



Doing film geography

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Abstract Film geography as a subdiscipline of cultural and media geography is a long-established field of research that since its emergence more than twenty years ago has diversified into a variety of perspectives. Nowadays, a critical perspective on film is central, which no longer considers the medium merely as a text, but rather as a social practice—a perspective that continues to focus not solely on the meaning of representations, but on what representations do and how they do it. Following Roberts' (in: Edensor, Kalandides, Kothari (eds) *The Routledge handbook of place*, Routledge, London, 2020) call for 'doing film geography,' this introductory article to the *GeoJournal* Special Issue on Film Geography provides an overview of current trends in the field as well as an overview of the essays included in this collection. In addition to the established film-as-text perspective, we examine the burgeoning research in cinematic cartography, film industry geographies, and videography/documentaries.

Keywords Cinematic cartography · Film industry · Videography · Media geography · Film as social practice

Introduction

In recent years, geography has seen a shift from film and media as text to understanding them as social practices. Here, the emphasis is not on representational meaning, but on what representations do and how they do it (Lukinbeal, 2019). A high potential and key characteristic of film geography lies in the complex interconnections of cinema and everyday life. Film geography is tackled best when interdisciplinary approaches are combined (Sommerlad, 2021). Researchers consider screened content, location and place, reception and reflection and link them as interrelating spheres. Roberts (2020) advocates for an approach of 'doing film geography,' which incorporates aspects of performativity and haptics in order to creatively engage with the relation between place(s) and filmmaking practices. Cinema and the everyday are interrelated through the geographical, historical and contemporary cultural phenomena (Escher, 2006, 2019). Escher's (2019) work provides an excellent example of this through a materialist historical geography of the set design of Rick's Café in the film *Casablanca*. He argues that the cinematic world (Escher, 2006) has a lingering and tangible legacy around the world. Film induced tourism shows how

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the construction of a geographical imaginary compels ongoing place-based economic practices (Escher & Zimmerman, 2001, 2005; Zimmerman & Escher, 2001; Zimmermann, 2009). But unlike screen tourism and other consumption based practices, a focus on film production begins to expose the underlying issues of the unseen/unscene social practices involved in creating and maintaining a regional cinematic landscape (Lukinbeal, 2005, 2012, 2022).

The current trend in film geography may be best positioned by what Anderson (2018) has called a ‘representation-in-relation-to’ approach; one that seeks to bridge the divide between non-representational and representational linguistic theories and methods. One of the burgeoning avenues of research has been in film production studies and interrelate representational meanings with the lived, grounded experiences of labor, finance, and people living at locations filmed. These are the geographies of the unseen where filmmaking practices create the scenes, but labor must be removed from the calculus of the image to allow for suspension of disbelief to remove the spectator from the process of production and reiterate “the illusion that a film is a cultural product rather than a cultural process” (Lukinbeal, 2012, p. 175).

It has been over fifteen years since the last *GeoJournal* special issue on film geography was published (Lukinbeal & Zonn, 2004). During that time the emphasis on linguist based social theories and textual approaches to film, landscape, and cartography have fallen from favor to be replaced with more action, practice, and process oriented approaches. There appears to be concern over a representational culdesac in logic, where ontologically ‘nothing existing beyond the text’ which gives rise to a suspicion of hermeneutics where the “presumption that people’s access to the world was primarily an interpretive one always already mediated by ‘signifying systems’” (Anderson, 2018, p. 1121). While the importance of meaning construction through narration remains, meaning must now be positioned with a context of what images do and how they do it. How is cinema actively produced and consumed and what are the representational languages deployed by cinemas to perpetuate and construct viable products for regional, nation, and international markets? How does the film economy and geopolitics play a role in shaping what we see on screens? These are some of the questions

that drive inquiry in film geography. With this special issue we look at four emerging research themes in film geography: film-as-text; cinematic cartography; film industry geographies; videography and documentaries.

Film as text

The concepts of space and place have been central to film geography where an iterative hermeneutical framework is deployed to ‘read’ the discourse of a film. From this perspective, the focus on analysis is reading a text from a specific theoretical framework to probe a topic using a hermeneutical circle (Grondin, 2016) or “an interpretative and iterative process of querying existing textual assumptions and primary source materials to develop new knowledge” (Lukinbeal et al., 2010, p. 14). The “author-text-reader” (ATR) model of understanding the varying geographies of film has become a common device through which to structure an approach to film geography (Sharp & Lukinbeal, 2015; Lukinbeal & Zimmerman, 2008). In this collection, Edward Holland’s essay is an example of deploying the ATR model. In the last few decades and influenced by non-representational theories, ‘readings’ of film are frequently deployed using a representation-in-relation approach where the text is put in relation to everyday phenomena. Films are condensations of lifeworlds and are constantly positioning themselves in a hyperreal geographic imaginary of production and spectatorship. Similar to the textual/representational cul de sac that landscape studies got itself into in the early 2000s—where nothing is found outside the text—film geography has emerged as an active research topic requiring ground truthing, fieldwork, primary data collection and geographic information systems analysis.

In this collection of essays there are variety of hermeneutical readings including feminist geopolitics, Bourdieuan analysis, intercultural film, and mythical thought. Orhon Myadar and Tony Colella use a feminist geopolitical frame to examine the film *American Sniper* (2014). They deploy the concept of a ‘sensible encounter’ where knowledge and affect is exchanged. Whereas ‘sensible’ relates to the embodied or haptic experience in cinema, ‘encounter’ relates to cinema’s spectatorial experience where meaning endlessly unfolds with curiosity rather than being bound

by a pre-scripted narrative. The purpose of focusing on sensible encounters is to break open meaning in diegetic space as well as unbind the spectator from a naturalized preset ideology. James Craine's excellent Bourdieuan analysis of *The King of New York* (1990) uses the concepts of *habitus* and *fields* to expose the transgression of ex-con drug lord Frank White against naturalized capitalist spaces and places. Adopting and combining perspectives of geographies of encounter and intercultural film (Jacobsson, 2017), Elisabeth Sommerlad examines intercultural encounters in films on New York City (NYC). She posits that there is a continuum between intercultural togetherness and coexistence where boundaries are drawn, crossed, or enabled. This exploration of a geography of cultural difference exposes a tension in the depiction of NYC. On one hand, movies on NYC propagate a myth of the city as culturally diverse. However, it may be accurate to say that many NYC independent films produce diegetic spaces that tolerate rather than celebrate cultural diversity as separately practiced coexistence. Marcus Stiglegger's essay begins by following a well trodden path of the linkage between the western genre and Fredrick Jackson Turner's frontier myth then proceeds to an analysis of the film *Wind River* (2017). This myth lies at the heart of the genre and while it was more visible during the genre's golden age it remains an active element though now focused inward. Stiglegger argues that this change is because the frontier is now within ourselves, the stranger within. Moving beyond hermeneutics, Marcus Doel challenges the notion of film as a re-presentation—the underlying assumption of film-as-text—by using Deleuze's 'movement-image' and the 'time-image' to argue that geography *is* a film. Doel here draws on the notion of film as a skin or covering that 'develops' and 'fixes' spatio-visual images. These essays show that text-based film geographical analysis does not have to remain "in the film," but instead may be continued in a variety of innovative modes that align with interdisciplinary debates.

Cinematic cartography

There is an increasing interest in applying cartographic theory and methods in film studies and vice versa. For cartographers, the interest in film is seen as a means to re-humanize and re-narrativize the map

and to draw from cinematic language to make better animated maps (Caquard & Fiset, 2014; Caquard & Taylor, 2009) and affective geovisualizations (Aitken & Craine, 2006; Lukinbeal, 2018). Hallam and Roberts (2014, p. 25) argue that what film studies needs is to conduct a "critical mapping of the multifarious spatialities of film on the one hand, and the expressly visual cultures of geography and cartography on the other." They contend that the use of spatial analysis via GIS offers an alternative to textual analysis. GIS can interrogate the spatiality of a single film (Lukinbeal, 2018) or examine a bricolage composite of a region's cinematic landscape by focusing on film production (Lukinbeal, 2012, 2022) or consumption data (see Avezzù in this volume). Research on mapping film production now can be found in digital Atlas for Australia, Britain, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Spain, to name a few.

Places featured in film are often illustrated with maps with the most popular perhaps being film tourism maps in print and online, as well as geotagged images of film locations on social media platforms. Online mapping in the digital humanities related to "on location" filming is common especially as web mapping software has become easier to use at a lower cost, and more importantly, researchers are actively seeking out and requesting primary data from agencies involved with film production, distribution, and consumption. In the US film production data is collected by local government agencies—typically film commissions—that assist in location permitting. Data can also be generated from production company records and sometimes through secondary online sources or through ground truthing locations from watching films. Additionally, maps appear in films in manifold ways and perform a variety of narrative functions (Conley, 2007; Mauer & Sommerlad, 2022). They are used, for instance, to locate cinematic stories or to orient the spectator in the diegesis of the film. The interconnections between cartography, mapping practices, and film are complex and have been analyzed under the heading of cinematic cartography (Caquard & Taylor, 2009; Caquard & Cartwright, 2014; Penz & Koeck, 2017; Lukinbeal et al., 2019). This perspective integrates a diverse range of topics, involving more than just the question of what functionality maps have in film. Hallam and Roberts (2014, p. 8) identify five thematic fields of cinematic cartography: "(1) maps and mapping in films;

(2) mapping of film production and consumption; (3) movie mapping and place marketing; (4) cognitive and emotional mapping; and (5) film as spatial critique.”

In this edition, two contributions address topics that fall into the category of cinematic cartography. Drawing on Kevin Lynch’s *Image of the City*, Erica Stein offers an alternative to his cognitive mapping model by returning to one of the film forms most closely associated with it: the city symphony. By exploring Rudy Burckhardt’s *Seeing the World pt 1: A Trip to New York* (1937) as a city she shows how New York is imagined as a place constructed by the images and representational strategies of its planners, inhabitants, visitors, and visual cultures, including cinema. Her analysis highlights how the film performs a new kind of cognitive mapping, one that re-envisioned the image of the city. Giorgio Avezzi’s paper offers a more traditional GIS analysis of consumption and popularity of films shown in Italy between 2000–2020. Whereas most GIS analysis of film has focused on film production, Avezzi looks to see how regional consumption patterns accentuate and promulgate a north-central / southern economic, social, and cultural divide in Italy.

Film industry geographies

A representation-in-relation-to approach to film production has become a prominent way to explore the geographies of film. The influence and importance of cultural processes and their imprint on diegetic meaning can range from individual choices to the larger economic and geopolitical decisions of where to film. Along these lines, Lukinbeal (2019) examined how the Chinese government impacts Hollywood productions seeking access to its growing national box office. These issues not only predetermine production and financial decisions, they also led to Hollywood producers self-censoring material to present the Chinese government in the best light. This was the case with *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014) which celebrated Chinese control over Hong Kong and filmed all destruction scenes of Hong Kong in Detroit and Chicago so as to not upset government censors (Lukinbeal, 2019). In contrast, Sharp’s (2018) case study of on location scouting in Los Angeles highlights how film and television are constituted by the

ongoing but invisible practices of below-the-line labor, or the geographies of the unscene.

In film studies, both Morgan-Parmentt (2019) and Mayer (2017) examine how New Orleans promotes film production as a positive example of local economic development. However, as Mayer’s (2017, p. 12) work shows, local policies that promote film production often fall under the “twin banners of economic and cultural renewal.” Thus, while these policies promote New Orleans on film, they also allow for the perpetuation of the concentration of wealth in the city. Morgan-Parmentt’s (2019) examination of HBO’s *Treme* highlights how it served as a neoliberal tool that solicited neighborhood performances of racialized spaces while the government abdicated its responsibility to its citizens because *Treme* offered them the chance to participate in this entrepreneurial activity.

In this collection, Chris Lukinbeal and Laura Sharp delve further into these geographies of the unscene labor practices of location workers in New Orleans. Their case study of the impact of motion picture incentive (MPI) on location workers in New Orleans shows the precarity of local below-the-line labor under a neoliberal film economy that seeks out locations primarily based on the bottom line: the cost of production. New Orleans rode the wave of being “Hollywood South” after Katrina through 2015. While film production was booming, location workers had no life because they were working overtime for out-of-town producers. However, when filming began leaving for Atlanta because of changes to Louisiana’s MPI, the precarity of gig-based location work hit the newest and less skilled the most. In many cases, the process of production is not only related to neoliberal economic practices where localities vie with one another to see who can have citizens pay for tax breaks for film production to get a bit of Hollywood glamor. Whereas most production studies focus on the impact of filmmaking on a nation, state, city, or neighborhood, Julian Zschocke’s essay focuses on how the Nate Starkman Building in the Los Angeles Arts District became a cinematic star. This micro-level analysis uses a variety of methodologies including GIS, fieldwork, interviews and hermeneutics to chart the ongoing production and image legacy of the building. In contrast, Helen Morgan Parmentt’s essay examines how the geography of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* produces a nostalgia for the lost, vanishing,

and gentrifying New York City. Morgan Parment shows how production and textual analysis can be brought together as a representation-in-relation to approach to film studies.

Videography and documentaries

The geographical study of film today considers it not only as a medium of analysis, but also as a medium of communication and a tool or result of academic research. Garrett (2010, p. 536) discusses the advantages of including video production in the toolset of geographic research, as “[v]ideographic work gives researchers an avenue to depict place, culture, society, gesture, movement, rhythm and flow in new and exciting ways.” The production of geographic knowledge can be achieved through videography—the acquisition and analysis of qualitative video data (Knoblauch & Schnettler, 2012) and the production of films. Knowledge of the possibilities of researching film but also making film can change film geography from a form of inquiry to one of praxis (Jacobs, 2013; Lukinbeal, 2014; Lukinbeal et al., 2007; Thieme et al., 2019).

Geographers are more-and-more open to engaging with filmmaking as a research practice. This should come as now surprise for three reasons: documentary films are often cited as the origin of film geography (Aitken, 1994; Kennedy & Lukinbeal, 1997), social science sub-disciplines like visual anthropology have a focus on media making practice; and, as we move further into a digital information economy our pedagogic outputs as well as daily life practice are increasingly becoming digitalized in a pandemic Covid 19-world. The accelerated digitalization of teaching and learning environments has shown new possibilities and challenges for the incorporation of filmic media into our everyday (teaching and researching) life. Shutdowns and the associated close-downs of university campuses caused academic teaching to be moved more or less ad hoc into the digital sphere. As we all went online and became digital representations of ourselves, new geographies of teaching and learning emerged, mediated through platforms such as Zoom, MS Teams, Panopto, etc. Even though some of us certainly had previous experience with digital teaching formats, there was no way around it in this ongoing pandemic, so we quickly became media

experts in order to survive in the day-to-day professional world. However, it is important to remember that critical reflection on the use of film in learning and teaching environments is a key feature of film geography. It is essential to keep in mind that precisely in these times, in which we are (over)challenged by technology, requires an approach to education that includes the praxis of filmmaking as part of geographic media literacy (Lukinbeal, 2014).

The combination of geography and filmmaking allows geographers “to utilize new skill sets, reach new audiences and produce different forms of critically engaged audio-visualized knowledge” (Jacobs, 2013, p. 724). It is crucial to acquire a sound knowledge of how film content is produced in order to critically analyze and comprehend it (Jacobs, 2016, p. 453). Several geographers in the field thus call for strengthening the perspective of film as an academic research output (Jacobs, 2016). Through acquisition and analysis of video data (Knoblauch & Schnettler, 2012), reflexive filmmaking, and participatory videos, researchers are provided with “an avenue to depict place, culture, society, gesture, movement, rhythm and flow in new and exciting ways” (Garrett, 2010, p. 536). For research on and with film, it is essential that geographers adopt methodological approaches to the medium in a critical and determined manner and utilize established approaches for their own endeavors (Thieme et al., 2019). Further, the integration of media production into learner-centered education is key to the praxis of geographic media literacy (Jacobs, 2013; Lukinbeal, 2014; Lukinbeal et al., 2007, 2015). Numerous geographic institutes already provide media labs for integrating film-related education into their curricula. Current explorations of these filmic geographies address corporeal subjectivity, or the embodiment of the researcher/filmmaker in the production process (Özlem Özgür and Laurel Smith in this collection; Ernwein, 2020). The result is a multitude of exciting projects that show the many ways in which geographers can deal with life-world phenomena in a filmmaking way.¹ In addition,

¹ A prominent example is the website “Film geographies” maintained by Jessica Jacobs and Joseph Palis—an “online platform for anyone interested in films about geography and geographers who make films” (<https://www.filmgeographies.com/>). Related to this is the organization of specific workshops and an annual geography film festival as part of the American Association of Geographers conference. According to Jacobs and Palis, “filmmaking in an academic context can produce

geographic films can convey and reflect contemporary issues—political tensions, social diversity, crises, etc.—and thus make them accessible to a broader audience. The exploration of film as a geographic method is, for example, being incorporated into geographic curricula. Thus, excursion and project films are produced to accompany university courses, or self-contained student film projects are carried out to further enhance the academic engagement with filmmaking (Lukinbeal et al., 2007, 2015). For example, Lukinbeal and Sommerlad offered a field methods in film geography course in Los Angeles in 2016 where German graduate students spent two weeks examining the history, role, and function of frequently filmed locations. An insight into this project is provided by Julian Zschocke's contribution in this issue. Such model projects are complemented by practical film seminars in which students learn to explore geographical issues through the lens of film; or collaborative seminars with neighboring disciplines such as film studies, in which methodological approaches to the critical examination of film and its multi-layered implications are developed.

The increasing engagement of scholars with this film-geographical dimension is demonstrated by a number of essays in this volume. Özlem Özgür's essay on a participatory video (PV) project with Sub-Saharan African refugees in Tucson, Arizona provides an excellent example of film making as a part of a geographer's methodological toolkit. Unlike traditional documentaries, PV upends the power relations of the filmmaking process by turning over decision making to the participants and how they want to represent themselves. Özgür's research shows the difficulties of positionality and subjectivity in PV research especially when heightened by anti-immigrant and anti-vaccine rhetoric during the Trump Administration and the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar to Özgür's contribution, Laurel Smith's essay highlights the role of subjectivity in film making. However, in this case subjectivity goes much further beyond a singular project to encompass the author/filmmaker's embodiment and life as it relates to the film *Reencuentros*

by the Mexican filmmaker Yolanda Cruz. This autobiographical approach to living with film (Kennedy, 2008) focuses on the indigenous geopolitics of Oaxaca, Mexico and the representation of transborder communities. In contrast, both Edward Holland's and Susan Mains' essays take a closer look at the geopolitical impact of documentary films. One of those films, *Icarus* (2017), documented the Russian doping regime for athletes at the 2014 Sochi Olympics. Holland takes an in-depth look at the geopolitical impact it had following its release. In contrast, Mains looks at the agency that the documentary film *Windrush Betrayal* (2020) continues to have on British immigration policies through a convergent media approach where different forms of media intermingle around a particular discourse. The convergence of media, Mains argues, has increased because of Covid-19 restrictions and in the case of *Windrush Betrayal* (2020), film making became a central component to communicate how people experience place and government immigration policies.

Conclusion

Film geography as a research area deals with the multi-layered, cinematographically generated geographical imaginations and their interconnections and effects manifested in our everyday world. Thereby, a high potential and key characteristic of film geography lies in its ability to focus on complex interconnections of cinema and the everyday. Researchers in the field should consider film geographic perspectives, some of which have been addressed here, not as separate approaches, but rather as interrelating spheres that can be creatively combined. Escher (2006, 2019), for example, reveals how cinematic and everyday cultures are interrelated through the decisive integration of various perspectives within historical and contemporary cultural phenomena.

A highly innovative approach to film geographic research, as noted above, is to understand film as a spatial practice. Drawing on this perspective, Roberts (2020) advocates for an approach of “doing film geography,” which engages aspects of performativity and haptics to explore both creatively and critically the relationship between place(s) and filmmaking practices. Doing film geography, in a broader sense, is no longer an activity solely for the

Footnote 1 (continued)

new forms of knowledge, and help us understand how knowledge is produced” (<https://www.filmgeographies.com/about-2/>).

movie theater, living room, or smartphone. Rather, by situating film as a product and process within the larger economic cycle of production-product-consumption has allowed researchers to situate representation within the everyday business and labor practices that go into making the cinematic world. These geographies span the globe, are embedded in national, cultural, spatial identities, global geopolitical relations, the politics of labor, and require resituating the spectator as an active agent in the process. Film products are more akin to travelling landscape-objects (Della Dora, 2009) which create a series of different spatial practices and social geographies in production and consumption. Putting film products in relation to these practices are key to doing film geography.

This special issue not only gives an insight into cutting-edge research in film geography it also serves as an invitation to further explore this rich field, to introduce and adopt innovative perspectives, and to ensure a continuing place for the significance of film in geographical research. We are convinced that the pandemic times we are currently experiencing, challenging as they are, offer great potential for precisely this. Where other empirical research projects have been put on hold, pandemic restrictions afforded exciting new media and film experiences with for example new forms of digital placemaking (Norum & Polson, 2021), shifted and altered spaces of film production and consumption (e.g., streaming platforms, watch parties), transformed and dynamized virtual and cinematic travel experiences (e.g., live streaming, virtual landscape footage, AR/VR tours). Consequently, new foci are unfolding in film geography, requiring further analysis and discussion. As editors of this Special Issue, we eagerly await the emerging debates and look forward to a continuing and dynamic dialogue in the inspiring practice of doing film geography.

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