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Navigating Movie (M)apps: Film Locations, Tourism and Digital Mapping Tools

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Abstract

The digital revolution has been characterized by the overlapping of different media technologies and platforms which reshaped both traditional forms of audiovisual consumption and older conceptions of place and space. John Agnew claims that, traditionally, the notion of place has been associated with two different meanings: 'the first is a geometric conception of place as a mere part of space and the second is a phenomenological understanding of a place as a distinctive coming together in space' (317). Both of the dominant meanings have been challenged by the idea that the world itself is increasingly "placeless" as space-spanning connections and flows of information, things, and people undermine the rootedness of a wide range of processes anywhere in particular (Friedman). On the one hand, by obliterating physical distance, new technologies such as the Internet and the cell phone are making places obsolete, on the other hand, the proliferation of media representations favoured by these technologies are making places more relevant than ever. These increasing mediatisation processes, in fact, generate what Urry and Larsen call 'imaginative geographies', namely the conflation of representational spaces and physical spaces that substitute and enhance each other in contingent ways (116).

The smartphone as a new hybrid media platform that combines different technological features such as digital screens, complex software applications, cameras, tools for online communication and GPS devices, has played a crucial role in the construction of new notions of place. This article examines a specific type of phone applications: mobile, digital mapping tools that allow users to identify film-locations. In doing so it will assess how new media platforms can potentially reconfigure notions of both media consumption, and (physical and imagined) mobility. Furthermore, the analysis of digital movie maps and their mediation of film locations will shed light on the way in which contemporary leisure activities reshape the cultural, social and geographic meaning of place.

Digital, Mobile Movie Maps

Digital movie maps can be defined as software applications, conceived for smart phones or other mobile devices, which enable users to identify the geographical position of film locations. These applications rely on geotagging which is the process of adding geospatial metadata (usually latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates) to texts or images. From this point of view these phone apps belong to a broader category of media that Tristan Thielmann calls *geomedia*: converging applications of interactive, digital, mapping tools and mobile and networked media technologies. According to Hjorth, recent studies on mobile media practices show a trend toward "re-enacting the importance of place and home as both a geo-imaginary and socio-cultural precept" (Hjorth 371). In 2008 Google announced that Google Maps and Google Earth will become the basic platform for any information search. Similarly, in 2010 Flickr started georeferencing their complete image stock (Thielmann 8). Based on these current developments media scholars such as Thielmann claim that geomedia will emerge in the future as one of the most pervasive forms of digital technology (8).

In my research I identified 44 phone geomedia apps that offered content variously related to film locations. In every case the main functionality of the apps consisted in matching geographic data concerning the locations with visual and written information about the corresponding film production. 'Scene Seekers', the first app able to match the title of a film with the GPS map of its locations, was released in 2009. Gradually, subsequent film-location apps incorporated a number of other functions including:

- Trivia and background information about films and locations
- Submission forms which allow users to share information about their favourite film locations
- Location photos
- Links to film download
- Film-themed itineraries
- Audio guides
- Online discussion groups
- Camera/video function which allow users to take photos of the locations and share them on social media
- Film stills and film clips

After identifying the movie map apps, I focused on the examination of the secondary functions they offered and categorized the applications based on both their main purpose and their main target users (as explicitly described in the app store). Four different categories of smart phone applications emerged. Apps conceived for:

- Business (for location scouts and producers)
- Entertainment (for trivia and quiz buffs)
- Education (for students and film history lovers)
- Travel (for tourists)

'Screen New South Wales Film Location Scout', an app designed for location scouts requiring location contact information across the state of New South Wales, is an example of the first category. The app provides lists, maps and images of locations used in films shot in the region as well as contact details for local government offices. Most of these types of apps are available for free download and are commissioned by local authorities in the hope of attracting major film productions, which in turn might bring social and economic benefits to the region.

A small number of the apps examined target movie fans and quiz buffs. 'James Bond and Friends', for example, focuses on real life locations where spy/thriller movies have been shot in London. Interactive maps and photos of the locations show their geographical position. The app also offers a wealth of trivia on spy/thriller movies and tests users' knowledge of James Bond films with quizzes about the locations. While some of these apps provide information on how to reach particular film locations, the emphasis is on trivia and quizzes rather than travel itself.

Some of the apps are explicitly conceived for educational purposes and target film students, film scholars and users interested in the history of film more broadly. The Italian Ministry for Cultural Affairs, for example, developed a number of smartphone apps designed to promote knowledge about Italian Cinema. Each application focuses on one Italian city, and was designed for users wishing to acquire more information about the movie industry in that urban area. The 'Cinema Roma' app, for example, contains a selection of geo-referenced film sets from a number of famous films shot in Rome. The film spots are presented via a rich collection of historical images and texts from the Italian National Photographic Archive.

Finally, the majority of the apps analysed (around 60%) explicitly targets tourists. One of the most popular film-tourist applications is the 'British Film Locations' app with over 100,000 downloads since its launch in 2011. 'British Film Locations' was commissioned by VisitBritain, the British tourism agency. Visit Britain has attempted to capitalize on tourists' enthusiasm around film blockbusters since the early 2000s as their research indicated that 40% of potential visitors would be very likely to visit the place they had seen in films or on TV (VisitBritain). British Film Locations enables users to discover and photograph the most iconic British film locations in cinematic history. Film tourists can search by film title, each film is accompanied by a detailed synopsis and list of locations so users can plan an entire British film tour. The app also allows users to take photos of the location and automatically share them on social networks such as Facebook or Twitter.

Movie Maps and Film-Tourism

As already mentioned, the majority of the film-location phone apps are designed for travel purposes and include functionalities that cater for the needs of the so called 'post-tourists'. Maxine Feifer employed this term to describe the new type of tourist arising out of the shift from mass to post-Fordist consumption. The post-tourist crosses physical and virtual boundaries and shifts between experiences of everyday life, either through the actual or the simulated mobility allowed by the omnipresence of signs and electronic images in the contemporary age (Leotta). According to Campbell the post-tourist constructs his or her own tourist experience and destination, combining these into a package of overlapping and disjunctive elements: the imagined (dreams and screen cultures), the real (actual travels and guides) and the virtual (myths and internet) (203). More recently a number of scholars (Guttentag, Huang et al., Neuhofer et al.) have engaged with the application and implications of virtual reality on the planning, management and marketing of post-tourist experiences.

Film-induced tourism is an expression of post-tourism. Since the mid-1990s a growing number of scholars (Riley and Van Doren, Tooke and Baker, Hudson and Ritchie, Leotta) have engaged with the study of this phenomenon, which Sue Beeton defined as "visitation to sites where movies and TV programmes have been filmed as well as to tours to production studios, including film-related theme parks" (11). Tourists' fascination with film sets and locations is a perfect example of Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality. Such places are simulacra which embody the blurred boundaries between reality and representation in a world in which unmediated access to reality is impossible (Baudrillard).

Some scholars have focused on the role of mediated discourse in preparing both the site and the traveller for the process of tourist consumption (Friedberg, Crouch et al.). In particular, John Urry highlights the interdependence between tourism and the media with the concept of the 'tourist gaze'. Urry argues that the gaze dominates tourism, which is primarily concerned with the commodification of images and visual consumption. According to Urry, movies and television play a crucial role in shaping the tourist gaze as the tourist compares what is gazed at with the familiar image of the object of the gaze. The tourist tries to reproduce his or her own expectations, which have been "constructed and sustained through a variety of non-tourist practices, such as film, TV, literature, records, and videos" (Urry 3). The inclusion of the camera functionality in digital movie maps such as 'British Film Locations' fulfils the need to actually reproduce the film images that the tourist has seen at home.

Film and Maps

The convergence between film and (virtual) travel is also apparent in the prominent role that cartography plays in movies. Films often allude to maps in their opening sequences to situate their stories in time and space. In turn, the presence of detailed geographical descriptions of space at the narrative level often contributes to establish a stronger connection between film and viewers (Conley). Tom Conley notes that a number of British novels and their cinematic adaptations including Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings (LOTR)* and Stevenson's *Treasure Island* belong to the so called 'cartographic fiction' genre. In these stories, maps are deployed to undo the narrative thread and inspire alternative itineraries to the extent of legitimising an interactive relation between text and reader or viewer (Conley 225).

The popularity of *LOTR* locations as film-tourist destinations within New Zealand may be, in part, explained by the prominence of maps as both aesthetic and narrative devices (Leotta). The authenticity of the *LOTR* geography (both the novel and the film trilogy) is reinforced, in fact, by the recurring presence of the map. Tolkien designed very detailed maps of Middle Earth that were usually published in the first pages of the books. These maps play a crucial role in the immersion into the imaginary geography of Middle Earth, which represents one of the most important pleasures of reading *LOTR* (Simmons). The map also features extensively in the cinematic versions of both *LOTR* and *The Hobbit. The Fellowship of the Ring* opens with several shots of a map of Middle Earth, anticipating the narrative of displacement that characterizes *LOTR*. Throughout the trilogy the physical dimensions of the protagonists' journey are emphasized by the foregrounding of the landscape as a map.

The prominence of maps and geographical exploration as a narrative trope in 'cartographic fiction' such as *LOTR* may be responsible for activating the 'tourist imagination' of film viewers (Crouch et al.). The 'tourist imagination' is a construct that explains the sense of global mobility engendered by the daily consumption of the media, as well as actual travel. As Crouch, Jackson and Thompson put it, "the activity of tourism itself makes sense only as an imaginative process which involves a certain comprehension of the world and enthuses a distinctive emotional engagement with it" (Crouch et al. 1).

The use of movie maps, the quest for film locations in real life may reproduce some of the cognitive and emotional pleasures that were activated while watching the movie, particularly if maps, travel and geographic exploration are prominent narrative elements. Several scholars (Coudry, Hills, Beeton) consider film-induced tourism as a contemporary form of pilgrimage and movie maps are becoming an inextricable part of this media ritual. Hudson and Ritchie note that maps produced by local stakeholders to promote the locations of films such as *Sideways* and *LOTR* proved to be extremely popular among tourists (391-392). In their study about the impact of paper movie maps on tourist behaviour in the UK, O'Connor and Pratt found that movie maps are an essential component in the marketing mix of a film location. For example, the map of *Pride and Prejudice Country* developed by the Derbyshire and Lincolnshire tourist boards significantly helped converting potential visitors into tourists as almost two in five visitors stated it 'definitely' turned a possible visit into a certainty (O'Connor and Pratt).

Media Consumption and Place

Digital movie maps have the potential to further reconfigure traditional understandings of media consumption and place. According to Nana Verhoeff digital mapping tools encourage a performative cartographic practice in the sense that the dynamic map emerges and changes during the users' journey. The various functionalities of digital movie maps favour the hybridization between film reception and space navigation as by clicking on the movie map the user could potentially watch a clip of the film, read about both the film and the location, produce his/her own images and comments of the location and share it with other fans online.

Furthermore, digital movie maps facilitate and enhance what Nick Coudry, drawing upon Claude Levi Strauss, calls "parcelling out": the marking out as significant of differences in ritual space (83). According to Coudry, media pilgrimages, the visitation of TV or film locations are rituals that are based from the outset on an act of comparison between the cinematic depiction of place and its physical counterpart. Digital movie maps have the potential to facilitate this comparison by immediately retrieving images of the location as portrayed in the film. Media locations are rife with the marking of differences between the media world and the real locations as according to Coudry some film tourists seek precisely these differences (83).

The development of smart phone movie maps, may also contribute to redefine the notion of audiovisual consumption. According to Nana Verhoeff, mobile screens of navigation fundamentally revise the spatial coordinates of previously dominant, fixed and distancing cinematic screens. One of the main differences between mobile digital screens and larger, cinematic screens is that rather than being surfaces of projection or transmission, they are interfaces of software applications that combine different technological properties of the hybrid screen device: a camera, an interface for online communication, a GPS device (Verhoeff). Because of these characteristics of hybridity and intimate closeness, mobile screens involve practices of mobile and haptic engagement that turn the classical screen as distanced window on the world, into an interactive, hybrid navigation device that repositions the viewer as central within the media world (Verhoeff).

In their discussion of the relocation of cinema into the iPhone, Francesco Casetti and Sara Sampietro reached similar conclusions as they define the iPhone as both a visual device and an interactive interface that mobilizes the eye as well as the hand (Casetti and Sampietro 23). The iPhone constructs an 'existential bubble' in which the spectator can find refuge while remaining exposed to the surrounding environment. When the surrounding environment is the real life film location, the consumption or re-consumption of the film text allowed by the digital movie map is informed by multi-sensorial and cognitive stimuli that are drastically different from traditional viewing experiences.

The increasing popularity of digital movie maps is a phenomenon that could be read in conjunction with the emergence of innovative locative media such as the Google glasses and other applications of Augmented Reality (A.R.). Current smart phones available in the market are already capable to support A.R. applications and it appears likely that this will become a standard feature of movie apps within the next few years (Sakr). Augmented reality refers to the use of data overlays on real-time camera view of a location which make possible to show virtual objects within their spatial context. The camera eye on the device registers physical objects on location, and transmits these images in real time on the screen. On-screen this image is combined with different layers of data: still image, text and moving image.

In a film-tourism application of augmented reality tourists would be able to point their phone camera at the location. As the camera identifies the location images from the film will overlay the image of the 'real location'. The user, therefore, will be able to simultaneously see and walk in both the real location and the virtual film set. The notion of A.R. is related to the haptic aspect of engagement which in turn brings together the doing, the seeing and the feeling (Verhoeff). In film theory the idea of the haptic has come to stand for an engaged look that involves, and is aware of, the body – primarily that of the viewer (Marx, Sobchack). The future convergence between cinematic and mobile technologies is likely to redefine both perspectives on haptic perception of cinema and theories of film spectatorship.

The application of A.R. to digital, mobile maps of film-locations will, in part, fulfill the prophecies of René Barjavel. In 1944, before Bazin's seminal essay on the myth of total cinema, French critic Barjavel, asserted in his book *Le Cinema Total* that the technological evolution of the cinematic apparatus will eventually result in the total *enveloppement* (envelopment or immersion) of the film-viewer. This *enveloppement* will be characterised by the multi-sensorial experience and the full interactivity of the spectator within the movie itself. More recently, Thielmann has claimed that geomedias such as movie maps constitute a first step toward the vision that one day it might be possible to establish 3-D spaces as a medial interface (Thielmann).

Film-Tourism, Augmented Reality and digital movie maps will produce a complex immersive and inter-textual media system which is at odds with Walter Benjamin's famous thesis on the loss of 'aura' in the age of mechanical reproduction (Benjamin), as one of the pleasures of film-tourism is precisely the interaction with the auratic place, the actual film location or movie set. According to Nick Coudry, film tourists are interested in the aura of the place and filming itself. The notion of aura is associated here with both the material history of the location and the authentic experience of it (104).

Film locations, as mediated by digital movie maps, are places in which people have a complex sensorial, emotional, cognitive and imaginative involvement. The intricate process of remediation of the film-locations can be understood as a symptom of what Lash and Urry have called the 're-subjectification of space' in which 'locality' is re-weighted with a more subjective and affective charge of place (56). According to Lash and Urry the aesthetic-expressive dimensions of the experience of place have become as important as the cognitive ones. By providing new layers of cultural meaning and alternative modes of affective engagement, digital movie maps will contribute to redefine both the notion of tourist destination and the construction of place identity. These processes can potentially be highly problematic as within this context the identity and meanings of place are shaped and controlled by the capital forces that finance and distribute the digital movie maps. Future critical investigations of digital cartography will need to address the way in which issues of power and control are deeply enmeshed within new tourist practices.

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