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FILM-PHILOSOPHY

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Review: Gail Cunningham and Stephen Barber (2007)  
*London Eyes: Reflections in Text and Image*  
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This collection of essays brought together by Gail Cunningham and Stephen Barber, considers London's ongoing capacity to generate cultural responses, particularly within literature and film. The book considers how these responses might have shaped the city, the people who live in it and perceptions of both place and people.

In the introduction to the book, Cunningham establishes London as the prime site in the UK and 'probably the Anglophone's world', from which 'notions of emerging urban modernity have evolved and have been tested in writing, in photography and [...] through the moving image' (xi). The suggestion is that the book examines the implications for this construction of place and identity through a wide-reaching spread of essays by prominent thinkers in the field of cultural, literary and film studies by concentrating on the significant period

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between the beginnings of modernity through to the post-modernity of the digital age.

The book is split into two parts, the first entitled 'Victorian and Edwardian London on the Page' and the second 'The Modern Age: London in Image'. In her introduction to Part I, Cunningham sets out the links between the essays in this part to a spatial relationship with London, and establishes the binary considerations of space within these chapters, in particular the dialectic between home and city, private and public space with particular emphasis on gendered spaces or issues of class division. Cunningham points out that the essays deal with these fragmented issues by focussing on 'aspects of London specificities, whether in locations, groups, behaviours or media' (4). The introduction to the second section of the book, written by co-editor Stephen Barber, suggests that Part II will continue in looking at the fragmented way that London is seen and constructed. However he suggests that the way that Part II will do this will be in a foregrounding of the way that 'technology forms an engulfing preoccupation and an essential part of the spectatorial experience of the city' (119). The first part includes essays on the implications of the new commute between newly established suburbs into the city, the new medium of photography displaying street scenes in the mid 1800s and Sherlock Holmes's role in the gendered spaces of the city. The second part of the book includes essays on how films feed into how we map the city to how the city is constructed as a dystopia through film.

The diversity within these essays does not necessitate two sections within the book, and yet the split reminds us of the division between modernity and post modernity. This rightly emphasises literature's role in determining the representation of London in the first half through to the concentration upon film's role along with literature in the second. As the essays all concern themselves in some way with a moment of change (the century's turn, a significant alteration in culture, a different way of seeing), the literal split is a subtle but ultimately useful tool to think about the implications these writings uncover.

Whilst gender and class are equally weighted as significant and ongoing factors in the essays of Part I, with no less than four of the six chapters in this section touching upon the gendered division of the city for example, this theme does not create dialectical cul-de-sacs but manages instead to introduce some interesting nuances in some themes that have been overworked elsewhere. For example in Cunningham's own essay 'London Commuting: Suburb and City, The Quotidian Frontier', the commute between the new suburbs (the space of women) into the city (the space of men) created, as she puts it 'the consequent growth of gender separation', (7). Whilst this essay does ground its consideration of this new phenomenon in terms of the split between city and suburb and the corresponding male and female spaces through an examination of a number of literary texts including stories by H.G. Wells and the poetry of Dollie Radford, the essay's most significant idea is to consider the commuter as a significant form of city flaneur, providing 'a more empirically grounded alternative figure through which to apprehend the relations between individual and city, the personal and the mass' (8). The commuter, Cunningham suggests, has the privilege of experiencing the city not through a binary of city/suburb – but through what she describes as a 'triple spatial and [...] temporal identity' (9). The commuter gets to experience the time and space of the in-between, inhabiting the moving train, seeing the inbetween city, the backs of houses, into windows hidden from the street but not from the train. The commuter is not a character that is usually considered in a positive light, but is more often tangled up within an implied enslavement to consumerism. Instead of depicting the commuter within this or that other popular image of the zombie masses described by T S Eliot in 'The Wasteland', Cunningham enables us to see through the more joyful eyes of other writers "the pavement of the Strand and Fleet Street look quite radiant ... with clerks", their silk hats shining in the sunlight', (11). It is a much richer perspective of the commuter than expected.

In Andrew Smith's 'Displacing Urban Man: Sherlock Holmes's London', once again, class and gender issues feature strongly. Smith begins by establishing the link between Holmes and the concept of rational male

intellect, and the link between both in critical thinking about urban space, thereby gendering the city as spatially male. However, Smith goes on to suggest that the gender split comes not from the association of Holmes's masculine intellect with London, and demands that there should be a move 'beyond solely reading Holmes's rationality in gender specific terms' (48). Smith sets up the idea that although London feels like the consistent setting for Holmes, most of the crimes that Holmes investigates, takes place instead in the Home Counties. Much critical thought on this usually implies that the country setting is just simply an extension of the city, but Smith disagrees. Instead, he shows that Doyle establishes the countryside as having a greater potential for evil as there are less people to witness the crimes committed, it is a place 'where crime is less easily prosecutable' (49). It is therefore in 'the country that Holmes can reassert a model of masculine rationality that was becoming increasingly squeezed out of the city in the nineteenth century' (49). Smith goes on to examine this phenomenon with a close look at two stories 'A Scandal in Bohemia' and 'The Engineer's Thumb', both of which foreground gender in the process of examining the relationship between city and country. Smith's take on 'A Scandal in Bohemia' is particularly fascinating in terms of the way that he sets out a perspective on this story as to how gender and rationality is performed in the city.

The final essay in Part I, Roger Webster's 'The Aesthetics of Walking: Literary and Filmic Representations of London in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*' provides a bridging essay to Part II of *London eyes*, as this is the only essay in Part I that deals with both cinema and literature, as well as sifting in a more concentrated take on the influences of modernism on London than seen anywhere else in Part I. Webster draws upon the chapter on the city in Michel de Certeau's seminal *The Practice of Everyday Life*, to describe Certeau's walker as an 'isolated integer, a blind fragment of a disconnected totality' (92). By bringing this imagery in at the start of his essay, Webster immediately establishes something of what *The Secret Agent* achieves in its representation of the city and its people. In particular it raises implications for the players in

*The Secret Agent* as being caught up and potentially broken on 'the wheels of state machinery' (102). Another fascinating comparison that Webster brings to our consideration of *The Secret Agent* is in relation to Cubist art: 'the parallels between Cubist art and *The Secret Agent* are significant: the ironically detached anonymous narrative voice articulates this world largely indifferently, compounding the lack of a unified and coherent perspective or moral framework' (99). In the last section of his essay, Webster looks at three film versions of the book – firstly a BBC television adaptation *The Secret Agent* (David Drury, 1972), secondly the film, *The Secret Agent* (Christopher Hampton, 1996) starring Bob Hoskins and finally Hitchcock's *Sabotage* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1936). Whilst acknowledging the faithful adaptation to the novel of the television series, Webster feels that the 'urban disruptions and chaos of the novel are largely absent' (103). Webster also acknowledges both the BBC and the Drury versions' use of walking characters in the city to 'suggest the contradictions and compartmentalization of London as in the novel' and agrees that 'the camera lens is at times the equivalent of Conrad's detached ironic narrator' (106). However it is in the less historically accurate version, *Sabotage* that Webster suggests that there is an attempt to create a:

Form of alienation effect here and throughout the film, in which the comfortable perspectives of traditional family and social life are contrasted with the acute perspectives of the modern, of the spectre of war, and of disintegration and destruction. (109)

The Hitchcock film seems to conjure the essence of *The Secret Agent* as 'a disjointed and fragmented vision of London in which its citizens will always walk alone' (113). His close reading of the Hitchcock version draws the section of the book dealing with modernism to a close and enables us to move into the second section and its more post-modern slant with some useful perspectives on the city and the technology that feeds its portrayal.

As touched upon above, Part II is concerned with how technology can create and shape our ideas of the city. Hugo Frey's essay 'Shutting out the City: Reflections on the portrayal of London in 1960s auteur cinema' deals directly

with this issue, and he establishes its aims early on in the essay to examine how the 'contemporary cinema and London form an important, incendiary and complex partnership' (136). He examines closely how a range of films display interior and exterior images of different modes of housing throughout the city, how secret spaces are portrayed, and how in auteur cinema the settings, rather than falling into a documentary vs. dystopian rendition of the city, are 'rigorously manipulated to support narrative and psychological tension irrespective of the urban reality' (139). In considering auteur films such as *Performance* (Nicholas Roeg, 1970), *Blow up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966) and *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960) he acknowledges that the films spoke to anxieties about urban life and 'operated as a grim welcome to the corrupting "Smoke"' (141). He reflects upon the significance of the outsider nature of the filmmakers and the characters within the films and finally considers whether the works are 'implicitly anti-London pieces' (143). Frey investigates the random acts of violence that pepper these films and looks at lone terrorist acts perpetuated in London, including the murders of Stephen Lawrence and Jill Dando, along with IRA attacks and the actions of nail bomber David Copeland. The events of July 7<sup>th</sup> are not mentioned anywhere in this collection of essays, despite containing multiple places where they might have made for interesting inclusion, but it is in this section of Frey's essay that this exclusion is the most baffling.

The final essay in *London Eyes* is Jeremy Reed's 'Coda: What Colour is Time? Derek Jarman's Soho' which begins by asking us to imagine 'what colour is time when you try to remember it?' (203). This short (four page) essay more than any other for me, has the ability to draw the reader into a very specific consideration of the city, in terms of our own response to the question, into Reed's answer to his own question and into Jarman's lived experience of the flat he lived in when he resided in Soho. The question 'what colour is time when you try to remember it?' is immediately framed as both having a temporal and a spatial dimension – to think of a colour of time necessitates us choosing a time – and to colour it – as a space. Reed chooses 1984, as it was the year that Jarman took on the lease of a flat on the fourth floor of Phoenix House. The colours Reed pulls

into this framing are 'aqueous white rain skies' and 'pink and white, maroon and grey, pistachio and russet bands according to my abstract notation of big city seasons' (203). Reed's writing pulls us into the looking glass of Jarman's artwork, the pop videos he made for fellow Soho inhabitant Marc Almond, and his films. It is a supremely evocative attempt to enable us to see how technology can colour and colour in the city, ending with the fabulous summing up of Soho as being 'a starting point for London's imagination'.

Whilst I have only managed to touch briefly upon five of the twelve essays included in this text, in no way should this imply that these are the best choices. In any collection of essays, some will stand out while others fade away – but in *London Eyes*, each essay is itself a new way of relating to the city. By allowing the reader to drift, the texts enable a new vista of the city to emerge. To discover a story about a place is to change it in some fundamental way. *London Eyes* provides paths through the city, chancing upon those stories that ultimately have the potential to change London, to see it with new eyes, casting new shadows and seeing new stories open up at many turns. This collection has at its heart a joyous fascination with the city and the texts, images and films that have contributed to our ideas about London. It was a wonderful opportunity to stumble upon some new panoramas.