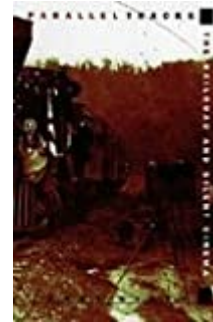


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Lynne Kirby. *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema.* Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997. ix + 338 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-1839-2; \$84.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-1833-0.



Reviewed by Douglas Bailie (University of Alberta)

Published on H-PCAACA (December, 1997)

Train passengers and cinema audiences shared a common experience. Scenes flashed past the train window or the movie screen, taking the passenger/spectator on a journey which challenged one's perception of space and time. Several historical examples underline the parallel development of these two technologies: Hale's Tours put the cinema audiences in train cars; Albert E. Smith's solution for the flickering film image was supposedly developed while his view out a train window was being repeatedly interrupted by telegraph poles; and the early film audiences reacted hysterically to the sight of an oncoming train in *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*. Lynne Kirby suggests that the relationship is worthy of extended analysis, and thereby provides an imaginative approach to the discussion of film and culture.

Kirby uses the parallel between passengers and spectators to approach the difficult question of the role of the audience in cinema history. She argues both technologies destabilized perceptions of reality by annihilating space and time. Through a series of semiotic analyses of train films from the United States and Europe in the silent era, Kirby explores how this destabilizing experience affected the cultural perception of gender.

Kirby includes discussion of the social context of railway and motion picture development. For example, she discusses the relationship between trains and the insti-

tution of standard time. Another example is the changing roles of women in the workplace and American cinema's coincident pursuit of middle-class female spectators. Thus, the analysis Kirby provides of various train films is sensitive to the time and place in which they were created.

She also proves her ability to make meaningful observations on films from different countries without making unwarranted assertions of common themes. Kirby shows contrast between the strident modernism of the Soviet avant-garde film *Man with a Movie Camera* and the mix of modernist and anti-modernist themes in King Vidor's *The Crowd*. Similarly, the inevitable heterosexual coupling in John Ford's *The Iron Horse* is contrasted with the apparent impossibility of such a coupling in Abel Gance's *La Roue*. But all these examples are used to argue film's ability to use deception and shock to put the audience in a suggestible state. This allows Kirby to conclude "deception, suggestibility, and the uncertainty of representation, these form the *modus operandi*, the currency, of modern life in which so much becomes subject to confusion and the influence of image-based culture" (251).

Kirby has uneven success in showing how films have destabilized gender identity. The point is well demonstrated in, for example, *The General* where Buster Keaton's character's masculinity is challenged and then

confirmed. At other times, such as in Kirby's analysis of *The Iron Horse*, the point is stretched when she argues that a boy witnessing his father's murder is akin to Freud's primal scene wherein the child witnesses its parents in the sexual act. The sometimes excessive use of Freud fails to explain the audiences' experience of the film or how it might have shaped their understanding of gender.

The parallel between train passengers and film spectators is strong and should be pursued further. Similar parallels are drawn between cinema and aviation

in Michael Paris's *From the Wright Brothers to Top Gun* (1995) indicating that the relationship between motion pictures and other modern technologies could be a fruitful avenue for discovering the role of the film audience and the place of that experience in modern culture.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pcaaca>

Citation: Douglas Bailie. Review of Kirby, Lynne, *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. December, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1566>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact P.C. Rollins at Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu or the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.