

Documentary Film and Urban Change Igor Krstić¹

Villarmea Álvarez, Iván. 2015. *Documenting Cityscapes: Urban Change in Contemporary Non-Fiction Film*. London and New York: Wallflower Press / Columbia University Press. 240 pp.

Film Studies' turn towards scrutinizing the historically multifaceted and deeply interrelated relations between urban space and cinema, most commonly referred to in the field as the “cinematic city”, now has a history that spans two decades of wide-ranging scholarship. This research paradigm began to evolve in the wake of the so called spatial turn of the 1990s, creating an interdisciplinary project that combined concepts in geography, architecture, and urbanism with cultural, film, and media studies (cf. Clarke 1997; Shiel and Fitzmaurice 2003). Today, there are no indicators that this scholarly endeavor is going to disappear anytime soon. On the contrary, as several recent publications (cf. Guha 2015; Anderson and Webb 2016), as well as several recently launched journals (see *Mediapolis: Journal of Cities and Culture* or *Journal of Urban Cultural Studies*) testify, the “cinematic city” constitutes a research paradigm that is not only firmly established but steadily expanding.

Documenting Cityscapes: Urban Change in Contemporary Non-Fiction Film is a fine example of the paradigm's further expansion. Iván Villarmea Álvarez' study adds refreshing angles to the discourse in two particular regards. First, the monograph is one of very few studies that exclusively tackles non-fictional forms. Second, it convincingly narrows its scope not only to documentary filmmaking, but also to a reasonable historical framework (1970s to now) that convincingly relates developments in urban development and cinema to each other. Given the sheer number of examples that have ‘documented cityscapes’ in the past decades, Álvarez' focus on non-fiction film is more than justified as is his focus on the four decades following the 1973 oil crisis. Just like a recent study on the *Cinema of Urban Crisis* (Webb 2014), Álvarez thinks that – for reasons that have been outlined by numerous sociologists of the (global) city (cf. Harvey 1989) – the 1970s need to

¹ Independent scholar.

be considered as a watershed period. This conceptual framework allows him to look at films that have documented or “mapped” one development in particular, that is, the gradual decay of industrial cities as they have occurred in the U.S. and Western Europe and their (sometimes successful, but often deeply unsettling) transformation into postindustrial landscapes. However, instead of looking at these non-fiction films as representational audiovisual material, Álvarez conceptualises them as *agents* (rather than just as documents) of urban change.

This conception of cinema as a “technology of place”, is drawn from ideas outlined, among others, by Edward Dimendberg (2004) in regard to Los Angeles. The conception is particularly illuminating, because with documentary’s “subjective turn” (cf. Renov 2004; Rascaroli 2009), non-fiction filmmakers increasingly side with or even effectively shape the gazes, emotional investments, and subjectivities of the often powerless city dwellers, who were, due to capitalist power struggles over city space, forced to adjust to these changes rather than be allowed to actively take part in them. Employing this critical and innovative perspective, Álvarez looks at 15 selected case examples more closely, including films such as Tony Buba's *Lightning Over Braddock: A Rustbowl Fantasy* (1988), Michael Moore's *Roger & Me* (1989), Manoel de Oliveira's *Porto of My Childhood* (2001), Thom Andersen's *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003), and Guy Maddin's *My Winnipeg* (2007). The films are reviewed not only formally or aesthetically, hence in regard to the respective directors’ uses of *mise-en-scène*, camera or editing techniques, but also in terms of their subjective or autobiographical approaches to “places of memory” (p. 2) – think of Tom Andersen’s take on Los Angeles through both Hollywood cinema and his in-depth knowledge of the city’s spaces and histories, of Michael Moore’s autobiographical look at the decay of his home town Flint or of Guy Maddin’s nightmarish depiction of Winnipeg via his childhood memories.

Álvarez argues, however, that “the way we perceive the city in film has more to do with the evolution of cinema than with that of urbanism” (p. 4). The post-industrial “cinematic city” of non-fiction film is, according to him, tightly linked to the evolution of documentary film practice itself, which underwent (approximately at the same time as the industrial city, in the 1970s, and particularly in the U.S.) a radical change from the dominance of an observational, non-obtrusive (or “direct”) cinema to more reflexive as well as autobiographical (or performative) forms (cf. Nichols 1991). These “new documentaries” (Bruzzi 2006) have, in turn, enabled spectators to engage more emotionally as well more reflectively with topics like urban change. Accordingly, the book is divided into three parts, each of which explore what Álvarez believes to be a dominant or prevalent new aesthetic

strategy of documenting cityscapes since the 1970s: documentary landscaping (p. 39-102), urban self-portraits (p. 103-77) and meta-filmic strategies (p. 179-211). These chapters are further divided into sub-categories. The notion of documentary “landscaping” is discussed via films that either display an “observational” (p.43-62), a “psycho-geographical” (p. 63-87) or an “autobiographical” (p. 87-102) approach. In regard to “autobiographical landscaping”, for instance, Álvarez discusses a classical essay film, Chantal Akerman’s *News from Home* (1976), by looking at how Akerman depicts New York’s 1970s cityscape of urban decay and crisis both in an observational and autobiographical way, indicating how this crucial change in documentary film practice emerged with classical films like Akerman’s in the 1970s (p. 90-95).

All of this – the book’s structure, historical contextualization, main arguments, and numerous close readings – is of excellent scholarly quality and highly convincing. Álvarez is, above that, a gifted writer, who manages to break complex ideas down into a highly readable prose. The only point of critique worth mentioning is that the book’s almost exclusive focus on Western European and North American cities and examples unnecessarily limits its scope to what are possibly more wide-ranging, even global changes in both urban development and documentary cinema (cf. Mazumdar 2007; Anderson and Webb 2016). This does not, however, diminish the book’s overall value for scholars of the cinematic city, who will find plenty of insightful readings and ideas in Álvarez’ excellent monograph.

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