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Abstract

Review of Steven Ungar. *Critical Mass: Social Documentary in France from the Silent Era to the New Wave*. U of Minnesota P, 2018. Xxii + 300pp.

Keywords

Film, France, Documentary

Steven Ungar. *Critical Mass: Social Documentary in France from the Silent Era to the New Wave*. U of Minnesota P, 2018. Xxii + 300pp.

This engaging and poetic book analyzes French and colonial African social documentaries and photos chronologically, between 1928 and 1963. It examines not only the aesthetic contribution of these films and images, but also contextualizes their influence on literature, cinema, and their impact on the arts and society. The author sets the tone for the book's framework in the introduction by referring to *la zone* 'the zone,' the strip of land outside Paris, and giving the etymology of its historical usage. Its inhabitants, literally on the margins of the city and of bourgeois society, exemplify the continuously displaced and disenfranchised that are the subject of the work in this study. While Georges Lacombe's film *La Zone* (1928) considers the daily, sordid hardships of ragpickers as they move around urban spaces sorting through garbage to make a living, the eight-minute 'Les Halles centrales' (1928) ('The Central Covered Markets') (never released commercially) reconsiders questions regarding marginalized space in Paris and those who pass through it, while visual confinement frames the narrative. These films poignantly narrate and give the central focus to the working poor in Paris, and the films' harsh lighting and claustrophobic atmosphere ask the viewer to question societal injustices.

Ungar also examines the spatial dimensions of Paris in late silent films, beginning with André Sauvage's *Études sur Paris* (1928) (*Studies of Paris*). The film's five segments contrast the images of the people of Paris and the places they inhabit (canals, streets, manual laborers, lovers, monuments, advertisements), and illustrate Sauvage's idea that cinema was neither an elitist art form nor merely a business, but that it expressed everyday activities and occupations of the common people. Marcel Carné's first film *Nogent, Eldorado du dimanche* (1929) (*Nogent, Sunday's Eldorado*), considers the Sunday outings in Nogent, where working classes went to escape for a day, and the Marne river as being spaces for the people. Ungar reminds us of Carné's important work in social documentary before his more well-known career in poetic realist films.

Moving away from Paris, Ungar considers questions of urban symbols and misery in Jean Vigo's *À propos de Nice* (1930) (*Concerning Nice*), Eli Lotar's *Aubervilliers* (1946), and photos of slaughterhouses that appeared in various art journals. While Vigo's title and the camera's sweeping opening scene of the city in *À propos de Nice* film lead the spectator to expect a travelogue, its following shots sharply politicize social inequalities as it starkly contrasts everyday life differences between the leisure class and the working class, whose days are spent performing manual labor. This polarization and politicization continue thematically in *Aubervilliers*'s depiction of squalid poverty and misery of the working poor; Ungar concludes that it is an artistic film, firmly situated in the emerging post-war avant-

garde cinema. In moving from the analysis of cinema to photography, the thematic study of the working classes continues as he examines how Lotar's published slaughterhouse photographs humanize manual workers. Ungar highlights how their harsh and unsafe labor conditions are exposed, and links them back to the more graphic depictions of wretchedness that are visualized in *Aubervilliers*.

Ungar also studies films set outside of the metropole, exposing the censorship and difficulties that anti-colonial French filmmakers encountered when they filmed colonial injustices and tragedies in France's sub-Saharan colonies, specifically Mali, Niger and Ivory Coast. Ungar examines René Vautier's 1950 film *Afrique 50*, Alain Resnais and Chris Marker's *Les Statues meurent aussi* (1953) (*Statues Also Die*) and Jean Rouch's *Moi, un Noir* (1948) (*I, a Black Man*), and places them in their complex postwar context as they galvanized opposition against French colonial policies. Vautier disregarded colonial French orders and filmed in spite of imposed restrictions. Parts of his film were seized and destroyed after his return to France, but he was able to save some of it surreptitiously and show it at venues in Europe slated for both political and cinematic events. He filmed the exploitation that French colonists imposed on Africans, while documenting, condemning, and listing the atrocities (such as murders, arson, exploitation, and repression) sanctioned by France's destructive colonialism. *Les Statues meurent aussi* is a film that Présence Africaine commissioned to question ethnocentric categorizations and expose the way art from sub-Saharan Africa was displayed at an anthropological museum, le Musée de l'Homme ('The Museum of Man'), rather than at the Louvre, where art from China and Ancient Greece resides. Rouch's *Moi, un Noir* exposes the complex identity of six young people from Niger, who move to the city to look for work and meaning. Ungar points to these three new African cinema films as frontrunners in blending the deeply personal with artistic representations.

The last part of the book explains the activist association of the Group of Thirty, "a collective of French film directors, producers, critics, and technicians" (171). It examines films by two of its members, Alain Resnais's *Toute la mémoire du monde* (1946) (*All the World's Memory*) and Chris Marker's *Le Joli Mai* (1962) (*The Lovely Month of May*). Resnais's film documents the Bibliothèque Nationale (French National Library), its texts, spaces, employees, holdings, storage, and the process that an ironic nonexistent/fake book goes through as it arrives at the library and enters the cataloguing system. Ungar presents this film as a social commentary on government silence surrounding Vichy and French Algeria. Marker's documentary consists of interviews with Parisians in May 1962. He engages with them as Algeria's independence looms, and implicitly questions how personal happiness and concern for others are or are not intertwined in the comments of the interviewees.

Critical mass is copiously illustrated with film stills and photographs, all of which are explained, contextualized, and analyzed. This eminently readable and engrossing book would be of interest to a wide variety of scholars in French studies, sociology, photography, cinema, art, and history. Its insightful and perceptive social commentary of early to mid-20th century French documentaries brings to the forefront of academia a thoughtful study of the marginalized, the disenfranchised, and the oppressed, while opening up questions about artistic vision, power, representation, and belonging.

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