

Cities and Cinema, Barbara Mennel. Routledge (USA and Canada), 2008, 245 pages, ISBN: 978-0-415-36446-1, £ 21.99 (paperback)

Cities and Cinema - as the title of the book suggests - focuses on the complex relationship between cities and cinema from a historical perspective and reflects on representations of cities in films in relation to a broad range of issues i.e. politics, sexuality, gender, war, globalization and national boundaries. The book is part of the series called *Critical Introductions to Urbanism and the City*, which specifically targets undergraduate social scientists especially those interested in urban studies, urban planning, cultural studies, geography and sociology. Therefore, it makes a useful introductory source for those who are interested in and new to researching cinema in relation to urban settings. The book successfully draws attention to social and political life in cinematic cities at a particular time of history and the ways in which this interacts with the production and consumption of film.

The book has a useful and wide-ranging bibliography and key filmography that encourages the reader to research further on the topics, hence it could be suggested as a good text book to undergraduates and to scholars who are designing a module in the above mentioned fields. The structure of the book is based on a selected film historiography that is *sine qua non* for film studies. Consistent with the structure of the book Mennel lays out a very well known relationship between cinema and modernity which (i) starts the film history with the first film screening in Paris, (ii) considers cities both as settings and inspirations for films, and (iii) considers the film as an industry and cities as places of film consumption. In that sense, the book does not say anything new in the field of film studies but introduces film theory into other social science disciplines.

Mennel begins by constructing the relationship between cinema and cities in the introduction of the book. She clearly draws attention to the parallels between the birth of cinema and urban culture. She relates historical shifts in society to the history of cinema and the ways in which cinema and films are affected from these shifts both technologically and ideologically. For

example Mennel explores the concept of 'train effect' as the founding myth of cinema and she uses as a metaphor to demonstrate the changing perception of time and space in modernity. She places an emphasis on cities such as Paris, New York, Moscow, Berlin and London as emblematic sites of both urban culture and the early development of cinema. In doing so she positions cinema and cities as inseparable entities. She also draws attention to the similarities between the analysis of film and the city and highlights the necessity of a critical understanding of history and geography regarding constantly changing spatial categories of analysis.

The analytical core of the book consists of three main sections each of which consists of three chapters. Each main section focuses on a different aspect of the relationship between cinema and cities. The first section offers a chronological development of film history in relation to urban culture from mid-1920s to early-1960s. Within this section Mennel establishes the connection between Weimar cinema, film noir and French New Wave through the aesthetic politics of everyday life. Within this framework the first chapter outlines the concept of modernity and the development of urban film through the lens of Berlin - the predominant setting being Weimar Republic city films in the mid-1920s. Theories of modernity and urbanity, especially Simmel's concept of *blasé attitude*, Benjamin's concept of *flaneur*, and Kracauer's theory of the *mass ornament* provide a background for the analysis in this chapter. Chapter Two then discusses Los Angeles as an allegory for modernity and as the primary setting for film noir post-World War II. The chapter also discusses the role of the femme fatale in film noir from a feminist perspective. The third chapter defines auteurism and French New Wave that refers to small budget, inspirational productions, which allowed chance encounters. Mennel draws attention to the commonalities between this kind of film making and Benjamin's and Simmel's understanding of the city and places with an emphasis on the concepts of the *auteur* and *flaneur*.

The second section highlights the political and historical dimensions of the cinematic representations of cities and focuses on the shift from modernism to postmodernism and from national to transnational. The section

employs a thematic approach to underline different political uses of film. Chapter Four, as the first chapter of this section, focuses on the Hong Kong film industry and discusses films made from the 1920s to late 1990s. It gives an insight into the history of Hong Kong in relation to China and points to the conflicts between communist China and capitalist Hong Kong. The city is also considered in relation to Great Britain in a transnational context and addresses the shift in the martial arts genre towards comedies in relation to Chinese diaspora and nostalgia, the transnational audience and the transnational urban context. Chapter Five discusses cinematic representations of the divided and the ruined cities - in particular Berlin, Belfast and Beirut - in relation to war and post-war moments. Mennel contextualises the postmodern use of the ruin and considers the spatial topography of the divided city. She analyses the spatial politics of films as reflections of ideological positions. Chapter Six focuses on science fiction films in relation to utopias and dystopias within the context of postmodernity. It also discusses the changes of narratives in science fiction in relation to the development of new media technologies and conflicts between human subjectivity and virtual reality.

The third and final section focuses on urban experiences of marginalised social groups and the ways in which their existence defines contemporary cinematic representations of urban space in relation to independent cinema and the entertainment industry. Within this theme chapter seven focuses on ghettoisation in relation to issues around class, race and migration (both in a domestic and international context). In particular Mennel highlights cinematic ghetto aesthetics and different kinds of spatial politics around issues of ghettoisation. Chapter Eight considers the city as a queer playground and examines the changing relationship between the city and sexuality in relation to a changing historical context, and explores the concept of the gay ghetto. This chapter particularly focuses on queer cinema in the 1980s and 1990s, but also outlines the historical changes and shifts in gay and lesbian films. In doing so it draws attention to its origins in Weimar Berlin, the repressive films of 1950s USA, and the 1960s gay and lesbian

liberation movement through to contemporary commoditised television shows. The final chapter of this section (Nine) draws attention to the relationship between globalisation and cities. Exploring both mainstream global market films and independently produced films Mennel investigates their different approaches to the representation of the city.

The conclusion of the book recalls the train effect that was introduced at the outset. Mennel theorises a shift from the 'train effect' to the 'favela effect'. She argues that the focus of urban films has shifted from the centre to the periphery. Hence she introduces the concept of 'favela effect' as a tool of analysis in a postmodern and global context. However, instead of developing this idea further the conclusion shifts to a form of research methods text which tutors students on how to write an essay on films. This seems like something of a missed opportunity, though as I mentioned at the beginning of this review, this book aims to provide a background to undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds with an interest in film, and it is successful in that sense.

By way of conclusion, if the book is read as a compact text book that chronologically engages with the relationship between urban settings and the film industry, it is largely successful. However in such a short volume Mennel covers roughly a century of film history in relation to modernity, and for the very same reason it lacks in-depth and critical engagement with many of the theories mentioned throughout the book. For that reason I would recommend the book to students and scholars who have an interest in film in relation to cities but have little or no previous engagement with film theory.

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