CINEMA AND THE CITY

FILM AND URBAN SOCIETIES IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

Edited by
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Some years ago, when driving toward Rome along the via Tuscolana, I caught a glimpse of what seemed to be a Gothic cathedral standing in an empty field. Stopping for a closer look, I discovered it to be a model, considerably less than actual size, and, although more than just a façade, not completely three-dimensional either. I then realized that I was—as I should have guessed—only a few miles from the Cinecittà studios, headquarters of the Italian film industry since their inauguration by Mussolini in 1937, and that this therefore must be a film set. It didn’t have to be perfectly three-dimensional because only the front and a bit of the side would be needed for the film, and it didn’t have to be full-size because the shot in which it was going to be used would be a “process shot”—that is to say, one which mixes direct-to-camera action with other more or less synthetic elements.

The most likely use of that cathedral, I suspected, would be as part of the so-called Schüfftan process, in which a miniaturized set is located at the side of the action to be filmed while a partially scraped mirror is placed in front of the camera at an angle of 45 degrees. The action would be shot through the scraped part of the mirror while the little cathedral would be visible through the unscraped part. The process got its name from the great German cinematographer Eugen Schüfftan, who devised it in response to the problems highlighted in 1915 by the extreme cost of building full-size sets for the re-creation of ancient Babylon in D. W. Griffith’s Intolerance. Working for the major German film company, Ufa (Universum Film AG), he put his invention to work in Fritz Lang’s Metropolis in 1927 and it became standard
practice in the studio film thereafter. It can be seen as part of a generalized move, which gained momentum from about 1905 and was complete by the mid-1920s, to control the cinema—not just to control costs (always a problem), but to control the whole filmmaking process, including the selection of materials necessary for there to be a film in the first place. If everything could be simulated in the studio there was no need to depend on the vagaries of the outside world—bad weather, out-of-period architecture, pilots who refuse to fly between tall buildings. If the filmmakers had a concept, they could enact it.

But not depending on the outside world also meant not learning from it. Filmmaking ceased to be an encounter with reality from which the filmmaker emerged—as the case might be—chastened or inspired. Concept became everything.

The first casualty when the cinema retreated into the studio was nature. The second was the built environment. We have probably all seen films in which machine-made snowflakes fall gently down onto plastic flowers, but probably not too often, because the artifice is too blatant and increasingly filmmakers avoid it. It looks wrong, and it is wrong. With built environments the situation is more ambiguous. Studio sets of buildings can imitate them almost perfectly, even if it does sometimes involve making miniature models if the original is too big, and many components of a set are arguably not imitations at all. A shot in a film of a man sitting at a desk, looking out of a window toward what we have been told is a garden, shows us a real man sitting at a real desk, looking out of a glazed opening in a real, if flimsy, wall. The only unreal thing is what he is presumed to be looking at. Ontologically as well as perceptually, the offence against built things is lesser than against natural things, so it is not surprising if it is more frequent.

The fact that it is easy, in a photographic medium, to simulate built environments has had important consequences, particularly for the relationship between cinema and the city. It has opened up a number of choices for filmmakers, beginning with a basic one: to confine oneself to what already exists or to create different things in accordance with the dictates of the imagination. Different answers to this dilemma have been offered at different times. Thus in 1927, the year when Lang, Schüfftan, and their collaborators created the imaginary dystopian city of Metropolis, another German filmmaker, Walter Ruttmann, went out onto the streets of Berlin to film what he saw (or some of the things he saw) under the title Berlin: Symphony of a City. In 1945 we can note a sharp divide between, on the one hand, the Italian neorealists, eager to remake contact with perceived reality by shooting in almost documentary fashion their country's war-ravaged cityscapes (for example, Roberto Rossellini's Rome Open City, 1945) and, on the other hand, filmmakers like Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger in Britain, who ostentatiously turned their backs on the city streets to concentrate on lavishly
recreated interiors and exteriors with painted backdrops (for example, *Black Narcissus*, 1947).

In relation specifically to the representation of built environments I propose to start with a broad-brush distinction (which we shall refine later) between two types of city film. On the one hand, there is the kind of film which is mostly studio-shot (perhaps with the additional enhancement of special effects) and often offers a generally dystopian vision of an undifferentiated "city" which is either unidentifiable with any actual place or only loosely so. This is the type to which *Metropolis* belongs, as do a number of science-fiction films, a lot of *films noirs*, and some films which mix the two genres such as Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982), but also some less easily categorized films such as F. W. Murnau’s silent classic *Sunrise* (1927). Then, at the other extreme, there are films which are mostly location-shot and happen in a place which is identifiable, very often named, and where the name may even form part of the title. Thus *Hell Is a City* (Val Guest, 1959) takes place in a city recognizable as Manchester but not (to my recollection) named as such, whereas Tony Richardson’s *A Taste of Honey* (1961) is not only clearly located in Manchester and nearby Salford but draws attention to the specifics of its setting by sending the characters off to an even more recognizable (and named) Blackpool for the day. A decade earlier the Boulting brothers’ *Brighton Rock* (1947) not only shows its resort setting but names it in the title. The attraction of films in this second category can be touristic, as personal dramas are played out against attractive backdrops—San Francisco in Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958) or Venice in Joseph Losey’s *Eva* (1962). But films in this category can also show aspects of cities which do not correspond to audiences’ pre-existing expectations, as for example in Ermanno Olmi’s *Legend of the Holy Drinker* (1988), set in a suburban Paris far from the tourist trail or that of filmmakers who follow it.

The dystopian city vision does not always need special effects. *Film noir* is a case in point. The cinematic antecedents of 1940s American *film noir* are to be found in studio-based German films of the Weimar period and in the French réalisme poétique (also studio based) of the late 1930s—films such as Marcel Carné and Jacques Prévert’s atmospheric thriller *Le Jour se lève* (1939). But its literary origins are the hard-boiled detective novels of Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain, and Raymond Chandler, all of them, but especially Chandler, poets of urban *anomie*. Chandler’s Los Angeles, while undoubtedly a very subjectively conceived literary creation, is also a very specific socio-geography. Marlowe’s drives around the city are minutely described as he moves from neighborhood to neighborhood, each with its distinctive styles of architecture and its distinctive inhabitants, from old-money Pasadena to new-money Westside, passing through pockets of poverty and degradation on the edges of downtown and elsewhere. The screen adaptations of Chandler’s novels made in the 1940s and 1950s make only the most perfunctory attempt
to capture either the sociology or the geography of the novels. It is enough for them that "the city" is a place of crime, corruption, and darkness. They are mostly shot in the style from which *film noir* gets its name, with high-contrast lighting and lots of night scenes. A few lyrical daytime shots, set in the country and shot on location, may be inserted to make the contrast explicit — for example, *The Killers* (1946), *Out of the Past* (1947), and *On Dangerous Ground* (1952). The most celebrated of the Chandler adaptations, Howard Hawk's 1946 film of *The Big Sleep*, contains not a single shot which looks as if it was taken elsewhere than on the Warner Bros. lot in Burbank, though others, such as Robert Montgomery's rendering of *The Lady in the Lake* (also 1946), do contain actual daytime exteriors. It is not until the 1970s that you get a Chandler adaptation which takes a real interest in Southern California as a peopled environment, and that is Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye*, made in 1973. But Altman's film is anachronistic: rightly enough, he makes no attempt to re-create Chandler's Los Angeles of a quarter-century earlier, but he does offer a plausible representation of Los Angeles in the 1970s. (Altman is, incidentally, one of the few American directors who actually takes the trouble to make films about Southern California which look authentic.)

Of course, the division is not absolute. There are a number of studio films which name the city in which they are set and throw in a few location shots to prove their authenticity. Hitchcock does this, quite aggressively, in *Psycho* (1960), which opens in Phoenix, Arizona, before proceeding to the spooky motel preserved, to this day, at Universal studios. Even in *film noir* the city may be named, though you may not see much of it except at night. Generic cities can, at a pinch, be created on location (this is the case with Godard's *Alphaville* (1965), set in an imaginary future but entirely location-shot in Paris), and cities can stand in for other cities. This procedure is called "license-plateing" because what happens is that you shoot a film, say, in Canada but all the cars are decked out with American license plates. In his novel *Girlfriend in a Coma*, Canadian writer Douglas Coupland has one of his characters describe the use of Vancouver as an all-purpose location: "They film everything here because Vancouver's unique: You can morph it into any North American city or green space with little effort and even less expense, but at the same time the city has its own distinct feel. See that motel over there? That was 'Pittsburgh' in a Movie of the Week." (In passing I'd note here a slight hint of Canadinism — a resentment that although Vancouver is different it manages not to seem so, and can be so comfortably subsumed into the United States.)

Shooting on location is sometimes an aesthetic choice, sometimes an economic one, often probably a mixture. In cases of marginal choice, well-equipped but high-salary businesses such as the American film industry will often go for the studio option, while in a country with poor facilities and low
labor costs it may be cheaper to shoot the same scene on location. Italian neorealism was famous for its use of location shooting, but as soon as he could afford to, Federico Fellini broke with it and shot most of *La dolce vita* (1960) in studio sets. By re-creating Rome's fashionable via Veneto in the studio he could make far more things happen as he wished them than if he had been in a real street with real traffic and real passersby to contend with. And many — indeed most — location-shot films involve a lot of tampering with their locations to make it possible to shoot them. The shepherd’s hut on the island where the characters take refuge in Michelangelo Antonioni’s *L’avventura* (1960) was built by the art director, there being no huts (or shepherds) on the island itself. Furthermore, despite advances in microphone technology, the presence of alien sounds on locations (a passing airplane, a child screaming), or just too much sound (the lovely but noisy waterfall where the lovers swear undying love), means that location-shot films will also often have studio-dubbed dialogue.

In spite of all this compromise, however, there remains a core of films, one of whose characteristics is that they yield up a sense of place that would have been impossible without the ontological link between nominal setting and actual location. For the reason already mentioned, many such films are set in the countryside, which, whether represented as harsh and unfriendly to man or as fertile and yielding, is hard to simulate in the studio. But there are also films whose representation of the city plays heavily on authenticity or where the decision to shoot on location radically alters the character of the film. In the latter category, I would cite in particular François Truffaut's *Tirez sur le pianiste* (1960). This is a *film noir* story, taken from a novel by David Goodis who, as a writer, is even more a poet of urban *anomie* than Chandler.5 But it is also a Paris film, as are so many films by Truffaut and his French New Wave contemporaries.6 The decision to set and shoot the story in Paris contributes to giving the film a very different and generally more domestic atmosphere than the novel. It is not that Paris is somehow a more cozy place than Philadelphia (where the novel is set) — though it undoubtedly is the case that Truffaut is a cozier director than Goodis was a novelist. A more substantial and more generalizable reason is that consistency of atmosphere is more easily realized in the studio, where every detail can be constructed to fit a purpose. Goodis’s mean streets, every bit as mean as those of Chandler or Scorsese, would be hard to find in any actual American city. Locations, however carefully researched, are impure. Whatever idea the filmmakers may have, the location cannot be guaranteed to enact it. Indeed, it can almost be guaranteed not to enact it. To make it fit a preconceived idea the filmmakers have to rough it up a bit, force it to conform. That is why there will always be an art direction credit even on a 100 percent location-shot film, since at the very least someone is going to rearrange the furniture, put different pictures on the wall, and generally redesign a place around the
characters whose lives are being portrayed. This is also what makes Godard's *Alphaville* such an amazing *tour de force*. Everything in it has been pressed into service to stand in for something relevant to the action. An extraordinary bureaucracy, ruled by a monster computer, lurks behind the doors of a simple hotel corridor, while the computer itself, Alpha 60, is represented by what proves on closer inspection to be the control panel of a building's air-conditioning system. More frequently, however, the location is wanted to represent itself: if a film is set in a particular city, it (or parts of it) will be shot in that city in order to guarantee authenticity; but differences can always emerge between what the location is and what it is supposed to be for the purposes of the story, thus undermining the original concept, weakening it, or extending it, depending on your point of view.

There are plenty of films which start with an idea and then go out and find locations to fit. One of the best Los Angeles films, in my opinion, is Roman Polanski's 1974 film *Chinatown*, which succeeds brilliantly, with the aid of some period costumes and automobiles and the odd lick of paint, in creating the atmosphere of the city as it was before the war, using surviving clusters of suburban houses. The resultant effect is—probably deliberately—quite disconcerting. The story of political and sexual corruption is all the more disturbing for taking place in such an Ideal Home environment, representative of the innocent California dream of the first half of the twentieth century. The fact that the world Polanski depicts can be physically brought before the audience in the form of photographic testimony unsettles its temporality and distinguishes the film from those set more comfortably in the past.

Most interesting, however, from my point of view, are the films in which the city as it is acts as a conditioning factor on the fiction precisely by its recalcitrance and its inability to be subordinated to the demands of the narrative. The city becomes a protagonist, but unlike the human characters, it is not a fictional one. The idea of the city as protagonist is quite an old one in cinema. A number of so-called “city films” were made in the silent period, art-film documentaries with a limited admixture of staged or quasi-fictional elements, which generally portray the city and urban life in a more or less celebratory mode. But the idea that the city might infiltrate itself to become protagonist of an otherwise fictional film was slower to emerge, perhaps impeded by the move to studio filming in the 1910s and 1920s. If fiction filmmakers fled the studio in the years before World War Two, it was more often to immerse themselves in nature than to explore the relation between character and built environment.

The big change comes with Italian neorealism at the end of World War Two. Roberto Rossellini's three immediately postwar films—*Rome Open City* (1945), *Paisà* (1946), and *Germany Year Zero* (1948)—each in a different way homes in on war-devastated urban environments which provide the condi-
tions of life for the films' characters and which are effective because absolutely authentic. Rossellini pushes this same concern with environment even further in a later film, *Journey to Italy* (1954), in which a character played by (and to a certain extent based on) Ingrid Bergman enters a personal crisis brought on by her experience of Naples. This film was to have an enormous influence on the young French critics – François Truffaut, Eric Rohmer, Jacques Rivette, Jean-Luc Godard – who were to form the core of the *nouvelle vague* at the end of the decade and all of whom, in their different ways, were to make street filming a part of their style.

The neorealist city, particularly in Rossellini, is more complex than it appears. At first sight the neorealist film seems only to declare: this is how things are. In fact it is saying: this is how things were. For by the time the audience sees the film, what is being shown is a testimony to what the filmmaker (in this respect similar to the still photographer) saw at a particular time. Not only that: the city is often a ruin, and the film's testimony is to the prior existence of an integral city, prior to war, destruction, and decay, which demands to be restored.

Neorealism is above all a cinema of reconstruction, and its aesthetic in this respect follows its politics.

A very different conception of location filming is found in Italy a few years later in the work of Michelangelo Antonioni, a more pictorialist director than Rossellini, who had different reasons for preferring location shooting. Antonioni is a landscape artist, for whom physical settings of all kinds are important – deserts, seascapes, townscape. It is the physicality of the setting, as much as the life within it, that provides him with his initial inspiration; or more accurately it is the possibility of integrating into a composition physical setting and some human fact which outside that setting would not appear significant. It is, therefore, essential for Antonioni that the setting preexists the act of filming by which an image is crystallized. It is very rare for him to use constructed sets, and when he does so it is always in a location rather than in a studio.

As an urban filmmaker, Antonioni reaches a high point with *La notte* (1960), set in Milan. The late 1950s and early 1960s were the years of Italy's "economic miracle," which was concentrated in the North and in Milan in particular. Antonioni's modernist concrete and glass city differs radically not only from the immediately postwar neorealist version but also from that portrayed by Luchino Visconti in *Rocco and His Brothers* a year earlier. Visconti's Milan, although it has modern bits, is historic, and the filmmaker dramatizes the city, using its landmarks – the Central Station, the spiky Gothic cathedral – as settings for dramatic action. For Antonioni it is more a matter of textures and surfaces, aural as well as visual, checkered patterns of rough concrete and smooth glass, the cacophony of motor horns translated into quasi-musical harmony. Although *La notte* is routinely described by critics as pessimistic, in its approach to the city it celebrates the here and now. In
Figure 8.1 Michelangelo Antonioni filming *La notte* on the streets of Milan, 1960. (Courtesy BFI Stills Library)
Antonioni’s approach the city lives in a different way both from the expressionist cities of Metropolis or Blade Runner and from the popular cities of neorealism. But Antonioni’s cities share with neorealism one fundamental thing. They are there before they signify, and they signify because they are there; they are not there merely in order to be bearers of signification. The fact of being able to work with real materials, which retain their original quality however much they are artistically transformed, is a privilege which filmmakers neglect at their peril.

Notes

1 Born in Breslau (now Wroclaw) in 1893, he later emigrated first to France (where he became Eugène) and then to the United States (becoming Eugene Shuftan) before eventually returning to Europe. Although best known for his studio work, he also shot the documentary feature Menschen am Sonntag in 1929 before escaping from Germany. In France before the war he shot Quai des brumes (1938) for Marcel Carné, and after the war was Georges Franju’s cameraman on Les Yeux sans visage and La Tête contre les murs (both 1959). The process described here is sometimes referred to in its American spelling as the Shuftan process and is still in use, although it has increasingly been superseded – first, by advances in the technique of making matte shots and, more recently, by computer imaging.

2 It should be added that Olmi’s source - the novel by Joseph Roth – also obliges him to have scenes set in a mining village in Silesia, for which he uses a stand-in location which looks to me suspiciously like eastern France.

3 There is an undoubted oddity in the fact that although the American film industry is based in Hollywood, California, a suburb of Los Angeles, it has yielded up few films that represent its home turf New York and San Francisco have both been more memorable sites for films than has Los Angeles. I am never too happy with this kind of speculation, but it’s almost as if Hollywood didn’t want it to seem as if its products came from a real place for fear that this would destroy the mystique. There have not been all that many Hollywood-on-Hollywood films and, of those there have been, very few are city films. The great exception is Sunset Boulevard (1950), but were I to be asked to name my favorite film about Hollywood (Hollywood the business, not Hollywood the suburb), I think I would name a film that takes place, as its title implies, somewhere else: Vincente Minnelli’s Two Weeks in Another Town (1962).


5 The original title of Goodis’s novel – a neglected masterpiece – was Down There. It was retitled Shoot the Piano Player after the success of the film drew attention to it.

6 The New Wave directors can perhaps be divided into those who often set their films in Paris – Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette (see Paris nous appartient (1960) or Céline et Julie vont en bateau (1974)), and, less consistently, François Truffaut, and those who prefer provincial settings – most of all Jacques Demy, but also Claude Chabrol and Eric Rohmer.
7 _L'avventura_ again can serve as an example. For the film Antonioni "borrowed" a flat from a wealthy acquaintance to shoot a small scene. When he and the art department had finished with it, according to a diary included with the published script, it was left "like a battleground" (_L'avventura_, Bologna: Cappelli, 1960, pp. 29-30).

8 Some of the best IA films have been made by émigrés or visitors from Europe. Besides Polanski I would cite Billy Wilder's _Double Indemnity_ (1944) and _Sunset Boulevard_ (1950), Antonioni's _Zabriskie Point_ (1969), and Wim Wenders's _The State of Things_ (1981) and _Paris Texas_ (1984).

9 Besides Ruttman's _Berlin_, already mentioned, the genre includes Alberto Cavalcanti's _Rien que les heures_ (Paris, 1926) and Dziga Vertov's _Man with the Movie Camera_ (Moscow and Kiev, 1928).

10 Not every location in these films is precisely what it claims to be, and some of the scenes in _Germany Year Zero_ have action filmed in a Rome studio in front of back-projections of Berlin locations, but almost all the exteriors are places unchanged since the moment described in the fiction.

11 This idea was suggested to me by James Donald in conversation after the _Cinema and the City_ conference in Dublin in March 1999.

12 In an article written in 1959, Antonioni gives a vivid description of arriving in a small town and being served a coffee in a bar overlooking a windswept central square. He describes the very ordinary-looking woman serving the coffee and the only oddity in the scene, which is her unusual name, Delitta (feminine of delitto, the Italian word for crime - because, she explains, "my father thought it a crime to bring children into the world"). Capturing a scene like this, Antonioni says, is his idea of the real _cinéma vérité_ (Antonioni, "Making a Film is My Way of Life," reprinted in Marga Cottino-Jones (ed.), _The Architecture of Vision_, New York: Marsilio, 1996, pp. 14-17).

13 There is an exception to this rule in the form of _La signora senza camelie_ (1953), part of whose action set is set in a studio and which therefore uses the studio as a location.