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SPACES

CINEMATIC GEOGRAPHIES AND MULTICULTURAL SPECTATORSHIP IN AMERICA

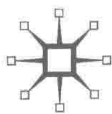
AMY LYNN CORBIN



Cinematic Geographies and Multicultural Spectatorship in America

Amy Lynn Corbin

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**CINEMATIC GEOGRAPHIES AND MULTICULTURAL
SPECTATORSHIP IN AMERICA**

SCREENING SPACES

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Cinematic Geographies and Multicultural Spectatorship in America

Amy Lynn Corbin

For Thomas A. Campbell Jr. and Imogene Rose Campbell

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
Introduction	
Cinematic Map-Making	1
Chapter 1	
The Story of a Land: The Spatial Politics of Early Multiculturalism in Indian Country	25
Chapter 2	
Primitive Cousins: Roots and Authenticity in the White South	57
Chapter 3	
The Urban Frontier: From Inner City Tourist to Resident	113
Chapter 4	
"Home" Turns Otherworldly in the Suburbs	167
Chapter 5	
Ghosts of Indian Country: Filling in the Map	227
<i>Notes</i>	249
<i>Index</i>	303

Introduction

Cinematic Map-Making

Watching any film is a travel experience, one that psychically transports viewers into another place. From a sedentary position in the movie theatre or in one's living room, film invites the spectator to imagine that she is in a different space. Giuliana Bruno describes the way that sensations of travel are built into the medium through its multiple types of motion—moving humans, moving camera, contrasting angles, and points of view that allow the spectator to occupy several different locations:

Film spectatorship is thus a *practice* of space that is dwelt in, as in the built environment. The itinerary of such a practice is similarly drawn by the visitor to a city or its resident, who goes to the highest point—a hill, a skyscraper, a tower—to project herself onto the cityscape, and who also engages the anatomy of the streets, the city's underbelly, as she traverses different urban configurations. Such a multiplicity of perspectives, a montage of "traveling" shots with diverse viewpoints and rhythms, also guides the cinema and its way of site-seeing. Changes in the height, size, angle, and scale of the view, as well as the speed of the transport, are embedded in the very language of the filmic shots, editing, and camera movements. Travel culture is written on the techniques of filmic observation.¹

Within the filmic world, characters may either travel or stay put, but outside the film, the spectator is always taking an imaginative journey *to* and *through* a new place. Once the spectator arrives in this virtual world, the film uses its narrative and visuals to anchor her as an insider or outsider and correspondingly code its setting as familiar or foreign. In what follows I take up this capacity to travel and be positioned through imaginative geographies by applying these ideas

to films engaged with emerging American multiculturalism from the early 1970s through the 1990s.

The book groups films by region or settlement pattern, looking at the cultural landscapes popularly known as Indian Country, the South, the inner city, and the suburbs. Popular films set in these landscapes present themselves as solutions to a post-1960s quandary: how to “tame” racial groups and geographic places that seemed out of control and turn their otherness into a recreational experience instead of a threat. The book also looks at the reverse: how a typically “ordinary” landscape can be turned into an experience of the exotic. By examining the dominant film cycles that resonated with audiences and the ways in which the representations of the landscapes are in dialogue with each other, *Cinematic Geographies and Multicultural Spectatorship in America* constructs a “map” of multicultural discourse during its time period.

The simulation of geographical positioning for the spectator creates senses of familiarity or foreignness. The phenomenological geographer Edward Relph describes the way geography manifests feelings of belonging: “From the outside you look upon a place as a traveler might look up on a town from a distance; from the inside you experience a place, are surrounded by it and part of it.”² Here Relph reminds us that these feelings are a matter of where one is standing, and so cinematic geographies position the spectator, rather than merely produce “positive” or “negative” images of landscapes. The task is to interpret the geography of the text itself,³ how it moves its characters—and, more importantly, its spectator—through its places. Spectator study is thus akin to mapping as it is an analysis of the textual cues the film provides its viewers, which they use to orient themselves—and such orientation is mental, emotional, and cultural, not just physical. In the films examined here, virtual travel becomes a metaphor for multicultural experiences. Places are coded and recoded as familiar or foreign depending on shifting cultural trends.

Film as Travel

First it is necessary to draw together disparate works of film theory to extend the proposition that Bruno makes above. Film space, it has been argued, temporarily replaces the real space in which we live: instead of merely occupying one coordinate within our real space, as a stage play does, it produces a complete, contiguous (though virtual) space.⁴ This quality applies more to the traditional viewing setting of a movie theatre, with its large screen and darkened surroundings, and

is less true when one watches on a smaller screen, such as TV or computer. However, the photo-realistic basis of the medium means that it transmits a visualized space that exists separately from that of the spectator. And its space is precisely rendered, even if it is as abstract as an empty, entirely white room—unlike a work of printed fiction, in which the author can determine how specifically to flesh out the setting.⁵ Film, therefore, is not merely one of many discourses that contribute to the American geographical imagination—as a narrative and visual medium, it has unique capabilities to simulate place. Its images place us in cultural landscapes, metonyms that stand in for social experiences, like a graffiti-covered wall or a green lawn.

This is not to displace other theories of spectatorship—surely gendered and raced gazes are still fundamental, as are fandom and flexible identifications. But looking at spectator-place relationships gives us the opportunity to examine the combination of a psychic and a social process—places are formed collectively, so to project oneself into a place is an act of connecting with a socially constituted group rather than with an individual bearing a socially constituted identity such as race or gender (as Edward Casey puts it, “We partake of places in common—and reshape them in common”⁶). Other recent theories have suggested ways in which films activate sensory experiences; writings on haptic or embodied spectatorship become relevant to thinking about spectatorship as travel, since to activate bodily responses is one way to feel a part of the diegetic world and thus have “traveled” from one’s seat in the movie theatre.⁷ In *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, Anne Friedberg suggests that film spectatorship grows out of a trajectory of mobile viewing experiences, a trajectory that becomes ever more immersive as it simultaneously becomes more stationary.⁸ Her historical narrative of viewing technologies moves from arcade shopping windows to panoramas that surrounded viewers to dioramas that moved while the viewer stood still, and finally to film and TV viewing. The evolution of this “mobilized virtual gaze,” as she terms it, allows the spectator to take up different vantage points—figuratively to have a sensation of movement—as opposed to the single ideal viewing position of apparatus theory. The more stationary the spectator experience became, the greater the demand for immersive technologies, an evolution also traced by Ellen Strain in her work on the “tourist gaze” in cinema.⁹

Film viewing is a “stationary trip” because the medium itself “re-engineers space and time.”¹⁰ The film’s duration takes the spectator on a narrative journey that is visualized, which Bruno compares to the itinerary of a map, in that on-screen space provides a world

that can be traversed in multiple ways, and the narrative offers one option.¹¹ Following Bruno, Jeffrey Ruoff argues in the introduction to his volume on travelogues that “travelogues matter because they are an intrinsic form of cinema, consonant with common parlances such as the *traveling* shot and *motion* pictures.”¹² While Ruoff is concerned with the importance of a particular genre, the notion of the “stationary trip” is central to any film viewing experience.

Even watching a film shot in one’s own neighborhood produces a sense of an “other” space on screen. This inherent outsider journey is akin to what Vivian Sobchack sees as a double layer of spectator perception: while we have our own perception of the sights and sounds of the film, we also recognize that we are experiencing second hand the original perception of the person behind the camera and the camera itself. This barrier between us and the film’s traces of the real gives us a relation to the filmic landscape—as Sobchack puts it, a “there, where I am not.”¹³ Tom Conley argues that the presence of a map in a film calls attention to these two locations, film space versus the spectator’s own location, in what he terms a sense of “bilocation.”¹⁴ And when Walter Benjamin writes his oft-quoted phrase about cinema from “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, “we calmly and adventurously go traveling,” he is referring to “our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories”¹⁵—the geographies of everyday experience that are made into new destinations through film.

Thus no matter the content of the images, viewers begin a film anticipating a brief displacement. Because of its temporary, bounded, and recreational qualities, cinematic travel most closely resembles that of tourism—regardless of whether the characters are traveling, and if they are traveling as tourists, imperialists, or migrants.¹⁶ There is a dialectic between distance and immersion that characterizes the touristic position, described by Ellen Strain when she writes, “Like tourism, film—despite its undeniable filtering of the profilmic—paradoxically offers up the illusion of a more intense and plentiful reality than that which lies just outside theater doors.”¹⁷ While wanting to stay in what she calls the “environmental bubble,” the spectator simultaneously wants the most “realistic” experience of the “other” place as possible. The spectator watches but never penetrates the window that separates her from the film world, just as the archetypal tourist stays in his tour bus.¹⁸ As evidence of the link between tourism and the visual, John Urry’s phrase “the tourist gaze” has become central to tourism studies.¹⁹

So *Cinematic Geographies and Multicultural Spectatorship in America* takes up the challenge implied by Jeffrey Ruoff when he

writes: "Travel and movement are central to fiction film... But to say that all cinema is travel cinema blurs distinctions that have yet to be adequately described and analyzed."²⁰ While several volumes have examined travel films as a nonfiction genre (including Ruoff's edited collection *Virtual Voyages* and Jennifer Lynn Peterson's *Education in the School of Dreams: Travelogues and Early Nonfiction Film*),²¹ this study works with travel as both a theme in narrative films and a metaphor that helps to explain film spectatorship. Here, I do claim that in a spectatorial sense, all cinema *is* travel cinema, but I parse different sorts of travel experiences offered by popular narrative films through modes of viewing I will be labeling "touristic," "dwelling," and "nomadic." Films that are usually called travel films, along with narratives that code their settings as "foreign" and to-be-looked-at, are just those that make explicit the fundamental practice of virtual travel.

The nonfiction genre of the travelogue was prominent from the early years of film through the 1930s. Their appeal is considered to have been in the ability of cinema to transport its audience to locales they could not reach through literal travel and to combine education with spectacle (a hybrid Jennifer Peterson terms "instructive entertainment"²²). Following decades of increased recreational mobility and journalistic coverage of Western explorers venturing into "dangerous" and "exotic" locales, early travelogues provided access to such places for the middle-class and lower-class viewer. Not only was this virtual travel more financially and logistically feasible for the ordinary American or European viewer, it also combined a simulation of thrills with the security of being in a theatre seat. As Tom Gunning observes, "Descriptions of travel films frequently point out the danger or discomfort in which the actual tourists find themselves."²³ Writing in the context of anthropological cinema, Alison Griffiths notes that ethnographic travelogues enabled the spectator to study a culture without the threat of the return gaze.²⁴ Dana Benelli points out that documentaries about "exotic" locales had license to show scandalous things like "bare-breasted women and genuine violence" that would have been censored in fiction films.²⁵ Such visual spectacles and visceral thrills can be contained and justified under the rhetoric of learning about other cultures.

Travelogues create an experience distinct from, not derivative of, actual travel, as Jennifer Peterson argues. "As much as they document places, travel films can also be seen as documenting mythologies about those places," she writes.²⁶ They simulate the real world in order to provide an escape from viewers' real worlds; "encouraging viewers to move beyond their everyday conceptions of dwelling and selfhood

and enabling spectators to envision new horizons of experience."²⁷ Peterson is writing about non-narrative, silent travelogues, films that are collections of views without voiceover or narrative structure to directly guide or instruct the spectator. Thus she argues that they leave more room for spectatorial fantasy. The narrative features that are the subject of this book provide a more guided experience, but it is just as virtual. Peterson's contention that travelogues document representations rather than actual places is a critical foundation of this project as well; what viewers are traveling to is not the real South or inner city but mythologies of these places.

My recurring use of the phrase "cultural landscape" is meant to emphasize the way these cinematic locales are called into being through the process of viewing. Geographers often invoke "landscape" instead of "place" when they want to highlight the inextricable combination of a real place that is experienced and the image of it held either by insiders or outsiders. W. J. T. Mitchell succinctly brings these concepts together when he defines landscape as "a natural scene mediated by culture. It is both represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what a frame contains."²⁸

Work on travelogues consistently documents the genre's ability to structure looking and power relations in a dichotomy of traveler and visited spectacle, often emphasizing traditionally "othered" groups such as non-Western tribal groups or European peasants. But "ordinary geographies" and "foreign geographies" are shifting terms, constructed *each time* a film or other text is created, rather than always-already defined. To give an example from early cinema, Charles Musser classifies a group of Coney Island films as travel films because they focused on "local color" and scenic shots over news and human drama.²⁹ That films about New York City, where many Americans live, can be labeled "travel" films illustrates that a traveling or outsider point of view is not inherent to a film's setting, but is determined by its approach toward its subject landscape. Many Hollywood films use their landscapes simply as backgrounds to stories of comedy, action, and melodrama, providing only enough information about culture and setting to make the narrative comprehensible. To uncover the textual codes that define one landscape as needing ethnography (cultural explanation) and one as so ordinary that it does not notice its setting is to show how watching any film is an experience of being positioned. As Edward Branigan notes, "Narrative causes...are thus principles of explanation which are derived from *cultural knowledge* as well as from physical laws. Narrative causality includes the human plans, goals, desires, and routines...which are encouraged, tolerated,

or proscribed by a *community*.³⁰ So motivation and cause/effect are not constant terms, but contingent upon both the characters' culture and the viewers'. When neither the film nor its characters act surprised by certain behavior that would startle a viewer in real life, for example, that viewer may "cooperate" by suspending disbelief for the duration of the film, thereby accepting its definitions of familiar and foreign. What I am calling a film's cultural point of view can code its characters and their world—its cultural landscape—as "normal" or "strange" and the cooperative viewer will accept those designations for the duration of the film.

Tourism, Dwelling, and Nomadism

Cinematic Geographies and Multicultural Spectatorship in America theorizes three spectatorial traveling positions: tourism, dwelling, and nomadism. These are positions from which narrative films suggest that their viewers watch and experience cinematic landscapes. I propose these overlay the fundamental otherness of cinematic space—"there, where I am not." In one sense, all cinematic spectatorship is an act of traveling to another location, and its bounded quality, its "distanced immersion," makes it most akin to tourism.³¹ But some films capitalize on the tourist gaze more than others; Chapter 1 considers how a touristic point of view is developed through an analysis of several iconic films about Indian Country.

As a starting definition, we can say that the touristic film renders its landscape a spectacle for viewing from an outsider's point of view. It is interested in behaviors and *mise-en-scène* that appear to be distinct from the ordinary. John Urry writes of the tourist gaze:

Places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is an anticipation, especially through daydreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasures, either on a different scale or involving different senses from those customarily encountered. Such anticipation is constructed and sustained through a variety of non-tourist practices, such as film, TV, literature, magazines, records and videos, which construct and reinforce that gaze.³²

But the construction of exotic and ordinary of course completely depends on point of view, for one person's exotic is another's ordinary. So essential to the touristic film is the designation of an "outsider" spectatorial position, regardless of the cultural positioning of individual viewers. The film's text must construct this position. And from studying cycles of popular filmmaking, we can discern a nation's

dominant conceptions of exotic and ordinary by noting which locales are most often chosen for explicit observation.

The emphasis on the gaze in classic tourism implies a separation from the visited landscape. There is a buffer between the tourist and the haptic sensations of the visited landscape, through a tour bus window or car and comforts provided such as climate-controlled buildings. In the context of spectatorship, a touristic film will thus give the spectator a protected sensibility; otherness is present, but controlled. The spectator is often given a tour guide in the form of a traveling character, voiceover, familiar narrative pattern, or cinematography that maps the on-screen world, thus orienting the spectator to unfamiliar terrain.

From Dean MacCannell we receive the insight that tourism is tied to a modern subject's desire for the authentic. MacCannell argues that the Western subject's world is fragmented and alienating, so s/he uses leisure time to travel to the world's new sacred places (tourist sites) where s/he finds a connection to the premodern. Tourism helps the subject make sense of the modern world. "For moderns, reality and authenticity are thought to be elsewhere," MacCannell writes.³³ In the American context, this phenomenon takes a particular form in the multicultural age (beginning after the civil rights era; defined more later), in which the white middle class feels it lacks the specificity and "color" of rooted racial or ethnic groups, and so it seeks out contact with products of these cultures. Correspondingly, marginalized groups sought entry into national narratives, including film and television. In America's multicultural age, public discourse insisted on at least a cursory recognition of distinct cultures and places, and so sampling these cultural landscapes through film is meant to bring a sense of commonality and national pride.

On the other end of the spectrum, a film can code its landscape "familiar" and attempt to give its spectator a "dwelling" experience. Fundamentally, the viewing experience is still a journey to "there, where I am not," but in these cases, the journey is completed in the first few moments of the film, as the spectator settles into an insider experience of the film's landscape, and "there, where I am not" is subsequently suppressed. The tourism/dwelling binary structures the book's theory of geographical spectatorship.

In dwelling films, the spectator is meant to have a feeling of "vicarious insideness," to use the categories with which Edward Relph nuances the insider/outsider opposition.³⁴ This is an experience of intense insideness but indirect because it occurs through someone else's representation—art, film, and so on—so it is always vicarious.