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Margaret C. Flinn. *The Social Architecture of French Cinema, 1929-1939*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2014.

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Abstract

Review of Margaret C. Flinn. *The Social Architecture of French Cinema, 1929-1939*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2014.

Keywords

French cinema, architecture, 1930s, spatial theory

Margaret C. Flinn. *The Social Architecture of French Cinema, 1929-1939*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2014. 254 pp.

The point of departure of Margaret Flinn's *Social Architecture of French Cinema* is the longstanding question of the status of film and its relation to and comparison with other arts, a question that was reopened with the arrival of sound in film. For investigating intersections of cinema and architecture, still an under-explored topic, Flinn lucidly analyzes the interplay among the social, aesthetic, urban, spatial, and architectural features of the French cinema of the 1930s. While interdisciplinary approaches are skillfully employed, the book is firmly grounded in the historiography of film studies. Cinema as a social medium is the core thematic and organizing concept of the book, which situates the subject matter in the heady socio-historical and cultural configurations of the 1930s, including imperial expansion, the Popular Front's intervention in the cultural arena, and militant filmmakers' engagement with architectural modernism. The book interweaves contemporary debates and theories by Sergei Eisenstein, André Malraux, and other filmmakers and critics who were aware of the expanding impact of film discourse nationally and internationally with later interpretations and theories such as Pierre Nora's work on historical memory and the theory of Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, Gilles Deleuze, and others. The "social architecture" of the title designates both physical constructions and the metaphorical configuration of filmic structures, narratives, and representations underlying the social characteristics of both cinema and architecture.

The book's corpus is cinema interrogating the real world, either through realism or the documentary mode. In the first chapter Flinn clearly lays out the distinct categories of documentary genres in the period in respect to spatial composition. A key film studied here (and also in a couple of other chapters) is Georges Lacombe's *La Zone (The Zone)* about ragpickers, set in the *banlieue* (suburb) of Paris. The interplay between the social, spatial, and aesthetic is powerfully present in this documentary that epitomizes one of the binary tendencies of portraying the *banlieue* as an industrial wasteland. Heaps of rags literally compose a wasteland, and thus the "zone" is devoid of any characteristics of the other tendency of the binary, portraying the *banlieue* as an idealized space of leisure for middle and lower classes. Yet, reviews of *La Zone*, Flinn shows, praised the film for its poetic quality that did not take away from, and actually enhanced, its commitment to truth. The approach of studying fictional films and documentaries (as well as films that are both) together brings forth other valuable insights concerning film's engagement with the "real." For example, although Flinn's observation that René Clair's films—the subject of chapter 2—were considered to offer more worthwhile and satisfying representations of the city than documentaries did has been acknowledged, she builds on this point to argue that for Clair set design

in realist film had to strive for verisimilitude much more than verity, the central aim of documentary. Here, while Flinn employs concepts of verisimilitude and authenticity drawn from film studies, those from architecture and other related fields might further yield fruitful insights.

Chapter 4, on architectural documentaries, is fascinating. The Popular Front loomed large in such documentaries, so that, Flinn shows, especially through the alignment of modernist architecture and history, militant films of the Popular Front monumentalized landscape. In doing so, such films went against the grain of modernist architecture repeatedly proclaiming that it marked a clear rupture from the past by celebrating the Gothic cathedral as a standard of architectural achievement among other things, something that right-wing filmmakers and politicians also did. This paradox was exemplified by Le Corbusier's appearance in Jean Epstein's *Les Bâtisseurs (The Builders)*, which selectively retold French history. Chapters 5 and 6 treat spatial ideas becoming fragmented, inaccessible, or transitory. In these films Paris is still significantly present even when set far away from it. Yet, in particular from the perspective of the *flâneuse* (female stroller), Flinn demonstrates, urban experience is rendered impossible, and monumentality—so central to the films of Clair for example in representing Paris—is subverted. Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante (L'Atalante)* represents the French waterway network as disconnected from cities particularly from the perspective of a *flâneuse* who yearns to see Paris. This point is ironic, since it is the functional efficiency of this network in connecting different towns and cities that navigation companies and public authorities emphasized. And in leftist militant films, the crowd, functioning “as a building block of social cohesion” (138) becomes a new, living monument. *Social Architecture of French Cinema*, beautifully and accessibly written, is an important contribution to both film studies and architecture. The book generates numerous ideas that could be employed in other related fields as well.

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