

Review

Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby and Philippe Meers (eds.) *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity: new perspectives on European cinema history*. London: Routledge, 2012. ISBN: 978-0415672788 (cloth). 232pp.

Cinema, Audiences and Modernity: new perspectives on European Cinema is an edited collection inspired by the conference 'The Glow in their Eyes', which took place in Ghent in December 2007. As its title suggests, this volume aims to offer new perspectives on the way the history of film distribution, exhibition and reception in early cinema has thus far been recorded, moving away from the text, and rather placing emphasis on empirical evidence of cinema-going within social, historical, cultural and spatial contexts. To this end, the book sets itself the task of addressing and further problematising the 'cinema-modernity thesis' (p. 8), which has seen cinema as both the product and the vehicle of modernity. The work that has been done already by leading scholars, such as David Bordwell, Robert Allen and Joe Kember among others, who theorised *and* questioned the association of cinema with modernity and urbanisation, is recognised by the authors in the introduction (p. 4-5). However, it is argued that the articles in this edited collection aim to challenge the 'modernity thesis' on another front: that of the reception of early cinema and of real audiences' cinema-going practices in a number of European countries.

Indeed, all the articles included in this collection use empirical data to ground their arguments and discoveries about early audiences' experience of cinema in the first few decades of its life. The volume's focus on contextual factors that might have influenced cinema-going – such as censorship, social and political groups who sought to control the new art form, as well as exhibition and distribution practices themselves influenced by social, political and spatial factors – is maintained throughout, giving this edited collection a fluent and cohesive articulation of the ideas expressed by its organisers.

In terms of its structure then, this is a well-designed edition that is easy to navigate, with equally sized chapters and effective introduction and concluding chapters. The number and use of chapter endnotes is impressive, offering a wealth of sources for further research and detailed information for accessing these sources.

The content is distributed between two parts: the first, 'Cinema, Tradition and Community' contains articles that focus on local specificities of cinema-going in a number of European regions, towns and cities; articles in the second part, 'Audiences, Modernity and Cultural Exchange' examine the conditions and practices (exhibition, marketing, censorship etc.) influencing early audiences' experience of cinema. Overall the content is strong, though there are those articles that stand out for their rigour and their critical extrapolations from the local to the European and beyond, thus opening up the book to those readers/researchers who have an interest in the methodology of empirical research rather than the specific localities. Chapters such as Anna Manchin's 'Imagining Modern Hungary Through Film' (p. 64-80), which considers early cinema as an important vehicle for mass culture and for instilling a national identity, and the implications of these notions; or Andrea Haller's 'Diagnosis: 'Filmmeritis'' (p. 130-141), which identifies early discourses of female cinema-going as a critical discourse of visibility for women in the public sphere. Indeed, Haller's contribution is the only one in the book which focuses on women's cinema-going and the importance of cinema on women's experience at the beginning of the 20th century in Europe. However, there are also those contributions that remain largely descriptive and too fixated on narrating data. Fortunately, these are few and far between and do not on the whole compromise the book's critical integrity.

In this sense, *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity: new perspectives on European Cinema* is a book that will prove most useful to researchers of those specific local and historical contexts, rather than an edition that could be accessible to all with an interest in early European film history. The collection is most useful in that it opens the field of European Cinema research beyond the countries generally covered by such works (like France, Germany, Italy); but not all chapters included here manage to effectively draw more general conclusions or move further from the observations or descriptions of those specific micro-contexts. This edition would have certainly benefited from placing itself more firmly within a wider context of empirical European Cinema history research.

Ben Singer, an author who is referenced by most of the writers in this edition, including the editors themselves, has conceived of modernity as 'a heterogeneous arena of modern and counter-modern impulses'.¹ This proposition indeed appears to be the driving force in this collection. Although the Introduction to this edition creates the expectation that the modernity-cinema thesis, indeed the concept of (urban) modernity itself, will be contested, this is something which does not thoroughly happen. Many of the writers start from Singer's astute and all-encompassing observation or re-confirm this notion in their conclusions, rather than going further. The final chapter, 'Negotiating Cinema's Modernity' becomes an appropriate conclusion in the way it addresses some of the above issues and ultimately recognises the centrality of the cinema-modernity discourse in history and historiography so far. Biltreyst, Maltby and Meers' edited collection in the end manages to expand (if not thoroughly challenge) the boundaries of what we understand as modernity, its relationship and association to cinema; in addition, and more importantly perhaps, it

stretches the historiographical map of Early European Cinema research towards territories and methodologies not yet common.

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¹ Singer, B., 'The Ambimodernity of Early Cinema: Problems and Paradoxes in the Film-and-Modernity Discourse', in Ligensa, A. and Kreimeier, K. (eds.) *Film 1900: Technology, Perception, Culture*. New Barnet: John Libbey, 2009, p.38.