

Chopra-Gant, Mike, London Metropolitan University. “Dirty movies, or: why film scholars should stop worrying about Citizen Kane and learn to love bad films”

This paper, based on archival research at the Warner Brothers Archive at the University of Southern California and the Kenosha Public Library, will present an empirical case study of movie exhibition at a small independent cinema in Kenosha, Wisconsin in 1941. The study will examine the exhibition strategies employed by the theater in its attempt to create a distinct identity for itself within the context of the commercial pressures faced by small independent cinemas at the time. Through the use of this empirical case study, the paper will question the ubiquity of a narrow range of canonical movies within film studies and argue that, in order to gain a reliable sense of the historical realities of cinemagoing in the forties, it is necessary for scholars to forego their disproportionate interest in the canonical movies and, instead, to turn their attention to movies that demonstrably were popular with audiences at the time. Assessing what the popular movies were, the paper will argue, is not a matter of simply reading off the list of highest earners from the trade press but is a complicated and painstaking process involving evaluation of numerous sources of data. Archive research is key to answering this question, providing film researchers with multiple types of data that can be used to build up a detailed picture of movie exhibition and, thereby, develop a nuanced account of movie popularity within different regional settings.

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