

BOOK REVIEW

***La Ville Méditerranéenne au
Cinéma******The Mediterranean City in
Cinema*****edited by Alain Brenas and Toufic El-Khoury
Paris: Orizons, 2015****Anna Poupou**

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

The collection of essays *La Ville Méditerranéenne au Cinéma/The Mediterranean City in Cinema* is a welcome and timely addition to the film literature on national cinemas of the Mediterranean basin, focusing on the representation of the geographical, social and political space of an area that has never been out of the spotlight of contemporary geopolitics. This bilingual volume (in French and English) is edited by Alain Brenas, director of the Film and Audiovisual School of the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts, and Toufic El-Khoury, film historian and professor at the same institute. The edition was supported by the Lebanese National Commission for UNESCO and the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) and inaugurates the collection *Cinématographies*, that aims to promote academic work in film studies based on the Mediterranean national cinemas and to create a platform for young researchers in this field, as we read in the introduction of the book.

Despite the numerous publications focusing on the relationship between city and cinema of the last thirty years, it is evident that the majority of this work is limited to representations of the American or the European metropolises, especially New York, Los Angeles, Paris and Berlin, cities that have been identified as laboratories of modernity. Few works in English-language film literature are devoted to the Mediterranean cityscape, and most of them study the Italian cities as, for example, Giuliana Bruno's groundbreaking *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*, presenting the urban films of Elvira Notari and offering a panorama of Naples both as a film protagonist and as a site of cinematic

production. On the contrary, the field of French-language film history and theory has always been more attracted by the particularities of the Mediterranean filmic geography. An example of this interest is the issue entitled *Méditerranée/Mediterranean*, edited in 1994 by the journal *Les Cahiers de la Cinémathèque/Review of the Cinémathèque* and the Institut Jean Vigo. This issue is divided into three thematic parts (*Mediterranean Identities, Myths and Beliefs*, and *Contemporary Realities*) and it raises questions about the existence of a “Mediterranean” cinema and its role as a mirror of the mutations of this area in the 20th century. In 1996 another thematic issue was published in French in the review of geography and social studies, *Espaces et Sociétés [Spaces and Societies]*, under the title *Ville et Cinema [City and Cinema]* and focused on the representation of the Mediterranean city. Finally, a rich bibliography about the representation of Marseille in cinema can also be found in French film literature.

The editors in the introduction of the volume define clearly their intentions and establish the principal perspectives of their project: they admit that their vision could not avoid a kind of “polemic” dimension (p. 12) and stress the importance of the heterogeneity and multiplicity of the “Mediterranean city”. While in the title they refer to it as one unified and coherent object (*The City – La Ville*), they seem to interestingly question this concept of a unified identity of a Mediterranean city, or a Mediterranean cinema, which also presupposes an idea of common origins that brings together the twenty nations of this area. El-Khoury explains that it is mostly this “continuous flux of dissonances and resemblances that we will try to capture” (p. 13) and underscores one of the main questions: “Is it the geography of the Mediterranean, an almost enclosed large sea that defines the fictions and the images that develop in this space, and generates their unity? Or are we ready to imagine, in a nostalgic way, a coherence that no longer exists? Is the unity and the identity of this space constantly illusive, and does cinema continue to feed this illusion?” (p. 13). This oscillation between accepting and at the same time questioning a kind of elusive “Mediterranean myth”, or the anxiety of disconnecting from the heavy burden of the cultural heritage and history and readjusting the myth in the political, social and cultural here and now, which can be felt in almost every essay of the book, is the most charming aspect of it. Furthermore, the interesting choice to focus mainly on the representation of the ports of the Mediterranean, bringing thus the figure of the sea into the foreground is in agreement with the centrality of the concept of exchange and flux between national cinemas. The cities presented are Marseille, Algiers, Valencia, Beirut, Sarajevo, Alexandria, Athens, Barcelona, Venice, Jerusalem and Istanbul.

The volume opens with Marseille, one of the most celebrated cinematic ports: Katharina Bellan explains that in the 1920s many representatives of the international avant-garde, such as Germaine Krull, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Walter

Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer lived and worked in Marseille, a city that participated at that time in the pantheon of modern metropolises. She reminds us emblematic films such as *Fievre/Fever* by Louis Delluc (1921), *Coeur fidèle/The Faithfull Heart* by Jean Epstein (1923) or *En rade/Sea Fever* by Alberto Cavalcanti (1927). Moholy-Nagy's film *Impressions From the Old Port*¹ (1929), depicting the district of Saint Jean which was dynamited and destroyed by the Nazis in 1943, captured a totally different view of this district than the one typically presented in fiction cinema and maintained by collective memory, as a popular quartier lined with bars and full of sailors and prostitutes. In the same period, the French version of gangster films is inaugurated by Maurice Tourneur—which will not flourish again until the 1970s with international productions such as the *French Connection* (1971) by William Friedkin or the films by Jean-Pierre Melville—and continues until the present with filmic adaptations of Jean-Claude Izzo novels. As the author concludes: "The city was fixed in a stereotype of its illegal relationships with the Republic and its laws" (p. 20).

The urban theme in Algerian cinema is presented in the second article by Hadj Miliani who studies the principal modes of the fictionalisation and figuration of the city by contemporary Algerian filmmakers. He explores the absence of the cityscape, the use of enclosed spaces which become a recurrent motif in the cinema of Maghreb, the urban language, the representation of the small city and the non-spaces. He also highlights the urban identities through the figures of young male types such as the "yaouled" ("wog") of the colonial cinema or the contemporary "hitiste" ("slacker"). Miliani touches on a variety of films by auteurs such as Mohamed Zinet, Merzak Allouache, Nadir Moknèche, Tariq Teguia and many others and concludes with the assumption that in many Algerian films, the city is used as a metaphor for enclosure, uniformisation and anonymity. Michèle Teyseyre takes on the difficult task to present a city that needs no introduction, Venice, and whose representations in cinema are numerous from the early period until today, with uncounted Othellos, multiple Jews of Venice and a dozen Casanovas. However, she shifts our expectations by starting from the presentation of the well-known painting *Il Mondo Novo/The New World* (1791) by Gianbattista Tiepolo that shows a street spectacle of a magic lantern show in a Venice street during the carnival, as the ancestor of cinema. Teyseyre focuses on the relationship of the Venetian form of cityscape

¹ Moholy-Nagy's film *Impressions From the Old Port* (1929) can be viewed on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-Sbywbl7Yo>. Accessed 20 September 2017.

painting, the *veduta*, of artists such as Tiepolo, Guardi and Canaletto with the pre-cinematic forms of magic lantern and camera obscura.

The next two essays are related by the fact that they both focus on the notion of masculinities and gender identities in relation to the themes of war and sexuality: the first one, written by Isabelle de le Court, explores the representation of two wounded cities, Beirut in the films by Maroun Bagdadi, and Sarajevo in the films by Danis Tanović. The writer focuses on the construction of identities by the male characters and the feeling of a “frustrated masculinity” (p. 61) in a situation of enclosure in a city during the war, a common theme that can be found in the films of the two directors. The next essay by Claude Murcia presents the cities of Costa Brava through the theme of the erotisation of the city in the films by Bigas Luna, *Huevos de Oro/Golden Balls* (1993) and *Son del Mar/Sound of the Sea* (2001), set in Benidorm, Valencia and their surroundings. She explores the figure of the “macho” character, one of the most expanded stereotypes of the Mediterranean imaginary, and she interestingly links the performance of an expressive masculinity to the aggressive urbanisation of the coast of Spain, the low-cost architecture and the real estate speculation of the 1990s.

The next three essays study the cinematic cities proposed by three emblematic auteurs, Maroun Bagdadi, Elia Suleiman and Theo Angelopoulos. Elie Yazbec’s interesting article explores the representation of Beirut in four films by Bagdadi from 1975 to 1991 (*Beyrouth ya Beyrouth/Beirut oh Beirut* [1975], *Les Petites Guerres/Little Wars* [1982], *Liban Pays du Miel et de L’Encens/The Land of Honey and Incense* [1988], *Hors de Vie/Out of Life* [1991] as witnesses of the ongoing civil war. According to the author, Bagdadi progressively records a kind of “dematerialisation” of his main urban characters, who in the first films represent the values of revolution and idealism, which go together with the destruction and disintegration of their city in ruins, confirming a pessimist gaze of darkness and enclosure on Beirut just a couple of years before the director’s death at the age of 43. May el Koussa’s article does not focus on a specific city; on the contrary she studies the changing landscape in the road movies of Theo Angelopoulos, and specifically *Topio stin omihli/Landscape in the Mist* (1988). She applies in her analysis Michel Ribon’s ideas on the “aesthetics of effacement” and she explores the “phenomenology of effacement” (p. 89) as she calls it, through the pictorial use of the natural phenomena of the snow, the rain and the mist by Angelopoulos. Ramla Kronfol, in her engaging article, discusses the representation of Jerusalem in the films by Elia Suleiman through the topics of sacralisation and demystification. According to the author, Suleiman achieves overcoming the geopolitical definitions of the city in order to redefine it in an original way. In *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996), Suleiman chooses to demystify the city by reversing all sacred symbols of the “Holy Land”, or the

touristic exploitation of Jerusalem. The same goes for his film *Yadon ilaheyya/Divine Intervention* (2002) with the assassination of a Santa Claus and a balloon with the portrait of Yasser Arafat flying over the sacred sites of Jerusalem. As Kronfol explains, referring to Said's theories, this is part of Suleiman's strategy in order to re-appropriate the city while at the same time presenting the Palestinian urban space as a "terra incognita". The need for a constant reinvention of a recognisable identity through the image of space, the political figurations and personal memory is expressed in these two films.

In the next essay, Afroditi Nikolaidou successfully attempts a panoramic overview of the cinematic depiction of Athens in Greek cinema, during a recent but obscure period that preceded, and somehow partially generated, the crisis. The years from 1993 to 2013, marked by the organisation of the Olympic Games in 2004 and the following economic recession, are rich in social and urbanistic mutations and coincide with cinematic evolutions in terms of technology, narration and style that found its expression in the genre of the "city film". Nikolaidou explores more than twenty films, tracing not only the changes in the urban fabric of Athens, but mostly the representations of the city in public discourses and imaginaries, reproduced by fiction cinema. Her conclusion is that as Athens made a transition from a local, peripheral and national-centric capital to a metropolis and to an international "stage of conflict" during the crisis, in the same way Greek cinema transformed from a national film production to a supra-national cinema in the post-2008 era. On the contrary, an inverse trajectory is the one designed by Joseph Fahim in his essay about Alexandria in cinema. In the same vein, Fahim presents an overview of an impressive number of films depicting the changes in Alexandria's cinematic identity from the early years until today. Alexandrian-born filmmakers, such as the Italian-Jewish director Togo Mizrahi and the Italian cinematographer Alevisio Orfanelli (who shot not only the famous *Bab al Hadid/Cairo Station* [1958] by Youssef Chahine but also *Kyriakatiko Xypnima/Windfall in Athens* [1954] by Michael Cacoyannis), are well-known names to researchers of Greek cinema, showing the wide range of multiculturalism and transnational collaborations of the Egyptian cinema of the golden era. The author sheds light on a number of interesting cases, such as the series *Shalom* by Mizrahi in the 1930s – with a working class Jewish hero modelled after Chaplin's "Tramp" (p. 151) – which offers an interesting representation of class, religion and ethnicity in the context of Alexandrian life. He continues with the exploration of the "topical" genres that flourished in the city after the 1952 Revolution, such as the thrillers and the "beach films" that expressed the "democratization of the beach as public space equally shared by people belonging to different socio-economic classes, where everyone's dressed the same, behaves the same, moves the same in contrast with the segregated beaches of contemporary Alexandria, between public beaches and upper class gated private ones" (p. 152). The essay continues with the exploration of the

images of the city from the 1980s to the present, with multiple examples that whet the reader's cinephilic appetite to search for these films.

Toufic El-Khoury in his text explores another dimension of the Mediterranean space viewed "from the outside" and specifically from the exotic gaze of classical Hollywood and its mechanisms that produce either a colonialist imagery or a stereotyped caricature of "latinity". In this rich article, the author starts with the study of the "exaggerated" representation of Monte Carlo in the films by Lubitsch (*Monte-Carlo* [1930]) and Von Stroheim (*Foolish Wives* [1922]), reconstructed with extreme stylisation in the Californian desert or in studio, expressing the decadence of old aristocratic Europe (p. 133). He continues with the case of Costa Brava, in the films of Joseph L. Mankiewicz *Barefoot Contessa* (1954) and *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959) and *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman* (1951) by Albert Lewin. In the American cinema of the 1950s the author traces the emergence of a "mythologised" Mediterranean space, where the film plots and their narrative mechanisms refer to well-known ancient myths, as an attempt of Hollywood to reach not only realism, but mostly universality. Furthermore, El-Khoury combines this trend with the practices of the "runaway" Hollywood productions, filmed on location in Spain, Italy or Greece.

The next two essays focus on the emblematic figure of southern France, Marcel Pagnol, and propose two methodologically different but complementary views on his work and his heritage. The first one by Jacques Sapiéga is an excellent case of reception studies as it explores the 1995 celebrations at the city of Aubagne devoted to the centennial anniversary of Marcel Pagnol. Departing from the descriptions of these municipal celebrations that mobilized the native population, the author examines the reception of the work of the filmmaker and its impact on the notion of "heritage" and on the construction of the provincial identity, together with its uses by the tourist industry and cultural politics. The second essay devoted to Pagnol is written by Guy Chapouillet and it is an extensive close reading of the Trilogy of Marseille, *Marius* (1931), *Fanny* (1932) and *César* (1936). In his profound analysis, the author explores the recurrent motifs and symbolisms that run through Pagnol's work, especially in terms of sound and language, highlighting details of Pagnol's poetics, such as the construction of Marseille's soundscape or the uses of accent and of particular words and their impact on characterisation.

Istanbul could not be absent from this collection: the last essay by Feride Cicekoglu explores the representation of Istanbul in Reha Erdem's films and highlights one particular recurring motif found in five films of the director, that is the figure of the boat as heterotopia. According to the author, Erdem's films portray, from different perspectives, the transformation of the city from 1898 until 2013, a period marked by the aggressive reconstruction of the city and the increase of the urban population to fifteen millions. Cicekoglu uses Michel

Foucault's concept of heterotopias, and enriches her analysis with references to Costas Douzinas's views about dystopia, linking in the last part of her article his ideas to an analysis of the film *Sarki Soyleyen Kadinlar/Singing Women* (2013).

In conclusion, the articles of this volume present a kaleidoscopic view on past and present depictions of the Mediterranean city, either they focus on the recent past and the uses of myth, or they deal with contemporary representations and identities. In this highly interesting collection, my opinion is that a further effort by the editors should have been made in order to prevent a few morphological and typographical mistakes and achieve a more homogeneous system of references, chronologies, film titles and bibliography. This however does not diminish the value of this collection which is useful for the researchers in the field of the cinematic city and for the wider audience as well, as it sheds light on the less explored cases of the Mediterranean cinema. Finally, this collection is an example that shows that French-language film research and literature, in contrast to the dominant Anglo-Saxon approaches that are often confined by rigid methodologies and theories, remains more inclusive and open to other disciplines, more reflexive and in many cases more socially engaged.

REFERENCES

- Espaces et Sociétés* (1996), Thematic issue "Ville et Cinema" no 68.
- Bruno, G. (1993), *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Les Cahiers de la Cinémathèque. Revue de l'histoire du cinéma*, (1994) Institut Jean Vigo, Thematic issue "Méditerranée", no 61.