
Book Reviews

Annette Kuhn (2002) *An Everyday Magic, Cinema and Cultural Memory*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris. ISBN: 1860648673

Barbara Knorpp

Communication and Media Research Institute
University of Westminster

The cinema audience has in the past not been given a lot of room in film theory; insofar Annette Kuhn's book 'An Everyday Magic, Cinema and Cultural Memory' (2002) fills a rather large gap. Kuhn explores how cinema-going affected people's everyday life and how the film text became part of people's personal memory. Cinema, Kuhn claims in her book, is an integral part of formation of identities, especially for the generation who were young in the 1930s and for whom going to 'the pictures' was their favourite leisure activity. Why were the 1930s so special? What kind of audience are we dealing with? When considering how popular it was to visit the cinema at the time we are inclined to think of cinema as mass entertainment, even just in reference to the sheer numbers - but what significance did cinema-going have and what role did the culture that surrounded cinema play in 1930s British society?

Thanks to a project that involved hundreds of hours of interviews with people who regularly went to 'the pictures' in the 1930s we learn the generation's memories and dreams that revolved around the cinema experience. What kind of films did this generation see and what did those films mean to the audience? What cinemas were available and what kind of social stratifications can we detect from data on cinema audiences of the 1930s? Kuhn gives a detailed account of how the experience of going to see a movie may have looked like by exploring many other spheres of popular culture at the time, such as, for instance, popular press, fan magazines, film posters, star photography, and advertisements. It is only recently that studies on the history of film bring notions of space and place and film together. In the early 1990s interest in the architecture of cinema buildings arose

and paved the way to look at how people actually used cinematic space, both the architectural space as well as the space that is created by the film text.

Traditionally film studies have been predominately concerned with film as a text. It has also conceptualised the spectator from a psychoanalytical perspective: 'Psychoanalytic film theory sees the viewer not as a flesh-and-blood individual, but as an artificial construct, produced and activated by the cinematic apparatus. This spectator is conceived as a "space" that is both "productive" (as in the production of the dream-work or other unconscious fantasy structures) and "empty" (anyone can occupy it) ... the cinema in some sense "constructs" its spectator' (Stam, Burgoyne, and Flittermann 1992, 147).

Kuhn (2002, 6-7) uses what she calls 'ethnohistory' (a slightly confusing term, I thought) as her dominant methodology, which is a useful way to approach her audience, but perhaps we can simply call what Kuhn is employing here, oral history instead. Ethnohistory is really a term stemming from social anthropology and refers to people without written accounts of their own culture. People here are of course not of such kind, they are both, conscious of history and part of history. It becomes clear from reading their accounts that the way they describe their situation in the 1930 is itself shaped by written history and other historical representations. Following former discussions in social anthropology about the subject and the power of both author and informant, Kuhn hurries to explain why she had chosen ethnohistory as a way to study aspects of cinema culture. 'Following Clifford and Geertz, it will respect informants as collaborators, and yet make no presumptions as to the transparency of their accounts' (Kuhn 2002, 7).

Although Kuhn (who refers to anthropologists such as James Clifford and Clifford Geertz who are from different generations and have different views) makes an attempt to create a text that is *polyphonic* and incorporates direct quotes of her audience into her text we do not learn a great deal about the people that were asked (Clifford and Marcus 1986). I felt that many of the memories and stories stand a little isolated from the people themselves; instead their quotes often seem to suit the author's argument. Also the circumstances of the interviews, how those people were found, where they lived, or other necessary details are not revealed. I would have preferred to be given some more information or longer extracts of the interviews in the appendix. On the other hand the interviews allow the reader, to some extent, to take part in a vivid exchange of memories. Her quotes are well selected and the reader is often drawn to the quotes first, before reading the explanations. Spoken language, as it becomes very obvious here, follows very different patterns and discourses.

It is not wrong to say that cinema going has *performative* aspects. All aspects of going to the cinema are parts of particular social codes and behaviours: with whom you choose to go the cinema, consumption of sweets, alcohol and cigarettes, courting, whispering, laughing, crying before or during the performance and later talking about the film. Cinema is integrated into the everyday of its viewers and has to therefore to be understood in relation to different experiences and spaces that cannot be identical to all. Correctly, Kuhn points to the talk *about* the film as a vital part of what she calls *cultural memory*. Kuhn very convincingly explains how cinema has become part of cultural memory and how fascinating cinema is as an area of social history. Despite several valuable contributions on the issue of cinema audiences¹, the focus, so far has been elsewhere but on the *mise en scène* or setting of the audience. Let me illustrate this point with an example given by Michel de Certeau. 'A different world (the reader) slips into the author's place. This mutation makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment. It transforms another person's property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient. Renters make comparable changes in an apartment they furnish with their acts and memories; ... as do pedestrians, in the street they fill the forests of their desires and goals. In the same way the users of codes turn them into metaphors of their own quests' (de Certeau 1984, xxi-xxii). In other words, the audience has to, to some extent, create, control, and manage the event of going to the cinema; more than the film text alone dictates. The cinema experience in this respect is a highly diverse and individualised event.

What is nevertheless attractive in Kuhn's work is the fact that she brings together some areas in film that are conventionally not looked at together in one book, cinema architecture, use of space and place, leisure culture, oral history, advertisement and popular press, film stills and private photography. By giving the *ordinary* and *everyday events* a space, she builds on, although she does not explicitly mention, what Simmel (cited in Highmore 2002, 297) entitled *sociological microscopy* and Michel de Certeau (1984) called the *science of singularity*, and last but not least Roland Barthes' (1993) 'birth of the reader'. Annette Kuhn's '*An Everyday Magic*' *Cinema and Cultural Memory* (2002) deserves the credit for opening new avenues for understanding cinema as a social space.

Notes

¹ For example: Emilie Altenloh (1914) *Zur Soziologie des Kinos* [On the sociology of cinema] quoted in Jostein Gripsrud (1998, 203-211) and Wolfgang Wilhelm (1940) *Die Auftrieb Wirkung des Films* [The Uplifting Effect of Film] quoted in Siegfried Kracauer (1960, Chapter 9)

References

- Altenloh, E. (1914) *Zur Soziologie des Kinos: Die Kinounternehmung und die sozialen Schichten ihrer Besucher*, Leipzig: Spamerschen.
- Barthes, R. (1993) *A Roland Barthes Reader*, London: Vintage.
- de Certeau, M. (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Clifford, J. and G. E. Marcus (eds.) (1986) *Writing Culture, The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books.
- Highmore, B. (2002) *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, London: Routledge.
- Gripsrud, J. (1998) 'Film Audiences', in J. Hill and P. C. Gibs (eds.) *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 202-211.
- Kracauer, S. (1960) *Theory of Film, The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stam, R., Burgoyne, R. and S. Flittermann-Lewis. (1992) *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics*, London: Routledge.