The Cinema of Michael Winterbottom, Deborah Allison (2013)
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About half-way through *The Cinema of Michael Winterbottom*, Deborah Allison cites Annette Kuhn's observation that it is both more interesting and more important to discuss what film genres *do* than what they *are* (116). As part of the Genre Film Auteurs series, one of the principle objectives of Allison's book is to investigate what it is that genre *does* in the work of Michael Winterbottom, one of the most extraordinarily prolific and controversial of contemporary British filmmakers. Thus, in each of the book's eight chapters, Allison sets out to use genre as a 'as a critical tool' (x), focusing her attention on one of the director's films and the variety of ways in which its dominant genre identity is constructed, inflected and, more often than not, inverted. In this way, despite a focus that is narrower than some auteur studies, Allison successfully unearths a variety of themes and characteristics that run throughout Winterbottom's eclectic oeuvre.

After a brief introduction setting out these objectives and their parameters, the first chapter begins with an investigation of *Butterly Kiss* (1995) and its relationship to the road movie. This is the earliest film discussed in the fifteen years of Winterbottom's output covered in the book, and Allison's discussion of it provides a useful foundation for the other chapters. Indeed, each chapter follows a broadly similar framework, beginning with a short plot synopsis before exploring each film in relation to its respective genre/s, discussing the ways in which the films draw on and challenge established genre codes and convention. Thus *Jude* (1996) is discussed as a heritage film, *Welcome to Sarajevo* (1997) as war cinema, *Wonderland* (1999) as social realism, *The Claim* (2000) as a western, *Code 46* (2003) as science fiction, *The Road to Guantanamo* (2006) as docudrama and *The Killer Inside Me* (2010) as neo-noir. As Allison shows, Winterbottom's handling of genre convention and his manipulation of audience expectation is a key characteristic of his filmmaking, and such a generically diverse body of work helps the director consistently provoke fresh engagements with readily identifiable forms (and avoid repetition when working on a number of projects in quick succession).

However, while the relationship between the films, their genre identities and Winterbottom's authorial style is the primary concern of each chapter, Allison acknowledges the limitations of such a narrow approach and situates her discussion in relation to a range of other factors that shape the creative process. Understanding that process as a collective endeavour, for instance, sees Allison discuss Winterbottom's relationships with producer Andrew Eaton – with whom Winterbottom co-founded the production company, Revolution Films, in 1994 – and writer Frank Cottrell Boyce. As Allison shows, these creative partnerships shape the films as much as the social, economic and political contexts of their making. So, the £25 million budget for *The Claim*, drawn from multiple (and nervous) investors, informs the analysis of the flawed film's relationship to the western genre as much as the religious views of Winterbottom and Cottrell Boyce (atheist and Catholic, respectively). Each chapter also closes with an overview of the critical reception of the film. Though often peripheral to Allison's core argument and perhaps derived more from her background as a film programmer than from any methodological acumen, this does help connect her arguments to the wider context in which Winterbottom's work is received and provides further space in which the film in question can be situated among the other titles in his oeuvre.

Indeed, Allison is keenly aware that her choice of films is limited to less than a quarter of the director's total output, and that she focuses only those films with the most distinct genre identities. This excludes discussion of films like *9 Songs* (2004) or *A Cock and Bull Story* (2006) which, precisely because they defy straightforward genre categorisation, would make for fascinating counterpoints to the others. It also means that the emergence of a political consciousness in Winterbottom's work is limited to a discussion of *Welcome to Sarajevo* and *The Road to*

Guantanamo, while *In This World* (2002), *A Mighty Heart* (2007) and *The Shock Doctrine* (2009) – the latter his most oppositional work to date – are barely mentioned.

However, these limitations are less problematic than the agency Allison assigns to the genres of those films she does discuss. From *Butterfly Kiss* and *The Claim* to, most notoriously, *The Killer Inside Me*, Winterbottom has drawn accusations of misogyny alongside his well documented desire to offend and unsettle his audiences. For the most part the debates surrounding these accusations are handled intelligently, and Allison is rightly critical of reactionary claims that Winterbottom necessarily shares his protagonists' attitudes. Yet all too often the director is also excused of *responsibility* for the sexism and other anti-social stereotypes that occasionally feature in his work, which are frequently treated as intractable aspects of the genres themselves. Given that Winterbottom's ability to invert and challenge genre convention is demonstrated so clearly throughout the book, this claim feels a trifle too simplistic. Still, this is a minor criticism of what is otherwise an eloquent and thoroughly informed account of Winterbottom's astonishingly varied body of work, and the distinctive qualities that hold it together.

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