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Main Street Movies: The History of Local Film in the United States, by Martin L. Johnson. Indiana University Press, 2018, 336 pp.

Jack Booth

In *Main Street Movies: The History of Local Film in the United States*, Martin L. Johnson begins with a grand, if parodic, tone when he says, in reference to the book of Genesis: "[i]n the beginning, all moving images were local" (1). Like any good essentialising statement, it aims not so much at an overarching truth, but rather at creating new ways of thinking within a well-rehearsed framework. The new in this statement is an attempt to provide an alternative story for the origins of cinema, circumventing the now well-established theories like Tom Gunning's "cinema of attractions" (57) or Charles Musser's cinema of "narrative integration" (407). In this way the book sets the scene for the importance of local film and its place neither as an "ahistorical film genre" that provides a "remnant of forgotten people and distant places," (3) nor as something that mimics established film genres. Instead, Johnson looks at how local film was a "mode" as opposed to a genre of filmmaking, and how practitioners of this mode "presented, and challenged, the local they claimed to represent," (3) while simultaneously challenging the prevalence of classical Hollywood cinema and the type of spectatorship it engendered.

Johnson historicises "six significant modes of [local] film production—municipal booster films, home talent pictures, local Hollywood films, amateur fiction films, movies of mutual recognition, and civic films" (3). He eschews existing "evidence" of local film "methodologies that favour national—and industry—focused narratives" (4), to present instead a historically nuanced view of local film through an overview of its variant strands using case studies. In this way, Johnson claims to move the discussion of local film away from revisionist histories that park local film as merely "local views" or "actualities" (4).

This historical nuance is augmented through a theoretical underpinning that is hinted at in the introduction in Johnson's discussion of Miriam Hansen's book *Babel and Babylon*. Johnson states that *Babel and Babylon* misses the opportunity to situate local film historically, instead focusing on the inherent politics of the mode: "Hansen argues, [that] the promise of self-recognition in the local film was potentially political, as it suggested the possibility for a democratic screen in which anyone could appear" (5). Hansen contrasts local films and their ability to provide a "mirror" for the viewer, to the quality of identification in "classical film narrative" (5). This contrast aims to shows how narrative identification "displaced interest in local and personal representation from the institution of cinema, relegating it to the private province of 'home movies'" (5). Beneath Johnson's retelling of the history of local cinema is an attempt to highlight the importance of recognition as a form of spectatorship.

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In the first four chapters of *Main Street Movies*, Johnson looks at the period from 1909–1932, analysing how local films were used in town advertising campaigns, the introduction of narrative techniques and fictional stories into local films, and the association of local films with stardom and Hollywood. Johnson lets the films he describes and the modes that these films fit into take precedence. This is important as there has been a lack of analysis of local film in film studies; Johnson rectifies this, providing a great depth and range of historical research, which he ties to recognition as a type of spectatorship. He shows how recognition has been overlooked in favour of more common modes of spectatorship associated with classical cinema, notably identification, a type of spectatorship, that for Johnson, valorised alienation as an essential aspect of modernity.

For Johnson, modernity within film theory of early cinema has tended to be understood as related to the socioeconomic transition to urban life, privileging "shock and alienation" as its attendant affects, which meant that '"individuals had become adept at objectifying others and detaching themselves from the responsibilities of genuine intimacy and empathy"' (Joe Kember qtd. in Johnson 20). The remedy to alienation, for Johnson, was the central affect and quality in local film. This quality was recognition, experienced most keenly in the form of participation, which allowed the viewer/subject of the film to practically contribute to the making of a film.

Participation is a central feature of local film for Johnson—its definition is broad and ranges from the passive to the active. This means that participation was evinced through the depiction of a viewer's house, the street someone lived on, their place of work or through the town they lived in. Participation was also active and practical; someone could help make the film, they could join the local "censor board", send off a "scenario to a production company" or feature in the film itself (20). Johnson aims to show how the idea of participation was integral to the creation of local film and how it attempted to bridge the divide between spectator and screen, as one relied on the other. For Johnson, the quality of participation in local films had the potential to create an unalienated viewer who developed a "capacity for empathy and intimacy that was elsewhere under threat" (20). Local films were not purely unalienated, yet they provided a potential site of unalienated labour, where the viewer/subject could "work through" the possibilities offered by modernity in the form of cinematic technology to create an active/passive viewer/subject who would be able to cultivate empathy and intimacy (20).

Johnson contrasts this ability to create empathy and intimacy with the negative experience of alienation that comes when watching classic narrative cinema. He creates the dichotomy of a negative and positive form of technology, where the positive uses of technology create a space for something operative to happen. In his essay "For the Love of Abstraction", art historian Blake Stimson addresses this dichotomy when he looks at how technologically deterministic contemporary theorists (using Donna Haraway as a central example) have carved out a logic where technology either renders society dystopic or utopic. When rendered as utopic, technology is referred to as a "feasibility space for social practice" (Yochai Benkler qtd. by Stimson 639), in what Stimson describes as an "attempt to wrest the promise" of media and technology away from presiding logics of neoliberal capitalism (639). Stimson goes on to problematise this dichotomous version of technology, being either a positive feasibility space for social practice or negative place of alienation, when he says that technology is always an "index of social capital in every sense" (642). Technology, Stimson asserts, is, as Marx described money, "the *mediating activity* or movement" (642), and holds within it the representation of value, (for Marx, value was the representation of socially necessary labour

time), as opposed to having either a use value or exchange value and, therefore, it is predominantly the measure of "social capital" (642).

Johnson does not directly fall into the trap of claiming that the technology of cinema determines social outcomes. His book works to reveal the labyrinthine structures of local film on a community, regional and national basis. Yet his discussion of H. Lee Waters' films in Chapter Six, "The Cameraman Has Visited Your Town: The Local Film and the Politics of Recognition", appears to situate film as a political driver as opposed to the technology of film acting as Marx says of money as the mediating activity or movement. In H. Lee Waters' films Johnson identifies a way to upgrade the quality of self-recognition that Hansen sees in local films to the quality of mutual recognition. Mutual recognition, like self-recognition, creates a viewer who is outside of "the chain of looks that aligns the classical cinema spectator with the ideologies of movie characters" (167), and goes beyond the mirror of self-recognition in that it shows a "socialised and embodied" viewer/subject (167). This viewer is asked to "be cognisant of both the other, the person who is asking to be recognised, and the norm, the figure against which we measure our capacity to recognise someone" (188). H. Lee Waters made a "particularly sharp expression" of mutual recognition in his films and, in so, doing "revealed a community to itself" (175). He does this through showing those in his films in a "neutral and objective fashion" (188), using a mixture of filming people without their knowledge and choregraphing shots, and exhibiting the films days after they were shot.

For Johnson, Waters' films are an exemplar of a local film as a "feasibility space" where viewers were subjects of the film and could explore "social dimensions" of their community (180). Johnson sees mutual recognition as political type of spectatorship. He draws from Paul Ricœur to elaborate that mutual recognition goes beyond the "interminable" quandary of the "politics of recognition", which is played out between those who advocate for a "redistribution of wealth" and those that advocate for the "legal protections for minority groups" (171). Instead, Ricœur looks towards the "peaceful experiences of mutual recognition, based on symbolic mediations as exempt from the juridical as from the commercial order of exchange" (172). The peaceful experience was, for Johnson, the act of going to see oneself in a local film. This would allow the viewer/subject to be "cognisant of the other" and "the norm" in a collective environment of others also doing this and so foster a feeling of "mutuality, not struggle" that (here Johnson again quotes Ricœur) "lightens the weight of obligation *to give* in return" (172). Cinema, for Johnson, can affect a modality that is outside capital (juridical and commercial) while fostering a new type of self-governance based on giving without return, which is, for him, what gives local film "its political, social, and ethical potency" (172). This utopic version of cinema spectatorship extends intimacy and empathy beyond the bounds of the screen, as opposed to the dystopic classic narrative cinema promoting detachment and alienation. This dichotomy of the good and bad uses of cinema technology, that make technology more than Marx's mediating activity or movement, sets up a certain type of local film as a means of creating a politics of care centred around the intimacy and empathy of mutual recognition that relegates the historical specificity of the United States in the first half of the twentieth century.

Johnson's reliance on contemporary theorists allows him to recast certain local film practitioners in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century as fulfilling twenty-first century European theory; here I'm thinking particularly of Paul Ricœur. Taking for example the mid-1930s to the early 1940s, a period that Johnson valorises through the figure of Waters who exemplifies his idea of mutual recognition, Richard Wright, author of *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), develops a collective history of the black American experience in

conjunction with the photography of the Farm Security Administration, that held indifference and generality over the individuality and particularism that can be associated with mutual recognition. Wright discusses the mass movement of black Americans from the South to the North and depicts this migration in a collective train ride of initial relief:

> The train speeds north and we cannot sleep. Our heads sink in a doze, and then we sit bolt-upright prodded by the thought that we must watch these strange surroundings. But nothing happens; these white men [from the North] seem impersonal and their very neutrality reassures us for a while. Almost against our deeper judgement, we try to force ourselves to relax, for these brisk men give no sign of what they feel. They are indifferent. O sweet and welcome *indifference!* (99)

He later says that "the clipped men of the North, the Bosses of the Buildings, are not indifferent at all. They are deeply concerned about us, but in a new way" (100). Indifference, for Wright, references the staid characteristics of structure and accountable governance rather than the charitable and easily retractable qualities of "empathy and intimacy" created through mutual recognition (100).

Johnson discusses Wright's idea of indifference, using Édouard Glissant's concept of "opacity". For Johnson the idea of recognition sits opposite to that of indifference and opacity which become for him a binary conundrum where minorities either seek 'visibility' (recognition) on the one hand and on the other invisibility (non-recognition/indifference/ opacity). Johnson leans towards recognition as the favourable mode, in that "the 'politics' in the politics of recognition comes out of a desire by members of excluded minority groups to seek rights granted to those who are in the majority" (173). Johnson concedes that not all minority groups want to be seen and uses Glissant's concept of opacity to invoke the right of minority groups to "not to be seen", which Johnson describes as the act of "remaining in the shadows" in order to "retain a certain degree of independence from a society that refuses to recognise its members" (173–74). Johnson counters the inclination to "not be seen" through Waters' *Movies of Local People* which utilises the essential qualities of local film, that is the ability of "seeing yourself as others see you" and the idea of "seeing yourself in the movies" (174). Waters, Johnson claims, uses the trope of the movies as "indistinguishable from Hollywood" to draw on the anonymity of the "larger representational system" of the Hollywood system (174). Therefore, *Movies of Local People* is a synthesis of the quality of local recognition and wider representational system Hollywood. This play between the particular and the general implicitly goes back to Johnson's use of Ricœur in his reading of Waters' *Movies of Local People* (1936–42), as eliciting "peaceful experiences of mutual recognition, based on symbolic mediations" and amounting to utopic non-violent spectatorship obtained through cinema (172).

However, Johnson's argument mischaracterises Glissant's concept of opacity, which does not call for "the right not to be seen" as Johnson has it (173), but rather to see without a pre-established idea of distinction. Glissant states that his concept of opacity would allow "[t]hought of self and thought of other" to "become obsolete in their duality. Every Other is a citizen and no longer a barbarian" (190). Johnson's mischaracterisation of opacity as invisibility overlooks opacity as citizenship and the institutional forms implicit in this; Johnson deterministically does not go beyond the institution of cinema to resolve the question of oppressed minorities suggesting that exclusion can be solved exclusively through "symbolic mediations" (172). Glissant and Wright, in different ways, call for institutional indifference in order that "Every Other" becomes "a citizen"; their call for a type of seeing that is based on

indifference and opacity is not a call for invisibility, instead it is a basis of both civil and political enfranchisement, that aims not to preclude what Glissant would call the "exultant divergence of humanities" and would not rely on the type of mutable and paternal understanding that mutual recognition calls for (190).

At points Johnson's historical research becomes superseded by his holding up of Waters as an ideal of mutual recognition, which does a disservice to the research in the book and unconvincingly makes the case for mutual recognition as an alternative form of spectatorship theory and a type of care politics which in its ideal form affect intimacy and empathy in the viewer. Nonetheless, I would recommend this book to those interested in local film in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century for its thorough and extensive research on local film.

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