

CINEMA AND GEOGRAPHY: GEOGRAPHIC SPACE, LANDSCAPE AND TERRITORY IN THE FILM INDUSTRY

Agustín Gámir Orueta y Carlos Manuel Valdés

Department of Humanities
University Carlos III, Madrid

As occurs in other forms of artistic expression, such as literature, fine arts, and photography, film has an enormous capacity, possibly even greater than the others, for transmitting images. Despite the fact that cinema supplies a plethora of images from the whole world, implying a strong and varied connection to geographical space, research on the subject, in a geographic context, has hardly begun.

In these pages we will present, from a very general standpoint, some of the characteristics of cinema as a means of visual information, as well as the main existing connections between film and geographic space, paying special attention to the two-way sense of this relationship. This relationship consists, on the one hand, of the use of geographic space in a film production, and on the other, of the consequences of the production on said space, in both the physical and symbolic aspects, if both show clear elements of this connection.

- CINEMA AS MEDIA

The rise of photography and cinema, along with the advances in the technical means of reproduction and distribution of images, has contributed to generalize the visual familiarity of many geographic spaces, enlarging considerably the potential viewing public. We could call this the «democratization» of the visual image of some, until now, inaccessible, and even, to the majority of the population, unknown places and landscapes. Inarguably, films and documentaries have, during a century of their existence, contributed to a new level of geographic culture.

In any case, the representation of reality in film implies a series of alterations. The difference between screen space and action space, and between real time and film time, is obvious, but it is necessary too, to point out cinema's limitations in reaching a fully quintessential perception, and in recreating atmospheric phenomena, or on the other hand, recognizing its ability to present from points of view impossible for the human eye.

- CINEMA AND GEOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

In spite of the great number of images with greater or lesser geographic significance, and its great capacity to create worlds of fiction, Geography as a study, has paid little and only very recent attention to the effects of cinema as an interesting means for the analysis of territory, of landscape, and the ways in which these two elements are understood by filmmakers, and by the public itself.

An analysis of the literature on the relationship between cinema and geography, allows one to recognize some fundamental aspects of attention. One of them deals with the teaching of geography; many works limit themselves to the analysis of the geographic components of a few titles, while others focus more on proposing specific methods in the geographical analysis of films. Other aspects have to do with economical geography (the relevance of the film industry in its different manifestations), and with cultural geography, (an analysis of the different tendencies to create geographical images and their possibilities for interpretation, which can even include political ones). Other approaches, which should also be mentioned, are a cross between the cultural and the economic, with an emphasis on analysing the economic consequences of film productions, especially in the tourist sector.

Apart from these different possible lines of analysis, there are three essential paths of study in the relationship between cinema and geography. On the one hand, the technical and aesthetic systems applied in the filming of a geographic space. Secondly, there is the historical and social context in which the filming is produced, and finally, the impact which the geographical representation has on the viewing public.

- CINEMA AND GEOGRAPHIC SPACE

There is a two-way sense in the relationship between cinema and geographic space. Firstly, geographic elements influence the film production, thus giving a series of physical factors which influence the shooting in certain places, despite the fact that other factors could contribute more believably or with a better result. Secondly, the activity of filming influences the geographic space and its perception. The power of certain film industries contributes to an inequality apparent in the frequency in which certain geographic environments are presented. It is also true that more developed environments are shown than crisis zones. For that reason one could speak of a clear duality in geographic space represented in cinema.

The images which the viewers perceive, even when they are real, often challenge the detailed reconstruction of the scenery through which the characters move; something which is very clear in the case of cities. Films contribute to the creation or the familiarization of emblematic scenery, through its reiteration or magnified representation.

From the above, it is easy to conclude the existence of «duplication» in the images of perceived space by the average person: real space and fiction space (the world of film and television). And, if we go one step further, we see how so often the individual's approach to the real world is mediatized by the images of film and television, as in the case of *movie tourism*.

Locations that appear in film are conditioned by diverse factors; natural, economic, and aesthetic-narrative. According to the correspondence produced between narrative space and

filming space, the difference could be described as «authentic location», when both concepts coincide, «supplanted location», when the coincidence does not exist, «modified, simplified, or imaginary places».

With respect to the supplanting of sites, this was justified in filmmaking's early history, as there were many technical difficulties which made filming exteriors difficult, resulting in the extensive use of sets, both indoors and out. As time passed, however, after solving the early technical difficulties, the supplanting of locations was motivated by such geographic considerations as the number of sunlight hours available, predominant atmospheric conditions, and topography, and from the human point of view, there was the lack of sufficient infrastructure. There were also technical difficulties in shooting caused by surroundings with intense activity, such as large cities. Economic reasons such as the high cost of travel, and difficult or impossible to reach locations existed too, and political-administrative reasons such as wars, or locations protected for their natural value. There were even cultural aspects, such as religious sites with limited or prohibited access. All interior scenes are filmed in the actual studios, which prefer to film nearby rather than where the narrative really takes place.

In reality, the use of «authentic locations» is limited to those films which are set in environments found near the studios, or in very ambitious projects, more and more feasible today considering the recent developments in transportation, in which the director or producer consider it essential to move to other surroundings. Another form of change in the reality of the set which appears in films happens after adapting the scenery to the story. This is something especially common in some genres like science fiction or adventure.

- LANDSCAPE, NATURE AND CINEMA

The possibilities of working with landscape in cinema are numerous. In any case, technical conditions have improved, achieving great credibility and highly powerful imagery. The addition of colour, better quality of film, new formats and styles of shots, and even the use of aerial shots, are some of the factors that have contributed to improving the possibilities of presenting landscape, or its relevance.

It isn't difficult to find parallels in the use of landscape in film and literature. It is normal, especially in some types of cinema, or in the works of specific directors, to give a certain degree of relevance to the landscape, or at least to find a backdrop that lends itself to either give importance to the psychological characteristics of the characters, or to provide a context which increases the drama of the plot.

Apart from these considerations, most normal film production tends to count on (often to make the final result more spectacular) landscapes which are exotic or have great natural beauty. Nature, through a medium as powerful as cinema, is easily converted into landscape, that is, modified by human perception. In this sense, the view of film toward nature has changed since the ideas of «reverential fear», to other ideas which promote the exploitation of its resources, and more recently showing examples of degradation resulting from the productive activity of modern society, and even on occasion, the natural world's capacity for revenge, as in the case of disaster films.

- CINEMA AND TERRITORY

The term territory, understood as a special component, either natural or artificial, which often implies political-administrative references, is another concept which films, consciously or not, allude to in a very normal way. For example, some films portray with great detail and importance, certain urban morphologies as an essential context of specific marginal underworlds. Some territorial environments, beyond their own physiognomy, are converted into basic elements of the story, such as monotonous territories, mountainous territories etc. The connection to territory is evident in the actual scripts of some films, which tend to intervene in the territory, sometimes pointing out elements of transformation or conflict.

Another territorial orientation has clearer political or political-ideological connections. The powers that be have charged cinema with the task of contributing to the formation or development of a national and even imperial consciousness. Films ideological function has been almost inevitably, historically linked to the possibilities of the film industry's development. In any case, it is true that the degree of ideological compromise varies greatly, from propaganda films, to those which, in an indirect way, transmit the nation-state's particular values.

- THE TERRITORIAL AND ECONOMIC REPERCUSSIONS OF THE FILM INDUSTRY

If cinema, as an industry, carries clear implications from an industrial point of view, (in some countries, as in the United States, it is considered a leading industry), there are also other economic derivations from the business: the creation of studios, or shooting expenses when the crew has to be moved to another location, clearly generate profits where the activity takes place. But maybe the most interesting of all is the effect that created the term *movie tourism*. We have already mentioned film and television's capacity to transmit images from other geographic contexts, and this has functioned for many years as tourist company's perfect allies. *Movie tourism* is the kind of tourism influenced by the screening of a film. Some studies have started to calculate the growth of tourism in certain places after the opening of certain films. This phenomena has led to the creation of the so-called *film commissions* or *film offices*, which work as intermediaries between the local councils and the film industry to promote and encourage filming in their working environments. They even develop marketing strategies for tourism, generating products and services which encourage sightseeing, like movie maps, for example.