

Chapter 27

Landscape in Film

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Introduction: Geographies of Cinema

Although films have long performed a pedagogical function within geographical studies, anthropology, and area studies, it is only recently that the cinema has itself become the focus of systematic study within these fields. The reason for this neglect, as Jacqueline Burgess and John Gold observed some time ago, may well be that, as components of popular culture, films have been overlooked because of their “ordinariness” (Burgess & Gold 1985: 1). The burgeoning interest in films within cultural geography could thus be taken to reflect a more thorough engagement with popular culture and an acknowledgment of the cinema’s role in shaping individual and societal perceptions of space and place (Aitken & Zonn 1994; Cresswell & Dixon 2002).

Notwithstanding the theoretical interest in films within geographical research, however, and despite the converging preoccupations of geography and film studies evinced in collaborative publications such as the recent special issue of *Screen* devoted to the theme of Space/Place/City and Film (Lury & Massey 1999), geographers have yet to develop theoretically consistent approaches to the geographical dimension of the cinema (Kennedy & Lukinbeal 1997).

Research on the geography of cinema (a term that encompasses the business of making films as well as films taken collectively) has tended to concentrate on the ways in which space and place are represented in individual films or within generic groups of films. The concept of *mise-en-scène* or ‘staging in action,’ which originated in the nineteenth-century theater, refers in film studies to the constituent elements that compose a shot and create a specific ‘screen space.’ Amongst other prerequisites, including lighting and movement, props and costumes, setting is a crucial aspect of *mise-en-scène*. The setting is sometimes privileged as the leading character in a film, functioning not merely as an incidental background for the main action, but as an expressive component of the narrative itself (Bordwell & Thompson 1997: 169–209). Analyses have been made, for example, of the functions performed in Australian cinema by a distinctive bush setting, which pits the corrosive influences of the city against the salutary wilderness of ‘authentic’ outback Aus-

tralia. The Australian filmmaker, curator, and critic Ross Gibson has argued, within this context, that the prominence given to the landscape in Australian cinema signifies the urge by a white society to historicize and root the Australian nation in an aboriginal territory. Seen from this perspective, the *Mad Max* film trilogy (1979, 1981, 1985), which engages with the conventions of the Western, may be said to exemplify the frustrated attempts by colonial explorers to subjugate the 'wilderness' (Gibson 1992).

The world as it is evoked in a narrative film is known as the film's *diegesis*, after the Greek term for narrated story. Diegetic components of a film include both the activities and places that make up the fictional world of the film, even when these are not pictured on-screen (Bordwell & Thompson 1997: 92). In film studies, given films are considered both as textual constructs, the product of an *auteur* or director who 'authors' the work, and as cultural products or commodities caught up in a dynamic network of political, economic and industrial systems. Films are analyzed in relation to their contents, style, form, and aesthetics. But they are also considered within the terms of their production, distribution and exhibition; aesthetic preoccupations are linked to social and economic environments. Indeed, there is a growing interest in the material circumstances within which films are produced and consumed. More than simply reflecting the environment, cinema actively participates in its configuration: "The city has been shaped by the cinematic form, just as cinema owes much of its nature to the historical development of the city" (Clarke 1997: 2). The cinema, and particularly Hollywood, remains influential in marketing ideas about the natural world (Zukin 1991; Wilson 1992). As the French theorist Jean Baudrillard remarked in his book *America*: "Where is the cinema? It is all around you outside, all over the city, that marvellous, continuous performance of films and scenarios" (Baudrillard 1989: 56).

Ideology and the Reality Effect

The invention of cinematic film in the 1890s constituted part of a modernist technological revolution that dramatically altered existing "ways of seeing." The cultural critic Walter Benjamin, writing about the advent of film in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), likened filmmaking to a surgical operation. Surgeons, like cameramen, he argued, were able to probe below the surface of the world and penetrate reality's "web." Film, Benjamin observed, "offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free from all equipment" (Benjamin 1973: 227).

As a mode of vision, the moving picture marked a key development in the modernization of vision, which had begun in the eighteenth century with the camera obscura (a darkened chamber where images of objects outside were projected onto a screen by means of a convex lens) and continued in the 1830s with the spread of photography. Ophthalmologic research and scientific studies of light and optics furthered understanding of vision and led, ultimately, to technical interventions such as the X-ray in 1895 (Crary 1992).

To view the inception of the cinema, however, simply as the culmination of an evolutionary drive towards the fulfillment of objective, 'natural' vision is

misleading (Crary 1992: 26–7). Cinema may be considered instead as a cultural phenomenon linked to the new “spectacular realities” of modern mass-consumer society, such as the department store (Charney & Schwartz 1995; Schwartz 1998). Moreover, the notion of the cinema as the natural outgrowth of photography and the apogee of nineteenth-century scientific progress belies the fact that the cinema has frequently been mobilized to bolster political power, performing explicit and implicit ideological functions. As Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni remarked in a seminal article published in the radical French journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* (1969): “every film is political, inasmuch as it is determined by the ideology which produces it” (Comolli & Narboni 1993: 45).

The cinema constructs and legitimates an idea of the real. Realism is not a form of mimetic transparency that spontaneously reproduces the external world, rather verisimilitude is an “effect” (Barthes 1989) produced by the artful arrangement of signifying elements within a text according to specific conventions (MacCabe 1993).

Film Studies has developed different theoretical models to elucidate setting, drawing on a range of disciplines from literary and visual theories to cultural studies. The concept of the “chronotope,” developed by the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, for example, provides one useful way of investigating the relationship of setting and genre. The “chronotope” is employed by Bakhtin to describe the specific confluences of time and place, which are inscribed in particular locales. Thus, the “chronotope” might be usefully deployed as a tool for analyzing the significance invested in the cocktail lounge, the nightclub and the bar within the postwar genre of film noir. All of these locales function as places “where the knots of narrative are tied and untied;” they are places out of real-life that have, over time, become associated “with fixed expressions and metaphoric patterns of thinking” (Sobchack 1998: 149). Considering realistic setting in this way opens up the relationship between text and context and reconnects “the historicity of the lived world” with the world of cinema (Sobchack 1998: 150).

Cinema and Postmodern Geographies

The geographer David Harvey has argued that studying films may be valuable in shedding light on ongoing theoretic debates about postmodern culture. Cinema, perhaps more than any other comparable media, he suggests, encapsulates the multifaceted relationship between temporality and spatiality in the postmodern age. For critics such as Harvey the term postmodernism alludes to a postindustrial economic and social order, characterized by the rapidity with which new digital technologies disseminate information and images globally. One feature of the postmodern condition thus defined is the concomitant compression of time and space, and the ‘deterritorialization’ of culture. Accordingly, identity is no longer firmly rooted in a specific place but constantly renegotiated among the shifting semantic contents of images and signs.

In a comparative analysis of Ridley Scott’s 1982 cult movie, *Blade Runner*, which is set in the derelict streets of a futuristic and deindustrialized Los Angeles, and of Wim Wenders’ *Wings of Desire* (1987), which takes place in Berlin, Harvey demonstrates how the two works are symptomatic of a crisis of representation. Both films,

he contends, offer the audience a mirror, which reflects “many of the essential features of the condition of postmodernity;” namely, the fragmentation of time, space, history, and place (Harvey 1990: 308, 308–23).

Harvey’s work intimates ways in which the theoretical models and insights developed in film studies may be usefully redeployed within cultural geography. At the same time, the writing of cultural critics such as Fredric Jameson, who has drawn upon the work of the geographer Kevin Lynch in developing his notion of “cognitive mapping,” suggests how, reciprocally, film studies has drawn upon theoretical developments in cultural geography (Jameson 1991: 51–4, 409–17; Jameson 1992: 188–9). For Jameson, “cognitive mapping” describes the process through which individuals are able to locate themselves in relation to society, conceived as a totality. In a postindustrial world, he argues, there is a need for a political culture that “seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system” (Jameson 1991: 54).

The Power of Cinema: Classical Hollywood and Beyond

The notion that postmodern films can self-reflexively comment on the condition of postmodernity is to suggest that films are somehow able to interrogate the circumstances of their production. In the twentieth century, however, the development of film has been closely connected with attempts by political authorities to curtail meaning in order to reinforce a given view of the world. The cultural critic Paul Virilio has shown, for example, how the history of film technologies and war technologies are intertwined. In the twentieth century film has formed part of “a perceptual arsenal” that has been crucial in conflicts from the First World War to the Gulf War and beyond. Films have been instrumental in strategies of surveillance and espionage aimed at the military subjugation of populations (Virilio 1989).

As a pedagogical tool within anthropological research, the documentary film – a term reputedly coined by the pioneering British filmmaker John Grierson (1898–1972) – has long functioned as a vehicle for mediating ‘exotic’ places and its inhabitants (Griffiths 2002). With the availability of hand-held cameras in the 1950s and 1960s, documentary filmmaking, known as *cinéma vérité* (cinema truth), developed with the ostensible aim of spontaneously recording objective, factual information. Documentary techniques were employed in the making of feature films. The directors of the so-called *Nouvelle Vague* or New Wave in France, such as François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, and Eric Rohmer were influenced both by the emphasis on contemporary life in the work of Italian Neorealists, as well as by ethnographic filmmakers such as Jean Rouch. In the main they eschewed the studio and shot their films in actual locations using lightweight cameras that enabled greater flexibility, often casting nonprofessional actors and employing faster film to take advantage of natural light.

Although France produced the most influential group of new wave filmmakers, many other countries around the world, such as Japan and Brazil, saw the emergence of similar progressive groups during this period. Often the move towards documentary-style realism corresponded with a radical political agenda. In Greece, for example, the early realist films of Alexis Damianos, Theo Angelopoulos, and

Pantelis Voulgaris, which blurred the line between factual reportage and fiction, constituted a challenge to the authority of the dictatorship that ruled the country between 1967 and 1974.

Documentaries are always partial and informed by social and political assumptions. They do not offer unmediated, purely factual views of the world, but draw on narrative techniques and rhetorical strategies that are common to feature films (Nichols 1991). The controversy surrounding the editing of factual material in Michael Moore's documentary *Roger and Me* (1989) highlights the ambiguity of the documentary as a 'neutral' genre. Moore's film was offered as a factual account of a series of layoffs at General Motors' plants in the town of Flint, Michigan, during the 1980s, even though it transpired that the documentary rearranged events to dramatize its story more effectively (Cohan & Crowdus 1990).

Institutionally, at least, cinema is still marketed and studied as the product of specific geopolitical conditions. Hierarchical categories such as Hollywood Cinema, National Cinemas, and World Cinema are still widely employed as classificatory frameworks for defining films. The political role of cinema has been explored most thoroughly in the context of Classical Hollywood Cinema, which lasted from the 1920s to the 1960s. During the 1920s the US film industry amalgamated into the hands of a few large mass-production studio corporations, such as MGM, Fox, Warner Brothers, Universal, and Paramount, which controlled the production and distribution of films. Hollywood's studio system was organized around what may be called an industrial mode of production, where films were produced as commodities in a highly centralized production process (Naficy 1999). With the decimation of Europe's film industries during the First World War, Hollywood acquired unparalleled dominance of global screen entertainment.

During the 1970s, however, the studio system was transformed in order to come to terms "with an increasingly fragmented entertainment industry – with its demographics and large audiences, it diversified 'multimedia' conglomerates, its global(ized) markets and new delivery systems" (Tom Schatz quoted in Naficy 1999: 126). The preeminence of this 'new' Hollywood was secured by the global consolidation of US television networks and the availability of innovative audiovisual technology (Wasko 1994). Other factors were important, such as the widespread deregulation and privatization of the media, the unification of Europe, and the liberalization of former Communist countries during the late 1980s and 1990s. The case of India, a country with the second largest film industry in the world and a highly developed internal distribution network, remains an exception to the supremacy of Hollywood.

One consequence of Hollywood's hegemony, it is often claimed, is the impoverishment, both culturally and economically, of other less powerful nations. Hollywood cinema has been descried as an exemplar of US economic and political imperialism. While Hollywood is aggressively marketed and clearly does exert enormous economic and cultural influence, anti-imperialist criticism tends to simplify the ways in which viewers, both individually and collectively, mediate Hollywood films. By the same token, cultural imperialism, as opposed to economic imperialism, is notoriously difficult to evaluate with any precision. Recent research has confirmed how imported US popular culture may be appropriated in complex ways into indigenous cultural forms, while different individuals and audience groups impose

divergent interpretations upon the same films, according to their backgrounds, experiences, and values (Liebes & Katz 1990).

In large measure, then, the concept of a 'national cinema' has emerged as a bulwark against the influence wielded by Hollywood Cinema. In many countries, the role of the state has been crucial in the financing of 'national' films, making the concept of 'national' cinema, in effect, a form of cultural protectionism. National cinema is frequently viewed in symbolic terms, as a synecdoche standing for a whole culture. French costume dramas of the 1980s (*film de patrimoine*), notably Claude Berri's *Jean de Florette* (1985) and *Manon des Sources* (1986), promoted a vision of France's heritage as a timeless, immemorial rural landscape linked to the Third Republic (1870–1940) (Forbes & Kelly 1995: 260). Such films obliterated the contemporary urban and multicultural realities of France and its attendant social problems in favor of the nostalgic idea of a stable and quintessential landscape, protected from the "discontents of modernity" (Nowell-Smith 1996: 766).

Ironically, however, 'national' films are often marketed for foreign export and, consequently, project an outsider's perspective on a local culture, homogenizing the differences within. The acclaim with which the work of Chinese filmmakers of the so-called Fifth Generation was greeted in the West prompted heated debates among Chinese critics about what constituted a 'Chinese' cinema and the manner in which specific images of 'China' were manufactured for external, Western consumption. Chinese filmmakers were caught in a double-bind: between accusations of fetishizing local culture for 'outsiders' and promoting an ethnocentric approach that suggested Chinese culture was somehow exclusive and impossible to represent for non-native audiences (Reynaud 1998: 545–6). As Chris Berry has remarked, however, critiquing the notion of a singular, essential 'China' does not entail debunking China as a fiction. On the contrary, 'China,' he contends, needs to be seen as a discursively produced and historically contingent entity. In this sense, it is not so much China that makes movies, he argues, but the movies that help to make different versions of 'China' (Berry 1994, 2000).

In African Cinema similar questions are being addressed, too, about the validity of African Cinema as a generic category, as well as the usefulness of Third World Cinema as a designation for non-Western productions. The debate has increasingly focused around the constitutive differences between African Cinema, Hollywood, and Second World Cinema, and the dilemma of how its distinctiveness is to be understood, given that the technology of filmmaking itself forms part of a colonial heritage (Diawara 1992; Ukadike 1994, 1998).

The category 'national cinema' suggests a community of like-minded viewers who share a vision of the world. Increasingly, however, the nature of the nation-state and national identity are being reassessed, following the influential work of Ernest Gellner (1983), Benedict Anderson (1983), and Eric Hobsbawm (1990). Much work has been done on demonstrating the ways in which films naturalize nationalist ideologies and help engineer and sustain a sense of identity. Sumita Chakravarty has shown, for example, how Indian popular films, after the creation of an independent India in 1947, reinforced ideas about the Indian nation at the same time as they created new ones (Chakravarty 1993). In Japan the *jidaigeki*, or historical drama, was similarly influential in forging a national identity, especially during the 1930s within the context of Japan's fraught relationship with modernity and the West

(Davis 1996). Like the novels of the nineteenth century, films may provide narratives in which individual viewers are able to associate themselves imaginatively with a collective community.

Thus, over recent years, the idea that films are the expression of specific geopolitical circumstances has been more openly debated. Cinema's categorization and the mechanisms of its funding have been widely researched. Questions have been asked about the political dimension of cinema's classificatory frameworks and about the disparate criteria (cultural, geographic, or economic) that render a film national in the first place. In addressing these issues film critics have emphasized both the political and industrial pressures and the aesthetic conventions that inform cinema as a cultural and economic activity.

Some critics allege that even reputedly 'conservative' Hollywood films contain structures of resistance, so that watertight divisions between experimental and non-experimental, popular, and art films are impossible. They maintain that Hollywood often subverts dominant ideologies by employing adversarial strategies, such as irony or parody, which self-consciously play with the viewers' expectations (Hutcheon 1989: 114). Far from projecting an unambiguous vision of the world, Hollywood films may offer different visions of the social order and self-reflexively draw attention to their own limitations.

An Oscar-winning blockbuster such as Anthony Minghella's *The English Patient* (1996), a film adaptation of the novel by the Booker Prize winner Michael Ondaatje, suggests how big production films can interrogate assumptions about race and culture. The narrative of *The English Patient* shifts between Egypt and Italy, where a Canadian nurse, Hana (Juliette Binoche), cares for the dying English patient (Ralph Fiennes) in an abandoned Tuscan villa. An analogy is drawn in the film between the cave paintings in the Sahara, testament to the demise of a once flourishing civilization, and the wasted Tuscan landscape, once the 'epicenter' of European culture and the birthplace of the Renaissance. In a scene that recalls the English patient's discovery of the cave drawings, a young Sikh sapper, Kip (Naveen Andrews), takes Hana to visit the frescoes of a medieval church. On one level, *The English Patient* may be read as a postcolonial allegory: it is the once peripheral colonial subject who defuses the bombs and becomes the emissary of civilizing values at the heart of a deserted metropolitan culture.

On another level, *The English Patient* promotes a vision of transcendence, of humanity undivided by the borders of class and nationality. In a war-film set against the backdrop of contested political borders, the repeated aerial shots of the desert are juxtaposed against the grisly gashes underneath the English patient's bandaged body. Indeed, the film draws a visual analogy between the undulating dunes of the Sahara and the erogenous contours of a female body. The desert obliterates distinctions and hierarchies and as such it stands opposed to the imperial partition of Africa and the Indian subcontinent, as well as the aggressive contestation of borders that has ravaged Europe. It comes as no surprise, perhaps, that the English patient's mistress, Katharine Clifton (Kristin Scott Thomas), confides her dream of "a life without maps" and elsewhere geography is described as being "sad." In short, a cursory reading of *The English Patient* suggests how successful big-budget films can explore difficult cultural issues and that often they do so through a complex engagement with place.

Conclusion: Watching Films

Although an increasing interest is being taken in the specific social contexts in which films are watched and the meanings of the activities that accrue around grounded sites of spectatorship from the multiplex to the art-house theater (Jancovich et al. 2003), there are still relatively few studies devoted to the geographical dimension of film spectatorship.

When considering the social context of the cinema, as a locale where individuals come to watch films, it is important to remember the conditions in which the cinema was born. The motion picture developed at a moment when populations in industrialized societies were migrating to the city. Indeed, it has been argued that the cinema reflected an impetus to bring order to the visual chaos of the urban environment. "The cinema," observes Paul Virilio, "gratified the wish of the migrant workers for a lasting and even eternal homeland, giving them a new kind of freedom of the city" (1989: 39). The cinema auditorium became a cenotaph or temple and "the site of a new aboriginality in the midst of demographic anarchy" (Virilio 1989: 39).

Today the cinema auditorium is being redefined in new ways. On the one hand, multiplexes in shopping malls are promoting forms of sociability that embed the experience of watching films in a wider context of consumption. On the other hand, the availability of digital technology and computer-mediated communications is effectively privatizing spectatorship by bringing cinema into the privacy of the home. While these transformations have given rise to a reconsideration of place, the bulk of critical work on postmodernity continues to stress, generally in abstract terms, the compression of space and time effected by the new technology. The focus has tended to be on the ways in which individuals are uprooted from locality and experience geography as a virtual reality (Morley 1999: 156–9). An investigation into the diverse ways in which individuals and groups experience cinema, and the different physical contexts of their spectatorship, remain profitable areas for cultural geography to explore.

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