

Projets de paysage

Revue scientifique sur la conception et l'aménagement de l'espace

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Note de lecture du livre de Robert Fish

Cinematic countrysides

Robert Fish (ed.)

Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2007, 272 p.

This volume, edited by Robert Fish (human geographer and research fellow at the University of Exeter, UK), is a response to the wide literature available on cinematic urban landscapes, most notably to Clarke's *The Cinematic City* (1994). The book would like to act both as a counterpoint to this body of work and as a trigger to increase the literature on what is often constituted as the city's 'other': the rural. As explained in the introduction, the strong interest and the deep engagement with cinematic cities that we see in scientific literature tends to implicitly carry the message that countryside is in some ways less involved in cinematic representation. To subvert this dominant spatial imagery, the volume takes into consideration a wide range of ways in which rural landscapes have been portrayed in movies.

The volume also explores how specific depictions of rural landscapes in movies (often heavily laden with values and ideologies), affect the morphology and the organisation of the territories. In this process, ingrained ideas of the urban and the rural are analysed and problematised. The essays that constitute the *corpus* of the book illustrate how the city and the countryside are created within cinematic *mediascapes* as opposed categories. When the city is viewed as the centre of modernity, culture and ferment, the countryside is perceived as its opposite, as the quintessential representation of whatever the city is not. Alternatively, when the city is portrayed as the apex of modernity's destructive aspects, the countryside emerges as the only possible place for positive reactions.

The starting point of *Cinematic countrysides* can be identified in the belief that cinema functions as both a product and an instrument of geographical experience. What links the essays, apart from the obvious thematic focus, is the idea that the cinematic use of landscape is the product of specific social, cultural, political and economic contexts, having the capacity to affect the way a specific landscape is perceived even by those who were already familiar with it.

The book is divided into four sections, each emphasising different thematic concerns and approaches to the cinematic countryside.

The first section, entitled *Nations, borders and histories*, displays a plethora of ways in which ideas of nation and border are used in different film traditions, for different reasons and with different consequences on the geographical imaginary. The analysis of the Australian rural landscape done by Jonathan Rayner shows how movies in general, and those depicting rural landscapes in particular, are used and can be used, more or less intentionally, to project specific ideas of nations. If in Australian cinema this was not part of a specific political agenda, the example brought forward by Carol Medlicott in her analysis on North Korean films shows an instance in which this was actually made on purpose. Less coherent images of nationhood are identified by Maria Rovisco in her essay on European 'film of voyages' and by Tanya Kryzwinska in her account of the 'pagan' landscape in British cinema. In both cases we see a tension towards a reconsideration and a reinvention of borders, histories and ideas of the nation in order to

add new dimensions to the landscapes: in the first case to include a cultural and ethnic dimension to the borders issue, in the second case to add a sacred dimension to the historical British landscape. The session ends with an interesting essay by Rachel Woodward and Patricia Winter on militarised countryside in British and American film that shows how and why rural landscapes have been widely present in war representations on screen.

The second session of the volume, entitled *Mobile production and contested representations*, is constructed around the different impact (mainly in social and economic terms) that the film industry has on rural areas and landscapes. Ian Goode examines the case of Scotland, often portrait as a 'natural' and rural area, investigating the encounters of this image with the urban values of America in the narrative of Bill Forsyth's *Local Hero* (1983). To follow, Andy Pratt investigates the film industry global system and its economic impact on rural areas through the case study of Ireland. In his analysis, the author notes that rural landscapes often are not depicted as they 'really' are, but instead they are heavily edited to conform to what the production and/or the audience think they should look like. Martin Phillips closes this session with an essay on *The Lords of the Rings* role in transforming the socio-spatial identity in New Zealand (the country where the film was shot). The author notes that since Peter Jackson's trilogy (2001, 2002, 2003) draws on specific images of rural landscapes (which includes pastoral idylls but also a romantic construction of wilderness), it had the effect of generating ambivalent responses on the national self-image.

The third session, *Identity and difference*, focus on the production of rural space as related to the social identity of its inhabitants. The analysis mainly evolves around the construction and portrait of childhood and masculinity. Owain Jones in his essay examines the different discourses on rural childhood, predominantly constructed as idyllic, that deliberately play upon romantic notions of the rural as an ideal childhood environment. In contrast to this perception of countryside, Michael Leyshon and Catherine Brace show the other side of the picture, by analysing the lives of young people in Tim Roth's *The War Zone* (1998), a movie that was set in northern Devon (UK). As the authors point out, this film reconfigures the countryside as an aberrant and sinister place of marginalisation, thus envisioning a contemporary alternative to a historically constituted image of rural England as a pleasant land. Closing the session, David Bell turns his attention to the construction of gender identity in rural spaces, focusing on how cinematic countryside produces specific ideas of masculinity.

The last session, *Mediating experience and performing alternatives*, addresses alternative ways of interpreting and practicing cinematic countrysides. Mark Neumann and Janna Jones analyse a series of amatorial movies shot in New England (USA) between 1915 and 1940, a time when people started to document the places where they lived and travelled. Different pictures of countrysides emerge in this type of films, but they all share the implicit record of the transformation of the rural in the face of modernisation. Another form of alternative representation is put forward in the last chapter by Katy Bennet and Richard Lee, who analyse the relationship between performance, representation and identity through the work of the Amber Film and Photography Collective. In particular they focus on one

movie, *Like Father* (2001), that portrays the landscape of the former coalfields of Durham (UK). They show how alternative systems of production can affect the way rural landscape is imagined and lived.

Cinematic countrysides is, in my view, a very interesting laboratory where scholars in geography, film, and cultural studies coming from the Anglo-American academic environment work with their diverse abilities and experience to explore the multiple ways in which cinema and rural landscapes are co-produced.

Notes

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Bibliographie