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Towards a multimethod approach for film geography: a case study of Los Angeles' Nate Starkman Building

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Abstract This paper introduces a multi-method approach for Film Geography that intertwines spatial analysis, cartography, textual analysis, discourse analysis, field research, and expert interviews. Historically, film studies has focused on textual analysis whereas geography has emphasized the material aspect of space through field research. However, if cinema is a double ontology of image and industry film geographers must engage with both to make a meaningful contribution to the complex interwoven discourses on cinematic space. This case study focuses on the Nate Starkman Building, a frequently filmed warehouse located in the Arts District of Los Angeles, California. This case study acts as an example of how a multi-method approach can be applied to on-location filming. I demonstrate how the methods can be combined to contextualize and pinpoint previously invisible interactions between the on-screen appearance and the cultural politics of film production and placemaking. I argue that film-geographic analysis allows for a more in-depth look into the Hollywood-machinery that has led to these unique socio-economic structures.

Keywords Los Angeles · Film geography methods · Nate Starkman Building · Film production

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Introduction

The Nate Starkman Building is a warehouse located in the Arts District of Los Angeles. It is one of the most frequently filmed buildings in L.A. and a prime example of how the geography of a filmed location is complex and interwoven with aspects related to the logistics of filmmaking and the production of meaning in a film's narrative. The paradigm for the analysis in this paper was laid out by Fitzmaurice (2001, p. 20) who states that the double ontology of cinema consists of two parts: image and industry. If researchers were to look at these aspects separately, they risk missing context, interaction, and unique blends of the two. In this essay, I introduce a multi-method approach capable of analyzing these discourses together. I combine aspects of spatial analysis, industry analysis, and cultural studies to demonstrate how film geographers can make significant contributions to the discourse by transcending the *reel/real binary* (c.f. Cresswell & Dixon, 2002).

First, I review how scholars from different disciplines have approached questions of film and its geography in the past to see what methodologies and conceptual understandings were applied. Next, the film-geographic method is introduced in a case study for the Starkman Building. Here I ask why certain locations are filmed more frequently than others and how the *image* influences the *industry* and vice versa. Film-geographic analysis allows for a more in-depth look not only at the Hollywood-machinery

of production, but also how the Starkman Building is situated within the heart of LA's downtown warehouse district with its micro studios, the LA River, skid row, and rapid gentrification. This type of analysis turns previously invisible cultural practices visible and leads to a better understanding of the social and geographical implications these have.

Film studies and geography

There is a strong case to be made that film and geography have never been separate entities. As Sommerlad (forthcoming) argues, "the analysis of filmic landscapes already appeared about 100 years ago in Balász' theoretical considerations to landscape photography." However, in scholarly analysis film studies and geography have laid out different paths of examining cinematic places and placemaking processes.

Film studies as an academic discipline has had a textual focus engrained in its identity. In the 1950s André Bazin, founder of the influential *Cahiers du Cinéma*, posed the question "What is Cinema?" (Guzetti, 1973, p. 292). Semioticians like Metz (e.g. 1974), Bellour (e.g. 1975) or Eco (e.g. 1976) responded "cinema is a language" (Guzetti, 1973 p. 292) and therefore "film is a text" (Bellour, 1975 p. 19). Shiel (2001) suggests that this emphasis stems from the roots of film studies within literary analysis. The textual metaphor understands cultural products as systems of signification which can be interpreted (Sharp & Lukinbeal, 2015). Interpretations can be enriched by context such as the era and circumstances a film was produced in or the values and beliefs of a film's creator. However, an understanding like this could lead to the misconception of "film as a secondary object, a cultural text that functions only to reflect lived conditions" (Sharp & Lukinbeal, 2015, p. 25). While there have been other methods applied in the field, especially with the rise of poststructural and non-representational theories (c.f. Shiel, 2001), the textual metaphor continues to be critically challenged and further developed with numerous film scholars arguing in favor of a textual conceptualization of film (Wildfeuer & Bateman, 2017). The critique of 'film as text' has stayed consistent throughout the years: Cinema is not a language, but rather "the outcome of industrial production—a fact with inescapable consequences for its means of signification" (Guzetti, 1973 p. 308).

Geographers have applied two approaches to studying the macro economics of Hollywood's film industry: The first focused on examining labor markets and commodities which adhere to the logistics of film production. For example, Scott (1984) used standard gravity-entropy equations to examine the relations between the commute and wages of animation film workers in Los Angeles. The second and more dominant approach was on the industry and used economic theory to examine the formation of production centers (Lukinbeal, 2004). Especially the works of Storper and Christopherson (1985, 1987) who laid the way for temporal and spatial economic modeling of Hollywood film production. These researchers have traced, mapped, and mathematically analyzed processes surrounding film production.

In recent years, film geography has forged new methods for thinking about filmic spaces by bringing together cultural studies and cultural economy approaches to location production studies. Along those lines Sharp and Lukinbeal (2015, p. 23) proposed "that we understand the creation of a cultural text or product as ontogenetic, embedded within the ongoing political and economic practices of the industry," and "that we recognize that hermeneutical analyses of cultural texts necessitate an engagement with the political economy of the production practices that went into the text's creation." Film geographic research should apply methods capable of analyzing content (image) and context (industry) by intertwining the political economy of production with its geographical representation.

The Nate Starkman Building

Perhaps one of the most filmed buildings in Los Angeles that is both known and unknown because of its relative anonymity in the warehouse district; the Nate Starkman Building also known as Pan Pacific Warehouse. There are some uncertainties in the early history of the building and some misinformation floating around. The structure was built by the Dutch Brininstool Painting Company. However, many journalists wrongly state it was built in 1908. This error occurs due to an entry in the database Los Angeles Historic Resources Inventory (2021), which

Fig. 1 The Nate Starkman Building in 2016

claims the building was built 01-01-1908. We[1] were able to find several advertisements from the 1906 San Francisco Call proving that the Brininstool Painting Company already ran a three-storied painting-factory at the corner of Palmetto and Mateo street during May 1906 (California Digital Newspaper Collection, 2021). Blum (2016) told us that Brininstool sold the site to another painting manufacturer in the 1910s. We obtained a scan of an insurance document that features a drawing of the building and is dated to 23rd of June 1914—so the resale occurred later than that. Around the time of that resale the side-structures were added (Blum, 2016). The building was later sold to an elevator manufacturer and after that sold again to become a rag warehouse. The ghost writing 'Nate Starkman and Son' which became namesake for the building is attributed to a record label inhabiting the site during the early 1980s (Los Angeles Historic Resources Inventory, 2021). The current owner, Stephen Blum, acquired the building in 1983 and was the first to rent out the building as a film location (Blum, 2016) (Fig. 1).

In preparation for the case study, we obtained a geographic information system (GIS) dataset of film permit data from 2008 to 2012 from Film LA. The database consists of 125,000 permits in the greater Los Angeles area. A kernel density analysis was first conducted to examine patterns in the L.A. area. This analysis takes the film permit points and changes them to look like weather maps covering different neighborhoods and districts with high to low film making. The thirty-mile-zone (Roland, 2016) within downtown L.A. proved to be the most filmed. Here we discovered several structures that peaked the frequency of filming. Next, we developed a locator map of these buildings to determine which location would be the focus of the case study (Fig. 2).

While most of the sites had a historic significance before becoming film locations two entries stood out to us: The Sun Chemical Building (239 filmed records) and the Nate Starkman Building (181 filmed records), both located in the Arts District. After narrowing it down to these two, a practicality decided the focus of our case study: The Sun Chemical Building was torn down in 2015.

Spatial analysis and cartographic representation enable researchers to reveal geographic patterns of site usage and find relations to other spatial configurations. The next step of the methodology focusses on qualitative work. Fieldwork and interviews are meant to help grasp how the Nate Starkman Building as a part of LA's cinematic landscape is formed and represented.

[1] The fieldwork laid out here was conducted by Martin Konrath and me during September and October 2016 in Los Angeles. Additionally, I want to express my gratitude to Chris Lukinbeal, Laura Sharp and Elisabeth Sommerlad for making the trip to Los Angeles possible and for providing me with feedback and guidance.

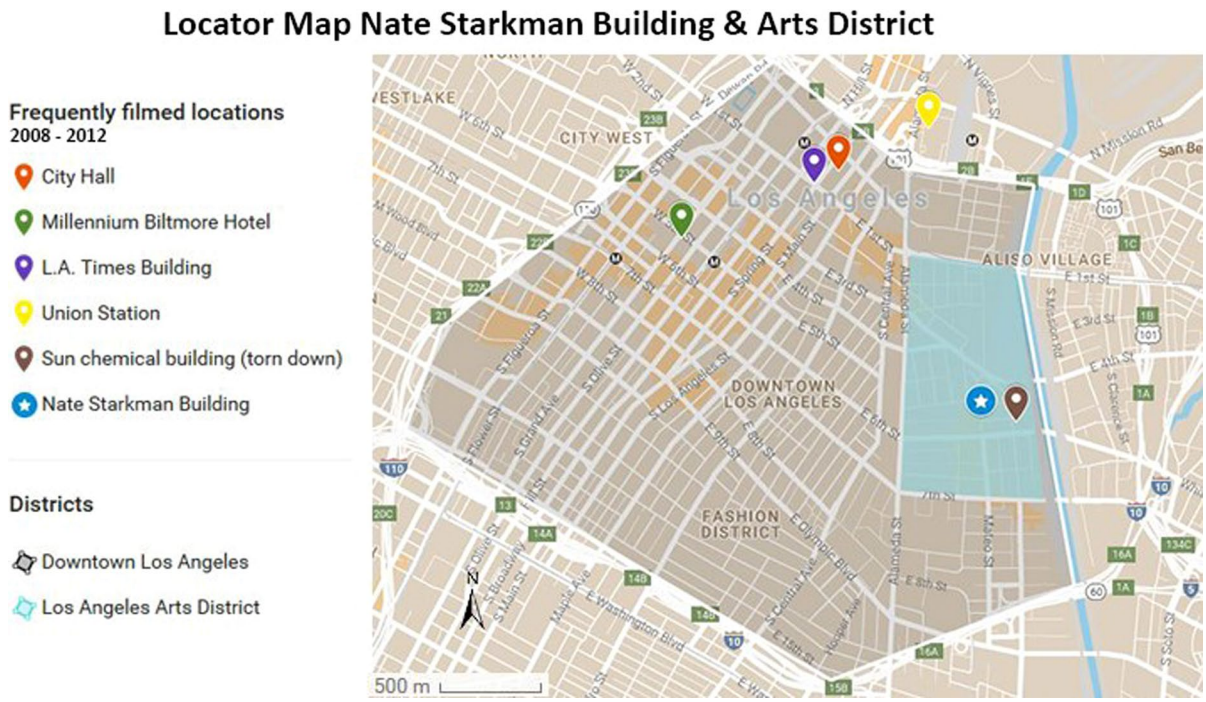

Fig. 2 Locator map for frequently filmed locations in downtown LA

Fieldwork and expert interviews

The fieldwork began by contacting Stephen Blum, owner of the Starkman Building. Through him we were able to gain access and insight to the building and related documents. Formal interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed.

The Nate Starkman Building sits on the corner of Mateo Street and Palmetto Street at 544 Mateo Street, Los Angeles, CA 90,013, USA. The building is curved from one side, has a flat roof and is made mostly out of brick. Systematically arranged round-arc windows and big green doors can be found on the two sides that are facing Mateo and Palmetto Street. In the back part of the site is a garden, which is fenced and ends at the back end of the adjacent clothing store. The main building provides broad rooms, with wooden floors, uncovered ceilings, narrow dark staircases as well as corridors and windows with a circular arc. The old wooden floors and brick walls emphasize the historic charm of the site. The special segmentation of the complex is rare for this kind of warehouse: The site is visibly divided into three main sections and two side sections: The main three storied building, the bordering warehouse, and the side building. Most of the rooms are rented out exclusively to production companies for photo shootings or on location film production. Parts of the building are also rented to individual tenants (Blum, 2016).

Figure 3 showcases the signature interior and natural lighting of the loft-style levels. While the third floor hosts the office of Blum, the second and first floor are left empty, to make it easier for the film industry to shoot their specific needs. A working elevator connects floors two and three, while the staircase goes from the ground floor all the way up. The ground floor is partially rented out by a parking service provider. The staircase not only connects the floors of the main buildings but is also a hallway to the bordering warehouse. Here several distinct looks can be achieved, for example a garage space, the darker staircase or hallway and the all-white studio section with accessible, customizable roof windows for daylight adjustments and a small stage. Every part of the interior can be rented out for filming. Fieldwork allows researchers to grasp the particular sense of place (Tuan, 1977) a site conveys which is mandatory to understand the multidimensional processes of

Fig. 3 Third floor of the Nate Starkman Building featuring wooden floors, brick walls and round-arc windows

on-screen representation where the atmosphere and feeling of a place matter just as any practicalities like accessibility or functionality.

Textual analysis

To reveal what had been shot at the site why and by whom, we added important personnel like the director, production designer, location scout and location manager to our dataset. We reached out to these professionals and interviewed them and in so doing, were able to do participatory observation research on a tech-scout at the Starkman Building.

The Nate Starkman Building has been featured in numerous movies since the 1980s. The GIS dataset only included 2008–2012 productions, however, through interviews our list of productions using the facility expanded exponentially. The following section analyzes TV and movie appearances we consider milestones in the development of the site as a filming location. While examining the role of the Pan Pacific Warehouse within the diegesis we also argue why a certain appearance is significant and what it added to the site culturally and historically.

After the first filming for an Ohio bank spot in the early 1980s, smaller productions like commercials, shorts and a lot of photography sessions began coming to the Starkman Building. One location manager told the other about it and word of mouth drew in the first feature film production in 1983 (Blum, 2016): *Repo Man* (Cox, 1984). With its punk attitude and the repossession theme, it became a cult classic. The film's tone fits the Arts District perfectly, which had been taken over by the artist scene in the previous decade. The Nate Starkman Building is clearly visible in the film with the number 544 featured prominently on the side of the building.

In the late 1980s location manager Christine Bonnem scouted the building for the movie *Pacific Heights* (Schlesinger, 1990). Coincidentally, the building was empty at the time of her scout because it was in transition between tenants (Blum, 2016). Bonnem told Blum that if there had been tenants in the rooms, she would not have recommended it. That marked the decision for Blum to turn the building into a filming location and not rent the frequently filmed floors out to tenants anymore: "That was 1989 that I really began to take it seriously for filming" (Blum, 2016). *Pacific Heights* uses the third floor of the Pan Pacific Warehouse to produce its cinematic space (Lukinbeal, 2005). The interior shots could potentially be set in any apartment. This generic representation of space indicates that Nate Starkman is only the setting, in which the plot unfolds.

The dark tone of that movie inspired the series-producers of *Columbo* (Saltzman, 1989) to shoot the 1991 episode "Death Hits the Jackpot" at the building. In the diegesis it acts as the apartment of the victim Freddy and becomes the crime scene, where he is murdered. Roughly a third of the episode takes place within the Nate Starkman Building and there are also some exterior shots. *Columbo* was a landmark TV series, one that shook up the crime genre by reversing the 'how dunnit' formula and it inspired a generation

of showrunners who worked on crime themed TV series after that (Sabin, 2015). *Columbo* laid out a path many shows followed: *CSI New York* used the Nate Starkman Building twice in the period between 2008 and 2012, utilizing the New York loft style interior of the site. In the series *Cleaner* (S1E07) it was a shooting range, in *Criminal Minds* it played an Art Gallery (Jefferds, 2016) as well as the place a detective is approached by two gang members (S4E22). In series like *The Mentalist* (S4E08), *Prime Suspect* (S1E13), *Castle* (S3E14) and many more the Pan Pacific Warehouse appeared as either a crime-scene or the hideout for the bad guys.

That silver screen presence kept pushing the site forward and into the forefront of bigger productions. In *National Treasure* (Turteltaub, 2004) it acted as the apartment for protagonist Ben, played by Nicolas Cage. In the diegesis the apartment is located somewhere in the Washington D.C. area. The film shows the exterior of the Nate Starkman Building, but it acts as mere cinematic space. *National Treasure* additionally features some interior shots of the Starkman Building.

2009 saw a franchise return to the Arts District. The fourth installation in the 'The Fast and The Furious' series entitled *Fast & Furious* (Lin, 2009) shot at the Nate Starkman Building. To this day the movie is the highest grossing film shot at the site with a $155,064,265 domestic box office (The numbers, 2016). In the diegesis a riotous street party is held in front of the building. While this seems generic at first glance, it is a utilization of the particular sense of place since the production team purposefully aimed at re-creating the atmosphere of the first film in the franchise: *The Fast and the Furious* (Cohen, 2001). In the first installment many scenes were shot on location at the Los Angeles Arts District but none at the Pan Pacific Warehouse. After *Tokyo Drift* (Lin, 2006) was considered by many fans and critics as a departure from what a 'The Fast and the Furious' movie should look like the franchise returned to its core roots with the fourth movie (Beaumont, 2009). Not only did they bring back the original cast, but they also revisited the Arts District, this time featuring the Pan Pacific Warehouse. The film's meta subtitle "New Model, Original Parts," pays homage to the film's cast and geography.

Arguably the most important show for the public recognition of the building started in 2005. The TV-sitcom *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (McElhenney, 2005), uses the exterior of 544 Mateo Street as "Paddy's Pub." The series is set in Philadelphia but most of the outside shots are produced in Los Angeles while interior scenes are filmed in studio. *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* provides an iconic use of the Nate Starkman Building and profits largely from its unique look and feel. The sitcom aired its 14th season in 2019 which makes it the "longest-running live-action comedy series in cable history" (Andreeva, 2014).

Discourse analysis

To find out why productions flock to the Pan Pacific Warehouse so frequently we need to take a closer look at the off-camera decisions, which enable the process of filmmaking to take place at the Nate Starkman Building. Here we reveal an optimized "taskscape" (Lukinbeal, 2012). In our interviews the experts kept pointing to one advantage the building offers directly affecting the "needs of the script" (Lukinbeal, 2012, p. 172): Jefferds emphasized that the building has "so many different looks" (2016). Not only is the building capable of imposing places, like New York (Jett, 2016), Washington D.C. (Hillman, 2016) or Chicago (Jefferds, 2016) but it can also provide different temporal looks from the late 19th century up to modern day (Jett, 2016).

> The ability for the site to appear as a variety of places, spaces, and times in films […] demonstrates how signifiers of place are flexible, allowing the site to become any place needed. In other words, place-making is not tied to absolute location. The ability for the site to become 'other' on these two levels—functional and visual— attends to the possibilities of place as process (Mathews, 2010, p. 174).

While Mathews' object of analysis, the Distillery District in Toronto, Canada, rarely plays itself (ebd., p. 181); the Nate Starkman Building can act as other but also frequently does play itself (Blum, 2016). Furthermore, it has become clear within the interviews and the diegesis analysis that the site is not limited to one particular tone or genre.

This mixed usage alludes to another factor in the taskscape that the site masters; multifunctionality (Lukinbeal, 2012). The Pan Pacific Warehouse

provides plenty of different looks on its own and the exterior, interior and alleyway behind it are all available for filming. There are also dozens of other filming locations in walking distance from the Nate Starkman Building. Just across the street is Willow Studios, a micro film studio offering a big parking lot that can be rented when filming occurs at the Starkman Building. Parking is required for film production where trucks and other equipment can be stored while shooting (Jett, 2016). Due to its warm Californian climate the Arts District is accessible all year long. Further, the building lies on the junction of two broad streets and therefore allows to shoot establishing shots with wider angles. The streets are not too busy so blocking these for filming is unproblematic.

While the Nate Starkman Building can act as a warehouse, it does not come with special machinery or other props. This is due to Blum aiming at an authentic look and feel and keeping the building original. However, some specialties can be useful for filming, for example the wooden staircase, working elevator, trap door and loading dock (Jefferds, 2016). Blum stated in our interview that the production companies do not rely on him dressing the location; they will bring whatever they need (2016). Keeping the building empty for filming adds to its versatility. Dressing the building, for example with a sign like in *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, as an Art Gallery (Jefferds, 2016) or bringing in props is unproblematic.

Budget constraints are the last major factor that influences the decision of a production team to shoot on location (Jefferds, 2016). Inside Los Angeles rental costs for filming locations have been established and standardized over the years (Blum, 2016). While there are higher cost locations the pricing does not vary unreasonably. Several full-service agencies offer representation for property owners who aim at renting out their site for on location filming. This professionalization of the filming location market has contributed to balancing the prices.

The analyzed factors constitute the taskscape of on location filming, but our findings point to two additional aspects that contribute to the frequent booking of the location: The film industry and particularly Hollywood are highly social entities (Jones, 1996). Networking is one of the crucially undertheorized aspects of the filmmaking business (Blair, 2009). Many of the location owners we interviewed stated that filming crews tend to come back; Blum says most of his business comes directly from location manager who know him personally and he has been establishing personal ties with filmmakers, scouts, and production designers since the 80s.

Further, the industry feeds off itself. On the one hand location managers and production designers learn from each other and ask each other for advice (Hillman, 2016). On the other hand, they turn to film and TV content to look for their next filming locations (Jefferds, 2016). This is akin to the reproductive system Luhmann (1996) attributed to modern mass-media: The Nate Starkman Building is frequently filmed and therefore stars in many movies and television shows. The system inspires itself and replicates shots of the Pan Pacific Warehouse which then restarts this cycle with even more potential to be seen. When asked why he went to the Nate Starkman Building for the first time Hillman (2016) responded: "In my youth I saw a hundred films with it so I cannot remember when I saw it the first time."

Conclusion

Film Geography holds the potential to offer new and unique insights by applying a multi-method approach. Quantitative methods like spatial analysis help identify economic hubs of production and expose distributions and densities of filmed locations in a region. Qualitative methods like observational work in the field and expert interviews are irreplaceable when working with locations. These greatly enhance a textual analysis which should still be conducted but intertwined with the results of the previous methods. Lastly taking concepts like the taskscape of on-location filmmaking (Lukinbeal, 2012) into account researchers can put them to the test in the field to see whether these models apply and if they are considered necessary facets film production.

By combining methods traditionally used separately, we can expose new ways of understanding the spatial processes of filmmaking. The analysis of the Nate Starkman Building shows how image and industry are intertwined. With a focus on on-location filmmaking the multimethod-approach is characterized by its flexibility and therefore easily adjusted to new locations and studies.

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