



Space, Place, and Case: Surveying the Grounds of Cinema History

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REVIEW ARTICLE

Space, Place, and Case: Surveying the Grounds of Cinema History

Locating the Moving Image: New Approaches to Film and Place, edited by Julia Hallam and Les Roberts, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2014, viii + 266 pp., 40 b&w illus., US\$32.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-253-01105-3.

Silent Cinema and the Politics of Space, edited by Jennifer M. Bean, Anupama Kapse, and Laura Horak, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2014, x + 346 pp., 55 b&w illustrations, US\$35.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-253-01226-5.

Of Empire and the City: Remapping Early British Cinema, by Maurizio Cinquegrani, Oxford and Bern, Peter Lang, 311 pp., US\$72.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-3-034-30923-6.

Where are we? How did we get here? These questions could be asked by travelling companions. At first, they seem to make the same inquiry about their common destination. Yet, the two questions betray surprisingly distinct concerns and methods of wayfinding. In the first, an explorer disembarks in a strange place and begins to describe what she perceives at hand. In the second, a passenger awakes in a familiar space and seeks to understand what happened while he slept. Each seeks to know what the other takes for granted. Too bad, in fact, they're not travelling together, geographer and historian arm-in-arm. There's a parallel in the divergent modes of inquiry in two recent anthologies addressing a shared problematic of cinema and locality: Hallam and Roberts' *Locating the Moving Image* is more concerned with geographic methods that compare across spaces; Bean, Kapse and Horak's *Silent Cinema and the Politics of Space* is more concerned with historical, critical case studies for their theoretical insights. *Locating the Moving Image* is more invested in geographies of the mainstream, often incredibly localized and particular; *Silent Cinema and the Politics of Space* is more engaged in histories from the margins, often circulating on a global scale. Place | Space; Geography | History; Mapping | Interpreting; Method | Theory. Of course, place mapping and the politics of space aren't dichotomous, nor are they as neatly disciplined as the reserves of geographers and historians, but the empirical question and its imaginative cousin are nonetheless distinguishable despite the family resemblance. Ultimately, the question is whether cinema as their common site binds their divergent approaches into a new 'spatial turn' in film studies?

In a third recent book – the only one that fits strictly into the domain of 'early' popular visual culture – Maurizio Cinquegrani remaps British non-fiction film up to WWI as a matter *Of Empire and City*. This book seems to present a marriage of the two concerns, and may offer a sense of what a study of cinema can realize when applied to both geographic place and political space. Allow me to map my own take on the spatial terrain in cultural studies before I turn to consider how

these books might chart a spatial turn in film history. Decades old, the premises of the spatial turn in cultural studies and the cultural turn in geography still stand: the transformation of city space (i.e., colonized space, i.e., globalized space, i.e., anywhere) into real estate is the foundation for capitalism as a world system, and its cross-currents of urbanization, industrialization, and modernization.¹ This work was heavily indebted to Michel de Certeau and also Henri Lefebvre, who had proposed that *The Production of Space* depends upon turning lived, concrete experience into abstract space. In part, the result was the coordinate grid of real estate, but also any rationalized coordination facilitating the spatial management of bureaucracies, policing, consumption, tourism, science, and sociology itself (de Certeau, 1984; Lefebvre 1991). Cultural processes transform lived place into ideological space; in modernity, experience can be erased with the imposition of the conceptual homogeneity of space, in capitalism rendering Earth itself into resources to exploit and explore. As elementary abstractions, polished core principles, the axiomatic status of these ideas could hardly be overturned. Vision and visuality, in general, were concurrently cast in similar terms as part of the spatializing process of mapping power onto other. As an artform, however, cinema retained instead a distinctly emancipatory sheen.²

In contrast to the typical close-reading of film analysis, the premises of the spatial turn in cultural studies mark out an approach that traces distinctions, maps differences, and catalogues variation and change. For example, Franco Moretti charts literary history as an atlas, as a matter of graphs, maps, and trees, continuing Fredric Jameson's claim that contemporary theorizing requires a spatial sensibility in order to maintain a critical distance from modernism's temporal bias that favours the present (Jameson 1991; Moretti 2005, 1999). Moretti turned to maps in order to grapple with immense amounts of detailed data derived from 'distant reading' across texts and genres (Moretti 2000).³ In this light, my own work on early cinema exhibition grapples with needing to amass quantities of what little information exists at all. Outside metropolitan cities, a newspaper's simple notice of the existence of an early cinema audience is in itself a significant fact, but only if connected to the wider circulation of cinema. Such 'New Cinema History', as media archaeologies, provide an almanac of miscellany produced from ephemera without producing a comprehensive atlas of the terrain.⁴ It is here that these recent books collectively take a spatial turn that, in contrast, seeks to account for the relation between cinema and locality. In the comparative project of their compilations, both *Locating the Moving Image* and *Silent Cinema and the Politics of Space* seek a more or less generalized understanding, but one aims to produce new methodological tools while the other provides a critique.

Hallam and Roberts explicitly claim we are amidst a spatial turn in film studies, but it is not clear whether Bean, Kapse and Horak's book fits within its contours. The crucial point comes early in the opening chapter of *Locating the Moving Image*, as Roberts and Hallam situate their authors' efforts within an 'empirical turn' that encompasses the shift to the spatial. Their project overall is less concerned with the conceptual problematic of film and place than with the full variety of methodologies for empirical (and only therefore located) studies of cinema, intended to cover all variety of relations between cinema and locality. The book works within an interdisciplinary and comparative framework, which is spelled out formally in Roberts' prior work, borrowed here to serve as an organizing and unifying principle. 'Five thematic areas ... constitute what in broad terms may be

provisionally defined as “cinematic cartography”.’ These are: (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’ (Hallam and Roberts 2014, 8). These five types of methods are immediately mapped onto three ‘overarching critical frameworks’ that delineate the supposed spatial turn in film studies: spatial anthropology (ethnographies of film practices as embedded in cultures); spatial ontology (cinema as cartographic space-making); and spatial historiography (empirical mapping of historic production and exhibition). Despite the pains taken to represent this expansive topology, all but two of the chapters fall into this last framework. This focus, however, is the book’s strength, as it coheres as a snapshot of contemporary research that visualizes film historical practices in spatial terms: maps abound, and a visit to interactive websites is a must to fully animate the visualizations depicted here in half-toned black-and-white versions. In full disclosure, my own research falls squarely here, and several contributors are close colleagues and collaborators.

Even a casual thumb through *Locating the Moving Image* shows maps to be central to nearly every chapter. A majority of the authors use specialized Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software to generate maps from historic information. Co-editor Julia Hallam charts the locations depicted in city films of Liverpool; Verhoeven and Arrowsmith map openings and closings of cinema in post-WWII Melbourne; Caquard, Naud and Wright map the contours of domestic film revenues for Canadian films. A fascinating example of the potential for digital, interactive mapping comes from Robert Allen’s efforts to digitize and layer a trove of North Carolina film history atop the state’s Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps. Each of these maps was itself a palimpsest, literally pasting a layer atop the base map whenever something was built or destroyed. On their own, they are an analogue wonder of encyclopaedic local context. For locations of movie theatres across North Carolina, Allen affixed a wealth of information from all variety of other documents. It’s an incredible way to learn and teach local cinema cultures. Yet, maps mostly show information; they don’t tell stories. It’s thus vital to see Jeffrey Klenotic go into great depth with the story of May Richardson, small-town independent female exhibitor in New Hampshire. Statewide GIS maps are juxtaposed against historic rail and road maps and newspaper advertising depicting the ‘show-woman’ herself, growing older, through her work as a local film exhibitor. Does May Richardson animate the GIS information? Or does the GIS data contextualize her story? Clearly both. In just the past couple of years, since this research was first done, mapping techniques can now be used with barely a learning curve at all. Any researcher or student can now create a Google Spreadsheet of events and locations, effortlessly transposed onto a Google Map. Does this lowered threshold for mapping as method change the achievement of the research done here earlier, more laboriously? Not at all; but it does beg the question ‘What next?’ Visualizing spatial patterns as they change over time still resists the transfer to print, leading here to awkward tables of maps frozen at intervals over time. Digital publishing may soon overcome this limitation.

Jennifer Bean’s introduction to *Silent Cinema and the Politics of Space* situates her co-editors’ Kapse and Horak, and their authors’ efforts firmly within the restricted, decidedly disciplinary, terrain of the ‘New Film History’, as first defined by Thomas Elsaesser and best known through Tom Gunning’s ‘cinema of attractions’ (Elsaesser 1986; Gaudreault and Gunning 2006). *Silent Cinema and the*

Politics of Space poses a crucial yet highly specific criticism against the so-called ‘modernity thesis’ for it applies

a historicist logic inherited from nineteenth-century European and North American intellectual traditions [that] depends on a conception of time as linear and successive, cyclical and recurrent ... [and] obfuscates a view of the rest of the world as anything other than space to be conquered or, emphatically, developed. (p. 2)

Giving early cinema its own grammar corrected a temporal fallacy but left unquestioned a spatial determinacy. ‘By shunting “representational illusionism” to the periphery, the wild success of the New Film History somewhat ironically assumed technological and industrial modernity as the medium’s explanatory center’ (p. 3). The book’s foregrounding of a ‘politics of space’ is not so much intended to chart a theory of cinema and locality as to simply bring new New Film History from the geographic margins to bear upon the presumptions of old New Film History, which left in place the spatial privileging of the metropolis as the creative engine of modernity. The intent is clarified, but also limited, by Bean’s introductory definition of ‘locality’ as ‘never pre-existent, internally generated, or isolated’ (p. 7), in other words, a post-structuralist realm of Foucauldian biopolitics like any other contested concept. As a result, despite its compelling case studies, this book’s very premise refuses to allow a spatial turn for film history. Instead, each case troubles any totalizing impulse to map beyond what’s at hand. Indeed, the textual basis of the politics of space is the overarching theme here, and the book is a critique of the politics of space rather than efforts toward the construction of an alternative. The result is nonetheless compelling.

Having earlier thumbed through *Locating the Moving Image*, a casual leaf through *Silent Cinema and the Politics of Space* shocks for the absence of maps. This book reproduces illustrations, where the former produced visualizations. The single map here is the exception that proves the rule: Mark Sandberg’s opening chapter on place substitution in location shots reproduces a Paramount studios promotion of California as a self-contained simulation of the entire world – the Swiss Alps in the Sierras, the Sahara in the Mojave, the South Seas off Catalina. The map betrays the casual substitution of there for here that sustained Hollywood hegemony under the guise of harmless entertainment. Laura Isabel Serna, similarly, writes about the US Foreign Department’s transnational ‘translation and transportation’ services in support of the film industry. Even in the silent era, the textual realm of translated intertitles was equal partner with the material realm of print distribution in reaching global audiences. Jan Olsson provides a nuanced history of Swedish nationals’ transnational stardom within a ‘cosmopolitan skin’ – and not just Garbo, although co-editor Laura Horak tackles that star’s gender deviance in relation to her foreignness in Hollywood. Most chapters sharpen your curiosity as you read more closely. Kaveh Askari considers junk prints of silent films circulating in Tehran long after their due date. Co-editor Anupama Kapse considers Douglas Fairbanks’ genre films in relation to Indian stunt pictures. Patrice Petro spins a critique of cosmopolitanism out of the recirculation of 1928 photos of Marlene Dietrich with Anna May Wong and Leni Riefenstahl, changing captions and context over time. The at-first trivial example stands in for the entirety of how movies ‘shape our ideas about gender, nationalism, and popular culture’, but only insofar as we continue to give rapt attention to the details. The book’s chapters

provide ‘variations on ... the “eruption of the local” into the presumed deterritorialization effected by the Lumiere brothers’ globe-trotting’ (p. 6). The case studies are energetic, robust corrective supplements to well-known, pre-existing film histories. The limitation is inherent in any critique, as all supplements risk becoming a mere accessory, highlighting the normative pull of the original.⁵

Maurizio Cinquegrani’s mapping of early British cinema in *Of Empire and the City* provides a good example to test the marriage of the two approaches to film and locality described above. Reworking an admirable doctoral thesis, the book retains just enough defensive, comprehensive impulse to perhaps be useful only to the specialist. Cinquegrani’s original arguments nonetheless fully illustrate how cinematic representations of place work to spatialize the audience’s relation to what is depicted, which dialectically reinforce actually-existing spatial relations – in this case of the British Empire during the time of silent film. Cinquegrani considers a wealth of extant prints and other descriptive sources for early British non-narrative filmmaking and recounts the history of early British cinema as an imperial map that continually marked its audiences as Victorian and Edwardian subjects of the Empire. He starts with depictions of London as Imperial capital, before moving to provincial cities as industrial and cultural domains of Empire, Irish cities as hybrid home-colonies, British colonies as resources of Imperial wealth and power. He finally reaches the important insight that only Asian and North African ‘foreign’ lands depict practices clearly outside the official Imperial order – there are few depictions of deviance at home, nor even filmmaking of everyday life that is not self-evidently civic life. Everywhere the London Bioscope operator travelled, he carried with him his Imperial lens and depicted everything he saw as if the camera was an official representative of the Crown, as if the lens was the very eye of Queen Victoria or King Edward.

Curiously absent are British-made films of Europe and the United States. Is this because there was no need since these places had their own domestic film industries whose products could easily and cheaply be imported rather than reproduced? Or does it mean these places had little interest to British audiences, who hungered for (or were force-fed) Imperial views? The answer matters in more ways than one, for Cinquegrani’s argument is not particular to British cinema if imported scenes could substitute for the Imperial lens. Early British cinema would just be one part of a global cinematic network of equally imperial, nationalist lenses. But Cinquegrani shows, to the contrary, that British cinema’s Imperial character derived in part from audiences’ popular *disinterest* in films from other industrial empires in favour of their own cinema. This was never totalizing; cinema and audiences alike are sometimes global, sometimes national domains. For example, I can confirm early British cinema in Canada often counteracted the hegemony of American cinema, without dislodging it. Crucial to Cinquegrani’s argument is how cinema – at least commercial, early cinema – failed to allow a reflective or introspective view of the local for its being local (i.e., cinema was always public and social, as opposed to private and communitarian). Local cinema happened under the logic of a mirror, not a diary, and provided the ability to ‘see yourself as others see you’ with a constant emphasis on the public self, aiming for social respectability. Much like today’s social media, the subjects of early non-fiction cinema were perfectly aware their image would circulate beyond conditions of their choosing. For example, conspicuously absent in Cinquegrani’s review are examples of the staple of local

view-making in the United States: local fire brigade runs. After the impact of Porter's *Life of an American Fireman* in 1903, these became so common in non-fiction American cinema as to make the filming of the local firemen essentially a work of local *fiction* filmmaking, mimicking the staged, edited finesse of a well-known popular film. In this sense, early American non-fiction cinema does not portray Empire, but it does betray the same imperial impulse in consistently representing its urban spaces as under the control of industry and civic patronage toward securing a mass market. I wondered how easily one could write a parallel history of early American cinema through its non-fiction productions as the imperial domain of the mass market and modernity, from New York, to the metropolitan network of other cities, to regional places, to the rest of the world. Just as in Cinquegrani's description of British cinema, there are few views of the underside of American cities, few glimpses of social forces, and an abundance of social institutions, typically on parade rather than at work. The exceptions are films of great city fires and natural disasters; here, the collective itself is at stake, and we see the institutions flicker into action to rescue the imperilled, crowded spaces of urban modernity. This is a powerful description of the ideological apparatus of cinema, and a useful one to carry forward to the other books' efforts to capture the relations of cinema and space.

Too often at conferences, I find presentations of case histories of movie exhibition start with the generic ways the case is similar to everywhere else, as if an international audience was seeking to continually reconfirm commonalities across a global cinema culture. The common ground is commercial showmanship, Hollywood integration, and youthful socialization, but this is the least interesting place to start. Usually in question periods, anecdotal and idiosyncratic trivialities get exposed that make the research, ironically, more interesting to outsiders. To proffer a spatial project across localities, case studies need to begin with the particular, which needs to be theorized in relation to the normative commonalities of ordinary movie-going. The best of the case studies do exactly this, in both volumes under review here, but they aren't quite united in a common project. These anthologies amass a wealth of potential in collecting case studies, but they don't yet amount to actual collective work. The editors provide frameworks for common lessons across the chapters, but the authors themselves aren't yet working on a common endeavour. In this sense, these books are evidence of a possible spatial turn in film history, but they don't yet establish the path forward. If we agreed upon a common set of questions, we could still work within the lessons from Lefebvre and Harvey and others to reflexively guard against imposing a homogenized, singular cinematic modernity that obliterates the uniqueness and eccentricities of local case studies. We could still establish a common project to articulate methods for researching and writing new cinema histories in a spatial relation of cultural circulation on a global scale. This project could include colonized and marginalized places and experiences of locality for their uniqueness, yet still on a map in relation to any other point, not just part of Hollywood's empire in the abstract. These books show the potential for future historians to turn and travel forward together, asking slightly different questions. Where are we going? How will we get there?

Notes

1. The cornerstones of the spatial turn in cultural studies (in English) would include David Harvey, *The Urbanization of Capital*, and *Consciousness and the Urban Experience* (both 1985), combined and abridged as Harvey (1989). Also, Soja (1989) on post-modern geographies; Castells (1989) on information technology in the urban-regional process; Zukin (1991) on consumption as landscapes of power; and Wilson (1991) on gender as means of control in urban life.
2. Key markers of the critique are Crary (1990); Foster (1988) and Jay (1993). In contrast, cinema studies relied on Benjamin's sketch of the apparatus' emancipatory potential in 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', to provide room-for-play (see Hansen 2004).
3. Moretti's term 'distant reading' is briefly defined by Moretti (2000).
4. I have argued for new cinema histories to be conceived as an almanac of regional ephemera in my paper, 'Cultural History as an Almanac of Regional Ephemera: Browsing as Method for New Cinema Histories' at the HoMER History of Movie Exhibition & Reception Network conference, 'What is Cinema History?' in Glasgow, Scotland, June 2015. See also Elsaesser (2004); Maltby (2011) and Parikka (2012).
5. Derrida (1976, 144) explains: 'the supplement adds itself, it is a surplus.' The supplement adds to a deficient original; it is an accessory that reinforces an initial incompleteness. And yet, it is always merely 'compensatory and vicarious ... As substitute ... its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness' (1976, 145).

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