

Charlotte Brunsdon, *London in Cinema: The Cinematic City Since 1945* (London: BFI, 2007), ppviii + 248. 48 illus., ISBN 978-1-84457-183-3 (pb).

I want to start by stating something entirely unambiguously: this is a *really* good book. Not just the kind of ‘really good’ where a chapter goes on a reading list but the sort of ‘really good’ that means if you teach anything to do with British culture or the city, you’ll be putting the entire volume on your bibliography. *London in Cinema* is going to become the seminal text on London in film.

Like many academics working on British cinema, I have heard Charlotte Brunsdon talk more than once on her work on London-set movies and found her talks engaging and informative. So, it was with the scepticism of being ever so slightly disappointed by most the books that follow entertaining papers, that I began to read *London in Cinema*. I am delighted to say that Brunsdon’s book fulfils everything I hoped it would be and it has lost none of the passion and energy of her conference discussions. If anything, it has become more erudite and more compelling in the story she tells and *London in Cinema* is academic writing at its best.

The book divides into six core chapters plus ‘Introduction: Impossible Geographies’ (an excellent discussion of the remit of the work and the choices made within plus an eloquent stating of her aims within the book and how it relates to previous works) and the ‘Afterword: The Poignancy of Place’.

Chapter 1 ‘Landmark London’ takes a critical approach to this short-hand term that has always managed to sum up both the substantive and the shallow in the way London is represented and one of the things Brunsdon is at pains to stress in both this and

the introductory chapter is that *her* London is not the kind of London which, when discussed, is forever at the intersection of setting and location. In ‘Landmark London’, in this book, it is not the power of the schematic signification of London through *actual* locations which she is interested in but the use of these at the next level of signification, when, as short-hand, we do not need to reality of the location to communicate London but a series of carefully places iconographic images within a generic urban space. As Brunsdon writes: [A]ll films, that claim London as their setting must engage with this hegemonic discourse of location – with that river, that clock, that bridge, those buses and those taxis” (p23). One of the most interesting avenues down which the reader is pointed for further contemplation is the inclusion of the ‘new’ landmarks of London (the Millennium Dome and London Eye) and, also, how some of these exist in cinema as cinematic landmarks but might be perceived by the British public as peculiar choices, particularly how “commercial London” is signified in the Bollywood film *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2001) by Kent’s ‘super-mall’, Bluewater (even on the periphery of Greater London as it is). Ultimately, however, and reflecting her interest in going beyond the Londons we recognise easily in cinema, Brunsdon argues that “landmark images, although they are images of place, mobilised to inform where a film is set, are in general not a part of the narrative spaces of the film” (p38). In other words, landmarks in film signify everything and nothing simultaneously, permitting us access and rapid cognition of the setting, period and sometimes even the genre, but ultimately adding nothing to the stories we are being told.

Chapter 2 invites the reader into the opposite of ‘Landmark London’, the site of the local: a ‘Local London’ for local people, but without *The League of Gentlemen*’s inbred community. Occasionally, throughout the book, you will be able to think of examples of films which Brunsdon does not investigate but, as she explains herself, choices do have to be made and examples privileged which provide the reader and spectator with a discourse which can be applied to other films. *The League of Gentlemen’s Apocalypse* (2004) engages with a representation of London, for example, but what they do with London appears fully influenced by *Trainspotting* (1995, to which she does refer). There is much in the chapters on the local signifiers of London which enhances how we think of the representation of England’s capital and it is difficult to sketch the images Brunsdon renders because they are so rich, so culturally engaged and so literate in their complex understanding of the city and its representations. Chapter 3 examines the allure of ‘Going Up West’: West is a site of immorality, a space for extravagance but equally a space which borders the Landmark (Soho, Piccadilly) and the Glocal (the back-alleys, the everydayness of international stores at its centre). The fourth chapter explores the tunnels of the London Underground which then nicely segue-ways into Chapter 5, on the Underworld, ‘London Horror’ and ‘East End Noir’ Anyone who has ever spent any time in the East End will recognise the reverberations of its history as represented on film but the East London in contemporary reality is a very different creature. The sixth chapter takes the reader onto the Thames itself as London’s symbolic artery and finally, in the Afterward, Brunsdon comes to an end by emphasising the pathos inherent in a number of London films along with the sense of a city constantly remoulding, repeating and continuing. Each chapter concentrates on a smaller number of films but Brunsdon’s

knowledge of the representation of London is far in excess of any work which currently exists. Every chapter is a gem; irrespective of what genres and tastes you have as a reader, Brunsdon's London leaps of the pages and makes you think.

This action in itself is an achievement. There is space, despite the tremendous pace of the book, to breathe and to think through the ideas she argues and raises. In summary, finally: read this book; it will pay you back in gold.

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