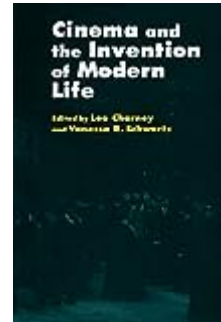


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Leo Charney, Vanessa R. Schwartz, eds. *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. vii + 409 pp. \$31.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-20112-5; \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-20111-8.



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Filming the Modern Moment

“Le cinema, c’est vingt-quatre fois la verite par seconde.” Jean-Luc Godard, *Le Petit soldat* (1960).

While Jean-Luc Godard’s celebrated dictum clearly cannot be regarded as a wholly adequate encapsulation of the relationship between material reality, or at least lived experience, and its photographic and filmic representations, it does provide a convenient shorthand for the undoubtedly complex but nevertheless real interpenetration of “life” and “art” (however they may be conceived). This applies particularly in the case of those technologically dependent media which we have become accustomed to perceiving as the characteristic, and characterizing, artistic forms of “modern life.” This is an even more reductive shorthand for the major cultural and psychological restructuring which Charles Baudelaire was the first to identify in the specific context of nineteenth-century Paris (as Walter Benjamin and many subsequent commentators have observed), and which may or may not be, depending on the individual reader’s preferred interpretation of late capitalist society, in the process of being replaced by a “postmodern” form of social existence.

It is the collective contention of the authors of this

important new book that cinema should be regarded as foremost among the familiar “talismanic innovations [or] emblems of modernity,” which include “the telegraph and telephone, railroad and automobile, photograph and cinema.” As the editors persuasively argue in their sparkling introductory essay, this is because cinema not only provides a privileged site for the analysis of the condition of “modernity,” but also, and far more importantly, because “modern culture was ‘cinematic’ before the fact” (p. 1). The editors undoubtedly make a large claim, but one which deserves to be taken seriously on the basis of the evidence provided by the thirteen wide-ranging, but ultimately harmonious, essays in this volume. Together they concentrate attention not only on the early cinema, but also—and, indeed, especially—on the variously modern modes of representation (from the literary to the photographic), which were its artistic forerunners and technological precursors.

While not all of the American academics who have contributed to this work will be equally familiar to an international audience (such distinguished contributors as Richard Abel, Margaret Cohen, Jonathan Crary, Tom

Gunning, and Miriam Bratu Hansen are joined by a number of less established, but clearly highly talented researchers), there can be no doubting either the rigour or the unity of purpose which the contributors have brought to this joint venture. A good deal of conceptual and structural “cement” is, predictably, provided by the co-editors’ introductory essay, together with their individual “keynote” discussions: of intellectual responses to the modern (Charney), and pre-cinematic urban spectatorship (Schwartz).

The end product is to be compared favourably with such important English-language contributions to our understanding of French cultural restructuring post-1850 as Charles Rearick’s *Pleasures of the Belle Epoque* (Yale, 1985), and even the second volume, *Intellect, Taste and Anxiety*, of Theodore Zeldin’s monumental *France 1848-1945* (Clarendon Press, 1977). In rather a different direction, this anthology might reasonably be likened to another thought-provoking (if not uniformly persuasive) recent American re-examination of what were previously considered to be well charted cultural waters. This is the second great period of French modernization, the “thirty glorious years” of the post-war economic miracle, 1945-75, which has been subjected to a thoroughgoing critical deconstruction in Kristin Ross’s *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (MIT Press, 1995).

The present volume’s refreshingly cross-disciplinary approach derives much of its collective thrust by being contained within four broad conceptual and empirical fields: “Bodies and Sensation,” “Circulation and Consumer Desire,” “Ephemerality and the Moment,” and “Spectacles and Spectators.” In all of these overlapping areas, the focus is firmly placed on a qualitatively distinct and historically specific metropolitan urban space, peopled by newly mobile and self-aware individuals. Together these *citadins* (and, to a strictly limited extent, *citadines*) constitute the mass audience for the many, varied, and generally commercially motivated and technologically mediated forms of distraction made available to them, thanks to their newly acquired leisure time and, especially, to their leisure budgets. It was against the whirling background of this dynamic urban culture that the first film-makers, like the Impressionist painters and the early photographers before them, would try to fix the moments and record the sensations which together made up the condition of modernity.

In their emphasis on the new urban reality of the major city, the authors collectively follow Georg Simmel,

the German sociologist and philosopher of alienation, with individual contributors regularly paying homage to his landmark essay of 1903, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” just as they do to Baudelaire, and, above all, Benjamin in his specific identification of the “Haussmanized” cityscape (both architecturally reordered and socially controlled) of post-1850 Paris as the “capital of the nineteenth century”. So, although the teeming cities of Berlin, London, and New York may regularly feature in this stimulating collection of essays, with Stockholm and Copenhagen even putting in brief appearances, there can be little doubt that the real focus of the study is, throughout, the France of the *fin-de-siecle*.

Of course, we are talking here not of the Lyon of the Lumiere brothers, but of the Paris of the *flaneur*. This ideal type epitomizes the mobility and ephemerality of the modern spectator, as of the urban visions which he fleetingly enjoys before strolling on. It is, by the way, very definitely “he,” for the *flaneur* is, we are reminded, and as Janet Wolff in particular has argued, also an emblem of the masculine privilege of modern public life, with his nearest female equivalent being the Parisian street prostitute. Here it was that the characteristically—and, if the authors are to be believed, quintessentially—“modern” juncture of movement and vision in the moving pictures of the cinema would be “prepared for” most systematically and experienced most intensely. The product of a uniquely rich social and semi-otic brew, the early French cinema would prove to be as commercially aggressive as it was artistically ambitious. When viewed from our own standpoint in the age of GATT and associated arguments over France’s (and especially French cinema’s) right to a “cultural exception” to unfettered international trade, the hegemonic tendencies of the early French cinema appear distinctly paradoxical. For, in the early days, even the United States, home of today’s globalized cinema industry, would have to fight hard to resist the combined entrepreneurial dynamism and cultural imperialism of the French “Red Rooster,” as Richard Abel argues in an outstanding essay on “The Perils of Pathe, or the Americanization of Early American Cinema.”

The scope of the Paris-focused essays in this collection is as broad as their collective methodology is rigorous. Throughout the discussion, theoretical considerations and empirical research are systematically interwoven, with detailed notes pointing the way to further reading in the specific fields of enquiry. In addition, each of the essays is powerfully illustrated with a series of black-and-white plates. Tom Gunning thus presents a fascinat-

ing and detailed examination of Alphonse Bertillon's systematization of the photographic identification of criminals. Jonathan Crary offers a distillation of ideas which he has developed at greater length elsewhere, and which are applied very productively here to Manet's *In the Conservatory*, a generally underestimated, because supposedly "naturalistic" and even "conservative," work of art. Margaret Cohen reflects on the panoramic literature of the July Monarchy, identifying its structural similarities with the treatments of the everyday which would be found in the earliest manifestations of the new medium of the cinema. Vanessa R. Schwartz writes with power and passion on the pre-cinematic (and even proto-cinematic) taste of the turn-of-the-century Parisian viewing public for "reality shows": from (painted and/or photographic) panoramas and the popular press, to the often horrific wax effigies proposed by the Musée Grévin, and, indeed, the all too real corpses routinely exposed to view by the Paris Morgue. Together, argues Schwartz, they constituted "a sort of *flanerie* for the masses" (p. 298).

Marcus Verhagen for his part casts fresh light on the poster art of *fin-de-siecle* Paris, including particularly the often critically revisited (not to say, thoroughly mythologised) Montmartre of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. His consideration of the production of publicity materials for circuses and carnivals leads him inevitably to the terminology, if not (as Verhagen himself is the first to acknowledge) the real spirit, of Mikhail Bakhtin:

The poster was carnivalesque in the sense that it was allied to reckless entrepreneurialism, to self-made men, to *americanisme* and *arrivisme*, and, more generally, to the adulteration of established social hierarchies. The ritual boasts of the circus director, the humiliation of the impoverished aristocrat, the social striving of the prostitute: those were the images it conjured (p. 123).

These comments tie in with the accurate observations made elsewhere in the book regarding both the increased blurring of the line between reality and its representations, and the commercialism (and indeed consumerism) underpinning so many of the characteristically "modern" diversions of the urban population(s) of the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-centuries. However, as personified by a Parisian entrepreneur such as Joseph Oller—who invested as much in swimming pools, skating rinks, and cycle-tracks as he did in circuses, music halls, and cinemas—this commercially motivated breaking-down of barriers and boundaries reveals a gap in the coverage of what is otherwise an excellent survey of the Parisian cultural scene, in both its "high" and "low"

cultural manifestations. Thus, for all its insistence on "the... centrality of the body as the site of vision, attention, and stimulation" (p. 3), this book has nothing to say about the post-1870 rise of French sport, a "modern" social phenomenon if ever there was one, and one destined, from its origins, to be ever more intensely commercialized and mediatized. However, this is only a quibble, and is offset to some extent by the useful references made to the pre-cinematic motion studies of Etienne-Jules Marey and the (also Paris-based) Eadweard [sic] Muybridge.

While clearly invidious to single out any one contributor among so many talented scholars, perhaps the individual high point in what is throughout an impressive collective performance is the particularly sophisticated and elegant reappraisal conducted by Jeannene [sic] M. Przyblyski of Eugene Appert's notorious series of faked photographs of the *Crimes de la Commune*. Rejecting the familiar condemnatory approaches to these jaundiced representations of 1871, she identifies in the well documented slippage between "fact" and "fiction", between reality and its multiple (and interdependent) representations, a microcosm of the tensions operating between the new technologies of representation, entrepreneurialism, and, of course, politics. The historical conditions of production and the representational structures of signification of Appert's works of reactionary propaganda are thus persuasively "unmasked" to reveal not their "true" meaning, but rather "the complex condition of transparency by which the world at large and its construction into 'current events' were coming to be regarded as interchangeable" (p. 269). Here, as throughout, "reality" cannot plausibly be considered in isolation from its doubly partial (both incomplete and biased) representations.

In their introduction, Charney and Schwartz express the hope that their book will "help us to reconsider the lineage from modernity to postmodernity and the technologies, distractions, and representations of our own turn of a century [and] ideally initiate a more rigorous interrogation of the contrast and resemblances between the 'modern' and the putatively 'postmodern'" (pp. 10-11). It is the firm belief of the present reviewer that such a reappraisal is both facilitated and stimulated by *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, and his sincere hope that this important study will receive the wide exposure which it undoubtedly deserves.

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