

DOCUMENTING CITYSCAPES. URBAN CHANGE IN CONTEMPORARY NON-FICTION FILM

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The past few years have disclosed a growing interest in the production of documentaries. In particular, scholarly research has developed a field of analysis that had traditionally been considered as marginal in the field of Film Studies, but it is a field that has recently cultivated an inclination toward the multiple liminalities offered by documentaries. Certain studies are pivotal in the articulation of theory and non-fiction film, and noteworthy examples of such studies could be Nezar AlSayyad's work on cinematic urbanism or Alisa Lebow's study on subjectivity.

Iván Villarnea's book, *Documenting Cityscapes. Urban Change in Contemporary Non-Fiction Film*, sets out to show how the different approaches to documentary production have been determined by their relation to subjectivity and objectivity, and how these networks result in a performative connection to the representation of the city. The author focuses on the analysis of space and the (de)construction of what he calls "places of memory" to highlight the relevance of non-fiction habitats in the production of the cinematic city, and therefore to understand the influence of these productions on viewers' interpretations of past and current urban spaces. Villarnea shows how these non-fiction films respond to the connection between identity production and postmodern (urban) spatial conceptualizations.

Villarnea organizes his book by defining the different productions of documentaries according to the subjective impact of their directors. He divides

his study into two main sections, devoting the first to landscaping approaches and the second to urban self-portraits. Chapter one examines the theoretical background of cinema and the city, and focuses particularly on the discussion of spaces and place as the foundation of human subjectivity in the shaping of urban spaces and spatialities. Here Villarnea emphasizes the relationship between the social production of space and the value of film in terms of history, culture, and the process of identity production, delving into David Harvey's (1989) and Edward Soja's (1989) claims about the reciprocal influence of individuals and spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces. Villarnea uses the process of geographical relativization brought about by the postmodern era to assert that urban documentaries address the production of place and spatiality through the combined action of memory and identity. Chapter two discusses this systematization of the production of the city through non-fiction film in detail.

166 Considering documentary film to be prominent at the turn of the century, chapter two offers a detailed panorama of the modes of representation that affect, and are affected by, documentary film. Villarnea analyzes the objectivity crisis as a main feature of the multiple representations of space in documentaries, particularly in the light of the aporetic nature of the camera as a narrative device that favors both objective and subjective depictions of reality. The author insists on the contribution of non-fiction films to the articulation of objectivity and subjectivity, especially when referring to representations of the city, using the terms "city-referent" and "city-character" to typify this ambiguity. It is this tension between describing and interpreting that, Villarnea claims, defines contemporary non-fiction film.

After the extended introduction and contextualization, Villarnea organizes his book by devoting the first section, "Landscaping", to discussing the portrayal of documentary images according to the involvement of the directors' subjectivities with their narratives. The second section, "Urban Self-Portraits", delves into the different forms in which films are used as a narrative instrument to create autobiographical discourses that place the author at the center of the representation. Chapter three focuses on the narrative device with the highest degree of objectivity, "observational landscape", where traces of slow cinema are to be found whereby duration is incorporated to the director's distancing from the image. This agrees with Ira Jaffe's claim that some directors have "taken rarefied pleasure in achieving various sorts of distance and detachment in [their] cinemas" (2014: 45). According to Villarnea, shot length is therefore the key element to define space in the two non-fiction films analyzed in this section. A still landscape proposal provides an increased exposure of the viewer to the scene

but, as it relies on the spectators' semantic contributions, it also distances the director from any form of objectivity.

Chapters four and five accommodate Villarrea's reference to the transnational nature of his approach. His analysis continues the examination of urban spaces in Los Angeles, and then discusses the production of relevant urban spaces such as New York and London. This chapter is therefore designed through two different argumentations: the first focuses once more on the idea of Angeleno spaces as envisioned by critics and film-makers of European origin, who provide the city with a subjective meaning. The second argumentation can be traced to his discussion of the emotional effects caused by territory on the subject through those historical landmarks, references, and everyday experiences that have become places of memory. Chapter five provides a thorough discussion of autobiographies, spatial urban narratives with the maximum degree of discursive intervention. Autobiographical films provide, Villarrea argues, an increased intensity and a direct presence of the directors' experiences in the represented city, enabling them to offer viewers a delineation of the structural changes and developments undergone by the city as past, present and future interpretations.

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The next part of the book, "Urban Self-Portraits", examines the different forms of self-portrait, a sub-genre of the autobiographical text. Chapter six begins by analyzing the performative mode used in self-portraits. Taking into account the aesthetics of failure to show the political possibilities of documentaries based on personal experiences and thoughts, it refers to the lucidity of these films when they are narrated in first-person by directors who are ordinary citizens.

Villarrea devotes the next two chapters to examining the self-portrait as essay film (chapter seven) and the urban self-portrait as self-fiction (chapter eight). In chapter seven he interprets the discourses in which a "second reality" unveils urban spaces normally concealed for the regular onlooker. This chapter closes with a look into the emotional search for memories derived from absent cityscapes, and then turns to a theoretical forethought about the causes of such a disclosure of emotional emptiness based on space. Chapter eight's analysis of self-portraits as self-fiction points out how this filming approach is based on compilations of real footage that are then fictionalized, becoming highly subjective. Villarrea argues that this amounts to a redefinition of documentaries, as it combines artistic imagination and actual memories to create new discourses of the city.

The last chapter draws on the final stage of subjectivity, where metafilm essays construct images not just as duplicates of the real but, Villarrea argues, as new realities. It also reflects on the impact of film imagery on actual (re)constructions of the city, employing a set of terms (elusive, exorbitant, noir, studio, city of exile,

etc.) to refer to the multiple interpretations of the city and “its infinite screens” (211). This agrees with other definitions of the city as postmetropolis (Soja 2000) or heteropolis (Jencks 1993).

As a whole, Villarnea’s book deals with one major concern: the diversity of interactions between the city and non-fiction films that produce places of memory. He first focuses on the theoretical discussions that provide structure for the different phases in the cultural construction of urban spaces, and then organizes his selection of non-fiction films.

Villarnea argues that his selection of films responds to a non-geographical arbitration, and therefore the reader will find productions from different national backgrounds. This is a praiseworthy strategy on the part of the author, who is coherent with his own claim that the global and transnational quality of urban spaces also defines films today. He explains that he opts for a “world systems approach” (9) in order to eschew the limitations imposed by national and cultural borders.

However, Villarnea’s task becomes a challenging one when he presents a rather erratic organization of the selected films. His transgressive approach clashes with the slightly traditional structure of the book, which works well in communicating his main ideas but would benefit from an interrogation of the concepts used to classify the chapters. This is not by any means a fault in this remarkable book, but the articulation of theory and analysis would expand its critical possibilities with an examination of Deleuze’s “territory”, David Harvey’s “the right to the city”, or Ignasi Solà-Morales Rubió’s pertinent concept “terrain vague”.

Villarnea’s reading of the individual films works much better because the author evidences his extensive scholarly research and articulates his critical apparatus with a thorough and innovative analysis. Villarnea, nonetheless, has an undeniable need to articulate the analyses of these films with current theories of space, and he succeeds in most cases. He very cleverly highlights, for example, the difference between space and place, and also the role of performative forms of identification and narrative production in setting about the documenting of the city.

Villarnea concludes this outstanding book about the representation of urban change in contemporary non-fiction film by showing how “the politics of representation in current urban documentaries has evolved into a politics of place-making and sense-making” (213). I am convinced that this book will open up new lines of research into the documentation of cityscapes. Its emphasis on the relevance of documentaries to (re)present the history of cities opens new windows to the study of urban spaces. This call for further research testifies to Villarnea’s success in his enthralling book.

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