

Urban/Rural

An Introduction

by Michael Christopher



La Place des Cordeliers à Lyon (source: youtube)

Summary:

Introduction to the topic urban/rural. The article explores the relationship between cinema, city and village.

Keywords:

Introduction, city, village

Quotation:

Christopher, Michael (2011) “Urban/Rural. An Introduction”, in:
manycinemas 1, 2-6

When we turn our views to the beginning of film history, we think about cinema as an urban medium. The first films were shown in Paris, Berlin, later in Dakar and Bombay. These are the places where cinema halls were built up in the early 20th century to entertain the urban spectators. The history of film is not well-defined, there were many precursors, many different machines which showed motion pictures. In Europe, the brothers Lumière are presumed to be the initiator of cinema. Two of their first movies are *La Sortie de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon* and *La Place des Cordeliers à Lyon* (both France 1895, Lumière) which show a very urban scene. In the first, workers are leaving the factory of the Lumière, in the second, we can see a street-scene in Lyon and a horse tramway drives into the frame. Since these beginnings, cinema stays well-connected to the cities. Cinema is the companion of the city in the modern times.

The success of Lumière's cinema is its ability to be a motion media, not only to show motion pictures, but to be in motion itself. Their projectors and films travelled around the world. They shot cities and landscapes which they showed in urban and rural areas. The cinema connected the urban and the rural. And even today, while many cinema halls are closed down and deconstructed to be transferred into shopping malls (in which, sometimes, cinemas are included), film and cinema is important to the people in cities and villages.

Cinema is a documentary and a fictional medium. But sometimes, the lines between fiction and documentary are blurred. It is possible to use a fictional depicted city as a historical source, but we have to keep in mind, that these pictures are used in filmic conventions and that they are no documents in the usual senses. However, when we follow different films of different ages of cities like New York, Tokyo, Bombay, we are able to see the developments and the changes. Therefore one of the most prominent indicator is the traffic in the city. When we turn our view to the countryside, the development is much slower. The village is pristine.

In historical *travelogues* we can see some differences in depicting the city and the rural. While the city is filmed by landmarks, sights, or crowded

streets, we see that the rural is shown with the help of landscapes and working people.

In modern cinema there is still this kind of divide. There are (not exclusive) urban movie genre like thriller, (neo-) noir or coming-of-age movies and rural movie genre like heimatfilm or (neo-) nativity movies. The filmic city is a crowded place with impressive buildings and fast cutting montage, and sometimes, it is a dangerous dark place of crime. A good example is Ramgopal Varma's *Satya* (India 1998), where the protagonist Satya (J.D. Chakravarty) comes to the city of Bombay to find his luck, but ends in jail and then in organized crime. Ramgopal Varma draws a dark picture of Bombay in contrast to the world of Bollywood. Since then Varma is popular for his underworld based Bombay films. Edward Dimenberg (2004:10) describes how "[...] cinematic representation of the city in film noir provide an aidé-memoire [...]" to reintroduce forgotten fragments of the city into consciousness. The same can be said about Varma's Bombay-movies.



Satya (source: DVD Visions)

Village movies can also be very rude, the role of the underworld is taken by the feudal landlord or his successor, the business man, like in *Svet-Ake* (Kyrgyzstan 2010, Aktan Abdykalykov, engl. *The Light Thief*). The protagonist who is called the "lightman" (Aktan Abdykalykov) tries to find a way out for his poor village. He steals the electricity and dreams of windmills to become autarkic. But his family and the other villagers think his dreams are foolish. When the mayor dies, a business person from the neighboring town takes over the village and becomes the new feudal lord. His

henchmen kill the lightman. Like in *Satya* in *Svet-Ake* the dreams of the protagonist haven't been fulfilled.

Manycinemas would like to look beyond the dichotomy of urban and rural. We are interested in the sphere in-between and the transition from city to village and vice versa. What are the impacts of modern (urban) life on a village society? What happens with migrant workers when they are forced to move to a city? What is the role of slums in movies? How is nostalgia of former urban or rural experiences implemented to the memory? And where are the places in-between? Ravi Vasudevan reminds us, that "much of the power of the popular cinema lies exactly in outflanking such a discursive terrain [social discourse] and setting up scenarios of the city, its violent landscapes and subaltern experience" (2003:100). The same can be said about rural films (ibid). In this issue of *manycinemas* (urban/rural) we follow this discursive terrain.

Meheli Sen leads us in her article "Vernacular Modernities and Fitful Globalities in Shyam Benegal's Cinematic Provinces" to Shyam Benegal's fictive villages Sajjanpur in *Welcome to Sajjanpur* (India 2008) and Chikatpalli in *Well Done Abba!* (India 2009). In these films Benegal shows the process of modernity in two Indian villages and how the new era brings social, political and economic transformations to the rural. Benegal is one of India's critically acclaimed filmmakers.

From the village to the city brings the Tamil film *Angaditheru* (India 2010, Vasanthabalan) its protagonists. **Helen Staufer** and **Michael Christopher** explore in their article: "Urban. Village. Urban-Village. *Angaditheru* and its 'mofussil' department store society in Chennai" the living conditions of the migration workers in Chennai's big textile stores and describe how the film creates a separate place for them between the city and the village. Parts outside the urban areas are called mofussil. Even of his raw content *Angaditheru* became a big hit in Tamil Nadu.

Christopher Garland shifts his analyzes in his essay "Urban, Rural, or Someplace Else?" to Giorgio Agamben's theorizing of sovereign power and bare life and his approach on biopolitics. Like Michel Foucault in "Discipline and Punish" Agamben focuses on power relationships. Christopher

Garland apply the term biopolitics to the situation of the inhabitants of three cinematic slums in Bombay (*Slumdog Millionaire*), Johannesburg (*District 9*), and Rio de Janeiro (*City of Gods*).

Oana Chivoiu turns her view to Romania and the Film *California Dreamin'* in her article "Cristian Nemescu's *California Dreamin'*: A Cinematic Radiography of a National Dream". Nemescu's only film, he died in a car crash before his movie released to the cinema halls, describes the situation in a Romanian village where the stationmaster stays between his nostalgia of the city (Bucharest) and his life in the village called Capalnita. His life comes upside down when a train of the US-Army comes to halt in his town on their way to the Kosovo.

John Libiran tells us in the interview section "Let's have a talk with..." about his two movies *Tribu* and *Happyland*. Libiran's films are situated in Tondo, a rur-ban area in the outskirts of the Philippine capital Manila. The unique character of his movies is, that he combines a fiction movie with a real social project.

The first edition of "Beyond the Cinema" leads us to the cinema buildings itself. We show you photographs of cinema halls in South India, some vanished, some modernized, and some survived the tides of changes.

References

- Dimenberg, Edward (2004) *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vasudevan, Ravi (2003) "Selves Made Strange: Violent and Performative Bodies in the Cities of Indian Cinema, 1974-2003", in: Indira Chandrasekhar and Peter C. Seel (eds.) *Body.City: Siting contemporary culture in India*, Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 84-117.

Filmography

- La Sortie de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon*, France, 1895 Lumière, silent.
- La Place des Cordeliers à Lyon*, France, 1895, Lumière, silent.
- Satya*, India, 1998, Varma, Hindi.
- Svet-Ake*, Kyrgyzstan, 2010, Aktan Abdykalykov, Kyrgyz, engl. Title: *The Light Thief*.