Exhibition: The Film Reader.

Edited by Ina Rae Hark.

London: Routledge, 2001. ISBN 0-4152-3517-0. 1 illustration, vii + 192 pp. £13.99 (pbk).

American Audiences on Movies and Moviegoing.

By Tom Stempel.

Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001. ISBN 0-8131-2183-3. xv + 280 pp. £17.26 (hbk).

An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory.

By Annette Kuhn.

London: I B Tauris, 2002. ISBN 1-8606-4791-X. 39 illustrations, xii + 273 pp. £39.50 (hbk), £14.95 (pbk).

A Review by Martin Barker, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, UK.

Here are three books, each in its own very different way valuable, addressing from quite different angles the very under-explored area of the ways in which film has penetrated and permeated everyday life. Between them, they point up directions that film studies should be taking.

Ina Rae Hark's volume in the Routledge series of Film Readers brings together a valuable series of essays and extracts dealing with issues around film exhibition. In effect, the book shows some of the best of what has been attempted up to this point. And some of it is very good indeed. The essays -- limited to the American experience, but of relevance far beyond that -- range across the gamut from the political economy of exhibition sites, the design and operation of particular kinds of cinema, to the meanings and pleasures associated with particular venues or kinds of moviegoing.

In this volume you will find one or two pieces which have already been anthologised elsewhere -- in particular, many are likely to know William Paul's "The K-Mart Audience at the Mall Movies". But even some already known pieces are usefully contextualised by Hark's introductory essays, and, in the case of the extract from Douglas Gomery's *Shared Pleasures*, by an interesting postscript by the author. What the latter reveals, is worth pausing on. There has long been a strand in American film studies which is content effectively to celebrate the wonders of the achievements of the industry. Whilst undoubtedly doing some excellent empirical, archival research, Gomery's account of the cinema-building operations of Barney Balaban and Sam Katz in Chicago does indeed press us to reconsider the balance of importance of the exhibition side as against the production side of the film industry. But I couldn't escape a sense that what Gomery wanted us to do was simply to add them to a

pantheon of heroes. What, no connections at all to the corrupt world of Chicago politics? No issues about their part in the racial politics of the city? And so on.

I found Hark's collection particularly interesting and useful for the way it recovers older pieces of work, although it would have been interesting to know a little more about the contexts of their production. For example, she reprints a 1953 essay by Anthony Downs from the *Journal of Property Management*. The essay clearly belongs to another world, and is advising its original readers on the likely investment opportunities. It would have been very interesting to know whether this essay was a lone consideration of the cinema field in such a magazine, and what wider discourses about the place of cinema in American business culture are associated with it.

The essays in this book generally give us a valuable skeleton of a history of how exhibition has been an issue for film academics and others. Hark's own essay (originally in *Film History*) on the gendered discourses of theatre managers is a good example. It explores with great care the handling of the problematic relations between emphasising the masculinity of cinema-operations, and the emphasis on cleanliness, tidiness and good presentation -- a tension resolved through the figure of the "Girl in the Box Office", who had to be attractive without being sexualised, a personification of the virtues and attractions of the cinema itself. What is so good about this essay is the way that Hark not only explores the general presence of this discourse, but investigates the one major exception: E V Richards, who ran a string of theatres across the mid-South of America in the post-war period, and who had a declared policy of promoting women to managerial positions. There is a richness and specificity about this kind of research which should inspire us. The one disappointment to me is the Dudley Andrew essay which may pose large questions (cinema as a site of "public rituals"), but rarely gets beyond anecdotes and speculation.

Tom Stempel's volume is an odd and unusual one, and won't be to everyone's taste. I should have found it irritating, given his tendency to have a go at "left wing" film critics (among whom I willingly count myself). But to tell the truth, this didn't bother me, because of the book's strange virtues. Stempel tells a story of how films have been responded to and taken up into people's everyday lives, across fifty years. This draws on a combination of 158 questionnaires, which asked very simple questions about such things as people's recollections of seeing a range of significant films (from *The Ten Commandments*, to *Shaft*, *Star Wars*, *The Rocky Horror Show*, and the gamut of Clint Eastwood films whom Stempel uses for a case-study); his own research into box office successes and failures; and a rather quirky, anecdotal film history. In one important respect, the book is interesting for just giving voice and pattern to a lot of ordinary views about films. But what is it we can learn from this book, beyond the (obviously not to be forgotten) truth that for every person who has loved a film, it's not difficult to find another who was bored by, or loathed it -- and that is true for all the "Greats" as well as all the pot-boilers? What do we get more than the (still useful) demonstration that there just aren't (m)any "cultural dupes" out there?

In some ways this is a (slightly unconventional) film history, touching on films that have failed, or found their feet later, or look better (or worse) in retrospect. In another, more ambitious way, it is an attempt at a history of cinemagoing manners. Stempel is at his best when he pays attention to the impact of different ways of watching films.

For instance with *Star Wars*, he is good on the way this "bedded in" to our culture, as it were, through people choosing to rewatch it -- they learned to repeat lines, and absorbed an expression such as "may the Force be with you" into their lives. And of course that is a gateway to the fact that the film has been a site of debate about the politics of defence, of the future of myths, and so on. Stempel becomes most interesting when, in a way, he outruns his quotes, and starts offering some generalisations -- which he can do because in a way he has listened closely to the *tone* of people's answers to his questions. So he writes: "One reason audiences continue to be drawn towards [the *Godfather* trilogy] is their seriousness, typical of the early seventies. If the films of the late sixties, such as *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Easy Rider*, struck nerves in the audience -- especially the younger audiences -- the films of the early seventies went deeper and became more complex and *found* an audience. As we have seen, it was a smaller audience than in the preceding decades, but it was also a more *intense* audience" (88). This seems to me an interesting direction -- though its very plural perception of audiences sits very uneasily with his tendencies in other places to talk (in the singular) of "the American audience".

What I found most puzzling but indicative, simultaneously, about Stempel's book, was his way of talking about film education. He has a chapter devoted to how "old" films are responded to in classes he has taught. The recurrent use of assertions that particular films "hold up well", or "still work", or "don't play well" with contemporary students associates film education with a kind of cultural instruction -- that by putting students in touch with a good range of past films (and there is no pretentiousness about his lists) we can help to induct them into a sense of their own past. They can expand their capacity to respond. There is no sense in here of analysing or evaluating the cultural repertoires of present-day students. When he writes (131) that a film "will make some connections with them", it doesn't seem to matter *what* those connections are, as long as they are made. Teaching film becomes a form of cultural civics. And that seems a disappointingly thin ground for our subject field.

Annette Kuhn's book is an account of her very substantial research project into the memories of cinema-going in Britain in the 1930s. Based on questionnaires and interviews with now-elderly people, she gives a truly fascinating account of the role of cinema in their lives. Methodologically astute (there are good discussions of the issues raised by memory-work, for instance), in one sense no enormous surprises emerge from her work. We hear in people's own words about the ordinary importance of cinema-going, their engagement with particular stars, the excitements of the Picture Palace. But the delight is in the detail. Kuhn, for instance, has one chapter that just mainly explores how her respondents placed the cinemas of their youth within mental geographies. And she portrays through carefully-assembled quotations the ways in which cinema as a whole was a *presence* in people's lives: guiding them through streets, mapping their areas for them. Cinema was powerfully *local* even as it was a portal to a magical world.

In the same manner, Kuhn takes us through people's relations with stars. She nicely captures the interweaving of the marvellous attraction of stars' lives, their looks, their fashions, and people's awareness of the material constraints of their own lives -- the "make-do" attitude, for instance, that states that the nearest a woman will get to that fabulous costume will be a home-made copy of it, using cheap fabrics and a pattern cribbed from a fan magazine.

Just occasionally in this book it is possible to glimpse (that word may come back to haunt me…) a collision between the warm ethnographies of this study and Kuhn's wider feminist theoretical concerns. In a chapter on cinema's romantic and sexual opportunities, she quotes at length one man who took, and has retained, real pleasure in the way films showed parts of women's bodies which were hidden from him in his daily life. "Mr Houlston" has a substantial collection of the kinds of glamour shots that emphasised "the point at which exposed flesh meets clothing" (158). Kuhn's commentary on this man becomes an excursion into another domain. This is the "play of concealment and revelation around the object of desire." This is "fetishism". This is, finally, "wanting to look to see if she has a penis." Hmm… unlike most of the book, this is interviewing in the service of a pre-established belief.

At several points, her discussion of her interviews bursts through into analysis of a favourite film, most notably (186-192) around *Top Hat* (1935). In this case, it seems to me that her conclusions are more respectful of the capacities of her interviewees. Following one man's long recalled description of the film, Kuhn comments just how accurately he has remembered it, and moves through a shot-by-shot analysis of it, in particular looking at its shifts of diegetic space. She closes with this comment:

> In this elegant and apparently seamless combination of kinesis and heterotopia lies the ultimate dance fantasy: the everyday, the local, the rooted, the communal -- for the adolescent of the 1930s, the crowds in the dance hall -- all fade from consciousness as, along with the dancers on the screen, you are carried into the space of the imagination, that other space where you are utterly graceful and where the dance of courtship proceeds, with never a false step, towards its climax. The sensation imbues your body, and carries you out of your local picture house onto the familiar streets of your neighbourhood, and you are moved to dance along the pavement all the way home (193).

This more embedded view of fantasy seems to me more persuasive and useable than the residual Freudianism.

Just occasionally, and particularly right at the end, Kuhn seems to me to indulge herself in the very "nostalgia" that she is otherwise generally superseding. She closes with a quotation from a woman who repeats, over and again, that it was all "wonderful". There is nothing wrong in such enthusiasm, or in observing it -- but then audience or ethnographic research is not about finding people right or wrong. But there is a sense, every now and then, of a rather "cleaned-up" mode of recall. Some of the films, surely, were awful. Sometimes the smokiness of the cinemas must have been unpleasant. Etc. Etc. This is to leave aside the way such discourses of the "wonderfulness" of past cinema becomes a rejection of contemporary cinema.

These gibes aside, this is a very valuable book. It complements, but maybe will also shift our perception of, existing valuable work on 1930s cinema, such as Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan's work.

The issue of exhibition is becoming more important to film studies, and rightly so. These three books are all valuable contributions to an underdeveloped field. If I enter one note of caution about the three of them together, it is that in different ways, each

of them seems to me to share one assumption: that the present-day multiplex is an inferior mode of exhibition. Gary Edgerton's contribution in Hark's volume talks of multiplex designers, owners and managers "soothing compliant customers" -- with the apparent aim only of selling them popcorn -- and when wasn't that the case? Stempel talks of the multiplex as "an instrument of brute commerce" (209) -- as opposed to? Kuhn does not speak directly on this, because her research is focused on the 1930s. But almost without exception, her respondents give voice to a story of decline and loss from the "loveliness" of their films and cinema. The danger should be evident. We are at risk of putting film studies on the side of one kind of experience, and not exploring the genuine pleasures that people do get from the multiplex experience.