BOOK REVIEW OF THE EUROPEAN CINEMA READER

The articles in the second section discuss how discrete moments of innovation punctuate the history of European cinema, including the French New Wave, New German Cinema, and the Dogma 95 group. These essays illustrate how both critics as well as film practitioners have initiated or reflected upon breaks from preceding aesthetic traditions. André Bazin’s landmark essay “An Aesthetic of Reality: Neo-realism,” formulates the critical framework under which an Italian Neo-realist aesthetic has been understood. “Godard and Counter-Cinema: Vent d’Est,” by Peter Wollen, situates the director as the creative force responsible for aesthetic change. Also included are the Oberhausen Manifesto and the Dogme 95 Vow of Chastity, manifestos by film practitioners calling for aesthetic innovations in the name of cultural legitimacy.

The essays in section three examine how films have been collected into broad categories and movements within the study of European cinema. It features articles concerned with art cinema, authorship, and national cinema, issues that permeate European film culture. Steve Neale’s “The Art Cinema as Institution,” examines how cultural and economic factors led to an Art Cinema practice in three different national contexts. Other articles investigate how specific national cinemas have negotiated issues of national or regional identity within specific historical and institutional frameworks, including David Gillespie’s “Identity and the Past in Recent Russian Cinema” and Marvin D’Lugo’s “Catalan Cinema.”

The fourth section of the book features texts that deal with issues of reception and economics. Some of these articles investigate the role played by Hollywood in various elements of European film culture, such as “Temporary American Citizens: Cultural Anxieties and Industrial Strategies in the Americanization of European Cinema,” by Richard Maltby and Ruth Vasey. In “Support Mechanisms Across Europe,” Angus Finney examines different approaches to film support in Europe, providing a comparative analysis of both state and regional subsidy systems. The issue of national cinema itself comes under scrutiny in Martine Danan’s “From a ‘Prenational’ to a ‘Postnational’ French Cinema,” where she delineates how French national cinema has negotiated international ambitions in the face of economic globalization.

The European Cinema Reader functions very well as an introductory text, featuring works that take up the central issues of European cinema in a brief but informative manner. Nearly all of the texts gathered within the collection have been abridged, presumably in order to offer a greater diversity of approaches and insights. Extensive references for further reading accompany each section, and a comprehensive bibliography is provided at the end. The organization of the book usefully implicates the broader relevance and interrelation of the individual essays, further clarified by the introductions to each section. These resources, in combination with the broad scope of the essays collected, make this volume a highly useful introduction to the study of European cinema.

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BOOK REVIEW

The European Cinema Reader

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In her introduction to The European Cinema Reader, editor Catherine Fowler states there is no such thing as “European cinema” (1). She argues that it is a field that has been created within critical discourse, and so reflects the preoccupations and approaches of contributing critics. In keeping with this, the anthology is not so much about European cinema per se, but instead provides an introduction to some of the ways that European cinema has been conceptualized and constituted within film studies. To this end, The European Cinema Reader includes a broad collection of texts, by critics as well as influential film artists, which have contributed to the creation and study of national cinemas in Europe.

The book is divided into four sections, each reflecting a formative trend within the field of European cinema. Introductions precede each section to help set the essays into their greater discursive context. The first section features essays that illustrate the early critical reception of film in Europe. This reception involved investigating film’s legitimacy as an art and its purpose in social practice. In “The Birth of the Sixth Art,” Ricciotto Canudo examines the relationship of film to reality as well as to the other arts, reflecting a concern with medium specificity that permeates all the essays in this section.

Dziga Vertov’s “Provisional Instructions to Kino-Eye Groups” and John Grierson’s “First Principles of Documentary” illustrate how film was critically mobilized toward various social practices and contexts.