

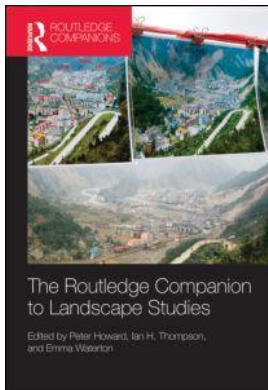
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Publisher: *Routledge*

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## **The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies**

Peter Howard, Ian Thompson, Emma Waterton

### **The field and the frame**

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203096925.ch18>

John R. Gold, Margaret M. Gold

**Published online on: 06 Dec 2012**

**How to cite :-** John R. Gold, Margaret M. Gold. 06 Dec 2012, *The field and the frame from: The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies* Routledge

Accessed on: 30 Sep 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203096925.ch18>

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# The field and the frame: landscape, film and popular culture

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[I]t is impossible to be an artist and not care for laws and limits. Art is limitation; the essence of every picture is the frame.

*(Chesterton, 1908: 57)*

A small road in north-west Malta ends at a cliff-top car park, but the settlement that it serves is no ordinary fishing village (see Figure 18.1). Vaguely reminiscent of small ports along the sleepy backwaters of New England, the quays and clapboard houses of ‘Sweethaven’ in fact only date from 1979 when a film production company selected the hitherto undeveloped inlet of Anchor Bay to construct a set for the film *Popeye*, a musical commissioned by Paramount and Walt Disney Productions and based on the cartoon character created by Elzie Crisler Segar (Inge, 1990). Begun in May 1979, the set took seven months to construct. Replete with extensive earthworks and a substantial breakwater to protect the site from high seas during filming, the final product constituted a substantial investment for a single film project.

After the end of shooting in 1980, the set’s future was undecided. The film company painted the buildings with grey protective paint and left, passing ownership to the Malta Film Facility (MCF). Rather than adopt the usual practice of quickly demolishing it and returning the area to something approaching its original state, the MCF hesitantly decided to retain Sweethaven as an attraction, seeking to generate revenue by drawing in tourists interested in visiting the sites of the film’s production. While this remains an essential part of the *raison d’être* of the ‘Popeye Village’, new owners have converted the buildings, all but two of which were originally just shells, into functioning craft workshops and tourist amenities. Hence as *Popeye* faded into cinematic history, the landscapes of Sweethaven became shaped by new attractions related to the packaging of Maltese tourism. During 2011, these included pedagogic instruction on the marine environment and nautical skills, displays of local handicrafts, a year-round Christmas display (‘Santa’s Toy Town’), and provision of adventure playgrounds – activities sometimes only tangentially related to the adventures of the strip-cartoon sailor.



Figure 18.1 'Popeye Village', Anchor Bay, Malta (John Gold, January 2011).

The transformation of Anchor Bay provides insight into the complex relationship between landscape and film and, beyond that, to wider relationships between landscape and popular culture. With reference to the former, constructing the faux harbour in line with the production needs of a Hollywood film emphasises the importance of the setting as part of the *mise-en-scène* or, literally, the business of 'staging an action' for the sake of the cameras (Gibbs, 2002). *Popeye's* director and producers required convincing frames for the film's action that would meet the audience's expectations and reflect the values and imaginaries that shape those expectations. As frames, the landscapes function rhetorically in the construction of the film serving, amongst other things, to provide information about characters' identities, convey persuasive ideas about the film's emerging narrative and supply images that might enrich the audience's experience (Groenendyk, 2000). Yet, to continue the cinematic analogy, the field within the frame continues to change. For Sweethaven, the *ab initio* imaginative creations of the film-makers have forever altered the landscapes of the bay, but a series of subsequent transformations have further mediated their meaning. The landscapes of Sweethaven are now consumed by paying tourists who visit an attraction now presented as a theme park, with the additional expectations that experience of theme parks elsewhere brings. Certainly, there has been no fixity surrounding the interpretation of the landscapes of this paradoxical, fictional-yet-existing place.

This example, of course, has features that are specific to the Maltese context, but it introduces ideas that may be developed further about the complex and multifaceted relationship between landscape and popular culture as mediated by film. At the outset, *film* is taken here to include the products of both cinema and television, notwithstanding the differences in the ways in which 'images are constructed, used or looked at' (Higson, 1987: 8). For its part, *popular*

*culture* – inevitably defined in contradistinction to elite culture (or the arts) – is defined as ‘the system of shared meanings, values and attitudes and the symbolic forms ... in which they are expressed and embodied’ (Burke, 2009: xiii) associated with the overwhelming proportion of the population who do not occupy positions of wealth and power in society. Against that background, this chapter builds on earlier research (Gold, 1974, 2001, 2002; Burgess and Gold 1985; Gold and Gold, 1995) to consider three central themes. The first, discussed in the next section, deals with the question of ‘realism’ in representations of landscape, using examples relating to the documentary movement – the sub-genre of film-making that supposedly has greatest concern with the notion of accurately holding up a mirror to the world. The second part turns attention to the clichéd representations of landscape often found in the cinema, illustrated by considering the reasons why science-fiction film-makers routinely employ a powerful but limited set of urban landscapes to anchor the narratives of their movies. The final section examines the cultural meaning that landscapes acquire as a result of their contact with film production, noting how such contacts challenge ideas that popular culture is necessarily associated with ordinariness.

### Landscape and documentary realism

The contested notion of ‘realism’ haunts discourse about documentary film and its characteristic modes of representation. The idea that non-fictional film provides a truthful and accurate portrayal of reality is, of course, almost as old as the cinema itself. In 1898, the Polish photographer Boleslaw Matuszewski recommended film as an instructional medium suitable for recording history, daily life, artistic performances, even medical procedures (Winston, 1995: 8). Early ethnographic film-makers were ‘burdened with the expectation’ that they would record the practices and customs of marginal cultures before they disappeared (De Brigard, 1995: 13). In response to one such film, the Scottish film-maker John Grierson described Robert Flaherty’s *Moana* (1924) as ‘a poetic vision of Polynesian tribal life’ that had ‘documentary value’ (Hood, 1983: 100). Grierson’s was the first unambiguous use of the term ‘documentary’ for a genre of ‘utilitarian, pedagogic and impersonal’ films with a high informational content that differed from straightforward travel films or pedagogic films by virtue of their social intent (Macdonald and Cousins, 1996: xii).

This sense of social purpose was readily apparent in the documentaries produced on both sides of the Atlantic from the 1920s through to the 1950s (Beattie, 2004; Chanan, 2007). Benefitting from such changes in film technology as the introduction of safety film and smaller formats, documentarists could escape from the studio and depict the living and working conditions in the everyday world that the commercial cinema was simply ignoring. The results were films that went beyond romantic travelogues about faraway places to throw light on unseen rural and urban environments much closer to home. The landscapes depicted played a strategic role in underscoring the message of the film. In Great Britain, for example, films on housing conditions conveyed powerful images of the mean streets and decrepit buildings experienced by those living in slum neighbourhoods (Gold, 1985). The imagery of urban despair was then juxtaposed with glimpses of newer developments, particularly estates of flats, which might offer hope for the future. The greyness, crowding and neglect of the outmoded city were contrasted with the brightly lit and apparent spaciousness of the new dwellings. Concerns with housing conditions, in turn, were routinely extended to argue the need for town planning (Gold and Ward, 1997; Gold, 2002), although exemplars of better practice might well be in short supply. This deficiency, however, could be resolved by means of collage. The American documentary *The City* (1939), for instance, seemingly showed a Garden

City-influenced settlement that would resolve the problems of the existing metropolis, but *stricto sensu* the community shown living cheerfully in its sunlit and verdant surroundings did not exist. Instead, it was a composite of shots from five different locations scattered across the USA brought together in 'sincere and justifiable reconstruction' to flesh out the message of the film (Barsam, 1973: 1).

Contemporary documentary film has retained the practices of using landscape as an adjunct to exercises in public education, journalistic inquiry and radical interrogation, but the increasing role of documentary as entertaining diversion (Corner, 2002: 259–60) has emphasised landscape as spectacle. Where there is any latitude, for example, the director will use striking landscapes that approximate to the right ones in order to advance the storyline rather than dwell on visually dull landscapes that may be more accurate locations for the action. Even when based on historic journeys, travelogues will be diverted to include adjacent, but not strictly relevant, scenic wonders. Landscapes are frequently shot at the time of day that shows them at their spectacular best (sunrise and sunset); times which may not reflect the presence of the presenter. Night skies are routinely enhanced with image intensifiers and digital editing techniques, because conventional camera technology can rarely do justice to the starlit panoramas about which presenters are enthusing. All that is essentially required is that the audience believes that they are witnessing landscapes as they are and actions as they happen without any obvious intervention from the film-maker (Burgess, 1987: 6).

Travel series, a staple of television programme schedules, throw further light on the myth of documentary realism. These range from programmes that glossily address the holiday market to personal odysseys in which academics, journalists or 'glitterati' (celebrity presenters) undertake nostalgic voyages of self-discovery for the sake of the cameras. The former essentially subsume landscape depictions into an environmental rhetoric that has implicit commercial value for tourist destinations (Dunn, 2005). The latter conventionally depict landscapes as part of a dialogue between presenter and place, although even here representations of landscape conform to existing aesthetic-narrative conventions. Landscape shots, for example, are consistently edited into the completed film to regulate their pace, with the freneticism associated with rapid jump-cutting of images contrasting with the serenity imparted by slow wide panning. With respect to the latter, the documentary producer David Wallace observed that incorporating landscape footage helps a film 'to breathe' – a property enhanced by adding supporting music or appropriate lines of spoken text. Referring to the BAFTA-winning 'River Journeys' series (BBC Television, 1981–4), for example, he observed that even 'travelling up a river ... these wonderful landscapes going past (can) ... all look the same', but add 'a simple piece of music or a few well-chosen lines ... and you can just run a scene like that forever' (Wallace, 2011). It is hard to avoid the conclusion that, even in documentary, 'the landscape, the travel and everything else' are chosen 'to inform the story' (*ibid*).

### Future shock

If documentary film masks selectivity in landscape representation through realist conventions, science-fiction film routinely makes explicit use of a limited and highly stylised repertoire of landscapes to contain narrative, provide spectacle and sustain atmosphere. In some respects, this relative homogeneity is surprising. The novels on which so many science-fiction films are based embrace a huge diversity of genres, from extraterrestrial fantasies and essays in time travel to alien invasion and post-apocalyptic survival (Landon, 2002). Nevertheless, there is remarkable consistency in the landscapes depicted when film-makers frame their narratives to negotiate the characteristic polarities of the genre, such as between good/evil, light/dark, sanitised/

contaminated, order/chaos, utopian/dystopian, and urban/rural. In line with both cinematic and wider cultural traditions, they predominantly portray landscapes that bear testimony to the longstanding hostility towards the city endemic in Western thought in general (e.g. White and White, 1962) and science fiction literature in particular (Kuhn, 1999). Certainly the large city, portrayed as a dystopian mixture of anthill and labyrinth, is *the* prime setting for science-fiction film, with its landscapes used as signifiers to communicate where and when the action is set and to offer coded information about what types of human behaviour one might expect to find there (Gold, 2001).

The precise faces of such cities, however, have varied over time. During the interwar years of the cinema, the dominant vision was the 'vertical city' – a prototype drawing partly on North American urban experience that had already featured in novels written at the turn of the twentieth century. The cinematic archetype of the vertical city was supplied by Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926), a film framed around the sombre vision of human society 'divided into brute labour and trivial consumption, and then of the city shaped physically to embody these worlds' (Williams, 1973: 374). When translated into set design, this juxtaposed a city with two vertically distinct segments. The upper or 'overground' city, which Lang readily admitted was strongly influenced by the visual appearance of Manhattan (Ott, 1979: 27), comprised an opulent high-rise city that contained the homes and businesses owned by the ruling classes. By contrast, the underground city presented a bleak and dehumanising environment, with barrack-like tenement housing for the workers tending the machines that powered *Metropolis*.

Vistas of colossal buildings, cavernous roadways and skies filled with flying machines of all descriptions became a *de rigueur* feature of the urban imaginary of science-fiction film. So too did the close association between the city and its tyrannical ruling elites. Those who confronted the forces of evil were outlaws driven to the margins – normally finding refuge either in the sewers under the city or the desolate (post-apocalyptic) wilderness that lay outside the city's guarded boundaries. Nevertheless, convergence with other film genres led to further iconographic innovations. The most notable was with *film noir*, characterised by the atmosphere of darkness and pessimism conveyed by Hollywood crime dramas in the late 1940s and 1950s (Dimendberg, 2004). Science-fiction cinema readily embraced a future *city noir* (e.g. Sammon, 1996), the hallmarks of which were panoramas of densely packed cityscapes, glimpses of city streets in perpetual night-time lit by flickering bonfires, skies besmirched by industrial pollution and wastelands of decaying buildings presided over by brooding high-rise buildings.

New York, commonly felt to be in terminal decline in the 1970s, became the archetypal future *city noir*, just as it was once the inspiration for the vertical city. The proto-environmentalist *Soylent Green* (1973), for example, depicted the city as a humid and claustrophobic place where the population had spiralled to 40 million by 2022. *Escape from New York* (1981) offered a scenario by which the ruling elite had sealed Manhattan Island behind by a 50 foot high perimeter wall to serve as a dumping ground for dangerous criminals. Los Angeles, the home of Hollywood, also acted as the setting for stories involving urban dereliction, decay and abandonment. *Blade Runner* (1982), with its storyline about environmental collapse and malfunctioning experiments in genetic engineering, embodied characteristic duality in its anticipations of the Los Angeles of 2017. At its heart lay a high-density and teeming city centre with a visual appearance influenced by elements drawn from the cityscapes of Tokyo, Hong Kong and Las Vegas. Around it were the crumbling remains of the existing city, rendered by clichéd noir settings of dark and deserted streets fringed by deteriorating blocks of apartments. Regardless of what narrative twists were added, *Blade Runner's* representations of urban landscapes were essentially the present-as-future.

The same representational strategy perhaps reached its apotheosis in science-fiction cinema with the concept of hyperreality, whereby re-creations become so convincing that they are more authentic than the real. *The Matrix* and its two sequels (1999–2003), for instance, find human beings in the late twenty-first century living in a simulated world created by intelligent machines in order to mask the fact that their human slaves are actually being held in suspended animation so that their body heat can be used as a source of electrical power. The settings replicate the above/below ground dichotomy seen in earlier films. Members of the human resistance live underground in a *future noir* environment that remains undetected by the machines. Meanwhile the hyperreality, into which the consciousness of most inhabitants is locked, conveniently replicates the appearance of cities as they were at the turn of the twentieth-first century. By virtue of this innovative stratagem, the future could be set authentically in any suitable existing urban environment – in this instance using the central business district of Sydney (Australia), lightly camouflaged with Chicago street names, for location work. The exact location, however, clearly mattered little, since the future urban nightmare was apparently anywhere and everywhere.

### Out of the ordinary

When reviewing the neglect of the media and popular culture by geographers and others, Burgess and Gold (1985: 1) argued that the ‘very ordinariness’ of media such as film and television ‘masks their importance’ since they ‘are an essential element in moulding individual and social experiences of the world and in shaping the relationship between people and place’. Although that remains substantially true, it should not be taken to imply that popular culture only addresses ordinary landscapes; perhaps as a parallel to elite culture’s typical concerns with ‘special landscapes’. Certainly, it is perfectly common for ordinary landscapes to be transformed into special ones through engagement with the institutions and practices of popular culture.

Film illustrates this theme particularly well. Understandably most of the thousands of locations that have supplied settings for film production are within easy reach of studios, for example, Central Park in New York has hosted over 200 cinema films alone since 1908 (Reeves, 2006). Yet while most films made for cinema and television arouse little or no lasting interest amongst their audience in terms of wishing to see the landscapes where they were made, a substantial number have aroused intense fascination amongst audiences keen to augment their vicarious experiences of the depicted landscapes with first-hand contacts. Indeed in such cases, the strength of attachment makes it perfectly plausible to draw comparisons with ideas of sacred space and pilgrimage.

The international film tourism industry (Beaton, 2005) that has grown up around this activity is a phenomenon with ample precedents in the field of cultural tourism. The idea of being drawn to places associated with creative works was a staple of the Grand Tour of continental Europe, where Europe’s elite flocked to see the views glimpsed in famous paintings or visit the locations of their artists’ studios (Black, 1992: 260–75), a form of cultural tourism that persisted into the twentieth century with, say, the popularity of visiting Provence to see places and landscapes associated with Paul Cézanne and Vincent Van Gogh (e.g. Pollock, 1998). In the late nineteenth century, a craze occurred for regional monographs around the notion of ‘literary country’, the typical aim of which invited readers to walk through the landscapes where the ‘thoughts and imaginings’ of the author in question ‘had their birthplace’ (Leyland, 1904: 1). These were not confined to elite culture. For example, the sentimental novels written by Scottish kailyard authors had their devotees and it was possible even in the 1940s to find

American tourists arriving in search of, say, ‘Crockett Country’ – the area of Galloway associated with Samuel R. Crockett (Gold and Gold, 1995: 119).

While interest in ‘literary country’ as a focus for cultural tourism persists, continued interest in such areas as special places for tourist consumption tends to rely on reinforcement from the release of film or televisual interpretations of their novels. The MGM version of *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1967), for example, spurred renewed visitor interest in the 22 identifiable locations from central Dorset and Hampshire used to create the look and atmosphere of Thomas Hardy’s Wessex (Pendreigh, 1995). At the same time, there is a growing trend for the creation of ‘film countries’ in their own right that had little or no existence as literary regions before the screening of successful television series. Urry (2002: 130), for instance, identified a series of areas in Derbyshire and Yorkshire – including ‘Peak Practice Country’, ‘Heartbeat Country’, ‘Last of the Summer Wine Country’ and ‘James Herriot Country’ – through which the tourist gaze was ‘produced, marketed, circulated and consumed’.

Understandably, the selling of landscape in this manner continually responds to new film releases and the identification of new landscapes with special resonances for film tourists. The film industry’s reassignment of Middle Earth to New Zealand for *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–3), for example, saw the growth of international tourism to see a selection of the 150 places scattered throughout the two islands that were used for location work. Yet despite the natural attractions of, say, the Matamata hills (the ‘Shire’ and ‘Hobbiton’) or the Tongariro National Park (‘Mordor’ and ‘Mount Doom’), ‘conservation and legal requirements’ meant that none of the original sets remain (Tzanelli, 2004: 32). The special meaning of the landscape came from visitors being able to see the backdrop at which a fictional narrative, substantially relying on overlaying of computer-generated imagery, unfolded, and then filling the spaces with their imagination.

Not all destinations relating to film production retain their ability to attract film tourists once memories of the films in question fade, but there are numerous instances of long-term attachments developing. Hence despite more than 40 years having lapsed since its release, estimates suggest that 300,000 tourists are still drawn to Salzburg and its surrounding region each year to visit landscapes associated with the 1965 Hollywood musical *The Sound of Music* (Oxford Economics, 2007: 41). In passing, it is worth noting that this compares with the 250,000 paying visitors who attended the city’s *Festspiele* in 2010 – widely regarded as one of Europe’s premier elite cultural events (Gold and Gold, 2011: 121). Intriguingly too, tourists also continue to flock to sites in central Italy around Rome, and Almería in south-eastern Spain where low-budget ‘Spaghetti Westerns’ were made during the 1960s and 1970s (Weisser, 1992) – locations originally considered viable precisely because they resembled somewhere else (the American south-west). Other locations retain their attractions by continually hosting new films. The architecturally rich townscape of Lacock (Wiltshire), for instance, is regularly pressed into service for films involving costume drama, hosting more than 30 major film and television productions since 1960. With building styles ranging from medieval to Victorian and strict aesthetic control over new development, it supplies a townscape that has effortlessly represented Jane Austen’s ‘Meryton’, Thomas Hardy’s ‘Casterbridge’ or Elizabeth Gaskell’s ‘Cranford’ (Smith, 2010).

The special status that film connections can supply for some groups may also constitute points of resistance for others. With regard to *The Lord of the Rings*, Tzanelli (2004: 36) noted the existence of British resentment at attempts to present the story as part of New Zealand’s cultural heritage rather than acknowledge its English origins. British critics suggested, for example, that Tolkien had actually envisaged the green landscapes of Lancashire as the notional setting for his epic fantasy. Local residents can also resent large-scale intrusions into landscapes that they regard



as special. Beaton (2005: 30) observed that the Friends of the Lake District had expressed concern at the negative social and environmental effects that followed film production, arguing that film-makers should be required to address the true costs that their projects pose for local communities. For his part, Mordue (2001) analysed the contested meanings of place and landscape in 'Heartbeat Country', an area in the North Yorkshire Moors where Yorkshire Television set their dramatisations of the *Constable* books by Nicholas Rhea. Despite the simplicity with which the main settlement (Goathland) could be converted into 'Aidensfield' – as easy as changing the sign to make the Goathland Hotel into the 'Aidensfield Arms' – he noted the conflicts between the local inhabitants' sense of community and the expectations brought by visitors drawn by the *Heartbeat* series. For the local community, the appropriation by visitors of the everyday landscapes of Goathland as special places linked to a fictional television series was at odds with their own vision of 'their traditional rural village' (ibid., 249).

## Conclusion

This reference to divergence between different groups highlights the recurrent theme of polarity that occurs in this chapter. When discussing aspects of the multifaceted relationship between landscape and popular culture as mediated by film, we have drawn attention to various such polarities – most notably between elite/popular, field/frame, realistic/fictional, urban/rural and special/ordinary. The first section considered the degree to which even documentarists shape the depictions of landscape in light of their narrative needs rather than respond to literal interpretations of realism. The second part looked at the way that science-fiction cinema, a genre of film-making that has unrivalled opportunity to exercise imagination, instead repeatedly recycles a stereotypically limited but culturally resonant repertoire of dystopian urban landscapes. The third part considered the way that (mostly) ordinary landscapes become revalorised into special places through their associations with film. Taken overall, it is true that, at times, landscape may be little more than 'just one of the arrows in the [film-maker's] quiver' (Wallace, 2011) yet, in other circumstances, film landscapes can represent the point where 'theatre, text, image, industry, event and narrative all come together' (Lukinbeal, 2005: 17). Either way, its ability to imbue film with universal appeal and to absorb, if not necessarily resolve, polarities makes landscape a rewarding focus for inquiry in any analysis of the workings of popular culture.

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