

Book Review

Vicki Mayer. *Almost Hollywood, Nearly New Orleans: The Lure of the Local Film Economy*. University of California Press, 2017.

Mark Barber

In *Culture and the Public Sphere*, Jim McGuigan defines cultural policy analysis as “the clash of ideas, institutional struggles and power relations in the production and circulation of symbolic meanings” (McGuigan 1996, 1). In calling for a political specificity and institutional analysis of cultural policy, McGuigan has perhaps indirectly prompted a range of recent scholarship that engages with the relationship of cultural policy to labour, space, and political economy. In *Almost Hollywood, Nearly New Orleans*, Vicki Mayer addresses these intertwining relationships through a self-admittedly “modest” exploration of how the implementation of film tax credits in New Orleans, Louisiana, has transformed local media labour practices and urban spaces, as well as media representations of the city’s culture (Mayer 2017, 3). In doing so, Mayer’s analysis opens up the possibility for other case studies of local film economies in North America, and how they reshape our understanding and experiences of the interrelation of taxation, labour, and urban space.

Mayer’s argument necessarily rehearses the established political economic notion that neoliberal cultural policy invites broad privatization of public institutions, spaces, and industries. In theory, film tax credits—which are a popular tool used by state and provincial governments in North America to attract major Hollywood

productions—generate investment in the local economy and labour pool. Mayer provocatively questions this assumption, tying it to a supply-side economic policy that advantageously targets poorer cities in the Deep South, such as New Orleans (Mayer 2017, 2). Relying on a range of methodologies—including theories of space, political economy, and historical analysis—Mayer ultimately argues that film tax credits unevenly benefit Hollywood production companies, foster a precarious labour force, and gentrify urban space.

Among the compelling contributions Mayer offers is a historical rethinking of New Orleans’ relationship to the film industry, particularly in the early twentieth century. Chapter one details at great length the transactional history between land developers, film industry figures, and politicians, who collectively vied for a prominent local film economy in New Orleans in the early twentieth century. Mayer importantly notes that early films shot and set in Louisiana exploited the cultural stereotypes of the Creole population, as well as the state’s association with French culture. These films, in part, were produced to encourage travel to New Orleans to participate in the city’s Carnavalesque culture. Mayer uses this historical context to provide a framework for the current film tax credit system in New Orleans, particularly how it has been used to

create investment in the local tourism industry. This thoroughly researched history is useful for early film history scholars, particularly in how it situates both larger systems and key individuals as important players in the formation of early local film economies. It is also instrumental in revealing the racist histories of early film productions, and how these cultural stereotypes were exploited for economic purposes.

Chapter two explores the contemporary state of the local film economy in New Orleans. Highlighting some of the book's major claims and criticisms about film tax policy, Mayer investigates how the implementation of film tax credits in Louisiana has dramatically shaped labour, space, and the circulation of wealth. The central discussion around what Mayer calls "the reorganization of space"—though 'transformation of space' seems more appropriate—reveals how film tax credits result in the privatization of public spaces as a means to revitalize the local economy (Mayer 2017, 44). However, as Mayer descriptively outlines, much of this gentrification unevenly benefits the tourism industry, creates a contingent, precarious media labour pool, and further centralizes wealth amongst the privileged while continuing to displace minorities along intersectional lines of race and class.

This discussion of gentrification is a critical intervention into scholarship on the phenomenology of space in New Orleans. Mayer rightly takes issue with scholars who have problematically framed the Disneyfication of space in New Orleans as resisting the dominant forces of imperialism by prominently representing local cultures (Mayer 2017, 50, 59). The creation of film tax credits is directly related to the creation of spaces in New Orleans. These spaces have been created or re-created, per Mayer, to foster an experience of the city that is historically related to early stereotypical views of New Orleans as exotic, magical, and hedonistic. Mayer luminously reveals how these spaces conflict with the quotidian experience of actual, marginalized New Orleanians outside of the touristic neighborhoods, and how it has dramatically reduced their mobility as urban subjects. The conclusions Mayer ultimately draws in chapter two are in

line with many arguments made about neoliberal alienation, but they present the devastating case that film tax credits foster inequalities and further discrimination against those who are in desperate need of financial aid.

The final chapter employs an ethnographic/reception studies lens to examine how HBO's *Treme* (2010–2013)—a television series that was filmed and set in New Orleans—has been experienced by the local community. Mayer provides a necessary platform for marginalized subjects to speak about their own experiences with both the show and the local film economy. This chapter concludes that while many subjects responded positively to the show and its role in making the plight of marginalized New Orleanians visible, HBO still exploited local contingent labour for an unequal financial gain under the guise of philanthropy.

One of the few shortcomings of Mayer's work is an appropriation of a trend in the humanities to use the term 'archive' metaphorically to explain how media texts represent history. Chapter three devotes significant space to framing *Treme* as an "archive of cultural contexts" (Mayer 2017, 74). Mayer suggests that the series "indexes" local cultural and spatial details with which the New Orleans community identifies (Mayer 2017, 74). While Mayer's use of the archive as a theoretical and metaphorical device assists in understanding the archive's affective properties, more direct engagement is needed with the actual, frequently imperialist role that archival institutions play in the formation and preservation of historical narratives. In this sense, framing the viewer as an 'archival researcher' who closely examines the show for cultural details—as well as factual inconsistencies—contradicts one of the book's central aims: to address colonial representations of New Orleans in the media (Mayer 2017, 75-76).

Overall, Mayer offers compelling evidence for rethinking the material benefits of film tax credits. Using New Orleans as a case study is especially conducive towards understanding the effects of neoliberal cultural policy on the most marginalized areas of North America. Importantly, Mayer's focus on intersections of race

and class provide the necessary framework for thinking about how other local film economies in burgeoning North American cities such as Toronto, Atlanta, and Vancouver have dispossessed underprivileged communities. To that end, Mayer's book offers a cautionary tale about the political embrace of an entrepreneurial film industry and its cultural, political, and economic effects.

References

- Mayer, Vicki. 2017. *Almost Hollywood, Nearly New Orleans: The Lure of the Local Film Economy*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- McGuigan, Jim. 1996. *Culture and the Public Sphere*. London and New York: Routledge.