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Review of Jan Olsson's *Los Angeles Before Hollywood:
Journalism and American Film culture, 1905 to 1915*

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In his lucid and well-crafted introduction, Jan Olsson writes that, 'this book about American film culture during the years 1905-1915 was written in an intimate dialog with contemporary journalism' by way of 'newspaper discourses', which he describes as 'the nervous system of the modern world' (15). Much more than an analysis of one film or trade journal, Olsson explores the often overlooked discourses on early cinema and modernity found in the everyday reading materials that were the predominate means of public communication in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Secondary to his use of newspaper discourse are the less public, but also illuminating sources that chronicle the modern world: 'maps, license records, directories, legal documents, general interest magazines, and trade papers' (17). These sources, as Olsson writes, begin to help scholars understand 'film culture's repositioning within the overall amusement geography' (17), at a time when many people and businesses were actively seeking to raise the prominence, and financial gains, of moving pictures over the likes of legitimate theatre and vaudeville.

Though Olsson situates his work within the early cinema scholarship that pre-dates his book, he signals a gap which *Los*

Angeles Before Hollywood might begin to fill. By his own account, the book aims to examine 'cinema's relation to modernity', but not by the means of previous scholars like Miriam Hansen and Tom Gunning, writers who have grappled with the so-called modernity thesis in several seminal works on early cinema. These existing accounts have approached their examination of cinema and modernity through an analysis of a specific film, or by employing theoretical paradigms—Hansen, for example, uses Habermas to delineate moving picture screening spaces as an alternative public sphere. But, as Olsson writes, these earlier works account for the space of the cinema, or the films screened in them, but leave the space(s) outside of the theatre unexamined. Olsson's newest contribution finds itself in the vein of other noted works by historians like Richard Abel, Gregory Waller, and Ben Singer, who have examined the discourses that circulate outside of cinematic spaces in conjunction with screen practices. Thus, *Los Angeles Before Hollywood* engages with the unexamined discourses at work in the larger non-cinematic space, notably in newspapers, which Olsson deems 'the central arena for negotiation' of culture (38). In addition to his examination of newspapers he also briefly turns to a few key films—pivotal films to 'bookend' the discussion in the decade under review—beginning with *Escape From Sing Sing* (Vitagraph) to illustrate an exemplar of cinema in 1905, and ending with *Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915) to show the sweeping changes that had occurred in the space of a decade.

Over the course of ten chapters Olsson covers a multitude of topics, including the screen culture in Los Angeles, the 'uplift initiatives' between reformers and motion picture producers and exhibitors, and a discussion of the early women film writers in major newspapers. In addition to these topics he accomplishes a number of other analyses that stand out as important contributions to the existing scholarship on early cinema. For example, in Chapter One, Olsson formulates an 'amusement theory', using the economist and social theorist Simon N. Patten, who published his lecture *The New Basis of Civilization* in 1907, and the pamphlet *Product and Climax* two years later. Patten postulates that modernity has brought regularity and predictability to people who have settled in the urban metropolis. Before the urban influx, people had moved west into the untamed American wilderness of the nineteenth century. A few decades later, people were more often inhabiting the regulated and tamed cities of

the twentieth century. Though people were now safe from the unknown they sought out a replacement for the lack of new, exciting, and dangerous elements in their daily lives. Patten praised nickelodeons as 'beneficial institutions' that provided opportunities for release after a long day of mindless work. Patten's social theory moved away from then-contemporary 'progressive discourse' that sought to bring people into museums and libraries, to educate and uplift them. Rather he accepted that moving pictures could be beneficial to people as well. By spending a chapter formulating an amusement theory, Olsson suggests that Simon Patten's work 'provided a socioeconomic context for understanding the magnetic pull nickel culture exercised' on people in the first decades of the twentieth century (51).

Olsson continues his engaging inquiry by surveying the amusement outlets in Los Angeles in Chapter Three. Here, he investigates the propagation of vaudeville houses, music halls, stock houses, waxwork scenes, nickelodeons, and moving picture palaces. Olsson concentrates on the sheer number of theatres that came and went, frequently changing names and hands, in order to exploit the growing popularity of moving pictures, namely through only a few key figures, like William H. Clune, Thomas L. Tally, and Oliver Morosco. By 1913, 'Los Angeles came across as a city of palatial theatres', which according to Olsson demonstrated that, 'the City of Angels spearheaded the era of movie palaces' (152). This resulted in the decline of the 'lower' five-cent theatres that had previously dominated the amusement landscape of Los Angeles. Cinema scholars now have at their disposal several book-length studies of popular amusements in places like New York City, North Carolina, and Lexington, Kentucky, but most historical accounts thus far have focused on Los Angeles only as a growth center in the film industry. Olsson provides a look into a decade of screen (and stage) practices, which to this point had been largely overlooked.

Another crucial element missing from existing early cinema literature is addressed in Chapter Nine. Here Olsson explores the early women film writers Kitty Kelly, Mae Tinee, and Gertrude Price, whose columns appeared in American newspapers like the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Record*. He looks at the range of formats, from film reviews and listings of currently films playing in the area, to

'movie news and gossip' that these women produced (342). In these early film columns, Olsson strikingly uncovers the wide range of topics that these women undertook, and the roles they inhabited: writer, film reviewer, expert on film stars, movie actress, reformer, and cultural critic. Like Olsson suggests throughout the book regarding the fleeting nature of many of the theatres and moving pictures from 1905-1915, the rise and fall of these women writers also followed the same limited lifespan.

As I suggested above, the common thread uniting the disparate historical work in *Los Angeles Before Hollywood* is not moving pictures per se, nor spectatorship, nor a reception study. Many of the existing scholarly works that Olsson engages with approach this time period from one of these angles, with an analysis of modernity and cinema, or regulation and censorship, or a biographical sketch of a key figure in the development of the film industry. Instead the central focus here is the newspaper and its discursive engagements and negotiation with film culture in Los Angeles over the course of a decade.

At the end of his final chapter Olsson writes, 'throughout this book we have engaged with complex processes of repositioning of cinema in a dialog with culture at large via newspaper discourses' (390). This is a book about cinema, but at the same time, it is not. On one hand this book accomplishes this enormous feat, with the kind of careful and exhaustive research that is apparent across the scholarly dialogue in which *Los Angeles Before Hollywood* participates. On the other hand, the use of newspaper discourse alone, punctuated briefly with lecture notes, pamphlets, and the occasional mention of articles from the film trade journals, makes *Los Angeles Before Hollywood* at times feel more like a book about journalism than a book about cinema. In the sheer volume of information presented over 400 pages, this book does sometimes lose its focus, and might have been better presented in two books rather than one.

There is great value in Olsson's desire to revisit questions at the center of early cinema research over the last several decades. He approaches them from a new perspective and provides an additional level of contemplation to previous assumptions. Olsson elucidates the complicated relationship between the burgeoning moving picture culture in the United States, and the newspapers and magazines alike

that took an active part in discussing, debating, and spreading the word regarding this new amusement form. *Los Angeles Before Hollywood* stands as a testament to the rich resource of information, historical data and ephemera found in newspapers. Olsson closes the book by writing, in regard to the number of films and film culture artifacts that are forever gone due to neglect and time, that 'it is still somewhat consoling that the newspaper morgues remain for chroniclers' use' (394).