

Reviews

From the Immediate to the Transcendent

- Paul Coates

Joseph G. Kickasola, *The Films of Krzysztof Kieślowski: The Liminal Image*, New York and London: Continuum, 2004, 256 pp., ISBN: 0-8264-1559-8

Although the subtitle of Joe Kickasola's thoughtful survey of Kieślowski's films highlights the liminal, and liminality – defined here as a feature of art whose 'themes . . . convey various thresholds to the metaphysical in human experience' (p. 38) – is indeed central to his analysis, an alternative subtitle might have foregrounded an equally crucial category, that of abstraction. Kickasola opposes the reading of images as signs, describing his theoretical framework as 'non-semiotic' and hospitable to cognitivism, but he may also have implicit reservations regarding the scientific dryness often associated with cognitivism, as his warmest words invoke a phenomenology attuned to the pre-verbal. He is interested primarily in those zones of experience evoked by such adjectives as pre-categorical (p. 42, p. 47), non-verbal (p. 47), ineffable (p. 46), poetic (p. 43), pre-theoretical (p. 53), musical (p. 78), even visceral (p. 53). However, his potentially valuable framework, based on distinguishing between three concentric circles – the immediate (outer), the abstract (middle), and the transcendent (inner) – is vitiated by conflating the non-verbalism of immediate experience with an ineffability located beyond the immediate (p. 56), thus collapsing his own three-part model. Such short-circuiting manifests itself further in a phrase like 'the immediate, abstract experience' (p. 53). These slippages muddy the definition of abstraction, and the theoretical mix of Husserl, Heidegger, Eliade, Buber, Otto and Arnheim – among others – does not really cohere.

In fact, one could describe 'abstraction' itself as a threshold word, a border post between the two categories central to Kickasola's thesis: a formal abstraction that can be (and often is) discussed in the same breath as Antonioni and might be called 'defamiliarisation', and an abstraction open to the transcendent or metaphysical. The problem with much of the book, however, is its unwillingness to define the conditions under which the one can be shown – and not just asserted – to have graduated into the other. (A related problem is that of determining how the abstraction practised by the artist known as Kieślowski relates to that ascribed to art in general (pp. 51–52), and whether or not this makes him merely an arbitrary example of 'the artistic'.) Even though Kickasola theoretically divides Kieślowski's images between ones whose abstraction is primarily formal, and others whose obliquities hint at the metaphysical (p. 45), he succumbs frequently to a temptation to transpose the one into the other. For example, he begins a discussion of the dissolving sugar-lump in *Three Colours: Blue* by citing Kieślowski's own description of Julie's close-up focus on the object as a sign of her insularity (p. 82). Conceived thus, the 'abstraction' of the close-up here would match Julie's grief-stunned abstraction, chiming more fully with an Antonioniesque alienation than with a sense of the transcendent. Since, as he notes, Kieślowski himself 'does not articulate the transcendental dimension explicitly' here (*Ibid*), Kickasola takes it upon himself to do so, commenting that that '[t]he liquid creeping into the sugar-cube appears almost magical: a transcendent penetration into her insular world' (*Ibid*). (Equally tendentious are the Christianizing descriptions of Dorota as 'prayerful' and the doctor as placed behind a window whose red is 'infernal' in a key sequence of *Decalogue 2*.) Rhetoric and metaphor smuggle transcendence into images that are at best on its threshold, and may even halt before it, the difficulty in placing

them securely being the probable source of their fascination. (A rigorous distinction between effects of denotation and ones of connotation might have helped here.)

Such examples of verbal legerdemain as the ones given above show how Kickasola's sensitive inspections of filmic details often end up bundling them across the borderline between the two modes of abstraction, denying his own theoretical insight into their haunting, poetic uncategorizability. One glaring example of the effects of his bias is his early insistence that Kieślowski assumed a metaphysical film-making baton from Tarkovsky; and although he astutely mentions some of the differences (Kieślowski's possession of a sense of humour, for instance), the texture of his analyses suggests a different location for Kieślowski: *between* Tarkovsky and Antonioni. The fact that whereas Tarkovsky cross-references such specific belief-systems as those of Russian Orthodoxy, Buddhism and animism, Kieślowski cuts the links with such systems, may be the crucial difference that injects an unreadable mystery into so much of the latter's work. Kickasola's repeated emphasis on a metaphysics that interfaces directly with theology reaches its apogee in the irritating, unwarranted naming of the 'young man' of *The Decalogue* as Theophanes, a critical move even a believer (this writer, for instance) might be tempted to call God-bothering, and whose dubiousness is matched only at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, by Žižek's outrageous nudging on of the commandments so that *Decalogue 10* activates the first one. Do Kieślowski's ambiguities foster an unconscious revolt in some interpreters that prompts them to twist them into something less equivocal?

Although Kickasola's choice of moments for comment as he moves descriptively through the films might seem a little finicky (like a hand drifting through water and catching on something every now and then), it also reflects a salutary implicit awareness that their sheer wealth and complexity render any such selection arbitrary. He thereby sensitises one to the works' richness to an extent to which few commentators have done hitherto; and this is

perhaps the greatest service he performs for Kieślowski, reminding one just how much remains undiscussed, even at this apparently late juncture. (My own list of outstanding topics for articles would begin with glass, Levinas, the face, Camus, metaphor and suspense, but this book prompts me to add hands, Bergman, Antonioni, Tarkovsky, and phenomenology, to name just a few.) If no single study of Kieślowski has achieved authoritative status as yet (the indispensable *Kieślowski on Kieślowski* is of course not a critical work, while Margarethe Wach's *Krzysztof Kieślowski: Kino der moralischen Unruhe* is quite comprehensive (513 pages) but lacks critical originality), may this not testify more to the films' resistance to totalization than to the putative limitations of their interpreters? If Kickasola conducts little dialogue with other critics, mostly mining them for comments by Kieślowski and his collaborators, does this perhaps indicate the near-impossibility of finding a critical lens whose angle is sufficiently wide to focus both the films and the discourses swirling round them? Kickasola's metaphysical reading is a useful counterweight to those of – say – Žižek, or Emma Wilson, but it promises more than it delivers, and his tendency to mark up almost all abstraction as transcendent is particularly unfortunate in violating a theoretical model, which, like Žižek's, makes a laudably ambitious attempt to situate Kieślowski in the landscape of 'theory and post-theory'. However, his privileging of metaphysics over modernism ignores the way Kieślowski's continual shifts between them enact a dialectic that favours neither. What is more, the choice of these two categories as exclusive avenues into Kieślowski's work represses the question of its continuity – for even though Kieślowski's incorporation of them suggests his awareness of the limitations of realism, and hence of his own earlier work, realism seems to have been something of which the one-time documentarist never quite ceased to dream, a third term that is less a synthesis than an additional ball suspended alongside the modernistic and the metaphysical.

Nostalgia for Lost Cities

- Peter Stanfield

Edward Dimenberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*, London and Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004, 327 pp., ISBN: 0-674-01346-8

Like any good connoisseur of film noir, James Wolcott, *Vanity Fair's* film critic, wrote in 1997 that the genre had its roots in German Expressionism and the private-eye novel, emerging fully formed 'like a walking hangover after World War II, a haunted shadow rising from Europe's bombed-out rubble and Japan's radioactive ash – a slice of death drawn from larger annihilations'. Wolcott's striking apocalyptic imagery is balanced by his replaying the cliché of the genre's European and hard-boiled antecedents which he follows with a litany of noir's staple ingredients that ran counter to the period's 'lusher' productions: its 'morbid bent', emphasised by deep focus cinematography, skewed camera angles, rain-slick streets, Kafkaesque compositions in high contrast black and white, and so on. The list, now so familiar to lovers of American cinema's middling productions from the middle years of the 20th century, is utterly redundant.¹ But Wolcott, writing at the end of the century, adds a novel twist: he will match the noir films set in New York from *The Naked City* and *Sweet Smell of Success* through to their seventies' stepchildren *The French Connection* and *Taxi Driver* and measure them against the city as it exists today. Inevitably, contemporary New York appears as an unexciting, homogenous space compared to the feverishness and madness of the city captured in the films of yesteryear:

Times Square is no longer the carny Sodom of midnight cowboys, Larry Clark chicken hawks, milk-white whores with blue bruises, and bell-bottomed pimps; the Port Authority Bus Terminal is no longer the fluorescent catacomb of the living dead. Most of the porn theatres and fleabag hotels are as extinct now as the Automats and pawnshops of 40s noirs.²

The nostalgia for the lost cities of 20th century New York/America registered in film noir is the subject of Edward Dimenberg's work. Noir, argues Dimenberg, records the process of rapid change facing the post-war urban space, creating a 'nostalgia and longing for older urban forms combined with a fear of new alienating urban realities' (10). This is a wholly compelling thesis, and Dimenberg almost pulls it off. Like the recent work of Tom Gunning, Miriam Hansen and Ben Singer, among others, Dimenberg's work engages with the urban theory of Benjamin and Kracauer, while Bergson, Minkowski, Lefebvre and, most interestingly, Sartre also play their part.

The book is organised into five chapters. The first considers the image of the centripetal city space as exemplified in synoptic aerial photography; one thinks of the opening shots in *The Naked City*: New York filmed from a view offered by an aeroplane. 'From law enforcement observation of neighborhoods to the use of satellite images to plan the future location of shopping centers, the aerial view of urban space facilitated its oversight, management, and planning, thus suggesting a new sense of the city and its "truth"' (47). It is a superbly argued and organised chapter, offering novel insights on the well known sights of some of noir's canonical films: *Pickup On South Street*, *He Walked By Night*, *Phantom Lady*, and, of course, *The Naked City*. The chapter represents the most interesting account we have of the development of the police procedural film, and his work on Sartre's notion of seriality is truly revelatory. According to this thesis, social relations are defined through separation, rather than reciprocity, an idea best exemplified in the list of Top Ten best selling records. Sartre notes that if the music consumer 'listens to the radio every Saturday and if he can afford to buy every week's No.1 record, he will end up with the record collection of the Other, that is to say, the record collection of no one' (60–1). A brilliant observation, which translates into a more general image of the urban inhabitant as *both* isolated and integrated: reading your newspaper alone as you travel with other commuters to work in seemingly endless

seriality. You might recall, for example, the commuters in the opening sequence in *Pickup on South Street*. Dimenberg effortlessly and perfectly matches Sartre's thesis against this film and others from his chosen list of noirs.

Chapter two develops the idea of noir recording a centripetal city in crisis, with the absence of an easily defined city centre increasingly coming to define 1950s noirs. All this work on films of the period is driven by an impressive excavation of contemporaneous urban theory and town planning, though the reader by the end of this chapter is left with the uneasy feeling that film noir as an area of investigation has got lost in the mapping of urban realities. By the following chapter, however, Dimenberg has returned in style to the image of noir as a 'prophylactic encounter with endangered urban spaces whose direct experience might well produce anxiety' (121). The penultimate chapter considers how late noir recorded the move from a centripetal to a centrifugal urban experience – the middle-class flight to the suburbs:

For the former elicits the agoraphobic sensation of being overwhelmed by space, fears of constriction, or the fear of losing one's way in the metropolis, its fundamental legibility can generally be assumed, despite the disorientating features of particular cities or neighborhoods. . . . By contrast, the anxieties provoked by centrifugal space hinge upon temporality and the uncertainty produced by a special environment increasingly devoid of landmarks and centers and often likely to seem permanently in motion. (172)

In motion, along the new freeways and motorways connecting suburban America to its failing urban heart, this chapter is arresting in its detailing of urban planning, it is also at its weakest in its analysis of films that might offer a complementary insight into the new face of the urban environment. Only *Odds Against Tomorrow* holds up to close scrutiny, and while he argues that the development of the highway is as 'significant to post-1930 cinema as the street and the railroad were to those earlier films engaged in charting a centralized and navigable

centrifugal space', it is a thesis that is woefully unsupported by his analysis of an utterly obscure film, *Plunder Road*, which he admits 'dispenses with many of the traits associated with film noir' (199). Are there no canonical noirs to support his argument, and if not what is he saying about noir and the centrifugal city?

Unlike Wolcott who addressed a general reader, Dimenberg never feels the need to trot through the iconography of noir, or even to 'search for its abiding essence', and this must be the first major work on the genre that has virtually nothing to say about gender and, given the significant amount of recent critical work on the area, race. This 'neglect' of the contours of the genre is both the book's strength, allowing him to focus on new insights, and its weakness. Again and again, noir's instability as a film category is thrown up by his insights only to be ignored, his analysis of *Plunder Road* being the pre-eminent example. The pressing and fascinating historical work Dimenberg has done on the development of post-war America's urban landscape is ill-served, I would argue, by an ahistorical acceptance of, and avoidance of critical engagement with, a broadly understood conception of film noir – the category is stretched to breaking point by his inclusion of Jean-Pierre Melville's *Two Men in Manhattan* as a key example of his thesis on noir and centripetal space, and at another point Orson Welles' *The Trial* and Godard's *Alphaville* are used to shore-up an argument for which supporting testimony from canonical films noirs are noticeably absent.

His final chapter, which focuses on Joseph Losey's version of Fritz Lang's *M* and the obliteration of Bunker Hill area in Los Angeles, a rundown proletarian enclave that town planners turned into a vast car park, confirms the potential of successfully matching urban theory and film analysis, and yet, once again the question of noir's unstable contours has been ignored and I find myself wishing Dimenberg had used his critical authority to consider the urban space in post-war American films as whole, rather than trying to find focus on such an unreliable set of films as represented by film noir. If he had followed a non-generic path we

could have had the pleasure of reading his thoughts on such wonderful films as D.A. Pennebaker's *Daybreak Express* (1953), a six minute film that depicts an early morning train ride into New York on the elevated railroad, or Lionel Rogosin's evocative document of Skid Row in *On The Bowery* (1955), or Minnelli's *The Clock* (1945). Still, and this is the book's real gift, it has provided a rich and profitable means by which others might engage with such films.

Notes

- 1 James Wolcott, 'New York Noir', *Vanity Fair*, no. 443, July 1997, 36–40
- 2 *Ibid.*, 36

Dream Landscapes

• Sarah Cardwell

Grahame Smith, *Dickens and the dream of cinema*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003, 206 pp., ISBN: 0-7190-5563-6

Smith claims that '*Dickens and the dream of cinema* seeks to dissolve the barriers between literary and film studies'. The book achieves this aim in an innovative, thought provoking and sensitive manner. It exhibits two key strengths. The first lies in its evocative and vivid explorations of Dickens' nineteenth-century world, and the account of Dickens' place within that world, bringing the era to life for both scholarly and non-expert readers. Smith's broad and eclectic range of references are carefully chosen to convey not just 'facts' about the time, but a sense of how it might have been experienced by those living in it; the reader's attention is captured and sustained by Smith's writing style, which is generally engaging, witty and enthused about its subject. The second of the book's strengths lies in its enthusiastic discussion of Dickens' writing, for *Dickens and the dream of cinema* is also an exercise in sensitive and thorough literary criticism, revealing patterns, motifs and stylistic features that recur across Dickens' oeuvre.

Smith describes his approach to the material as a 'dream methodology', offering a 'dream landscape', which sounds somewhat obscure, but which succeeds in execution: we are offered a gradual accretion of detail, reflecting the nature of the book's material and its argument; Smith rejects a simple linear, causal form of argumentation, but does so without descending into wooliness and irrelevance. A complex web of interrelations is sketched, yet the pertinence and importance of each constituent part is maintained. Smith's methodology is intimately and productively receptive to the project he is undertaking, and the book thus exhibits an impressive coherence given the breadth of its subject matter.

The first six chapters offer an extensively researched and carefully drawn account of the connections between Dickens' work and various aspects of his contemporary world; the last three are more concerned with explicit connections between Dickens and film, and consequently focus on more recent times (looking at recent adaptations, for example, and drawing parallels between Dickens and Orson Welles). Chapters 8 and 9 constitute a desirable and logical end to the book, moving as they do towards the twentieth century and towards a critical and evaluative reflection upon Dickens' work and its adaptations. There is a pleasing sense of engagement as the reader undertakes the same journey as that of the author.

It is satisfying for those who are familiar with Smith's work to see the fullest realisation of his ideas here. The integration of Smith's previously published essay on Christine Edzard's film adaptation of *Little Dorrit*, which is the basis for Chapter 8, is a case in point. The article in its original, isolated form lacked a certain conceptual grounding, which undermined its evaluative stance, but placed within the context of this book, the piece is considerably strengthened and is well-integrated – the book allows Smith to develop more fully his criteria for evaluation and his individual approach to Dickens' work.

For those readers interested only (narrowly) in film, *Dickens and the dream of cinema* might prove frustrating. Some chapters only touch

upon the subject: Chapter 4, for example, is primarily concerned with Dickens and the city, and film is introduced rather obliquely, through references to 'mirrors and reflections'. Given that this analogy is one that has emerged somewhat battered, if not wholly broken, in recent film theory, and that Smith does not devote time to supporting this analogy, the connection with film here is loose, to say the least. That is not to say that the discussion itself is flawed, but that it seems really to be about mirrors, reflections and 'looking', rather than cinema. Chapter 5 is comparable, drawing out Dickens' attitude to and relationship with technology, and only occasionally forging the further link between Dickens, technology and film. These chapters instead develop a greater understanding of Dickens' sensibility: his thoughts, feelings and responses in terms of his experiences of nineteenth-century life.

Smith's underlying conceptualisation of cinema becomes apparent in Chapter 6, which seems to hint at a loosely-constructed 'essentialism' of film that, interestingly, Smith attempts to deny elsewhere in the book. Although he explicitly states that there is no one form of cinema, he does seem to place a particular emphasis upon the connections between film and spectacle, which implies that

'the cinematic' is manifested in large-scale, grand productions, full of details, filling the wide screen (explicitly contrasted with television at one point). Yet this is only one kind of cinema, and thus appears to offer an unnecessarily limited point of view. Conversely, the cinematic is fractured into tiny constituent elements, and is frequently represented metaphorically rather than literally. In his eagerness to forge connections with 'film', Smith is compelled to resort to postulating a 'filmic' or 'cinematic' object that can be summoned through references to light and movement, spectacle, cities, mirrors or even railways (though Smith is cautious regarding the last).

Given the sometimes uneasy status of cinema within this book, single-minded film scholars may not find it to their liking. However, those who are more broadly interested in the literary and visual arts, in history, and in the valuable and productive connections that may be traced between these will find much to intrigue and inspire in this original book. *Dickens and the dream of cinema* is written from a deep knowledge of and abiding passion for its subject. It constitutes a laudable attempt to dissolve those obstinate barriers between literary and film studies, and open up new areas and modes of enquiry.

Books received

Books listed here may be reviewed in future issues of *Film Studies*.

Barton, Ruth, *Irish National Cinema*, Routledge, 2004, 214 pp.

Dalle Vacche, Angela, ed., *The Visual Turn: Classical Film Theory and Art History*, Rutgers University Press, 2003, 279 pp.

Elsaesser, Thomas, Alexander Horwath and Noel King, eds, *The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s*, Amsterdam University Press, 2004, 391 pp.

Ganti, Tejaswini, *Bollywood: A guidebook to popular Hindi cinema*, Routledge, 2004, 254 pp.

Hames, Peter, ed., *The Cinema of Central Europe*, Wallflower Press, 2004, 291 pp.

Hiltunen, Ari, *Aristotle in Hollywood*, Intellect, 2002, 143 pp.

Hughes, Howard, *Once Upon a Time in the Italian West*, I.B. Tauris, 2004, 288 pp.

Iordanova, Dina, *Cinema of the Other Europe: The Industry and Artistry of East Central European Film*, Wallflower Press, 2003, 224 pp.

Kitses, Jim, *Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood*, New Edition, British Film Institute, 2004.

Konstantarakos, Myrto, *Spaces in European Cinema*, Intellect, 2000, 188 pp.

Mayer, Geoff, *Roy Ward Baker*, 'British Film Makers' series, Manchester University Press, 2004, 224 pp.

O'Brien, Harvey, *The Real Ireland: The evolution of Ireland in documentary film*, Manchester University Press, 2004, 352 pp.

Rosenbaum, Jonathan, *Essential Cinema: On the Necessity of Film Canons*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004, 445 pp.

Rothman, Jack, *Hollywood in wide angle: How directors view filmmaking*, Scarecrow Press, 2004, 199 pp.

Tasker, Yvonne, ed., *Action and Adventure Cinema*, Routledge, 2004, 414 pp.

Wayne, Mike, *The Politics of Contemporary European Cinema: Histories, Borders, Diasporas*, Intellect, 2002, 146 pp.

Zhang, Yingjin, *Chinese National Cinema*, Routledge, 2004, 328 pp.

Book series

I. B. Tauris: KINOfiles Filmmakers' Companions:

Beumers, Birgit, *Nikita Mikhalkov*, 2005, 146 pp.

Riley, John, *Dmitri Shostakovich: A Life in Film*, 2005, 150 pp.

Taubman, Jane, *Kira Muratova*, 2005, 125 pp.

Widdis, Emma, *Alexander Medvedkin*, 2005, 154 pp.

- Books received

Routledge: Film Readers:

Benshoff, Harry and Sean Griffin, eds, *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*, Routledge, 2004, 242 pp.

Fischer, Lucy and Marcia Landy, eds, *Stars: The Film Reader*, Routledge, 2004, 299 pp.

Robertson Wojcik, Pamela, ed., *Movie Acting: The Film Reader*, Routledge, 2004, 240 pp.