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Richard Abel, Giorgio Bertellini, Rob King (Eds.): Early Cinema and the "National"

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Richard Abel, Giorgio Bertellini, Rob King (Eds.): Early Cinema and the “National”

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Early Cinema and the “National” is an edited volume that emerged out of the Domitor Conference held at the University of Michigan in 2006. In the Introduction, editors Richard Abel, Giorgio Bertellini, and Rob King argue that current film historiography has yet to thoroughly engage with theories of nationhood by Benedict Anderson (*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*) and Homi Bhabha (*Nation and Narration*): “In cinema studies today, [...] we have to ask whether current film historiography and criticism have fully explored the heuristics of the problematized and revitalized notions of *nation* and *national*.” (S.2). The volume seeks to ameliorate this problem by presenting 34 short essays that reflect on the relative productivity and dynamism of these notions in scholarship on early cinema. Part I (“Interrogating the ‘National’”) consists of eight papers considering the term ‘national’ in relation to early cinema, and the book’s remaining five sections contain essays that examine nationhood in terms of colonialism and imperialism, film exhibition practices, genre, gender, and memory and imagination.

The volume’s contributors include leading early film scholars such as Tom Gunning, as well as young scholars and graduate students at various academic institutions in Europe and North America. Furthermore, the essays represent a wide range of approaches and opinions – from theoretical conceptualizations of cinema’s global status and “encyclopedic ambition” (Gunning) to more empiricist case studies documenting the role of early film in the “formative nation-building exercise” (Braun and Keil [S.63]). Furthermore, many essays not only adopt a critical distance from Eurocentric, colonialist, and imperialist discourses, but also move beyond the Western/Central European and American contexts to consider early cinema in places such as Poland and Turkey. Nevertheless, one might have hoped for more studies that not only consider representations of colonial landscapes (e.g. Asia) geared for Western audiences, but also pay attention to films made by filmmakers (e.g. Dadasaheb Phalke) working in these contexts. The brevity of the contributions, most of which are 10 pages or less, not only enables readers to gain a sense of various cases and contexts and to place the papers in dialogue with one another; it also lends readers the sensation of attending what seems to have been a very exciting and fruitful conference.

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