

book review

Glick, Joshua. **Los Angeles Documentary and the Production of Public History, 1958-1977**. University of California Press, 2018

Andrea Mariani

Los Angeles' cinema cultures have received remarkable attention from scholars in the last decade. Joshua Glick's *Los Angeles Documentary and the Production of Public History, 1958-1977* deserves a noteworthy place on this list. After John Christopher Horak's pioneering "history in the gaps" of Hollywood's avant-garde, *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-garde 1919-1945* (University of Wisconsin Press 1995), the L.A.'s scene has been excavated with geographical accuracy and historiographically multifaceted approaches. For instance, David E. James' work on minor cinemas, especially *The Most Typical Avant-garde* (University of California Press 2005), contributed to open new perspectives, not just in the way he stressed the necessity for deeper excavations and detection in the margins of cinema history (questioning the cultural limits of professional and non-professional practices), but also in his introduction of an original mode of investigation. His "geo-cinematic hermeneutics" that moulded his wide recognition on L.A. Cinemas, prompting an "investigation of the way a given place is inflected or determined by the productive resources found there" (James 2005, 18). James' work could be read as an important precedent to Joshua Glick's book, if not a major inspiration, as Glick himself suggests: "*The Most Typical Avant-garde* [...] has been instrumental in dislodging New York as the often-presumed heart of avant-garde media" (Glick 2018, 5). James

dug deeper in 2015, with his collection and film program *Alternative Projections: Experimental Film in Los Angeles, 1945-1980* (Indiana University Press, 2015), while Glick was working on his dissertation at Yale University, supervised by Charles Musser. Joshua Glick's historiographical approach is maybe less theoretical than James', but possibly more radical in painting Los Angeles as a "non-fiction capital" in the Moving-Image "realm" (Glick 2018, xi). Moreover, Glick's research is exemplary in the way he conceived to combine an investigation on practices previously "marginalised" in cinema history (he studies not only the city's independent documentaries, but mainstream television documentaries as well, which are not "marginal" at all) with social and cultural minorities' issues, as they were inflected in the documentary practice.

Thus in the first place, *Los Angeles Documentary and the Production of Public History, 1958-1977* deserves great attention not only as a deeply-researched cinema history book, but as a nuanced and sharp cultural and political study as well: "While scholar have devoted considerable attention to this period of film and television in Los Angeles, the relationship between documentary and the city has been doubly obscured" (Glick 2018, 4). Documentary is crucial in this sense and it represents a point of further advancement in the field as well. "Los Angeles filmmakers played an integral role in shaping the social consciousness

of the nation as well as in contributing to the discourse of documentary as a pedagogical cultural form” (Glick 2018, 6). However, Glick also notes that “commercial Hollywood and alternative documentary did not necessarily conform to a core-periphery relationship. Documentary entailed geographic variation contingent on the material represented” (Glick 2018, 5). For instance, Wolper Productions produced independent documentaries while co-producing mainstream theatrical films such as *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* (1971), as well as sitcoms including *Chico and the Man* (1974–’78) and *Welcome Back, Kotter* (1975–’79). Therefore, Glick’s excavation of both independent and mainstream work bring nuance to James’ geo-cinematic core-periphery model, and while doing so, it encompasses the functions and dynamics of documentary in producing and transmitting public history, or “the diverse way that history informed public life in the present” in a field of contestation “in which different practices and representations existed in ideological contrast to one another,” thus a true practice of historical recording, social negotiations and cultural recovery (Glick 2018, 7). Concerning the point of history, Glick’s description and problematization of the *Nat Turner* case, in the fourth chapter is engaging and particularly incisive (Glick 2018, 119).

By looking closely into the book, Glick spans from the very period of migration of black, white, and Indigenous labourers from the south, southwest and Midwest to Southern California, to the post-Vietnam/post-Watergate era, including a coda on the 1984 Olympic games, at the threshold of a definitely new social and political order. The books’ three parts span two decades, and the chapters draw a line constantly wavering between a top-down view, driven by studio productions to a bottom-up view, driven by alternative and independent documentaries. Throughout, he discusses technological turns in cinema and television and traces a detailed history of the working relationships and overlaps in personnel among studios, independent collectives, universities, state departments and minority communities.

The Wolper production studio, discussed in the first chapter, is a significant player for the entire book. From the Kennedy Era to the 1984 Olympic Games it embodies the fundamental shift from an essentially liberal political culture, as it expresses

civil rights-era optimism and serves a crucial function in the mourning process of Kennedy’s assassination to a more conservative one, and it embodies the time frame of the book (Glick 2018, 27-33). Furthermore, it explores the crucial technological epistemological differences between TV reporting and Studio Documentaries, which the contingent geography of the city further clarifies. Glick’s second chapter pivots to *The Exiles* (1961) by Kent Mackenzie, providing a starting point for a deep investigation into how documentary helped to deconstruct and correct stereotypes about various groups of Indigenous people in America: “*The Exiles* made downtown legible, demonstrating that it was dotted with meaningful landmarks and that small groups of people were able to comfortably navigate its landscape” (Glick 2018, 53). Moreover, a case study on *The Exiles* case is useful to broadly explore the function of educational institutions, and notably UCLA, in the shaping of the independent documentary scene in L.A. In his excavation of the microhistory of films and their institutional or independent production groups, within the context of their own geographical landscapes, Glick demonstrates tireless accuracy in his use and ordering of primary sources throughout the book.

KCET’s Human Affairs department and Jesús Salvador Treviño’s Chicano documentaries are analyzed in the second part (and third chapter), where Glick reveals a key framework for making community-engaged documentaries and nonfiction series at the newly formed public television station. Glick can capitalize on recently unearthed archival films as well, such as Jan-Christopher Horak’s recent contribution: *The L.A. Rebellion* film series, as explored in *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema* (University of California Press 2015). Once again UCLA and educational structures were crucial: “Lessons about the history and theory of documentary and Third Cinema in ethno-communications encouraged students to see their films as a means for representing their communities as a form of socio-political critique” (Glick 2018, 102). The chapter open an important in-depth study on the female cultural presence too, in its discussion of Lynne Littman’s 1972 work *Womanhouse is not a Home*, and the objective to “create a space for female cultural production that could stand against a male-dominated art establishment” (Glick 2018, 93). Black cultures are

explored also through a case study of the *Wattstax* event and documentary film (*Wattstax* Mel Stuart, 1973), which prompts Glick to extricate a multi-layered “transmedia soul economy” (Glick 2018, 133).

Ultimately, the last sections of the book emphasize other minority filmmaking groups, such as the collective Visual Communications, formed in by 1970, Robert Nakamura, Eddie Wong, Duane Kubo, and Alan Ohashi in order to produce and screen documentaries about Asian-American identity. Another proof of the extremely wide spectrum of cultural and socio-political implications that Glick is able to clear and narrate, while reconstructing the L.A. Documentary scene in this important book. Even while following a linear chronological path, he is able to guide the reader through an intricate network of intertwined relations, institutions and commercial interests, in a city that “was seen as a trailblazer in the entertainment, manufacturing, petroleum, and defence industries,” discussing a very vast array of films, extracting and decrypting from them (with the help to very detailed descriptions too) a complex sense of history, that encompass recording of present events, collective memories, mourning of the past, social recovery functions, and the building of the future (Glick 2018, 22). This way, the book makes constantly explode its apparent linear perspective into intricate stratifications of cultures, times and spaces. The concluding chapter, opens further developments, rather than making a simple closure, by launching Los Angeles from its geographical specificity to its worldwide presence in a global perspective.

As a book of (media) history, *Los Angeles Documentary and the Production of Public History, 1958-1977* discloses a method that emphasizes the function and effectiveness of crossing geographical borders (a spatial anxiety, If I may say), and conceptions of time—revealed in the historiographical structure of the book—that see chronology and temporality moulded by the space and geography and the vibrating of expansions, contractions, and non-linear deviations (a temporal anxiety). It sheds a renovated and original light on the history of the twentieth century media culture(s) of L.A., and in the same way it reveals the potentialities of meticulous discursive excavations into the non-fiction realm, reversing film canons and stressing social and cultural functions that

make this book be a relevant one in the field of film history, certainly, but in the field of contemporary history at large too: it is a passionate interrogation of moving image as a source of historiography and a productive factor of history.

If a weakness can be found—or at least a curiosity that is left partially unanswered, it is a deeper and more detailed unearthing of “where the money came from” and how it circulated within the city’s documentary scene(s). The author is often keen in tracking down the macro-picture of the commercial and finance system of the media, especially in his discussion of “Roots as Media event” (Glick 2018, 165). He often represents this information through extremely useful graphics and maps, and this is undeniably a strength, but then, when he is inside the microscopic focus of a single film, he is more interested—understandably—in the cultural and socio-political evidences of its narrative and communication strategies (Glick 2018, 20-24). Where available, production papers and financial plans could have further enriched his already very detailed picture and maybe shed a light on additional overlapping trends in the financial system. A very minor shortcoming—if it is so—in this impressive research.

References

- Allyson Nadia Field, Horak, Jan-Christopher and Jacqueline Namura Stewart, eds. 2015. *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Horak, Jan-Christopher, ed. 1995. *Lovers of Cinema. The First American Film Avant-garde 1919-1945*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- James, David E., and Adam Hyman, eds. 2015. *Alternative Projections: Experimental Film in Los Angeles, 1945-1980*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- James, David E. 2005. *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press.