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Geography and Film: Avenues for Future Engagement

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BLAME SERGIO LEONE. It was his film *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968) that lured me down the rabbit hole. The journey began innocently enough (as most do) with a simple question. The naiveté of wondering “Why would an Italian make a Western?” quickly evolved, however, into the much more engaging inquiry “What was *happening* in Italy during the 1960s that propelled a score of predominantly southern Italian directors to make over four hundred ‘Spaghetti Westerns?’” This original desire to locate the cultural, economic, and historical motivations behind the utilization (and deconstruction) of the myths of the American West has grown into an obsessive quest to illuminate the substantial role that films have played in the creation and manipulation of place-based identities. Towards this end, I have focused on exposing the inextricable relationship between the development and popularity of Italian film genres and the distinct socio-economic and political periods of Italian post-war development from which they emerge and, most importantly, transform.

In the broadest sense I consider myself a historical geographer. More specifically, my research employs a historiographic framework informed by underlying concerns for the political, cultural, and economic *processes* of representation of imagining and concretizing identity at various geographic scales. These are processes in that their existence as hegemonic constructs of inside/outside continually requires regeneration given the practical and symbolic contestation with which they are faced. To clarify further, it is the recent past, the history of living memories so to speak, that interests me most. Identified in this way, it is easy to correlate how the processes of representation that anchor my research—of imagining and sustaining the ideology of the national, regional, and local—are directly related to the associative process of globalization, including that phenomenon’s effect on cultural and political identities and the re-imagining of place in the late twentieth century.

Throughout my research on post-World War II Italian regionalism, cinema has proven to be an invaluable and undeniable analytic and descriptive tool. There are two primary reasons for this: First, like so many iconic representations of place ranging from propagandist pamphlets and posters to travel brochures (replete with picturesque photographs) to monuments and maps, cinema is a visual medium. This is obvious. However, the semiotics of cinema extends beyond the purely visual, incorporating the linguistic (auditory) and behavioral (gestural) as well. Combined with the movement of the individual frames, the medium imbues an air of authenticity—a depiction of the real rivaled only by the subsequent development and diffusion of television. Without going as far as Pier Paolo Pasolini, who proclaimed that “cinema represents reality with reality itself,” films exist, in a purely descriptive sense, as documents of acutely specific historical times and places. Of course, this documentation is manifested in varying degrees of discernment and empirical usefulness, from a rather low level visible in the most escapist fictional films to a potentially high level rendered by films classified as “documentaries.” But what is this evidence that films ‘document’? In the most basic geographical sense, any film shot on-location captures a spatio-temporal picture of the physical landscape (the setting), allowing one to ‘locate’ via comparison the degree of natural and/or human-induced stability or change of a place. Socially and culturally, films contain evidence of time- and place-specific social relations because regardless of plot or narrative, they offer socio-cultural identifiers in both objects (the clothes, cars, appliances, for instance) and the behavior of people (the dialect they speak, their occupations, their actions and the objects they use which the viewer is able to associate with a particular class, ethnic group, etc.). Naturally, as with any other media source, the utilization of films as primary historiographic texts requires a researcher capable of locating representative works, usually those with the greatest visibility and commercial success or an identifiable cultural-political impact by the film or its author.

In truth, the unearthing of appropriate film sources for historical geographic research can be simplified and made less subjective. This brings me to my second point. Over the past twenty-odd years, a handful of geographers have critically examined the geography of, and in, films. By doing so, they have created a tapestried analytical blueprint that informs our utilization of the cinematic medium in geographic forays varying from an emphasis on the aesthetic, humanistic, and political to the iconic and purely spatial. Thirteen years later, the collection of essays compiled by Stuart Aitken and Leo Zonn (1994) still remains a seminal text within the discipline. Although the continued engagement with film by geographers is both encouraging and enlightening, I feel that a deep void still exists in scope. The vast majority of geographic research to date has focused on either individual films or directors. As a guilty party myself, I am certainly not slighting this approach. Yet, in a sense, this limits us to a particularism that denies the power that films, as cultural and often ideological products of mass consumption possess, through their ability to reiterate and transform our relationships

to other human beings and to the physical world. By extending our attention to film genres, we are able to encompass both greater time frames for understanding the social construction of place and more holistic considerations of recurrent viewpoints relative to changing socio-economic and political situations. This is because genres, in their persistence and unity of technique and/or content often elucidate the deepest and most tenacious cultural issues of a given time. Although geographers have made this call before, the formation of "*Aether: Journal of Media Geography*" entices me to make it again with the hope that these pages will be filled with a multitude of responses.

On the topic of calls, there is another void within the modes of geographic scholarship that *Aether* has the potential to fill and this is in the *making* of films and videos themselves. There is no doubt that today the channels of exchange within the communicative realm (at least in the developed world) are predominantly visual, owing to the combination of television and cinema and most recently the global diffusion of the Internet. Although the academic credibility of a multitude of television broadcasts and certain cyber alleyways is dubious at best, it is undeniable that both platforms contribute greatly to the construction of beliefs we hold about peoples and places. If we acknowledge this basic affectability then it remains a curiosity that we have done relatively little as a discipline to provide more empirically sound and complex geographic concepts for mass consumption. A connection to geographic principles is too often deferred to the reasoning and will of the spectator in that the viewer is ultimately asked to derive associations on their own between the visual geographic elements contained in non-geographical and non-critical representations and the (f)actual relevance of such depictions or themes. What is being offered in great doses as "geographical" amounts to little more than eco-porn, a natural-world voyeurism heavy on slow-motion panning shots and seductive (yet vapid) voice-over narration.

This void in film and video production by geographers surely can no longer be ascribed to a fear of subjectivity, an inherent characteristic of film and video media. If all the post-'isms' have collectively shown us anything, it is that the presentation/representation/historicization of reality is *always* subjective. Documentaries 'document' only one specific view of reality considering that it would take an infinite number of cameras and angles to objectively represent a single time- and place-specific action. The editing process itself requires choices of inclusion/exclusion and narrative structuring that are made according to the ideological goals of an individual or group, as every material work is meant to convey *something*.

If at one time the means of making films (particularly of the celluloid kind) was economically unfeasible, it is no longer the case. The advent of digital video has rendered possible a lens for tens of millions of people in the last decade. If we hesitate due to a perceived lack of technical know-how it is a shame. One needs to look no further than the hundreds of untrained Nigerians (of all ages) who contribute to the expansive growth of Nollywood or the daily uploaded video dairies put together by children

living in the favelas of São Paolo. The individuals participating in these endeavors have the desire to make known the characteristics that define their experiences with the social and physical settings in which they live and they have done this via visual media outlets that provide a high level of engagement and exposure. Why shouldn't we?