

Mennel, Barbara. *Cities and Cinema. Critical Introductions to Urbanism and the City.* London/New York: Routledge, 2008. 245 pp. ISBN: 9780415364461 paperback, \$49.95.

Reviewed for Women in German by Maria Stehle

Most German studies programs in the U.S. offer a version of a “German Film” course. These courses are often conceptualized as survey classes that will cover the history of German film in the 20th and into the 21st century. In spite of the fact that film courses are often well attended and known as “enrollment boosters” in German programs, they tend to be rather complicated to teach: beyond trying to convey a sense of film history, cinematic styles and forms, and film theory, instructors struggle with imparting at least the basics of the complex social and political history of Germany in the last century. This includes teaching about WWI and its aftermath, the Weimar Republic, Nazi Germany, the post-war years, a divided country with two different political systems, and, finally, unification, globalization, European integration. The other challenge is to teach film in a “national” context in spite of the fact that the art, production, distribution, and reception of film have rarely been a strictly national project.

While not specifically about German cinema, Barbara Mennel’s book *Cities and Cinema* offers ideas of how these challenges could be approached and how a film course could be structured by suggesting a possible focus: the linkage between urbanism, its politics, and the city film. One main advantage of employing such a perspective on “German” cinema in a film survey course is that it clearly situates “national” cinemas in a transnational context and fosters an analysis that pays close attention to aesthetic as well as social and political questions.

Mennel’s book is conceptualized as a reader; each chapter starts with a textbox that includes “learning objectives” and ends with a summary and a list of suggested further readings. The introduction briefly presents the field of urban studies and supplies students with a general idea of how to read and analyze film and how to define some of the central terms like “modernity,” “postmodernity,” “national cinema,” and “transnational cinematic practice.” Since the terms themselves are crucial for a discussion about film and its history but in themselves contested, this introduction is a way to set the tone for how students are expected to critically and analytically watch, talk, think, and write about films.

The three sections of the book are organized chronologically and each section contains three chapters that cover an array of geographic/urban settings. The first section starts with Weimar cinema, Berlin city films, and their relation to modernity; the second section discusses film noir and Los Angeles as the new center of film industry in the 1930s, and, finally, the last section explores the “city of love,” Paris, in order to analyze elements of the cinema of the French New Wave. In the context of a German studies class, the chapter on the Berlin/Weimar city film lends itself especially well as a class reading. It not only discusses some of the most important films of the decade, like *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Grossstadt* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927), *Die freudlose Gasse* (G.W. Pabst, 1925), and Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), but it also contextualizes these films in relation to the theories of the time, i.e., Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin, and offers a critical analysis of the social and gender politics depicted in the films.

Section two covers the middle of the 20th century, moving from Hong Kong’s city film industry and its most important international stars (Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan) to a chapter on cities in ruins and the divided city and a final chapter on fantastic and virtual cities. Especially the explorations of the city in ruins and the divided city, which cover Berlin, Belfast, and Beirut, prove to be useful for a film course in the context of German studies. For example, the film most

often taught as “the” German rubble film, *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (Wolfgang Staudte, 1946), appears in a new context. The focus on the “ruined” city allows Mennel to show that while these films are marked by historical specificity, they “also create a space for moral and metaphysical negotiation precisely because ruins enable abstraction from urban specificity” (115). The “divided city film” also has a dual function in the 1950s and 1960s; it “is either used for a state-sanctioned position in state-produced films or as a biographical investigation of individual attachment and despair in relation to the divided city” (123). The DEFA film examples discussed in this chapter, *Eine Berliner Romanze* (Gerhard Klein, 1956) and *Berlin Ecke Schönhauser* (Gerhard Klein, 1957), the documentary propaganda film *Schaut auf diese Stadt* (Karl Gass, 1962), and the ideological film *Roman einer jungen Ehe* (Kurt Maetzig, 1952), illustrate this spectrum perfectly. Mennel’s discussion offers insights into the complexity of DEFA film politics and lends itself to a comparison with West German cinematic perspectives on the divided city, for example, Wim Wenders’ *Der Himmel über Berlin* (1987), or Helke Sander’s *Die allseitig reduzierte Persönlichkeit – Redupers* (1978).

The third section explores “ghetto” films, queer city films, and global city films. Mennel moves from a historical-political perspective in section one and two to a discussion influenced by social science, urban identification, and cinematic representation (see 151). The selection of the films discussed in the three chapters does not follow any geographical organization but emphasizes the ways in which cinematic representation and the politics of race, class, and sexuality intersect in the city film. The last section on cities and globalization, for example, discusses Turkish-German films in the context of “accented cinema” (Hamid Naficy) and questions of global migration, exile, and diaspora. In this context, following Mennel’s argument, the films not only show marginalized subjects, but also illustrate the process of “gaining presence in global cities, presence vis-à-vis power and presence vis-à-vis each other” (Saskia Sassen 2003, quoted in Mennel 204).

But *Cities and Cinema* is not “just” an excellent textbook. It also offers sources, theories, and arguments that lend themselves to studying and researching film and urbanism in different decades, across national boundaries, and within various theoretical frameworks. The objective of the book, “to examine how these imaginary cinematic cities work through issues of the national and the global, modernity and postmodernity, and the reproduction of power associated with race, class, gender, and migration” (16), makes this book an important resource for research in the fields of gender studies, German studies, and film. In her conclusion, Mennel offers a collection of inspiring ideas for further research projects that might help to develop a new way of seeing “applicable both to film and also to the cultural representation of cities, urban space, and social reality in more general ways” (217).

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