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Going to the Movies: The Filmic Site as Geographic Endeavor

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I AM THE ARCHETYPAL SUBURBAN LOS ANGELES postwar baby boomer. Born in the summer of 1946 to one parent who could trace her heritage to both the Declaration of Independence and relatives who may have wandered the hills of Wales and a father born in Basra to a Russian father and Polish mother fleeing the Revolution, I am one of four children born within a short time to a homemaker and a father returning from the commitments of war. She was 17 and he 21 when they married the day of the invasion of Guadalcanal. We lived in a variety of Southern California suburbs, with the pilgrimage ending in Simi Valley, the prototypical suburb emerging from an exurb of walnut and orange groves. I graduated from the newly constructed High School in 1964.

We loved to go to the movies when I was a child, which we did intermittently. For years, the whole family would pack into the little pointed-nose red Studebaker, and later the stylishly-finned black and red Desoto, and go to the drive-in. Among these visits I can recollect a seemingly unremarkable and representative evening that for some reason is deeply embedded in my memory. Maybe it was the movie. My recent IMDB search tells me I was six.

We went to see *Singing in the Rain*. Of course, there were cartoons and likely another film, and maybe even a newsreel, but I mostly remember that particular film, eve, and place. It all began when the grounds were not yet dark and the air was still hot. Some popular but inane tunes and mnemonics for concessions played from the little speakers that attached to the slightly rolled up window while car headlights played on the screen. We were in our pajamas, but were allowed, nonetheless, to explore the playground equipment that was in front of the screen and to create new and fleeting friendships. As darkness settled in, lights flickered or horns tooted—I can't remember which—and we knew it was time to return to the little red car, which was always parked in front of the concession and projection building, and was, we realized decades later,

packed ever so-tightly with our family of five; number six was born the next year. Of course, we systematically devoured the hotdogs, Coke, popcorn, and jujubees that came with the ritual. I'm sure I fell asleep before it was all over.

Despite falling for Debbie Reynolds and as much as I've always enjoyed Gene Kelly's song and dance performance, surreally enhanced twenty years later by Stanley Kubrick, the memory was as much about the experience of the place as it was the film. The sights, sounds, smells, interactions and sheer excitement of being at the drive-in that one eve (as with others) was something we wanted to repeat again and again. But of course the family and times were changing. We finally got our TV, we became too big to tolerate being cramped into one space with siblings, and, well, we just outgrew it; there were so many other things to do. The experience we thought would never end did just that, and at the time we didn't notice. A little over ten years later, I started going again, now as a teenager, but despite the new excitement and far different rituals of mid-1960s high school, the experience was different and for some reason was far less memorable. It was about something far more significant than the differences between *A Hard Day's Night* and Gene Kelly.

Most of us have the tendency to take everyday places for granted, especially when the ritual of visiting the same kind of setting occurs regularly and in an environment that is seemingly generic in design. Watching a film at the local multiplex, in front of your own 42" flat screen TV, on a DVD player at 35,000 feet, or through the windshield of your car are place-based experiences that can become subtle yet integral and even defining features of our daily lived practices. The nature and source of these actions are deeply ingrained in the social and technological fabric of the country and beyond, and so shifts in the character of these practices are inevitable. Any seeming constancy of form and function should not be misconstrued as the status quo. Just as my high school visits to the drive-in had different contexts than a decade before, the recent and modest revival of the drive-in movie theater here in Texas, as in the case of *The Showboat Drive-in Theatre*, hardly (and fortunately) means that we are returning to the '50s and '60s. And so these three seemingly identical drive-ins are, of course, quite different from one another, unless a frozen vision of a landscape is the only issue of concern.

Clearly, watching movies is about place and experience, and the myriad of possibilities and stories that surround them fascinate me. As geographers, we are so often interested in the character of place-experience tales, and indeed they can often serve as a spark of interest, provide insight, and serve as a case in point, but without a broader focus of concern, they simply become anecdotes. My interest here, then, is with the ways in which filmic sites and their experiences are socially constructed through the intersections of historical, social, cultural and technological processes, even if an experience of a fleeting moment of one movie is the point of discussion.

Of course, the primary concern of film studies, including the geographic contribution, has been with the textual analysis of film, and there is no doubt that such

a view will and even should remain the preeminent concern. But, as Morely has stated, “...it is necessary to consider the *context of viewing* as much as the *object of viewing*” (Jancovich, et al, 2003, p. 11). I suggest that it is time for geographers to consider place-based ‘filmic sites’ as a means of acknowledging this context. In essence, then, the primary question here becomes: How are filmic sites and their respective experiences constructed and what do these place- and space-based processes tell us about the nature of cinema and its praxis as they are set within contemporary social, cultural and technological settings?

FRAMES AND SITES

The range of theoretical frames that can be utilized for the study of filmic sites are almost as varied as the subjects of emphasis, and so, to begin, the experiential should not be privileged over the social theoretical, while a rigid division between the two should not be presumed. Study the site as you see fit, and be creative. That said, there is a literature of immediate and more empirical value that can be used in studies of filmic sites, including as introductory examples, the site as landscape (e.g., Jones 2003), the history of technology, film, and the audience (e.g., Allen 1979, 1980; Gomery 1992), and the film as consumption and experience (e.g., Corbett 1998-1999, 2001; Hiley 1999; Jancovich, et al 2003; and Waller 2001).

Given the complexities that face the research of filmic sites, allow me to suggest a broad organizing frame. I would like to begin with the essay by Dixon and Zonn (2004) in which we assume a broad-based cinematic network comprised of elements that are loosely connected by the flows of people, ideas, and things. The elements that comprise the heart of the network—technology, sites of exhibition, audience, the film, society/culture, and the industry—should be seen as primary, but not sole, points of reference. The resulting linkages and thus flows between them allow for a relational approach in which influences are considered without deterministic effects. We consider the writings of Latour (1997) only in the broadest sense of his constructs, and so we are interested in:

“... how people and things are placed in relation to one another, such that issues of inclusion and exclusion, hegemony and dependence, remain at the forefront of analysis. All phenomena in such a network...whether they be human or nonhuman, can be considered powerful in the sense that they operate as part of a collective to allow for a particular event to occur or entity to perform; in this sense, all such phenomena are of explanatory significance.”

(Dixon and Zonn 2004, 246)

And so I am interested in the study of the network and of the many intersections of culture, society, technology, environments, and audience as they physically and socially construct places and spaces of the cinematic experience. The film is not considered to

be a singular or discrete entity within this view, but instead becomes thoroughly and inseparably integrated into the multi-faceted process of filmic site construction. Each filmic site occupies a distinctive position within the network, then, and so each site is accompanied by a respective and idiosyncratic experience that in turn can be related to broader constructs.

So, *where* are these filmic sites? Contemporary venues might include your living room, your neighbor's home theater, the classroom, the walk-in multiplex, the 'revitalized downtown theater', the mobile cinema found from Scotland to India, the DVD player being watched by four-year child on a transnational flight, the charge-at-the-door Nollywood film in someone's home in Lagos, the sheet between trees at the city park for a summer eve, and on my iPod, wherever I choose. Historical venues might include the penny arcade, horse-drawn traveling picture shows of the early 20TH century, and the drive-in of the 1930s, 1950s, 1960s, and 2000s America. Each may be studied as a unique entity or it may be part of a larger systematically framed work.

And now imagine filmic sites in cinema, whereupon the site becomes a text within a text. Here the lessons learned on the construction of place can be reintegrated into the film itself. Mainstream examples abound, starting with *Cinema Paradiso*, *The Last Picture Show*, and the *Purple Rose of Cairo*. For a yet richer and more complex scenario, consider Austin's Alamo Drafthouse's Rolling Roadshow, in which *The Last Picture Show* was shown on an inflatable screen adjacent to the theater used in the film, and so the immediate filmic site was set next to the filmic site that was used in the film!

As another example that requires a careful reading are films in which mobile cinema is part of the film. Arun Kumar's *The Truck of Dreams* (2006), is the story of a mobile cinema truck that goes from one village to the next in India and, of course, involves Bollywood love while reflecting a broad set of issues concerning a changing Indian society, technology, and globalization, just for a start. Now imagine this film being shown across rural India and the resultant filmic sites. Another example, from a list of films studied by me and my old friend in Adelaide, Craig Faulkner, is John Power's *The Picture Show Man* (1977), starring the Australian Rod Taylor. It is the story of a man who wants to open his own cinema to show films of the new silent film era, but instead travels around rural Australia in a horse-drawn wagon and shows films to small appreciative gatherings. The film was produced within the frame of a re-emergent nationalism of the 1970s when the film industry relied upon the tried and true model of a constructed rural and male identity as being the heart of Australian identity, and so the tale is one of technology, gender, rural spaces, and national identity, with a string of filmic sites sitting at the heart of the issue.

The filmic site as geographic endeavor, then, holds promise for the exploration of a rich array of issues associated with cinema as praxis, technology, landscape, place, space, and text as they reflect, influence, and integrate with broader social, cultural, technological and cinematic twists, turns, and trends. The exploration could open new

avenues for understanding the many ways in which people 'see' movies, which would provide a unique complement to so many of the existing directions. As for me, and thinking back about my first VCR, it has opened a stroll down a long memory lane.

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