

FERNANDO SDRIGOTTI is a writer and film researcher, born in Rosario, Argentina in 1977. He holds a BA (hons) in the History of Art from Goldsmiths, University of London, and a Masters degree in Latin American Cultural Studies (specialised in film) from the Department of Iberian and Latin American Studies, Birkbeck, where he is currently a PhD candidate. His thesis focuses on the construction of *crisiscapes* in new Argentine cinema. Other research interests are world cinemas, philosophy, spatial theory, and urban cultural studies. He is a founding member of the research group *The Screen Network* and since 2010 the managing editor of the Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies.

Email: sdrigotti@gmail.com

Book review

Abandoned Images: Film and Film's End

by Stephen Barber

Reaktion Books, 2010, 190 pp., £14.95 ISBN 978-1-86189-645-2



Fernando Sdrigotti

CINEMA IS DEAD, or has been dying for a while, or it will die soon. Such claims would surprise none and a book intent on portraying such demise would be at first sight an uncalled-for effort, redundancy, another opportunist requiem. Except that *Abandoned Images* stands at the opposite corner. Barber's teasing book is an inspiring meditation on the disappearance of film, both from the screens and the urban fabric, and in this joint gesture and in the lines of analysis that this gesture elicits, resides its important contribution to the field. Barber sets off on his exploration with an impassioned nostalgia for all things filmic; this nostalgia is a condition of his approach, and one the reader is left with no option but to accept. And the same goes for his suspicion of the digital medium (for the way in which it has been appropriated mostly by corporate speech). If the reader can accept these premises, *Abandoned Images* will take her on an illuminating journey.

Composed of four parts (plus a minor introduction that forewords the book's contents), *Abandoned Images* explores – with the accustomed Barberian juggling of theory, film analysis, and psychogeographic incantation – different aspects of film's demise. The model for this is the [de]materialised decay of Los

Angeles Broadway; formerly an opulent street, the favoured location for the Industry's *avant-premières*. Its abandonment, since the Industry's relocation to Hollywood, has rendered it a space of near dereliction and decadence. Barber's exploration is articulated rather freely, with each of the four parts moving from one theme to the next without a clear narrative, occasionally to the reader's bafflement. It is hard to follow Barber at points, to know exactly how one made the jump from a derelict Broadway screen to Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point*. The fact that death – in its different manifestations – seems to be running behind every word like a thread might provide a stepping-stone.

The first part, "Film and The End" begins by establishing the coordinates, spatial, historical and theoretical. The importance of Broadway during cinema's golden years, its current state, cinema's meta-discourse regarding its own demise – as evidenced in films that deal with film's death in general (i.e. Bill Morrison's *Decasia*), and Broadway's death in particular (i.e. *In Search of a Midnight Kiss and Mulholland Drive*), and the cult of die-hards that resist this demise, are all skilfully scrambled in these pages.

The second part, "Abandoned Images", starts by reflecting on the architectural traces of film's disappearance, focusing mostly on the Million Dollar Theatre. Memory, in its diegetic and architectural forms, plays an important part in this section of the book. This is a memory of film and a memory necessarily filmic¹, trained by film; the loss of the medium, according to Barber, would result in memory becoming an entirely different entity². Forgetting has always been an integral part of film according to Barber; yet it is only now, when cinemas are disappearing from the cityscape, that this forgetting becomes spatial (101). Death and film are here once again explored through reflections on films such as *Africa Addio*, *Gimme Shelter* and *Apocalypse Now*. And as if to deny death, the film "die-hards" make a second apparition via a tour of an abandoned screening room.

Following two short stops at the State and Globe cinemas the eye steps into the book. "Abandoned Eyes", the book's third part is almost in its entirety a journey across film's obsession with visuality, its nurturing of our ways of seeing, its difficult and stormy relationship with this most cinematic of senses. The eye as a prosthetic of the camera (or the other way around) in *Man with a Movie Camera*; the ocular hatred of *Un Chant d'Amour*, *Un chien andalou*, *Andrei Rublev*, and *Funeral Parade of Roses*; the eye as the guarantor of humanity in *Blade Runner*; the spiralling eye of *Vertigo*; the tortured eye of *A Clockwork Orange*; the incinerating eye of the horror film *The Eye*; all these ocular inhabitants of the frame allow Barber to trace the history of this liaison, suggesting the intensification of the "rapport between film and human vision"³ that anticipates film's demise and leaves one wondering about the possibility of a certain blindness (or the digitisation of vision, which to Barber seems to amount to the same).

"Film and Film's End: Resuscitated Images", the book's fourth and final part works as a conclusion in disguise, replicating in a reduced version the whole book's journey. Other derelict cinemas occupy Barber's attention (Tower, Rialto, United Artists); other forms of death (*Nosferatu*); other (self-reflexive) visualities (screens within screens); other ocular obsessions (East Asians', Bataille's); other celluloid melancholies (Wenders', Greenaway's). Barber's most interesting turn in this section is his analysis of the interplay and mutual influence of film and the digital medium, film's resistance within the digital – its existence even in the form of debris that replicates the cinematic architecture's resistance within the urban fabric. *Abandoned Images'* final scene is that of an underground projection from which the author walks out before

the film's end, thus extending – at least in his imagination – the medium's life a little bit longer.

Those familiar with Barber's work will recognise some of the author's twists and turns in the above paragraphs, preoccupations that cut across his oeuvre and that are particularly prevalent in *Fragments of the European City*, *Extreme Europe* and *Projected Cities*. Far from being repetitive, *Abandoned Images* adds new dimensions to his previous works as well as functioning as a sort of coda to his loitering through the urban disappearance of all things filmic. There is the impression that something ends with this book, that his search has reached a climax, that the connection between film's bodily demise with film's seminal – to use Barber's trademark word – moments has reached full circle.

From a formal perspective, the edition – even the paperback used for this review – is of high standards (a pleasant custom in Reaktion Books). A map of Los Angeles Broadway is very helpful to place the cinemas spatially and the author's own photographs dialogue in very interesting ways with the film stills presented. This said, it is hard not to feel disappointed by the near absence of shots from the cinema's interiors (a fact which may be due to a strategic position vis-à-vis the representation of disappearance, or, more prosaically, the technical impossibility of shooting interiors with what appears to be a rather amateur camera).

To sum up: This book is a worthy contribution to the field for those interested in film, cinematic urbanism, architecture and, why not, digital media. Perhaps *Abandoned Images*' weakest point, as argued above, is that it is hard to follow Barber at times, the division of the book into four parts not providing the reader much of a guide nor shaping the narrative against the cyclical nature of the book. *Abandoned Images* demands certain docility from the reader, it demands accepting the journey without criticising from the very start the unusual nature of the itinerary.

Notes

- ¹ Stephen Barber, *Abandoned Images: Film and Film's End* (London: Reaktion Books), p. 73.
- ² Barber, p. 76.
- ³ Barber, pp. 102-103.