



Figure 1.

Reel-to-Real Urban Geographies: the Top Five Cinematic Cities in North America

Chris Lukinbeal

San Diego State University

Film and television lie at an interesting theoretical junction in geography. On the one hand, we could view film and television as an industrial process which uses natural resources and affects both people and places. On the other hand, we could view television and film as representational images which depict themes and narratives of a culture and its geography. These two different ways of understanding the audio-visual media lies at the heart of this theoretical junction. This junction is where two different conceptions, or theories of space meet and mingle, where so called material or real space meets representational space. At different times in the history of geography we have privileged one spatial conception over the other. Here I am referring to the debate between traditional and new cultural geographers concerning the privileging of material cultural geography over non-material cultural geography (see Price and Lewis 1993, 1993a; Natter and Jones 1993; Cosgrove 1993, 1987; Duncan 1993, Jackson 1993).

Representational space is a subset of non-material culture and is used here to denote the geography depicted in feature films and television shows. Often these real and representational spaces are dealt with as completely separate entities. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that geographers studying film and television have either focused on the material manifestations of the film industry (e.g., Christopherson and Storper 1986; Storper and Christopherson 1987) or have examined the depictions of people and places within representations (e.g., Lukinbeal and Aitken 1998; Kennedy and Lukinbeal 1997). Of these two areas of inquiry, geographers have focused primarily on representational space (Clarke 1997; Aitken and Zonn 1994; Zonn 1990; Burgess and Gold 1985). By doing so geographers often limit a focus on media to one which closely resembles film criticism, where the geographer tries to make the reader aware of specific social and spatial aspects woven into the fabric of a media text. From this vantage the relationship between representational space and material space is one where the two are mutually inclusive: one does not exist without the other. Such a methodology, however, forces us to overlook other aspects of the relationship between these spaces. One of these aspects is the actual production of representational space. Simply put, by focusing on textual readings of the media we tend to ignore the process by which representational space is pro-

duced. Unfortunately, this oversight directs our attention away from a key process through which place making and the production of space occurs. That process is the underlying negotiation of political and economic aspects within the film industry which produce representational space. The modern film industry encompasses the economic activities of major motion pictures and audio-visual productions for television (TV shows, TV movies, commercials, and music videos). I focus on the film production industry and as such do not examine distribution or exposition.

With this essay I seek to show one way to examine this theoretical junction; this meeting ground of two conceptions of space. My argument is simply that the uneven development and dispersion of the film industry produces an uneven depiction of material space. Thus, the production of representational space is not a mirror of material space, but rather a product of the politics and economics of a specific industry. Consequently, if we wish to understand what we see on television and in the cinema we must begin by understanding how these images arise and where they originate. I first investigate how the demise of the studio industry changed the content of representational space. I then examine the top five cinematic cities in North America. A cinematic city is one which accounts for a high volume of on location filming. These cities dominate the economic activities related to the film production industry and are the most frequently depicted geographies in representational space.

Industrial Changes in the Film Industry

The film industry has had to negotiate a number of political and economic changes that have directly affected the content of representational space. While these changes could be documented back to and before the advent of motion pictures, I begin with the decline of the studio system. From the 1920s to the late 1940s Hollywood's studio system reigned supreme. The studio system was characterized by a factory-like system where all parts of production took place under a single roof. During this so called Golden Age of filmmaking most movies were produced on soundstages or in studio backlots. The geography depicted was mostly limited to indoor productions and backlot private spaces. Even during the golden age of film production real locations were needed to situate the action of narratives (figure 1). As figure one shows there is an amply supply of diverse locations within close proximity of Los Angeles. These locations could be used to represent a number of different sites through the world. Figure one is a 1918 Paramount Studio location map which documents places in California and their possible uses in representational spaces. Consequently, when film makers needed to film

on location they had a mental map of representational space which was grounded in real space locations.

Two developments lead to the demise of the studio system. The first was the Paramount Decision of 1948 in which the Supreme Court decided that studios could not own their own cinemas. This decision effectively removed the captive market for their products. The second event was the arrival of television which fragmented the visual entertainment market and decentralized the mode of reception of representational space. These two events lead to an organizational restructuring and vertical disintegration within the film production industry. In essence, with the changes in the film market, backlot productions became too expensive which triggered a gradual shift in production activity away from the studio system to a system based on flexible specialization with regional networks of production companies and their associated subcontractors (Coe 1998, Storper and Christopherson 1987, 1985).

Flexible specialization refers to an industry whose system of production is, organized around the interactions of a network of small firms. These firms specialize in batch or custom production of general classes of outputs, whereas mass production firms are committed to the production of specific outputs in large quantities. The production system as a whole is flexible because each production project can be organized with a different mix of specialized input-output providing firms. In more conventional parlance these firms are subcontracted in a system of production that is vertically disintegrated (Storper and Christopherson 1987, 104).

During the 1960s and 1970s three changes in the film industry transformed the content of representational space. First, with the shift in the production system to flexible specialization, there was a rise in on location shooting outside Los Angeles. Second, as a response to the television market, film makers had to find new attractions to help sell their product. One of these attractions was to situate stories in geographic realism. I use the term geographic realism in a slightly different context than that defined by realist and neo-realist film maker's (e.g., Italian film maker Roberto Rossellini) and film critics (e.g., André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer). Traditionally, realism refers to a respect for reality where quality is measured by how well a film reflects the real, material world. Realism includes both the realistic quality of landscapes and the realistic quality of a story's content. I use geographic realism to focus on the real quality of the landscape and thus realism reflects on location filming rather than the geography depicted on a soundstage or in a studio's back lot. With the rise of on location filming in the 1960-1970s, more and more real places began to look like studio back lots (e.g., the re-modeling of the Las Vegas strip) thus blurring the distinction between real and representational space. Geographic realism is an attraction in representational space in two ways: it provides a new element of scenic beauty, something used sparingly in the past; and second, it

strengthens a narrative by grounding action in real places. By strengthening the narrative the audience can more easily suspend their disbelief and enter into the world of representational space. Suspension of disbelief is a spatial issue in that it refers to the process whereby an individual, for the sake of pleasure, disregards the differences between real, material spaces and representational space. Geographic realism strengthens this disregard by providing an ontological bridge between real and representational space. For example, a real landscape and its representational image in a motion picture are ontologically the same (Bazin 1967). If the viewer can suspend their disbelief and accept the representational landscape as real, then their attention is not focused on the landscape of the narrative but is forced onto the narrative. This ontological bridge is frequently destroyed when the viewer can no longer believe that the narrative could take place in the depicted environment. This ontological bridge is also destroyed when the narrative *lies* to the viewer, telling them that the place depicted is a specific location when it is not. However, the narrative retains its validity and realism and is only guilty of lying when the viewer realizes that the ontological bridge has been destroyed. Consequently, the text becomes hegemonic – it is the dominant controlling factor of visually mediated representational space. The third change in the film industry was the invention of mobile cameras and recording devices which allowed film makers to go on location and capture the sense of place more accurately (Maier 1994). These innovations opened up a whole new geography for film makers. Places that use to be off-limits because of bulky equipment were now accessible. These three factors of providing beauty, authenticating the narrative and technological innovations continue to transform the content of representational space.

From the late 1970s to the 1980s, on location shooting continued and expanded. Specific places like New York City, Toronto, and San Francisco were frequently used for media productions. During the 1980s on location filming became such a regular event that many places began setting up film commissions to actively promote this economic activity. In North America the first film commission created was in San Diego. Film commissions are organizations funded and affiliated with local government bureaucracy. They help the film production industry obtain permission to shoot in local surroundings. They also create and maintain a local resource guide of qualified industrial service providers. The common goal of all film commissions is to attract film makers to their region. The main way that film commissioners promote their place is by focusing on aesthetics and economics. Usually the primary reason for major motion pictures to film in a specific location is due to aesthetic reasons: a specific place is needed to provide the realistic backdrop for a narrative. While aesthetics plays a role in television produc-

tions, of equally importance is economics: they need to be able to shoot in a specific type of locale within a given budget. Thus, the ability of a place to provide cheap access to locations along with an established regional network of industrial services will enable a production company to keep their costs down.

In the later half of the 1990s the film industry has grown enormously mainly due to cable television and the newly independent television broadcasters. New cable broadcasters like FOX, WB, UPN, A&E, and so forth, are determined to have their own programming which accounts for the huge growth and dispersion of the film production industry (Monitor Company et. al., 1994). In the early 1980s Storper and Christopherson (1985) predicted that there would be a continual rise in on location filming outside Los Angeles and California. This situation, however, has not happen – on location filming in California and Los Angeles appears to be on the rise. In 1996 the film industry was estimated to be one of the largest industries in California directly spending \$27.5 billion . Annual payroll expenditures to California residence were estimated at \$12 billion (Motion Picture Association of America 1998). If we apply the broadest definition of the entertainment industry, its annual business should reach \$40 billion by the year 2000 (Bates 1998). Of the 702 films produced in the United States in 1996 eighty-one percent (572 films) were partially or entirely filmed in California. Only 130 films were made outside California in 1996 which represented a fourteen percent decline from 1992. California also dominates in television production accounting for eighty percent of prime time episodes (Motion Picture Association of America 1998). Clearly California captures not only a large portion of the film industry's economy but it is also is the most depicted region in representational space.

In an effort to maintain its dominance, California has more film commissions than any other state in the US. Also, if California was a country, it would have more film commissions than any other country in the world except the US. The Film Liaisons in California, Statewide, or FLICS, represents a massive networking system centered in Hollywood with the California State Film Commission. These film commissions represent territorial domains vying for production dollars and the opportunity to be a star in representational space (figure 2). Just as in the Golden Age when California was the primary backlot for on location shoots (figure 1), economic data from the 1990s reaffirms California's dominance in real and representational space.

Top Five Cinematic Cities in North America

The most predominate cinematic city in the world is Los Angeles. In

The Film Zone Los Angeles, California



Figure 2.

1998 it is estimated that 262,000 people work in with an additional 50,000 people indirectly employed in the entertainment industry (Bates 1998). In 1996 the gross revenue from the film production industry accounted for \$25 billion in expenditures in Los Angeles County, a ninety-three percent increase since 1992 (Motion Picture Association of America 1998). Production days, or the cumulative days spent filming on the streets of Los Angeles County in 1997, was equal to 47, 669 days. This figure is double that of production days in 1993. On any given day there can be as many as 150 different film, television, music video or commercial projects filming on the streets of Los Angeles County (Bates 1998). Los Angeles clearly dominates the film production industry as well as being the most prominent region depicted in representational space.

Geographers have been writing about film for over thirty years (cf. Kennedy and Lukinbeal 1997) yet due to the focus on film as either a representational space or a real economic space there has been no mention of arguably the most important site in a geography of film (figure 3). This location is not the most filmed site in the world, but rather is the center point around which a thirty-mile zone is determined by three powerful labor unions, two of which are involved in the film production industry (figure 4). This thirty mile radius represents the most heavily filmed area in the world (Counter 1997), accounting for roughly seventy-five percent of all motion picture and television productions (Mosher 1997). This zone defines a line past which union members of the Screen Actors Guild and the International Theater and Stage Employees must be paid per diem benefits (meals, hotels, etc.). The thirty mile zone (known as 'the zone') originated in the late 1960s and grew out of the increased usage of on location sites for production. Due to the increase in on location filming in the late 1960s, tensions began to rise between the studios, their employees and the Teamsters Union. The studios wanted their employees to report directly to locations no matter where they were located in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. This procedure denied the Teamsters from providing transportation for studio employees and production materials. Negotiations between the various unions and the studios resulted in the creation of the thirty mile zone, which was centered at the old offices of the Association of Motion Pictures and Television Producers office at Beverly Boulevard and La Cienega Boulevard (figure 3). This thirty mile zone has only been expanded twice during the 1980s to include two sites: the so called 'film train,' a historic train owned and operated by Shoreline Enterprises in Filmore, and Castaic Lake in northern Los Angeles County (Counter 1997).

While coming in a distant second, New York City represents one of the prime regional networks for television commercials. So much so that Bergen County, New Jersey, just across the Hudson River from New York

City, is known as the kitchen capital of the world because its upscale homes have appeared in countless commercials for ad agencies based in Manhattan (Maier 1994). New York City was one of the first (if not the first) cinematic cities in North America because it was most likely the first city to be depicted on film and the origin for the film production industry in the United States. New York City is also the home for many television studios and remains the location of choice for many screen writers, directors and actors (most notably, Woody Allen). In 1997 production days in New York City was equal to 21,339 and accounted for \$2.37 billion in business. Aesthetics remains one of the principle reasons for filming in New York City – the city’s sense of place is needed to ground the action of particular narratives. Because of disagreements



Figure 3.

between local unions and Hollywood studios in 1991, New York City’s film industry suffered a decline in production. In this case economics outweigh aesthetics and images of New York City decline in representational space.

The third largest cinematic city, or metropolitan area in this case, in North America is the San Francisco Bay Area. The San Francisco Bay Area has not been considered a major cinematic city until recently because aggregate data was not available until the Motion Picture Association of America’s 1998 economic impact report (Motion Picture Association of America 1998). In their report which calculated production

expenditures for 1996, San Francisco County ranked third within the state of California and roughly seventh in North America in total production expenditures with \$349 million. However, total production expenditures in 1996 for San Francisco, Alameda, Marin, Contra Costa and Santa Clara counties equaled \$837 million (Motion Picture Association of America 1998). These represent the main counties in the Bay Area involved in film and television production. Perhaps the most important new resource which has encouraged the development and growth of the film industry in the Bay Area is the availability of the decommissioned Naval bases (Alameda Naval Air Station, Mare Island Naval Shipyard and Treasure Island Naval Station). All three stations have hangars suitable for large-scale interior sets and the decommissioned bases do not require DOD (Department of Defense) script approval. In 1997 the hangars were put to use for Disney's movie, *Flubber* and Warner Brother's movie, *Sphere*. *Sphere*, was shot entirely on a set in a Navy dry-dock at Mare Island Naval Shipyard. As Michael John Meehan, the location manager for *Sphere* notes, "The buildings are particularly well-suited for films that have few real-world spaces" (Ackley 1998, 62). Like New York City, aesthetics is the primary draw for film productions in San Francisco – its sense of place grounds geographic realism to the history of the City. The decommissioned bases add to this draw by allowing film makes to remain on location to finish their soundstage shots rather than having to return to Los Angeles to wrap-up shooting. The main drawback to filming in the Bay Area is that it is one of the most expensive places to produce films.

In contrast to the San Francisco Bay Area and New York City, Toronto and Vancouver British Columbia have become prominent cinematic cities because they are inexpensive locations from which to produce films. During the 1991 boycott of New York City by Hollywood producers, Toronto, the fourth largest cinematic city in North America, saw a boom in production expenditures. Toronto is home to Canada's film industry and continues to be the first choice for directors who want to shoot in New York, but can't afford it. Three examples of this include, *Three Men and a Baby*, *Moonstruck* and *Sea of Love*. In 1997 Ontario's film industry accounted for 8,458 production days with direct expenditures totaling \$635.1 million (Ontario Film Development Corporation 1997). The wannabe Hollywood of the North, Vancouver British Columbia, is the fifth largest cinematic city in North America. Both Vancouver and Toronto lure the majors away from Hollywood by providing economic incentives through a favorable exchange rate and many federal government tax-breaks. Another key economic incentive is the close proximity of these cities to the first and second largest film production centers in North America. Through their very proximity these Canadian cities are able to offer film producers an option when considering where to pro-

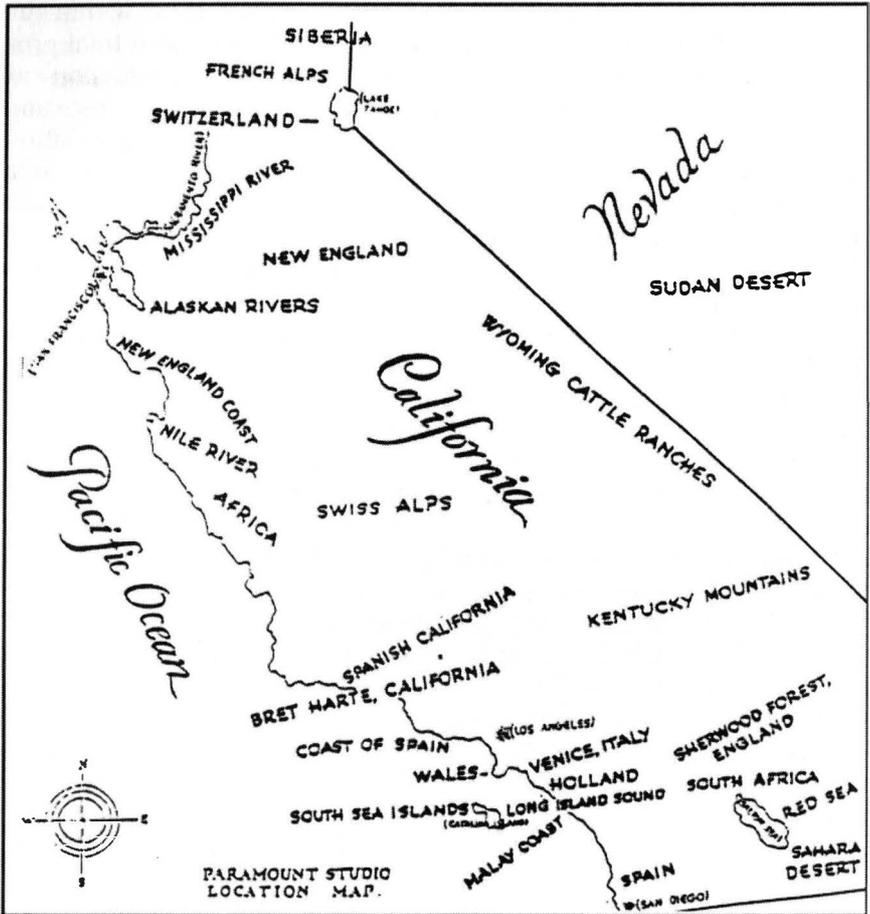


Figure 4. Paramount Studio Location Map 1927

duce their product. As such both Vancouver and Toronto have become cinematic not for their sense of place but rather for their low cost incentives. Consequently, in representational space these cities are frequently depicted in productions which have limited budgets (low budget feature films, made-for-TV-movies and television shows). Along these lines, Vancouver has become the second largest producer of television shows in North America (Vancouver Film Commission 1998). Vancouver is attractive to film and television production for three main reasons: first, it is a short two hour plane ride from Los Angeles ; second, it is in the same time zone as Los Angeles , an important factor in coordinating a shooting schedule; third, it has a relatively mild climate with topographic diversity in close proximity to Vancouver (Coe 1998). In 1997, British Columbia generated \$630.6 million in direct expenditures and accounted for 167 productions (mostly television shows). Vancouver has

been home to many television shows including, *Jumpstreet*, *Wiseguy*, *McGyver* and the enormously successful *X Files*. Vancouver, however, will be losing the *X Files* in the fall of 1998 to Los Angeles. It will be interesting to see how much this will affect the geography depicted in the *X Files*.

Conclusion

A cinematic city can be understood in many ways: as it is depicted in representational space; through the industrial practices which occur at real locations in cities like Los Angeles, New York City, San Francisco, Toronto and Vancouver; or, as a site which interweaves the two spaces producing a thirdspace, one that possess the qualities of both real space and representational space (cf. Soja 1996). Examining the cinematic city as an urban thirdspace has been difficult in the past because the two spaces have often been considered mutually inclusive or mutually exclusive. As mutually inclusive spaces the real and the representational are considered the same and therefore the relationship between the two does not need to be addressed. From this perspective a representation of a city and the real city are the same and should not be considered as separate spaces. As mutually exclusive spaces, the real and representational are distinctly separate spatial realms where one realm is often considered more important than the other. Here, what occurs in the real city may be considered infinitely more important than the way a city is represented by film and television. The third (space) choice shifts the focus away from the strict delineation of real and representational space by focusing on the way in which space is produced and interwoven in particular cities in North America. From this perspective, cities are cinematic because the industrial practices that occur within them produce a space that is both real and representational. The cinematic city is thus a real location which produces an audio-visual product and is depicted in that product.

Cinematic cities become prominent in real and representational space for aesthetic or economic reasons, or a combination of both. Both Los Angeles and New York City will remain prominent for both these reasons and because of industrial inertia. The San Francisco Bay Area has traditionally been a cinematic city for aesthetic reasons – its geographic realism and sense of place saturates its representational space. The representational space produced in the San Francisco Bay Area and New York City usually emphasizes geographic realism over placelessness. For these cities to increase their production they must, however, be able to offer more economic incentives which allow film makers to save money. Cheaper products usually mean less geographic realism and the production of placelessness. For the San Francisco Bay Area to expand its production it must be able to keep some of the decommissioned Naval

bases as active, low-cost soundstages where placeless imagery can be easily and cheaply produced. Similarly, New York City may be able to boost its production if it is able to build more soundstages and avoid another labor crisis. Both of these cinematic cities struggle with the dynamic tension of economic incentives and placelessness and, aesthetic incentives and sense of place.

Toronto and Vancouver also struggle with this dynamic tension but they excel in offering economic incentive and the production of placelessness. Vancouver has risen from an occasional location for film production to a dominant player in less than twenty years. Its rise to prominence offers us clues how future cinematic cities may rise to fame. With the expanding need for low-cost television productions the five major cinematic cities and other production centers will seek to lure production dollars through economic incentives. Cities which can offer economic incentives and attract television productions may become the future cinematic cities of tomorrow. Vying for future stardom are the Dallas/Forth Worth area, San Diego and Miami. Future cinematic cities will predominately emphasize placeless imagery over sense of place making geography into a series of set stages upon which stories can unfold. Placelessness continually allows characters, stories and events to rise above and perform upon a deadened space. While geographic realism seeks to make space come alive, placeless imagery produces an anesthetized geography which is a secondary consideration to the actions of social life. The challenge to geography is to chart these dynamic tensions lying within the cinematic city and present them in ways which can be taught and understood. We might favor the production of geographic realism over placelessness, but both geographies constitute our perception of and cohabitation in the cinematic city.

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