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BERLIN

The sound of silents: is it time to revive the 'city symphony' film genre?

www.theguardian.com Alex Barrett - Fri 26 Sep 2014

In the early 1920s, when the silent era of film-making was still in full swing, the genre of the city symphony emerged. Exactly what constitutes a city symphony is somewhat fluid, but broadly speaking it can be defined as a poetic, experimental documentary that presents a portrait of daily life within a city while attempting to capture something of the city's spirit.

More specifically, the term refers to films that are influenced by the form and structure of a musical symphony, although it is debatable as to how many of the films labelled as city symphonies conform to this pattern. Indeed, the city symphony tag is so slippery that it's questionable whether even its most famous example – Man with a Movie Camera (1929) – is a true city symphony.

Movie Camera is famous for presenting a dazzling portrayal of urban city life, but when considered as part of the genre, the film is a cheat: it was actually shot in three different Ukrainian cities (Odessa, Kharkiv and Kiev) so, while as a piece of film-making it is magnificent (it was recently voted the greatest documentary of all time by Sight & Sound), it is arguable that the film's concoction of a Ukrainian super-city robs us of one of the greatest joys of the genre: that of seeing a specific city as it was.

When seen today, films like Études sur Paris (1928) and Berlin: Symphony of a Great City (1927) offer us fascinating glimpses not only of their eponymous cities, but also of the time in which they were made. As the decades pass, city symphonies only increase in interest, rising above their initial existence as breath-taking avant garde experiments to the level of vitally important cultural documents. This is even more the case with a film like Berlin, which holds increased poignancy given that much of the city was subsequently destroyed during the second world war.

Seen together, the Berlin and Paris films make for an interesting comparison. There's an undeniable chain of influence among many of the city symphonies, and close study reveals similarities and differences of interest. For instance, both Berlin and Paris begin by travelling from the outskirts to the centre of their respective cities: Berlin with a masterful montage of a train hurtling towards the centre, Paris with a more leisurely trip on a barge. The question that arises, of course, is this: does the difference say more about the cities themselves, or about the individual aesthetics of the film-maker? Is Paris, in fact, a more leisurely city than Berlin?

Berlin also shares a structural similarity with Movie Camera, in that both films are ostensibly day-in-the-life portraits, traversing the time from dusk to dawn, and showing citizens at work and at play. In contrast to the movement with which Berlin and Paris begin, Movie Camera opens in an empty cinema in which a film within the film will soon play. The cinema opening provides a reflexive framework to which director Dziga Vertov and his unsung wife and editor, Yelizaveta Svilova, will return throughout (at one point we even see Svilova editing the film we are watching).

Indeed, the film begins with a declaration that it is "an experimentation in the cinematic communication of visual phenomena", and it can therefore be seen as much as an attempt to redefine the language of cinema as to present a portrait of a city – and it is perhaps the form as much as the content that has led to its enduring popularity. Berlin is likewise inventive in form, perhaps no surprise given that its director, Walter Ruttmann, had a background not in documentaries but in the German avant garde.

It is the two main aspects of the city symphony – the historical importance and the playfulness of form – that make them so fresh and appealing, even after all these years. It is also these two elements that I will be attempting to capture in my own silent city symphony, London Symphony, which is currently crowdfunding. The film will be a poetic journey through the capital, with the aim of exploring and celebrating London's huge diversity of culture and religion, while also creating an important record of the city as it stands today (the film will be shot in over 200 locations).

In a world dominated by commercial films, I feel it is important to keep the medium of cinema alive by making films of this kind because, however we wish to define city symphonies, they offer us vital and vivid records of life gone by.

Rome, Open City: what makes a classic?

Roberto Rossellini's Rome, Open City has a formidable reputation as a milestone in cinema. But watching such powerful storytelling today reminds Geoff Andrew why some films become classics in the first place.

Geoff Andrew Updated: 24 April 2019 www.bfi.org.uk

A classic is called a classic for a reason. I have no truck with that oft-debated oxymoron, 'instant classic'. A classic, according to Wikipedia, is "an outstanding example of a particular

style, something of lasting worth or with a timeless quality." The online Oxford Dictionary, meanwhile, says that a classic is "a work of art of recognised and established value", and for the adjectival use of the word proffers "judged over a period of time to be of the highest quality and outstanding of its kind".

Put simply, a classic must have stood the test of time. The test of time is what transforms an existing excellent work or masterpiece into a classic, proving it was no flash in the pan. Which is why 'classic' is probably best understood as a double-edged term. True, the word denotes greatness, but because of that temporal endorsement, it may also sometimes seem as if there's an unfortunate connotation of old-fashioned-ness: of something solid, decent, probably very worthy, but lacking the brilliance of the brand new.

Sometimes people want flashiness, even if the pan itself turns out to be sparkling tin rather than luminescent gold. So 'classic' often commands respect, but it can't always be relied upon to arouse excitement.

All this is by way of preamble to a consideration of Roberto Rossellini's Rome, Open City (1945), a classic if ever there was one, which is now being revived by the BFI in a new 4K digital restoration. (If you will insist on the glowing allure of the brand new, here you are!)

The film is an outstanding example of the Italian neorealist movement, and its excellence was very quickly recognised. True, its initial reception in Italy was a little lukewarm – audiences there apparently preferred escapism to a hard-hitting reminder of how life had been under the Nazi Occupation – but it went down very well in America and at the Cannes Film Festival (where it won a prize), and its reputation grew thereafter. Since then, it has been regarded as one of the towering achievements not only of the Italian cinema but of filmmaking anywhere… a classic, through and through.

Which is perhaps why, when I was about to look at it again some months ago, I initially experienced just the slightest… well, not reluctance, certainly, but a spot of trepidation. I hadn't seen the film for many years, and while I was well aware of the near-miraculous circumstances of its making so soon after the Germans had left Rome, of its brilliant performances by Anna Magnani and Aldo Fabrizi as the pregnant bride-to-be and the priest caught up with the underground resistance movement, and of its hugely influential status, I did return to it wondering whether it would actually do anything more for me than inspire a cinephile's admiration.

It did do more. So much more, in fact, that I was even a little surprised by my reaction. Despite or perhaps because of the extraordinary constraints under which it was made, Rossellini's landmark movie remains considerably more than an important historical and artistic monument. It exudes a raw authenticity, a dramatic urgency and a dark, desperate power undreamed of by the vast majority of films being made now.

In so many regards, it feels as if it could have been made yesterday in one of the world's war-ravaged cities. It certainly doesn't feel like a classic: it doesn't seem especially solid, decent or worthy. It simply stands out, head and shoulders, from the movie crowd, and feels both of its time and remarkably timeless. Which is why, of course, it's a classic.

www.myfrenchlife.org

Paris as seen by the French New Wave

June 19, 2013 By Laure Van Ruymbeke

France experienced a massive cinema revolution during the 1960s. The country's post-war film industry was shaken up by a new generation of young Parisian filmmakers who called themselves the 'French New Wave'. These filmmakers offered a newer, more original and intimate perspective of the French capital.

Out of the studio and into the light

For a long time French movies had traditionally been shot in studios, resulting in Paris being represented in a reconstructed and rather conservative way. Moreover, scenes of the capital filmed during the war were not readily adaptable to the screen. Such imagery had become less palatable to the French public, who sought to escape its sombre, everyday reality.

Upon gathering in the 'Cahiers du Cinéma' (Notebooks on Cinema) editorial room, the New Wave's future filmmakers – who were, chiefly, theorists – realised how artificial such studio-shot scenes really were.

Helped by economic factors and rapidly evolving technology, these filmmakers decided to break free of the restrictions imposed on them by the era's preferred aesthetics. By now it had become possible to film city scenes by night, and thanks to new high-speed reel, they were also able to use new lightweight cameras to shoot outdoors. In 1958, Louis Malle was the first director to try out these new technologies during the filming of 'Elevator to the Gallows'.

This movie was followed by a series of experimental films which captured the turmoil occurring in the French capital, giving the cinema-goer a realistic impression of the city. These movies showed scenes that reflected a reality which were not retouched, dramatised or false.

The French capital as a background

The New Wave showed Paris from an alternative angle. The filmmaker walked the streets of the French capital with his camera on his shoulder, following the actors. The filmmakers' determination to find an authentic perspective led to the creation of a documentary-style approach to the representation of places, people and everything in front of the camera lens.

In Jean-Luc Godard's 'Breathless', Paris is depicted as if in a news report. The famed director's preference for realism was evidenced by a multitude of shots of busy Parisian streets, buildings, coffee shops and historical monuments.

The soundtrack perfectly relays the outdoor cacophony of horns, engines, brakes, police sirens and other noises typical of a large city. We become submerged in a new world – a modern world in which the city is revealed to us.

Paris was again immortalised by the camera in Rivette's 'Paris Belongs to Us', which reveals diverse aspects and districts of the French capital.

In the same vein, Eric Rohmer's first movie 'The Sign of Leo' features a map of Paris as the film's central motif where all of its plots begin and end.

Paris as a home town

François Truffaut's 'The 400 Blows' is allows us to experience the everyday reality of life in Paris. The film is centred on Antoine Doinel, who, together with his friend René, plays truant and passes his days by walking the city, reading and going to the cinema.

In this film, Truffaut presents a touching and idealised version of Paris which serves as the backdrop to the life of the film's hero, played by Jean-Pierre Léaud. Imbuing the film with authenticity, the director portrays Paris as a home town in a loyal and familiar way, affirming the city's charm.

In Agnes Varda's 'Cléo from 5 to 7', tiny details of Parisian life are experienced from the point of view of a young Parisian girl.

Ironically, the last phase of the first wave of this burgeoning movement was marked by a 1965 collaborative project by six directors, entitled 'Six in Paris'.

Filmmakers Claude Chabrol, Jean Douchet, Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Daniel Pollet, Eric Rohmer and Jean Rouch drew on the origins of the New Wave, to offer a personal point of view of the French capital captured in six short films – set, of course against an authentic backdrop.

www.acmi.net.au

Writer Nick Bugeja explains why Manhattan is Woody Allen at his best.

Woody Allen has crafted a long, successful career as a writer-director-actor. He's directed 47 films so far, and that number looks to increase at one per year until he dies. It could be said that Allen is an embodiment of the cinema, and his name forever tied to its successes. His 70s and 80s films in particular carried an unshakeably confident sense of authorship that has meant his films are as aesthetically and thematically recognisable as those of his idols, Kurosawa and Bergman (in Manhattan, Allen's Isaac Davis is quick to rebuke Diane Keaton's Mary when she claims Bergman is overrated).

So it's to be expected that there are disputes over what is Allen's definitive film. By 'definitive', I don't mean best, or most entertaining. I mean the film that is most quintessentially Allenian. Some might say Annie Hall while other make the case for Crimes and Misdemeanours. For me it's Manhattan, Woody Allen's romantic but pensive take on love and relationships in his city, New York.

Manhattan opens in breathtaking style: we are immediately blessed with shots of the finest sights of New York- the city skyline, the Queensboro bridge, the interior of the Guggenheim. Allen's voiceover as Isaac embeds itself into the images, and we get the sense that it is Allen speaking, not Isaac. Or perhaps that Isaac and Allen are indivisible from one another. Allen's nasally voice labours over each word it emits, constantly revising itself in order to find the right words to describe his relationship to New York City. He begins swept up in his love for it ('He adored New York City, he idolised it all out of proportion') and finds his way to a bitter encapsulation of it ('He adored New York City, although to him it was a metaphor for the decay of contemporary society'). Allen's final summation of the city is a more circumspect, balanced one: 'He was as tough and romantic as the city he loved'. Gershwin's 'Rhapsody in Blue' rhythmically plays alongside Allen's ramblings, which contributes another

layer to the image that is being conjured. It is clear that we are seeing and hearing New York through Allen's perspective.

The cinematography of the opening scene sets Manhattan up well, establishing the immersive portrait that Allen so obviously desires. Importantly, Gordon Willis' cinematography maintains that assured handle over the images he presents, both in the grandiose shots of the city and in the more intimate, closed-off spaces of bedrooms, apartment lobbies and cramped restaurants. Willis' ability to shift from capturing the bigness of the city to the microcosms of Isaac and his companions talking in confined rooms is remarkable. This is best evidenced in the fact that the opening sequence of New York landmarks is followed by a scene with Isaac, Tracy (Mariel Hemingway) and Yale (Michael Murphy) and Emily (Anne Byrne) having dinner together in a small restaurant. Without having uttered a word, Willis' cinematography is able to convey one of Allen's foremost ideas: that New York is a melting pot for human encounters and romantic relationships.

It would be remiss not to mention the rich black-and-white image of Manhattan itself. It seems to both harken back to the golden days of New York, while also affording it a prominence and timelessness that no other film has done.

Though the themes inherent within Manhattan feel specifically Allenian, they are also timeless and ubiquitous. It's just that Allen has been the best at dealing with them. Allen has always thrived in exploring the fraught yet compelling nature of romantic relationships, and Manhattan is the most layered manifestation of this.

At the beginning of the film Isaac is with 17-year-old Tracy. Yale is married to Emily but having an affair with Mary. Isaac is unsure about whether he should be in a relationship with a girl that age at all, but sure the relationship will soon expire. During his verbal squabbles about Tracy and him, we cannot escape the thought that Isaac is trying to tarnish the relationship. Perhaps, he's scared of Tracy leaving him for a younger, more vital man. Isaac is constantly telling Tracy not to get too attached to him, but it could be a kind of defense mechanism. If Tracy leaves him, he can chalk it up to his own encouragement. After all, women have left him before. Isaac's ex-wife, Jill (Meryl Streep) left him for another woman.

Like Isaac, both Yale and Mary are uncertain about their relationship. Both profess to love each other, but remain sceptical about the longevity of their connection. It is only after Yale and Mary parting ways that Yale realises that she is an indispensable part of his life. This is of course a problem, because in the interim, Isaac and Mary have begun dating. For Allen, this mess is the defining feature of relationships. Humans cannot repress what they feel for others, even if it means discarding all sense of order in the process.

At the same time, Manhattan is more critical of the retrospectivity and petulance of the relationships in the film. It seems that both Isaac and Yale only wake up to their romantic realities once they have ended. Their tendencies to remember and idealise the past is damaging, and destined to lead down a path of loss and dysfunction. Similarly, Isaac's attempt to win back Tracy is embellished with a childish insecurity. He wants her back because he has lost Mary. Tracy is only an adolescent, and Isaac sees her as a resort where he can have power. What Yale and Isaac both share in common is a desire for control, something they cannot have with Mary, an intelligent, extroverted and volatile woman.

Manhattan, though, is far from bleak. It is laced with Allen's acerbic wit, and constantly remembers to satirise the turbulence of modern relationships. Even though Isaac's attempts to drive Jill's lover over come from a place of emotion, Allen's execution of the line 'I tried to run her off the road' could not be funnier. Even in the most inappropriate of moments, Allen's Isaac cannot help but take refuge in comedy. It is as though smart one-liners and jokes are Isaac's default state, a place in which he is protected from the harshness of the endeavours of love.

Manhattan represents Allen at his most self-examining and romantic. It melds three of his greatest fascinations: Jazz, New York, and romance. It is very rare in film that a director can explore the spectrum of love and romance, but Allen does and in the process augments Manhattan's truthfulness. Its ending is focused on the undying optimism we must have if we are to continue search for completeness, and what better place to find that than in New York City.

London Can Take It (1940)

www.screenonline.org.uk

Directed by Harry Watt Humphrey Jennings

London/Britain Can Take It! is the most renowned cinematic representation of the resilient heroism of ordinary Londoners during the early days of the Blitz. Structurally, the film adheres to an established documentary format: approximately 24 hours in the life of a city, albeit at a decisive moment in that city's history. The typical day begins in the late afternoon as people leave work. They prepare for and respond to a night-time air raid, then carry on undaunted next morning. Extracts from the film, which is full of images whose resonance has been amplified by their now mythic historical context, have frequently been incorporated into later documentaries about the Second World War.

The initial version, London Can Take It!, met with considerable success in the USA, where there was already a body of opinion sympathetic to Britain's beleaguered position. Iconic

images such as St Paul's Cathedral, the Palace of Westminster and the royal family provided American audiences with immediate points of visual recognition. In Britain, privileging London was seen as potentially counterproductive. The Ministry of Information (MOI) Films Division press release accompanying Britain Can Take It!, a slightly shorter version for UK distribution with some amended commentary, insisted that "the film is representative of what is happening in every other British city and town, where resistance to the intense aerial attack and powers of endurance are every bit as heroic".

American journalist Quentin Reynolds was vital to London/Britain Can Take It!'s success. The powerfully intimate tone of Reynolds' voiceover commentary was reportedly achieved by him speaking quietly into a microphone placed unusually close to his mouth. His delivery combines hard-boiled admiration for Londoners, sardonic humour, and cool stoicism. Following the lead of British journalists such as Tom Wintringham and broadcasters such as JB Priestley, Reynolds says that all classes, whether office or market workers, are in this together, thereby contributing to an emergent 'people's war' discourse. Historical British resistance to invasion is also invoked in the archaic phrasing "the nightly siege of London". When Reynolds says "these are not Hollywood sound effects", prior to dramatic bombing and anti-aircraft gun sounds, and images of alternately pitch black and explosively illuminated night sky, he asserts British documentary's claim to authenticity compared to fiction films. At the same time, he implies that British documentary had reached a point where it could, in its own way, be as emotionally intense as Hollywood.

Martin Stollery

www.glassofvenice.com

5 Great Movies Filmed In Venice That You Should See

Venice is a wonderfully scenic city, rich with dramatic architecture and a unique culture, a favorite of famous artists and writers, and a place that is unbelievably picturesque and photogenic. For this reason, since the advent of cinema many production companies have chosen the city as a stunning backdrop for a variety of films, and audiences worldwide are able to enjoy the beauty of Venice unfolding alongside dynamic story lines from the comfort of their homes.

The Tourist

'The Tourist' is a thrilling movie, a mix of romance, suspense, and thriller, starring both Angelina Jolie and Johnny Depp. The film revolves around an American tourist wonderfully portrayed by Johnny Depp, who meets gorgeous Elise played by Angelina Jolie, on a trip to Venice. Frank is heartbroken, and his misery starkly contrasts the beauty of Venice. Meanwhile, Elise deliberately crosses paths with Frank in a mysterious turn of events, that plays out across the narrow alleyways and dark corners of this unique city that is romantic and hauntingly dramatic at once.

The Tourist takes full advantage of all that Venice has to offer. Audiences will grab onto their seats during high-energy boat chases across the canals, delight in the gorgeous actors playing characters crisscrossing the streets of the small city, and enjoy the rare inside looks the interior of Venetian palaces that shine in all their former glory. The movie is set in modern times, but the elegant complexity of the storyline pays tribute to an opulent Venice of the past. This is a must see for movie fans, lovers of Venice and those who value beautiful backdrops to excellent stories.

Death in Venice

Those looking to explore Venice through the eyes of an acclaimed, 1970s Italian director Luchino Visconti will be captivated by the drama and intensity of 'Death In Venice'. This Italian-French film stars Dirk Bogarde, and explores the deep corners of a human soul by picturing inner struggles of a man on a visit to Venice who becomes infatuated with a Polish teenager, although he doesn't intend to involve himself with the young man in any way.

The movie takes a historical look at Venice, and portrays a seemingly romantic city hiding a dark secret of cholera epidemic. As the main character is a musician in this movie, audiences are not only treated to the hauntingly beautiful scenes of Venice, but also to great music by Gustav Mahler that accentuates the flow of the plot and the emotional upheavals of the main character. This is drama at its best that offers a taste of Italy, and an insightful look at the difficult emotional dilemmas that come from human emotions and experiences.

Bread and Tulips

Released in the year 2000, this wonderful Italian movie depicts Venice in all its romantic beauty. The film centers around Licia Maglietta's character Rosalba, a small-town housewife who goes on a long-awaited tour of Italy with her family, only to be forgotten at a highway rest stop while the tour bus departs with her family on board. Rosalba subsequently decides to live her dream and pursue a new life in Venice.

Rosalba finds love and happiness in Venice, and the director Silvio Soldini does an excellent job of portraying how romantic the city of Venice can truly be. The film was a big hit with

Italian and international audiences alike upon its release and earned 9 David di Donatello awards in 2000. Without a doubt, this life-affirming movie will encourage many viewers to visit the city for a romantic occasion if possible. At the very least it will allow you to live vicariously through the characters as they embark on their own romantic journeys that lead to self-discovery and an opportunity to experience long-dormant genuine feelings.

Only You

Starring a stunning duo of Robert Downey Jr. and Marisa Tomei, 'Only You' is a Hollywood charmer with a Venetian backdrop. This movie, however, packs a number of gorgeous Italian locales as it takes viewers on a trip throughout Italy- which allows audiences to get a glimpse of all the glamour Italy has to offer from famous hotel Danieli in Venice to gorgeous playground of the rich hotel La Sirenuse in Positano. It also features scenes shot in Rome and the countryside for an unforgettable and romantic look at Italian 'La Dolce Vita'.

The movie centers around Faith (Marisa Tomei) who at a young age is foretold that she will marry a man named Damon Bradley. Just before marrying another man, she discovers that a 'Damon Bradley' is currently vacationing in Italy. Convinced that her fate lies with this Damon Bradley, Faith drops everything and travels to Venice to pursue her fate. The movie beautifully combines serendipity, a little mystery and a lot of romance into one entertaining package.

Merchant of Venice

This 2004 interpretation of the Shakespearean classic is, of course, set in Venice. The movie provides historical accuracy, and a wonderfully retrospective look at 16th century Venice that is a rich quilt of traditions and customs of Catholic, Jewish, and uniquely Venetian origin.

The Merchant of Venice tackles the complexities of human relationships, honor, business, and romance, as well as unique cultural and historic aspects of Jewish ghetto life in Venice. This is a beautiful rendition of a timeless play, and one that was welcomed by film critics at its release, and remains current to this day. The scenes of Venice are stunning, and audiences will enjoy a glimpse into historical buildings and palatial spaces.

The Prime Of Miss Jean Brodie | 1969

DIRECTOR | Ronald Neame

CAST | Maggie Smith, Robert Stephens, Celia Johnson, Gordon Jackson, Pamela Franklin

Edinburgh provides most of the locations as Maggie Smith takes over from Vanessa Redgrave (who originally played Brodie on stage to great acclaim) in the film of Muriel Spark's Thirties-set novel, and Rod McKuen growls possibly the least appropriate title song ever.

As the undoubtedly charismatic but woefully misguided teacher Miss Brodie leads her charges through the city, there's a backdrop of real Edinburgh locations (minus TV aerials, which had to be physically removed in those distant pre-digital times), including the Vennel, the flight of steps leading down to Grassmarket, with its view across to Edinburgh Castle.

From here, they stroll through Greyfriars Kirkyard – yes, where Bobby the terrier supposedly spent 14 years guarding his master's grave, and last resting place of 'the Great' William McGonagall, legendary 'worst poet in the English language'.

The graveyard also has a fine view to the studio of Jean's rakish sometime-lover, artist Teddy Lloyd (Robert Stephens) who, on glimpsing her, suddenly decides to take a walk himself.

It's mightily convenient for him to sprint out of the house, across Candlemaker Row and up the churchyard steps where he can bump 'unexpectedly' into Jean.

Teddy Lloyd's home is the grand Mary Tudor house at 1 Candlemaker Row, on the corner of Merchant Street.

A little diversion here for Potterheads and JK Rowling fans: opposite this house is 'Rowling's window', the rear of the cafe where the Harry Potter books were written, which looks out onto the churchyard.

In fact, in Greyfriars Churchyard you can find, with a bit of difficulty, the memorial headstone to 'Thomas Riddell' whose name, at least, went on to give him posthumous fame – if not notoriety.

Miss Brodie lives in the Victorian house at 5 Admiral Terrace, opposite Lothian Regional Council Office (carefully avoided by the camera), to the southwest of the city centre.

Although interiors were built in the studio, the entrance to 'Marcia Blaine School' was, then, the Donaldson School for Deaf and Dumb Children, which is now part of Edinburgh Academy, 54 Henderson Row to the north of the city.

'Cramond', the estate to which Miss Brodie retreats at weekends, is Barnbougle Castle on the Firth of Forth, just a few miles west of Edinburgh. Part of the Dalmeny Estate, it's home to the Earl and Countess of Roseberry.

Ali Soozandeh: tackling the taboos of setting a film in Tehran

To shoot 'Tehran Taboo', a story of sex and corruption in a theocratic society, the director chose rotoscope animation. 'A city cannot be faked. It always has its own look,' he says

Thu, Oct 4, 2018, Donald Clarke www.irishtimes.com/culture

Just as Bergman once gave arthouse cinemagoers an image of Stockholm and Ozu gave the same punters a notion of Tokyo, the many great Iranian film-makers who emerged over the last three decades have offered us a take on busy, diverse Tehran. Yet we've seen little of the city depicted in Ali Soozandeh's slick, attractive, often disturbing Tehran Taboo (the title is apposite).

We begin with a sex worker bringing her son to a trick and, while she performs oral sex in a car, hearing the hypocritical john express disgust at the sight of his daughter holding hands with her boyfriend in public. Another subplot concerns a musician who must help a woman medically "reconstruct" her virginity after a one-night stand. Elsewhere in the same neighbourhood, a man prohibits his wife from taking a job.

I wonder if Soozandeh, who has lived in Germany for over 20 years, was actively trying to reveal hidden secrets about his home country.

Tehran is 14 to 16 million people. Depending where you are, you find a very different environment

"Not at all. I just wanted to make the story work," he tells me. "I wanted to find answers to questions I had. It's important to see the film as a fiction. It takes place in Tehran. But it could take place in many countries. Yes, it takes place in a real city, but I didn't want to describe a society."

Yet the pressures on women in particular will seem strange to most western viewers.

"Tehran is 14 to 16 million people," he says. "Depending where you are, you find a very different environment. North of Tehran women have much less of these problems. In the South of Tehran it is much more conservative."

Raised in Shiraz, Soozandeh studied art in Tehran and, after struggling with the country's cumbersome censorship laws, eventually travelled to Cologne in 1995. He soon developed a busy career in animation, shooting pop videos and segments on German TV. He was thus

well qualified to wrestle with the rotoscoping techniques – familiar from Richard Linklater films such as Waking Life and A Scanner Darkly – that bring such an otherworldly glow to Tehran Taboo. The choice was both aesthetic and practical for a picture shot thousands of miles from its setting.

"Yes, the big reason was we couldn't shoot in Tehran," he says. "There were similar places we could shoot – like Jordan – but in my opinion it would always be a fake. A city cannot be faked. It always has its own look. It has its noise. It has its feel. So we talked about animation. The images of animation are not so concrete. They leave a little space in the audience's head."

Sense of place

Tehran Taboo does indeed throb with convincing sense of place. An articulate, middle-aged fellow with (of course) immaculate English, Soozandeh insists that he's not attempting any sort of documentary. But audiences in these territories will still learn much about the culture of this populous city. We get a glimpse of the underground music scene, for instance.

"It's everyday life in Tehran," he says. "Everybody growing up in Tehran knows this scene. Fighting against these rules and finding spaces without control is part of everyday life. If you want to tell a story about everyday life you have to talk about this underground scene."

He goes on to recall how, when he first moved to Germany, he realised that the levels of corruption in Tehran – bribes pepper the characters' interaction with officialdom – would make eyes water elsewhere. That may be true, but some version of that particular dishonesty is familiar to everyone. More startling are the sequences dealing with black-market medics who, for a fee, will "restore" a women's virginity before marriage.

"In the north of Tehran you don't find that," he says. "People will not demand that a women show she is a virgin. But in the countryside and elsewhere you do find doctors who will 'reconstruct' virginity."

We can change society if we change the mindset of the people. We reach this situation through education

And not just there. This grim practice follows women as they emigrate.

"Even in Germany this happens," Ali says. "I couldn't believe it. Researching the film, I found a woman looking for virgin reconstruction within Germany. They were asking where you could find it and how much it cost. I was shocked. You find the same in Pakistani societies in the UK. The same rules apply."

He paints a grim picture and though Tehran Taboo – compiled from personal conversations, snippets overheard and online testimony – offers no obvious way out of theocratic oppression, the director is not without optimism.

“Yes, I hope that we can change society in a stable way,” he says. “The military solutions are not the best. We can change society if we change the mindset of the people. We reach this situation through education.”

Maybe his film can help. It hardly needs to be said that it will not receive distribution in Iran, but there are other ways of seeing it.

“You can buy the film on the black market,” he says cautiously. “You can download it on the internet. There are a lot of possibilities.”

Soozandeh is doing his best to be diplomatic here. On the one hand, piracy is the professional film-maker’s greatest enemy, but . . .

“Yeah, yeah. Sometimes it’s the only possibility to reach countries that have strong censorship.”

He says no more on the subject.

10 great films set in Tokyo

Gleaming, neon-lit and futuristic, Tokyo is not just one of the world’s great capitals, but also one of the great cinematic cities. Here are 10 tantalising Tokyo stories.

Jasper Sharp www.bfi.org.uk 16 August 2018

Tokyo is looked upon in awe by the rest of the world as the archetypal modern metropolis. Sprawling and chaotic, the city seethes with a boundless energy that its streets struggle to contain. To outsiders, it often appears alienating, perplexing and impenetrable. Its unique combination of exotic ‘otherness’ and technological progressiveness, and the overwhelming assault of neon lighting and tinny, otherworldly electronic street sounds make it appear, at times, completely divorced from nature.

As well as serving as an inspiring model of progress and mechanical efficiency, the city has provided fuel for numerous dystopian projections in international cinema, including the five-minute sequence of its concrete and chrome cityscape shot through the front windshield of a moving vehicle in Andrei Tarkovsky's Solaris (1972) and its deployment as a template for the bleak Los Angeles of the future in Ridley Scott's Blade Runner (1982). More recently, it's been recreated as both hedonistic theme park and nightmarish dreamscape in works including Kill Bill: Volume 1 (2003), The Grudge (2004), The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift (2006) and Enter the Void (2009).

Formerly known as Edo, Tokyo's population exploded during the 16th century to make it the largest urban centre in the word. Despite its role as the cultural and political centre of Japan, it only officially achieved capital-city status with the beginning of the Meiji era in 1868. The city has seen some remarkable changes since then. Twice during the past century it found itself flattened: first by the 1923 Kanto earthquake, and next in the Allied firebombing raids of 1945. Both times it was reconstructed to the near exact same street plans that have existed since the Edo era. Following the construction of Tokyo Tower in 1958, its majestic international profile has been defined by its gleaming skyscrapers and futuristic redevelopments, linked by the arterial spread of one of the world's most efficient public transport systems.

Abbas Kiarostami's Like Someone in Love, a portrait of a relationship between a retired professor and a young woman paying her way through university by moonlighting as a high-class prostitute, is but one recent attempt to piece together the perplexing puzzle the city presents.

There are no end of places to begin in any overview of films that have attempted to interpret, represent and explore the changing face of this most dynamic of world capitals. Let's journey through 10 of the most emblematic…

Stray Dog (1949) Director Akira Kurosawa

Akira Kurosawa's gritty film noir about a police officer on the trail of the homicidal killer who has pickpocketed his pistol is among the director's finest, and displays the same deft hand in invoking the lawlessness and chaos of the rubble-strewn aftermath of the war that Carol Reed brought to Vienna in The Third Man the same year.

The heavy use of location shooting makes this an invaluable document of the pockmarked city during the occupation. Most impressive is how Kurosawa manages to build tension by capturing Tokyo's sweaty, stifling heat and humidity during the summer months. Bodies

glisten with sweat, as its characters continually fan themselves and mop their brows, until the drama climaxes in a stormy downpour.

Stray Dog has inspired a number of remakes and homages, including Azuma Morisaki's Nora inu in 1973, and Johnny To's Hong Kong-set PTU in 2003. The most intriguing is Shinji Aoyama's An Obsession (1997), which reworks the premise to fit the paranoiac pre-millennial cultural climate of the wake of the 1995 Sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway by the renegade Aum sect. Aoyama's film features a suicidal cult member suffering from congenital leukaemia as the listless police officer protagonist's dark nemesis.

Tokyo Story (1953) Director Yasujiro Ozu

Occupying the top spot in Kinema Junpo's 2009 poll of Japanese critics and coming in at number three in the 2012 Sight & Sound poll, Yasujiro Ozu's timeless tale of intergenerational conflict and miscomprehension offers far more than just a trip down memory lane for modern viewers.

The story, of an aged couple who travel up from the countryside to visit their children only to find them so wrapped up in their daily lives that they have no time for them, is classic Ozu home drama. What makes this one stand out from other works by the director in the 1950s is his deployment of the capital, still smarting after destruction wreaked by the Allied bombings less than 10 years earlier but in the process of rebuilding, to portray a city that, despite retaining its traditions and idiosyncrasies, has changed forever.

Ozu's subtle blend of nostalgic yearning, muted smiles and choked-back tears suggests that cities the world over are less defined by the physical presence of their streets and buildings than by the memories, the imaginations and the patterns of existence of their inhabitants.

Godzilla (1954) Director Ishiro Honda

The shadows of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki A-bombings loom large over Ishiro Honda's classic monster movie. However, it was the combined forces of the 1952 Japanese reissue of King Kong (1933), the release of The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms (1953) and a real-life tragedy closer to home, the Bikini Atoll incident of 1 March 1954, in which the crew of a Japanese fishing boat were exposed to radioactive fallout following US nuclear testing in the Pacific, that prompted the iconic fire-breathing giant lizard to emerge from the murky depths. (This incident also inspired Kaneto Shindo's more overtly political Lucky Dragon No. 5 in 1959).

The beast would make regular reappearances to wreak havoc on a Tokyo meticulously constructed through scale models (or on Manhattan, in Roland Emmerich's much-maligned 1998 Hollywood remake), with Honda directing eight of the 15 films in the first cycle, up to

his final as a director, Terror of Mechagodzilla (1975). The original is still by far the best, presenting a poignant allegory about the destructive power of nuclear weapons, before the series became increasingly pitched towards younger audiences.

Akira (1988) Director Katsuhiro Otomo

Pessimistic fantasies of Tokyo's imminent annihilation were very much a feature of Japan's economic bubble in the late 1980s. 1987 alone saw the release of Akio Jissoji's live-action special effects fantasy Tokyo: The Last Megalopolis and Yoshiaki Kawajiri's adult-themed anime Wicked City. In Jissoji's film, pent-up occult forces are posited as the source behind the city's destruction in the 1923 earthquake. In Wicked City, the city lies in an uneasy truce with an alternate mirror universe known as the Dark Realm, populated by demons who manifest themselves in the real world as beguiling but deadly succubi.

Akira is the best known of them all. Directed for the screen by Katsuhiro Otomo from his own phenomenally popular epic manga series, it was, at the time, Japan's most expensive animated production. Set in the run-up to the fictional Tokyo Olympics of 2019, the action unfolds in an imagined Year Zero capital rebuilt and renamed Neo-Tokyo after being razed to the ground for the third time in the 20th century at the end of World War III in 1988. The story centres upon the titular teenage tearaway as he flees from authorities who wish to harness his unique psychic powers for their own nefarious ends.

Almost single-handedly launching the anime craze in the west, Akira is a milestone highlighting the animated medium's ability to construct, in a manner that live action could never emulate convincingly, an imaginable dystopian future metropolis extrapolated from the present day, only to have it wiped out again in cataclysmic scenes of devastation.

Lost in Translation (2003) Director Sofia Coppola

Champions of Sofia Coppola's boutique-chic tale of two lonely hearts who find solace in one another's company will claim that Lost in Translation is not really about Tokyo, nor Japan, and could in fact be set anywhere. Its detractors will point to the same failure of its main characters – Scarlett Johansson's blasé college graduate who arrives in tow of her photographer husband and Bill Murray's world-weary actor in town to shoot a whiskey advert – to engage in any meaningful way with the bewildering neon jungle surrounding their hotel. Both camps have their points, although the casual racism of certain scenes and the sheer ambivalence towards the film's locale tilt the balance in favour of the latter reading.

Other films featuring young American girls who find a sense of purpose in the metropolis have managed to scratch deeper beneath the surface: Robert Allan Ackerman's Ramen Girl

(2008), featuring Brittany Murphy as the young tourist who successfully crosses the cultural divide in her quest to make a tasty bowl of noodles may have suffered from soap-opera level performances and paper-thin characterisation, but its heart was in the right place.

By far the most convincing of such fish-out-of-water dramas, however, is Fran Kuzui's Tokyo Pop (1988), starring Carrie Hamilton as a singer who turns up in Tokyo on a whim and goes on to successfully storm the Japanese charts with her newfound lover Hiro (Diamond Yukai, who plays the commercials director in Coppola's film). The film is sadly currently unavailable on any home viewing format, but is definitely long overdue a reappraisal.

Also

House of Bamboo (1955) Director Samuel Fuller

The Insect Woman (1963) Director Shohei Imamura

Funeral Parade of Roses (1969) Director Toshio Matsumoto

Adrift in Tokyo (2007) Director Satoshi Miki

Tokyo Sonata (2008) Director Kiyoshi Kurosawa

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LOS ANGELES

The film noir era is best known for the emergence of the creative style and storytelling that would define the genre. But equally important is the impact it had on the location shooting of films. When sound became a viable part of film in 1927 the studios evolved by building the large sound stages and expanded back lots so that every aspect of filmmaking could be controlled. By the mid 1930s most of the major studios had become self-sufficient film factories. Not unlike the many aircraft factories that were sprouting up throughout Southern California at the time, they were churning out films instead of airplanes. Like the industrial factories, the electricians, painters, carpenters and all the other craft members needed to keep things running would punch the time clock at the studios.

Keeping filmmaking within the confines of the studio walls also meant the studio heads could better exert their control on cost. Filming outside the studio meant extra time and increased cost. And besides, Hollywood had become quite adroit at recreating anything

they needed to sufficiently convince audiences as to what they were seeing was real. The studios did maintain their library of stock footage for use as backdrops whenever they needed, but by and large the decade of the 30s saw little location shooting among Hollywood's filmmakers. But that would change with the beginning of film noir in the early 1940s.

Filmmaking in the 1930s had become an insular process with no need to go beyond the studio walls. But by the mid 1940s it was as if all of the interesting and unique places and backdrops in and around Los Angeles had just been discovered. This newfound interest in location shooting was encouraged by local government officials as well. The Los Angeles Police Department, seeing an opportunity to bolster its image, began cooperating in a big way. Directors were allowed to shoot scenes inside police headquarters which in those days was located within the city hall. And J. Edgar Hoover was eager to help producers for a good plug. 1948's The Street With No Name was among many films given access to FBI facilities.

Noir stories were all contemporary so you didn't need special sets or costumes, the entire modern city could serve as a backdrop. The use of hard lighting and shadows in noir meant less crew and equipment was needed at a location. In the creative process of noir there would be little need for cranes and dollies. 1944's Double Indemnity would be a turning point in this evolution. Billy Wilder's generous use of location shots added a realism to the film that both audiences and critics took note of. The film was nominated for seven Academy Awards . Wilder was no doubt motivated by the limited possibilities on the Paramount studio lot in his desire to bring that realism to the film.

The major studio's divestiture of their theater chains in 1948 provided opportunities for independent producers who found contemporary crime dramas to be just the ticket in terms of cost. Find a story, hire a cast and crew and go out into the environs and shoot your film. More than 80 percent of the independently produced film noirs were made after the court ordered divesture such was the impact. Many of these turned out to be very good noirs. Of course everything was much simpler in those times. There was not the maize of bureaucracy and permits that filmmakers encounter today.

Not every studio was quick to embrace the benefits of location shooting. MGM, and to a lessor extent Warner Bros, had extensive back lots and they needed to justify them. Louis B. Mayer at MGM in particular, never grasped the evolving taste of audiences nor did he have any appreciation for the new style of film making. That made MGM one of the

laggards in the production of noirs. On the other hand, Warner Bros. certainly produced its share of noirs and most of them quite good despite the limitations of being filmed on the studio lot. But for any film noir aficionado the differences are not only apparent, but in some cases distracting.

1950's D.O.A. is an example of what location shooting did for a film. Here was a film that had an intriguing storey and good characters. However the use of locales, both in Los Angeles and San Francisco provided a realism and ambiance that could not have been achieved on the set. When watching the film the viewer is reminded at every turn the vitality of everyday life and of O'Brien's impending mortality. It's one of the elements that makes the film work. Conversely, The Big Sleep, was filmed entirely on Warner's lot. It's a classic film owing to many factors, but it has an artificial feel about it. Within noir itself there also evolved the narrative, or docudrama style of film. Films like He Walked By Night relied extensively on location backdrops to give it authenticity.

Los Angeles of the late 1940s seemed to be the right place at the right time for noir filmmakers. Raymond Chandler had already set the landscape in people's minds using Los Angeles as the backdrop in his successful detective novels. As directors soon discovered, Los Angeles offered a wealth of interesting places for noir backdrops. Everything from the art deco Union Train Station to the boat dock at Westlake Park were finding their way into noir. But no area was more appealing than Bunker Hill district.

Los Angeles was by no means the only place directors found interesting for noir, they ventured to other cities as well. San Francisco, in particular offered the unique setting of its bay, bridges and hills. San Francisco was also a short train ride from Hollywood which didn't bust the budget for producers. New York certainly was a natural for noir but it took bigger budgets which could not always be justified. Throughout the 1950s many of the noirs with New York stories were shot in Los Angeles using New York footage as a backdrop. Nevertheless, some producers managed to use New York in its entirety and their efforts paid off. The most definitive of these is Mark Hellenger's The Naked City. But this discussion is about Los Angeles, a city that defined noir. Much of that fabric is gone in the never-ending cycle of growth and renewal. But the directors of film noir who knew the shadowy back streets of Los Angeles left a visual record of an era that is no more.