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*Nickelodeon City: Pittsburgh at the Movies, 1905–1929*  
(review)

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nation's conscience by the Monongah disaster and others similar, McAteer concludes that "Death still stalks the mines of America" (270).

At times the extent of McAteer's research bleeds through in his overwhelming presentation of facts, but this does not detract from the significance of his work, which stands testament to the 500+ souls lost in the West Virginia coal mines on the morning of December 6, 1907.

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Michael Aronson. *Nickelodeon City: Pittsburgh at the Movies, 1905–1929*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008. Pp. xvii, 300, maps, illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$39.95.)

The dust jacket to Michael Aronson's *Nickelodeon City* is branded with the seal commemorating Pittsburgh's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Aronson's careful and constant engagement with other scholars, when coupled with his peers' critical reviews, indicate that this book will leave its mark on the history of the silent era. But the commemorative seal speaks to the broader applications of this film historian's work as regional and social history. Aronson crafts this multi-layered text in a most engaging fashion, weaving together multiple fields of study as he argues for the critical contributions of Pittsburgh's film community—specifically film distributors and exhibitors—during the period 1905–29.

Aronson's study emphasizes the 1910s with any discussion prior to this period predominately historical context, and little attention paid to the 1920s. His primary source research draws from a diverse mix of national trade journals, local newspapers, state court cases, and existing locally-produced and focused films. However, the *Pittsburgh Moving Picture Bulletin* is the base upon which his exploration of the local industry is built. Aronson mines this regional publication, which ran from 1914–29 (and is a rare survivor for the industry in this period), for all that it is worth. His detailed analysis provides interesting insight into the world of film distributors and exhibitors.

The six chapters which comprise *Nickelodeon City* are thematically arranged. Aronson's introductory first chapter lays out his basic claim—Pittsburgh's significance in the industry. He also defines his work as an

exploration of community—one created and fostered by film distributors and exhibitors—and his desire to chronicle its collective experiences. Aronson rightly spends considerable time situating his argument in film history's current conversations. But he also contextualizes the industry within Pittsburgh's larger narrative, drawing on the work of regional scholars to do so. Grounding his work in this fashion allows Aronson to do many things, such as introduce film historians to the social and economic world of the city in which the industry operated; and, introduce other historians to another community which shaped the city's leisure culture.

In chapter two Aronson uses the stories of John P. Harris and Harry Davis to explore the history and historiography of the nickelodeon as a concept and institution. Partially because of previous experience in the entertainment business, these men were influential in making Pittsburgh a sustainable nickelodeon city compared to the transitory existence of (often itinerant) exhibitors and movie houses across the country. The city was a prime location for the 1905 opening of their Pittsburgh Nickelodeon as rapid industrialization of and immigration to the region, coupled with the purchasing power of the nickel, allowed these new peoples to partake in cheap amusements and thus stabilize the nickelodeon scene. A neat side discussion of Harris' life is Aronson's explanation that through his real estate dealings in particular, Harris was influential in developing downtown Pittsburgh—a story of city building not readily known.

With the nickelodeon firmly established, Aronson's third chapter centers on a discussion of the symbiotic relationship between film distributors ("film men") and exhibitors ("picture men"). Competition among the city's countless movie houses drove the need for several film exchanges to provide exhibitors with a constant stream of new films. Aronson's engagement of particular film men in discussing the overall business of film exchanges provides for engaging support of his claim of the importance of the film exchange in the industry. The author then shifts to the picture men, their position within the geographically, ethnically, and socio-economically diverse communities, and their trouble with the nickelodeon concept. Logically enough, the five cent admission price made for a razor-thin profit margin, and intense competition prevented cooperative price controls.

All chapters cover a number of topics, and chapter four is no different. Among other subjects, Aronson interestingly situates Pittsburgh exhibitors' promotional efforts in the context of Progressive Era reform movements. For example, exhibitor Harry Mintz's "Swat the Fly" promotional campaign

not only brought children to the theater, but also fit within public health campaigns while promoting theaters as “healthy” environments. Aronson then shifts to a discussion of the uneven evolution of the feature film and Pittsburgh exhibitors’ competition-driven preference for providing balanced programs of multiple films over the feature.

Aronson’s grounding of the industry in Progressive Era reforms contextualizes the subject of chapter five—censorship. In 1911 Pennsylvania established the first state board of censors; and, the author traces the development of this gender-diverse board and its political machinations. He provides a wonderful appendix noting the twenty-four points by which films exhibited in the state were judged. Aronson argues that Pittsburgh distributors and exhibitors were unique in their various forms of resistance to censors’ action—from organized public protests and anti-censorship campaigns to simply ignoring the law and screening uncensored versions of films.

In the final chapter Aronson answers a regional historian’s call to view Pittsburgh as part of a region while examining the role of some exhibitors as local filmmakers. To do this he chronicles the life and explores the films (or “local views”) of Waynesburg’s Charlie Silveus. Aronson’s Silveus was one of several regional exhibitors served by the Pittsburgh exchanges. His discussion of Silveus’ films and his/their relation to the community in which they were made is most interesting. Aronson weaves his discussion of community building through the creation and exhibition of local views into a theoretically grounded critique of Silveus’ films.

For those with an interest but not an expert knowledge of the field, Aronson’s work acts as an introduction to film history. While it is easy to note from Aronson’s engagement of their work who are the heavy hitters in the field, at times opportunities for the reader to further explore the major currents in film history are lost. There are a number of instances where Aronson makes generalized statements about scholarly consensus; but, whether by editing or author design, the footnoting of such scholarship is uneven and sometimes absent. In this same vein, a bonus to this text would have been a solid bibliography to guide those readers who wish to delve further into the nuances of various debates.

Regardless, for those who approach every text with the thought of whether or not it is teachable—*Nickelodeon City* is a fine selection for an upper-level U.S. or Pennsylvania History course. Students solidly grounded by a modern U.S. survey class will be able to explore the Progressive Era from an enhanced

perspective; and, they may also flesh out their understanding of the period's cultural shifts. Furthermore, the text allows educators to engage students in a more complex dialogue of the city and the region (and in the case of censorship—the state). If not used as an assigned text, it is definitely one to read for lecture enhancement. Finally, this work is extremely accessible—not just for scholars of all fields and students (both undergraduate and graduate) but also the general public. Aronson has provided a fine work which will undoubtedly be appreciated by many.

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Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns. *The War: An Intimate History, 1941–1945*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. Pp. 480, illustrations. Cloth, \$50.00.)

*The War* is the companion piece to the PBS series by the same name. As such, it is intended for the same general audience and follows the same themes and formats as the documentary. Readers who enjoyed the documentary will enjoy the book. Those familiar with Ken Burns' work will find this book familiar. Geoffrey Ward and Ken Burns are long-time collaborators; their other collaborations include the Civil War documentary that made Burns a household name.

The twist for *The War*, both the documentary and the book, is that, unlike the Civil War and some of his other subjects, World War II is within the living memory of Americans, albeit fewer with the passing of time, and that Ward and Burns have offered their version of the War at a peak of public interest. Like the documentary, the book tells the story of United States involvement in World War II through the stories of men and women who lived through the war. The result is an attractive book in an oversized format containing many compelling photographs and extended quotations from diaries, letters, and reminiscences.

Ward and Burns begin the book discussing their reluctance to revisit the subject of war after their seminal Civil War documentary. Eventually, they were convinced to do so by the many requests from veterans and their families to cover the Second World War. Ward and Burns give due credit to other efforts; *The War* is part of an explosion in commemoration and