As many tens of thousands of hours of newsreel footage are digitized and made available on platforms such as YouTube, what are historians and the public to make of this immense but disjointed collection of moving images? In *News Parade: The American Newsreel and the World as Spectacle*, Joseph Clark argues persuasively that however tempting it might be to think of them as transparent windows into the past, in order to be properly understood, newsreels must be contextualized within the system in which they were produced and received. *News Parade* is a thoroughly researched account of this under-studied media form, which sets it in the historical context of its production, distribution, exhibition, and reception. Using this approach, Clark shows that American newsreels forged a new kind of realism that structured an increasingly visual public sphere during the 1930s and 1940s.

*News Parade* not only updates extant research on the newsreel—as Clark points out, the most recent volume dedicated to it dates from the 1970s—but also contributes an original argument about the newsreel, realism, and the public sphere to the field of cinema and media studies. Using evidence from the trade and popular press, memoirs, newsreel production company archives, and representations of the newsreel in other popular media, such as comic books and film, Clark demonstrates that the newsreel did not simply document the world but shaped how the public related to it. It did so
not only by way of filmic indexicality but also, and more precisely, through its system of production, distribution, and exhibition, which shaped its mode of representation and presented the world as a “passing pageant.” Clark refers to this whole system of production, representation, and reception as the “news parade.”

Using well-chosen case studies, the book moves through two initial chapters that sketch this production system's contours and clarify its mode of address. In the 1920s, the major Hollywood studios absorbed most newsreel companies, consolidating production. Yet even under studio ownership, newsreel production remained centered in New York City and structured by editorial departments that resembled newspaper offices or wire services. Distribution occurred largely through the vertically integrated studio system. The “news parade” depended on what Clark calls a “processional mode.” Due to its serial appearance, it relied on events for which shooting could be easily planned for in advance—such as beauty pageants, sports, and especially parades. Consequently, it ordered the world as a passing procession of unrelated events.

In chapter 2, Clark delves further into the newsreel’s mode of address. The newsreel produced a reality effect by representing events in which the sharing of news itself was a crucial aspect of the story. It constantly referenced the power of its own production system as an argument for its realism, privileging “the experience of watching the news over the news itself.” Using the trial of Bruno Hauptmann for the kidnapping of celebrity aviator Charles Lindbergh’s infant child as a case study, Clark further argues that the newsreel benefited from a tension between “display” and “evidence.” The newsreel not only exploited film’s indexicality to offer evidence about world events but also reveled in its ability to display this evidence, to make it visible for the spectator. It thus allowed viewers to feel that they could judge the visual evidence themselves. Clark writes convincingly on interwar debates about realism and how the newsreel related to them. Especially after the advent of sound and voice-over narration, many in the press faulted the newsreel for misrepresenting reality and adding bias to its filmic representation of the real. Others meanwhile (prominently the documentarian John Grierson) faulted the newsreel for the opposite reason, questioning its refusal to create an artistic or narrative structure that would penetrate beneath the surface of appearances to illuminate social totality. Clark argues that the newsreel was neither a transparent copy of the real nor a synthetic representation of totality. Rather, it produced a reality effect by emphasizing the power of its own production system and the tension between display and evidence, forming a public sphere mediated by its way of visualizing events.

Making a more familiar argument, chapter 3 contends that the “news parade” encouraged identification with the figure of the masculine newsreel cameraman who traversed the world to secure footage, thereby positioning

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2 Clark, 42.
3 Clark, 51.
4 Clark, 49.
the viewer in an “imperial gaze” that feminized, objectified, and dominated the non-Western places and cultures it represented. In chapter 4, Clark turns to newsreel exhibition venues and audience reception, analyzing the Streamline Moderne architecture and interior design of purpose-built newsreel theaters. Such theaters, he argues, structured the viewing experience as a “global information environment” and a “vehicle for virtual travel.” Clark suggests that this exhibition apparatus constituted a public forum in which audiences could react to the news and to one another, reveling in the “collective experience of seeing and debating the news in public.”

The final chapter considers *All-American News* (1942–1952), a newsreel that, in the context of the World War II-era “Double-V” campaign to promote victory over fascism abroad and racism at home, attempted to make the achievements and contributions of Black Americans visible within the news parade’s forms and conventions. *All-American News* sought to disseminate positive images of African Americans to a broad cross-racial public while also refusing to directly address white racism or segregation. Instead, it proposed a model of “hard work, discipline, and self-improvement” for Black Americans. Yet the segregated American theater system and the consignment of Army Signal Corps film depicting African American soldiers to *All-American News* rather than the mainstream white newsreels meant that such images ended up being seen almost exclusively by Black audiences. Furthermore, in its “pedagogical address” to African Americans, it replicated what sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois called “double consciousness,” an internalized awareness of being watched and judged by white America. Sitting in segregated theaters watching newsreels depicting segregated armed forces, *All-American News*’ audience was sharply aware of this unresolved tension. Using discussions of audience reception published in the Black press, Clark argues that within this tension a Black counterpublic emerged that both “acknowledged and contested the subordinate position of African Americans within the United States’ visual public sphere.”

This argument fits well with Clark’s overarching argument about his object of study, which is that new media technologies are never wholly determining and instead depend on audiences who actively shape social meaning. Shifting the focus from the text of the newsreel, he calls for an account of production and circulation in order to understand how historically positioned publics and counterpublics contest messages in the media. Clark engages theories of the public sphere to argue that, contrary to narratives in which the vital public dimension of early film was eclipsed by the studio system, the newsreel represented a contested visual public sphere “where American identity and democracy were asserted and debated.” He rejects
Jürgen Habermas’s view of the mass media as “fundamentally beholden to
the ideological interests of capital and the state” in favor of an approach
more sensitive to audience reception.\(^{11}\)

Yet Clark’s evidence for the vitality of the newsreel’s public sphere seems
ambiguous at best. Habermas did not maintain that the public sphere ceased
to exist after the eclipse of its bourgeois form, which began in the last quar-
ter of the nineteenth century. In his view, the mutual penetration of state and
society caused “competition between organized private interests” to invade
the public sphere, replacing “rational-critical public debate” with a plebisci-
tary mass public called upon “for the purposes of public acclamation” or the
expression of preference.\(^{12}\) In *News Parade*, the evidence for newsreel theaters
as robust public forums largely consists of instances in which audiences
hissed and booed or alternatively clapped and cheered public figures such
as labor leaders and politicians. I wonder whether this form of engagement,
active though it may be, actually constitutes debate. Indeed, this form of audi-
ence participation could sustain a more straightforwardly Habermasian read-
ing in which the newsreel’s public sphere left little room for rational-critical
debate and instead solicited simpler plebiscitary expressions of preference or
group interest. Perhaps one of the newsreel’s most important legacies lies in
the way that social media polarize opinion by boiling public utterances down
to “likes,” allocating to their users a limited range of responses expressing
either approval or outrage.

Given its emphasis on the public sphere, *News Parade* engages surpris-
ingly little with the literature on the history of the press. Clark occasionally
writes as though the newsreel were the only visual mass media in opera-
tion at the time. Yet the newsreel was not alone in transforming the public
sphere along more visual lines; after all, the 1930s and 1940s were photo-
journalism’s golden era as well. Photojournalism likewise produced a sense
of realism by constantly calling attention to its own organizational efforts to
produce and disseminate picture coverage of the world. During this period,
the newspaper underwent dramatic changes; new developments in photo-
mechanical reproduction and communications such as wire photography
meant that it was becoming more visual than ever before. The 1930s and
1940s also witnessed the advent of the great American picture magazines,
such as *Life* and *Look*, shaped in their turn by the longer history of the illus-
trated press reaching back into the nineteenth century. Indeed, the news
had been visual for a long time.

The mass press seems continually to haunt the background of *News
Parade*. The newsreels’ “processional mode” was shared by the mass press
as a whole and was arguably invented by it long before the advent of film.
Moreover, the cultural landscape of the 1930s and 1940s was relentlessly
intermedial. Audiences watching newsreels also listened to radio reports
and read daily newspapers filled with photographs from far-off places, which
likewise invited them to relate to the world as a passing parade. The newsreel

\(^{11}\) Clark, 10.

\(^{12}\) Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry
into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of
seems to have translated this non-narrative way of representing reality into a cinematic medium.

While *News Parade* features some strong analyses of the newsreel’s filmic techniques, it might have benefited from a more sustained discussion of the specific importance of the *moving* image. Such a discussion would have clarified exactly what about the newsreel’s visuality differentiated it from the illustrated press writ large. Although moving away from the cinematic apparatus and the newsreel’s text and toward its production, dissemination, and reception allows Clark to make convincing arguments about the newsreel’s representational mode, such a move also poses a problem for cinema studies and studies of media generally. Shifting focus away from the medium’s specific formal properties makes newsreels seem very similar to photojournalism, not to mention radio news and written reporting. The difficult task ahead might be to determine how cultural artifacts’ unique formal attributes shaped the formation of publics and counterpublics, given a broad field of similar representational strategies and institutional practices among related cultural industries. One might then consider the overlaps between these representational forms and their respective business models. As Clark points out during his discussion of newsreel coverage of the second Sino-Japanese War, for example, newsreel stills were sometimes excerpted to circulate in the press as photographs. Such an endeavor might move outside photography studies or film studies to engage the broader conversation of visual studies, or even beyond the visual to something such as popular culture studies.

These criticisms ought not to detract from the contribution this book represents. Quite the reverse; *News Parade* should be commended for raising important questions about the future directions that media studies might take. It is sure to be invaluable to instructors who want to use newsreel footage that is now being digitized and placed on online platforms. Clark shows that such images do not speak for themselves, particularly since the studios’ archival practices tended to decontextualize films by cutting up footage and storing it by subject matter for future resale. The book concludes with a consideration of the newsreel’s legacy, identifying its “continuous, non-narrative sequence” as a formal structure that persists in today’s social media streams. Though more work remains to be done, *News Parade* will certainly be a key reference for the important but underappreciated newsreel medium for the foreseeable future.

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