribution, film treatment of historical topics, movies and their relationship to contemporary issues, and the evolution of the film personality as a driving force for

the success of movies. He examines these four topics by studying the marketplace of three geographical regions, parts of New England, northern Ohio, and the upper Midwest. As he explains in his introduction, Abel selected these regions for their comparable populations and railroad networks, and because urban newspapers in each reported extensively on the movies. Excluding the East Coast (New York), the South (Atlanta) and California (Los Angeles) may not preclude some of his conclusions about the development of the film industry, but their absence does at least call for a comparative study by other scholars.

Abel opens his book by concluding the story begun in *The Red Rooster*, the demise of the French production company, Pathe-Freres and the nickelodeon. He provides a well-organized and well-written account of the development of the first stage of what becomes the Hollywood studio system. Over a short period, the multiple-reel feature film eclipsed the one-reel short and live musical accompaniment disappeared. Films such as *Dante's Inferno* (1911) and *Queen Elizabeth* (1912) convinced producers that there was a market for feature films. Abel identifies

the importance of production companies such as Famous Players and, to a lesser extent, Warner's in understanding both the appeal of feature films and the need to standardize film distribution.

Abel then moves from film distribution to a discussion of the emergence of the cowboy and the West as popular subjects for audiences, including the popularity of the "cowboy girl." The leading production company in establishing the cowboy film was Bison-101, while Vitagraph produced a series of successful cowboy girl pictures such as *The Greater Love* and *The Craven*, both released in 1912. These production companies and others quickly learned that the western was not only popular with American audiences but with European moviegoers, as well. Especially appealing was the cowboy-and-Indian film, with Native Americans portrayed less as a threat to Western civilization than as a reminder of a romanticized past.

Although Abel discusses the cultural importance of the cowboy picture and its relationship to the dominance of the two reel features, he misses the opportunity to place the popularity of the western in a larger historical context. Timing and technology best explain the popularity of the western. The mass production of inexpensive books and the mass production of inexpensive movies occurred at the same time the country underwent a dramatic change. In 1890 the Department of the Interior announced that the country no longer had a frontier. Three years later Frederick Jackson Turner published his famous essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Within a decade of the publication, the country romanticized the West and the cowboy. In part, this can be explained by the social disruption caused by the rapid industrialization of the country. The country underwent a rapid transformation from a nation made up of rural farming communities to a country that quickly was becoming an industrial urban society. The independent artisan became the assembly-line worker. Families bought, rather than grew, their food. A community of neighbors became a society of strangers. Wild West shows, the popularity of western novels such as *The Virginian* (1902), Theodore Roosevelt's embrace of the West and the cowboy as the best examples of America and Americanism, all occurred in response to this sudden transformation of the country. Film producers looking for a formula that would attract an audience realized that if westerns were popular in paperback form, then westerns would be as popular on the big screen. Thus, movies quickly embraced the independent, self-reliant, morally upright cowboy of the West as a device to entice the film-

goer. Today, the cowboy remains the most important cultural icon of America. In 1972, John Wayne, who established his star potential as a cowboy in the classic film *Stagecoach* (1939) received a special Congressional Gold Medal of Honor inscribed, "John Wayne-America." [1]

For a few years the Civil War challenged the cowboy for screen time. The year 1911 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the war between the North and the South. Production companies recognized the marketing possibilities and released a number of films about the conflict. The political and moral questions of the sectional crisis received little screen time. Instead, films released between 1911 and 1914 focused upon battles and individual acts of courage by heroes and heroines and demonstrated sympathy for the South. These films seemed a conscious effort by producers to create a "reunion culture," thus ignoring the troubling questions of slavery and segregation. Oddly, Abel does not discuss the film that came to symbolize this reunion culture, *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Although released a year beyond the book's time frame, a discussion of the film seemed appropriate at this point in his work.

Abel concludes his evaluation of the period 1910-1914, with a too-brief discussion of the emergence of the sensational melodrama and the movie personality as formulas for increasing the size of movie audiences. Combined, these chapters, excluding the primary documents attached to the end of each chapter, total 45 of the 256 pages of the book's text. Since these subjects play an important role in shaping the film industry over the next decade, one assumes that Abel will pick up their story in his next work.

Abel's next effort also should further discuss what he introduces in this work, the importance of movies as a process of assimilation. Many immigrants could not read or write Standard English; thus, their introduction to America was through a visual rather than a print culture. Unconsciously, perhaps, movies acted as both entertainment and education for many audiences—and as a method of social control. The French critic Louis Haugmard made this latter point as early as 1913 when he wrote, "The charmed masses will learn to not think anymore, to resist all desire to reason and construct: they will know only how to open their large and empty eyes, only to look, look, look." [2] Abel's detailed analysis of the subject of their gaze is an important contribution for our understanding of the movies in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Notes

[1]. For the political and cultural importance of John Wayne and the cowboy see Garry Wills, *John Wayne's America: The Politics of Celebrity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997); for the influence of the frontier in American society see two works by Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), and *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992).

[2]. Haugmard's quote appears in Paul Schrader essay, "The Book I Didn't Write," *Film Comment* (2006): p. 49; for an overview of recent works by historians whose subject is the influence of movies in shaping the value system of industrial workers, many of whom were newly arrived immigrants, see, Steven J. Ross, "American Workers, American Movies: Historiography and Methodology," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 59 (2001): 81-105.

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**Citation:** David Cullen. Review of Abel, Richard, *Americanizing the Movies and "Movie-Mad" Audiences, 1910-1914*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. June, 2007.

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