

Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes and Global Culture. By Charles Acland. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003. 350 pp. ISBN 0822331632 (pbk.).

Charles Acland's *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes and Global Culture* is premised on a simple theoretical realignment: to dislodge textual analysis from its pride of place in cinema studies and give due regard to the "extratextual structures of cinematic life," specifically "the ordinary, the calculated and the casual practices of cinematic engagement" (p. 62). In and of itself, this is not a bold thesis. Over the past two decades, media and cinema studies have shown renewed interest in the way audiences encounter and engage—in ordinary and calculated ways—moving pictures and media of all kinds. What makes *Screen Traffic* worthwhile is Acland's rigorous consideration of the possibility that place matters: that where audiences see moving pictures is just as important as what they see. Acland's point of departure is not the audience per se, but the theatre as built space—and the megaplex itself as a particular type of theatre. Acland argues that the megaplex is the end result of a carefully orchestrated business strategy and one of the places where individuals (as part of an audience) experience the cultural consequences of globalization. *Screen Traffic* moves deftly from the cinema as a site of leisure to the cinema as a site of global commerce to the cinema as a cultural force worldwide. It is, in all respects, an enjoyable, rewarding, and original work.

Since its establishment in the 1920s as an economic and cultural powerhouse, the motion picture industry—and Hollywood, in particular—has reinvented itself many times over at the levels of production, distribution, and exhibition. Early on, the construction of majestic motion picture palaces helped counteract the down-market association with Kinetoscope parlours, vaudeville theatres, and storefront nickelodeons. These theatres played a critical role in helping the motion picture industry go "legit" and become a dominant cultural force. Soon enough, the "cinema"—the word itself registers the centrality of a built space to the industry's allure—was granted would-be status as an art form and given standing as an academic discipline (that the word "cinéma" is by origin French probably helped).

In time, the grand theatres with their neo-Egyptian and neo-classical trimmings did more than serve the acquisition of cultural capital; vertical ownership of everything from production and distribution to the "bricks and mortar" ensured a golden era of market dominance in mass entertainment outside the home. The cinema (as an industry) flourished wherever opulent (and kitschy) theatres were built. Rather quickly, Hollywood became the epicentre of the film industry: the beneficiary of a couple of wars, a huge domestic market, and the realpolitik of an impressive alliance between its trade association (the Motion Picture Association of America) and the State department. The heyday lasted a few decades. Television, even more than the 1948 Paramount anti-trust decree, altered the calculus for economic success; no amount of innovation—not CinemaScope or 3-D or even a bit of naked flesh—could ensure the same steady flow to theatre box offices. Shuttered theatres marked the end of an era. For some, it was the beginning of the end for the cinema itself.

Not for Acland. "As appealing as it is to proclaim new periods," he writes, "we are not in the post-cinema era. We are, however, in an age after the monopolization of the motion-picture theater as a site for moving-image culture" (p. 46). As we know, Hollywood partly responded to television by merging with it, especially at the point of production. But Hollywood also continued to value the theatre as a site for commerce and marketing. Over the next 30 years, the motion picture theatre was reborn: first as a multiplex (many screens under one roof) and then as a megaplex. Much of *Screen Traffic* is given over to a rich description of the megaplex as a strategic response to changes in the business of family

entertainment and to an assessment of how these new entertainment sites offer a particular vision and version of cinema-going and cultural practice.

In the late 1980s, Acland argues, each branch of Hollywood—and local compradors in foreign countries—came to the same conclusion: in order to reinvigorate the business of cinema “films did not require refinement; the context of cinemagoing did” (p. 92). “Upscaling, comfort, courteousness, cleanliness, total entertainment and prestige emerged as qualities to be offered through the services provided and through the design of auditoriums” (p. 106). Acland thoroughly describes how Universal’s CityWalk complex in Los Angeles, Sony’s Lincoln Square in New York (complete with an IMAX auditorium), and Famous Players’ four different megaplex “brands” in cities across Canada—the family-oriented SilverCity, the Paramount, the Colossus, and the Coliseum—represent the miniaturization of the theme park and the creation of safe and controlled sites for family entertainment and leisure. Megaplexes, as Acland shows, are not only sites of entertainment; they are also places designed to reinvigorate urban areas through the creation of safety zones for family play outside the home; they are, in other words, part of a calculated response to middle-class anxieties concerning urban life.

Acland is right to connect the megaplex phenomenon to the current trends and fads in urban planning and renewal. He is on equally firm ground when he links the megaplex to the internationalization of the cinema, specifically the synchronization of the temporal and spatial experience of cinema-going. Acland describes in detail Hollywood’s recent forays into the business of theatre construction overseas, especially in Western Europe and South America. This internationalization of the theatre ownership and construction, in Acland’s view, enhances “global coordination” and creates yet another circuit for the experience of globalization, an experience based as much on “synchronized international releasing patterns” and routinized theatre schedules as it is based on the films themselves (pp. 138, 239).

To make this case, Acland focuses primarily on the experience of cinema-going in Canada, reminding us that films about Canada by Canadians are generally absent from theatre screens and that Canadian audiences have been part of the continental cinema circuit since the early days of moving pictures. But Acland is eager to avoid the conclusion that usually accompanies this observation; he avoids labels such as “Americanization” or “westernization” entirely and seems loath to make claims of authenticity or diversity based upon the classic idea of national cinemas. If anything, Acland would agree with those who want to jettison the concept of national cinema and national audiences from the toolkit of cinema studies; instead, Acland is inclined to tip the balance in the other direction, hailing the “cinematic cosmopolitanism” (p. 195) and the global “simultaneity” of the audience’s experience—something that Acland refers to as “felt internationalism” (p. 229).

Acland urges us to take seriously the idea of “popular cosmopolitanism . . . as a pervasive mode for negotiating and managing reigning ideas and experiences of global economies and cultures” (p. 237). While the suggestion that Canadian audiences in particular have learned to manoeuvre effectively between the poles of nationalism and globalization deserves a hearing, *Screen Traffic* itself does not provide enough evidence to make the argument stick. Acland himself acknowledges the limits of this popular cosmopolitanism and felt internationalism, reminding us in his conclusion that “even as cinema complexes invite dreams of collectivity and agency, they are sites that survey, police and discipline public comportment” and further “that such zones mark a tacit agreement that public membership in a transnational context has a price for admission” (p. 246). What that price is exactly—and how it should be measured and assessed—remain open questions.

Acland hinges his observations on a careful reading of trade publications such as *Variety*, *Boxoffice*, and *Playback*. It is also clear that he has spent a considerable amount of time observing and participating in the megaplex experience. And though his claims

regarding the relationship between megaplexes and audiences seem sound enough, Acland has done little to bolster his case with evidence from surveys, interviews, or conversations with audience members or cinemagoers, especially those outside North America. Acland does make liberal use of the academic literature in film studies, cultural studies, urban studies, media studies, and critical studies, but at times the parade of scholarly stars overwhelms the narrative—much of this stuff could have been left on the cutting room floor. Even so, the final print is an impressive feat. Charles Acland's *Screen Traffic* deserves to reach a broad, international audience.

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