

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Mohit Chandna (2021) *Spatial Boundaries, Abounding Spaces: Colonial Borders in French and Francophone Literature and Film*, Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press (Paperback) 302 pp. ISBN: 978-94-6270-274-8.

In recent years, scholarly attention has increasingly been paid to concepts of space and place in Francophone cultural production. Studies such as James S. Williams's *Space and Being in Contemporary French Cinema* (2015) and Allison Connolly's *Spaces of Creation: Transculturality and Feminine Expression in Francophone Literature* (2017) investigate how writers and film makers producing work in French engage with ideas about spatiality in unique ways to demonstrate how subjectivity is created through space. Mohit Chandna's 2021 monograph *Spatial Boundaries, Abounding Spaces: Colonial Borders in French and Francophone Literature and Film* adds something new to this discussion of space and place in the Francophone world. Unlike these previous works, the book focuses explicitly on the French colonial project. Chandna's aim is to examine the impacts of colonial practices of spatial expansion on subject formation and identity politics, and to investigate the role played by literature and film in fracturing and distorting colonial paradigms of space. To do this, he not only analyses contemporary texts and films written in our postcolonial present which offer a counter-narrative to colonial practices which reinforce spatial borders, but he also studies nineteenth-century writing in order to expose the spatial imperialism against which these contemporary Francophone writers and film makers resist.

Spatial Boundaries, Abounding Spaces explores literary works by Jules Verne, Ananda Devi, and Patrick Chamoiseau, and films by Michael Haneke. In this way, not only does the book examine cultural production from a wide temporal span, but it also engages with a range of geographical spaces, such as India, Mauritius, Martinique, and mainland France. As Chandna remarks, there is a geographical and thematic logic to the book and the way in which it is structured, in that the texts and films are connected to each other in the places they evoke. He explains:

Verne's text takes us to the colony of India, and Devi evokes modern-day India to present the woes of those displaced by French colonialism to islands like Mauritius and Martinique. Chamoiseau's work is set on the island of Martinique and negotiates Martinican identity in relation to the French nation. The very last chapter deals with a film based in Paris, the capital of the French nation and the heart of the French colonial empire. (38)

The book thus follows a coherent and well-conceived structure. Each chapter takes on a particular author or filmmaker, providing historical, political, and social context about the spaces with which they engage before offering close readings through the lens of colonial spatiality, a paradigm which explores how 'colonial spatial processes continue to shape relations of power' (27). Some chapters

focus on a single text – Chapter Four, for instance, analyses in close detail *Texaco* (1992), arguably Chamoiseau’s masterpiece for which he was awarded the Prix Goncourt in 1992. Other chapters explore a selection of works in an author’s *œuvre* which engage with the concepts of borders and space in different ways, such as the chapter on Devi’s writing. The monograph is bookended by a prologue, in which Chandna explains his approach and reasons for investigating colonial space in the works, and an epilogue which draws connections between them.

To introduce the book, Chandna incorporates an anecdote from *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours* (*Around the World in Eighty Days*), a text to which he returns in the second chapter. Chandna shows how protagonist Phileas Fogg’s adventure around the world is indicative of the ‘borders and spatial markers that deploy a blinkered colonial vision to empty the world of its peoples and cultures, reproducing it into an assemblage of rationalized spaces’ (21). He then introduces theoretical concepts of spatiality, drawing heavily on Édouard Glissant’s notion of ‘relation’ and Henri Lefebvre’s work on the connections between space, society, and lived experience. He also reflects on the intersections between geography and literature in the introduction, charting the development of literary geography – and how texts have been read spatially – from the nineteenth century to the present day. Chapter Two, ‘Around the World in Eighty (One) Days’, analyses Verne’s writing in further detail to show how later texts work within a postcolonial framework. The first section of this chapter contextualizes Verne and his work, challenges the widely-held beliefs about his relationship to geography. The second section analyses the workings of the opium economy in Verne’s writing as an early form of capitalism and shows how his texts are ‘a register of social equations’ which participate ‘in perpetuating the colonial ambitions of the colonial project’ (56).

The rest of the book is dedicated to examining how contemporary writers and film makers deconstruct these colonial ambitions. Chapter Three, ‘Dislocating the Indian Nation: Ananda Devi’s Homelands’, investigates the local and global spatial dynamics in Devi’s writing. Focusing primarily on her novels *Rue la Poudrière* (1988) and *Indian Tango* (2007) and the collection of short stories *L’Ambassadeur triste* (2015), the chapter examines the gendered dynamics of the Indian cityscape in these texts before using Glissant’s concept of ‘relation’ to better understand Devi’s refusal to define location in her writing. Chapter Four, ‘Martinique: Space, Language, Gender’, moves from analysing the immigrant’s connection with the ‘source nation’ to exploring relationships with the host country of France through an exploration of Chamoiseau’s *Texaco*. The chapter argues that the text acts as a spatial metaphor which reverts the ‘centre-periphery’ binary between Martinique and mainland France: ‘*Texaco* makes the margin the centre of our agenda and shows it to us by making the topographical space represent metaphorically the relationship between the two idioms at stake’ (159). In addition, the chapter examines connections between space, landscape, and language in the novel and undertakes a gendered reading of how structures of power and space are inscribed on the body of protagonist Marie-Sophie. The final chapter, ‘Out of Place: French Family at (Algerian) War’, marks a departure from the other chapters as it investigates hidden colonial histories associated with the Algerian War of Independence in Haneke’s award-winning film *Caché* (2005). In particular, it investigates the film’s links to the Paris massacre of October 1961, during which the French police violently attacked a peaceful demonstration of people of Algerian origin. The engagement with theories of spatiality is less clear in this chapter; rather than questioning explicitly the spatial discourse in the film, the chapter is

driven by a quest to discover how *Caché*'s cinematic techniques engage with this travesty of colonial history, elaborated to support the fiction of a French nation' (212).

One of the strengths of the book is its detailed and helpful historical, political, and cultural contextualization of each location examined in the study. In addition, Chandna demonstrates excellent close reading skills – he takes care to draw out the key themes and ideas of the novels and films while also analysing their formal and stylistic features in relation to colonial spatiality. Chapters are well structured and subheadings are used effectively to guide the reader through the diverse arguments. However, the corpus is rather unbalanced – only one film is analysed throughout the book, despite the insistence on film in the subtitle of the monograph. Furthermore, there is no discussion in this final chapter about methodological or structural differences when analysing films in comparison to literary texts. It would have been helpful for the author to have explained his approach to cinematic material at the beginning of this chapter. The book lacks an index, which also limits its usefulness as a teaching and research resource. Overall, though, this is a well-researched study of Francophone colonial and postcolonial cultural production which makes a unique contribution to scholarship. The fact that quotations are given in French and also translated into English ensures that the study is accessible to non-Francophone scholars, although it is perhaps mostly aimed at postgraduates and researchers, given the complex theoretical ideas explored in the book. Above all, *Spatial Boundaries, Abounding Spaces* shows how the French colonial project continues to shape identities and subjectivities today.

Works Cited

- Connolly, A. (2017) *Spaces of Creation: Transculturality and Feminine Expression in Francophone Literature*, Maryland: London: Lexington Books.
- Williams, J. (2015) *Space and Being in Contemporary French Cinema*, Manchester: New York: Manchester University Press.

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