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Conference Review

'Location London: Portraying the City on Screen', 7 March 2014

Reviewed by

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Hosted by the University of London Screen Studies group and using both the impressive/imposing Senate House and the edgy/expressionistic Birkbeck Cinema as backdrops, the Location London conference dug into the particulars of the greater London area while keeping focus on the individually affective registers of space and place. Put another way, the Location London conference was a chance to discuss real and imaginary Londons on screen, with the added bonus of taking place amidst specific locations that formed a part of London's cinematic history. As conference co-organiser Roland-François Lack pointed out in his unannounced talk during the last session (he'd prepared something in case of extra time), the University of London has often appeared on screen, but seldom as itself. Such disparate films as *Doctor in Love* (1960, dir. Ralph Thomas) and *Britannia Hospital* (1982, dir. Lindsay Anderson) use interiors and exteriors from around campus as parts of medical buildings. At the first night drinks reception in the Gustave Tuck Lecture Theatre, Lack pointed to that location's history on screen, which has recently been seen in University College London alumnus Christopher Nolan's film *Inception* (2010). Lack, who runs the popular cinematic mapping website *The Cine-Tourist* (<http://www.thecinestourist.net>), has also launched an ambitious blog at the *Location London* website (<http://www.locationlondon.net/london-streets-on-screen.html>) that aims to capture images from every London street ever to appear in a film. The focus of this work is not a mere chronicle, but rather an attempt to sample the disparities between places

experienced (or remembered) and places framed through the narrative and idiosyncratic visual logics of individual films.

How places relate to experiences – real and imagined – formed the basis of many of the conference's papers. Karolina Kendall-Bush (UCL) discussed the lost visual worlds of Chinese immigrant experience in the historic Limehouse of pre-World War II London. Early films such as *Broken Blossoms* (1919, dir. D.W. Griffith) and the travelogue *Cosmopolitan London* (1924, dir. Frank Miller) do attempt to capture some of this culture, albeit with obvious shortcomings. In the absence of any surviving film by filmmakers from this Chinese community, Limehouse would remain a magnet for sensationalist stories by white interpreters. Famously, Thomas Burke's stories in *Limehouse Nights* (1916) expressed fears about drug use and miscegenation, while Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (based on 'The Chink and the Child' from *Limehouse Nights*) re-constructs this vibrant world in a studio, albeit with some degree of historical authenticity. Later in the conference, Angelina Karpovich (Brunel University) discussed *Lenin in London* (1963, dir. G. Bobrov), a Soviet documentary in which a film crew investigates Lenin's brief time as a resident of the city in the process scouting out his old lodgings and looking into his reading habits at the British Museum. Karpovich perceptively noted that the Soviet filmmakers had to tread a fine line between fact and fiction, in that London could not be made to look too attractive and wealthy for Communist audiences, nor could the opulence and class-cleavages of contemporary England too obviously contradict the party's ideology of a united and struggling proletariat.

The Location London conference hosted extensive public airings of two major projects. The first, Cinematic Geographies of Battersea (<http://cinematicbattersea.blogspot.com/>), pairs film historians and architects from the Universities of Cambridge, Liverpool and Edinburgh with the Survey of London (<https://www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/architecture/research/survey-of-london>) in a comprehensive exploration of the screen history of Battersea. Richard Koeck (University of Liverpool) discussed the various difficulties in gathering information and mapping films (for, despite films and places both existing in space, films often combine locations into impossible, illegible or incoherent sequences that do not correspond to the reality of a built environment). Aileen Reid used examples from this Battersea project like *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (1961, dir. Val Guest) and *The Optimists of Nine Elms* (1973, dir. Anthony Simmons) to look at the problems that come from mixing discourses of a 'hard' city (locatable, mappable) with discourses of a 'soft' city (mythological or symbolic). Her suggestion is that this creates a kind of location anxiety – one felt by many of the presentations at the conference – a kind of hang-up that need not be seen solely as a point of critique, nor a shortcoming in a film's creation. Knowing where a film was shot does not retrospectively and irreversibly alter that film's meaning. Productive work can come out of the tension between these two registers of knowledge.

The second collaborative project was a screening and Q&A for the film *Another London* (2013), a documentary produced by the Architecture programme at London Metropolitan University. Directed by Hector Arkomanis, the film is a personal tour of London by architectural critic Robert Harbison (best known for the seminal book *Eccentric Spaces*, 1977) that surveys select curiosities of the city in a way that is at

once sensitive to various historical moments of the city, but at the same time acknowledges the current shift in power and finance from the West (old wealth) to the East (land speculation fuelled by foreign capital, the boom in high rise development). While this is very much a film about buildings and not culture *per se* – in fact, one audience member questioned its hesitance to talk with the people who live in and around these places – it still emerges a document of major cultural importance, as a kind of streamlining and updating of such curious films of earlier periods as *Journey into a Lost World* (1960, dir. Ken Russell), a fantastic travelogue of entertainment space in and around London hosted by John Betjeman, or *The London Nobody Knows* (1967, dir. Norman Cohen), a film about lost and forgotten London adapted from a book by Geoffrey Fletcher, hosted by a bemused James Mason. While *Journey into a Lost World* and *The London Nobody Knows* make their places fantastic through film techniques such as quickly edited close-ups and whimsical musical cues, *Another London's* strangeness derives from Harbison's commentary. I reacted to this film in a quite specific way since, as Harbison points out in his narration, this is London as seen through the eyes of someone who is both a specialist on places *and* an outsider (our connection: we are both Americans and remain in awe of the city, though not in obviously monumental and touristic ways). Harbison talks about very different buildings throughout, including now-acknowledged masterpieces like Hawksmoor churches or Sir John Soane's house, but also spends time on the most personal and out-of-the-way. My favourite was a digression about the oddly ahistorical cul-de-sac houses on the Isle of Dogs. His commentary and Arkomanis's direction cause us to dwell on details that we would otherwise never see.

Despite its compact schedule, Location London gathered together a suitably differentiated set of presentations, ranging from detailed historical and biographical writing (Robert Murphy's paper on Jules Dassin's career and the filming and London-centricity of *Night and the City*) to work with a wider historical remit (Ian Christie explored the popular discourses of crime that fed into London's screen presence as a dangerous city). In the closing remarks, and in a gesture typical to this conference, Roland-François Lack invited everyone to submit ideas to the Location London blog. Just as London is alive with constant change and re-invention, so to is the city's screen profile: the greater metropolitan area is being reframed and opened up with each new film by Patrick Keiller or new series of *Sherlock*. At events like these, scholars attempt to change and keep tabs apace.

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