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PRIMED REAL ESTATE: FILM PRODUCERS AND LAND DEVELOPMENT

Karl Schoonover and Barbara Corsi

In this conversation, historian of the film industry Barbara Corsi and theorist of film history Karl Schoonover offer a new way of thinking about the film business and the cinematic image. Emerging from their collaborative research in the archives of various production companies and the personal papers of major Italian producers, their conversation describes an uncharted history of the entanglement of film financing and real estate redevelopment schemes following the period of Italy's 'economic miracle'. Their research and their conversation end up raising a series of questions: What economic structures allowed for the connections between these two industries? What does this alliance between film financing and real estate development indicate about ongoing shifts in the Italian economy during this period? Have postwar tourist industries encouraged a parallel commodification of landscape in the image? Did producers who engaged in real estate development encourage their directors to engage with the new builds and construction sites the producers were developing as potential fictional locations? If so, did film production contribute to gentrification? Given that key stars were often used to promote 'new builds', did producers provide property developers with other 'cinematic' means of promoting their projects? As it begins to answer these questions, the dialogue between Schoonover and Corsi proposes a crucial reframing of Italy's 'cinema of economic miracles.'

KS: Over the past ten years, film theory and the analysis of film form has paid a great deal of attention to the question of how cinematic space relates to processes that make or remake extra-cinematic places. At the same time, there's been an explosion of book series that map

locations for famous films.¹ In scholarly studies, fan books, IMDb.com, and film mapping sites, we see a compulsion to map the settings of films. These mappings typically either attempt to enable readers to find and enter the diegetic world of films, or they do the opposite and try to show just how much certain locations have changed and thus demonstrate the impossibility of ever finding those settings again.² But if the generation of cinematic space nearly always involves a fabrication or distortion, what are these mapping projects actually telling us about films and their production? Is the popularity of these endeavours symptomatic of larger shifts in how we engage with landscape, placeness, and in particular, Italy?

BC: The ubiquitous contemporary impulse to map film locations seems to me to depend upon the recent phenomenon of 'cine-tourism'—that is, a tourism marketing infrastructure that specialises in film and tv locations. For some decades now, the tourist industry has been hunting for new opportunities and approaches to marketing particular places in Italy.

Meanwhile, the consolidation of the regional film commissions in Italy, which have become ever more powerful, has given rise to the rediscovery of the film location's touristic value.

From the perspective of contemporary production, these commissions have also recognised the value of promoting their regions through cinema and television. This seems to me a recent phenomenon. During the 1950s and 1960s, the choice of a location corresponded to a more functional or practical set of criteria: the closer the better and at the least cost. If the film was a coproduction, there was also a need to show the collaborating nation as a location.

KS: These connections of tourism and cinema persist today in the production of the idea of Italian-ness for the rest of the world—i.e., the Made-in-Italy brand. Even a film such as *Chiamami con tuo nome* (Call Me by Your Name, Luca Guadagnino, 2017), which was fairly

coy about its exact shooting locations and famously begins with the title 'Somewhere in Northern Italy', now serves as the pretext for tourism and property speculation, as is evidenced by various tour packages, YouTube videos³ and articles such as 'The sexiest thing in *Call Me By Your Name* is the real estate'. There is a transactional quality to this type of Made-in-Italy mapping that is also at the heart of the tourism initiatives that you mention. We might describe this as an over-eager desire to bring down to earth—to provide with a geographical address—those spaces that feature films create for the imagination. It seems to be an impatient wish to make these imagined spaces consumable.

On this issue of making imagined spaces consumable, I considered in a recent essay what we should make of the preponderance of vacant spaces in Italian horror films. While this may seem like a formalist question about vacant space in the image on the screen, it actually also involves industry and geopolitics. For example, during the opening scene of what is arguably the first postwar Italian horror genre film, *I vampiri* (Lust of the Vampire, Riccardo Freda, 1957), a dead body is discovered after two long takes that track a formal transition across an open landscape. During this tracking, we see a fairly empty terrain being gradually invaded by largescale construction equipment. I argue that a desire to fill up empty urban spaces preoccupies Italian horror and is often inseparable from the tensions and shocks that constitute its horror. Not only in the diegesis but also in the profilmic world, these are spaces being actively emptied out for redevelopment, rehabilitation and quick-build projects. Of course, five years later, Francesco Rosi would address head-on the creation of spaces for gentrification in his masterpiece about the corrupt interweaving of city politics and property development in Naples, *Le mani sulla città* (Hands over the City, 1963).

I vampiri is germane to our conversation for another reason. In contrast to cine-tourism and Brand Italy, I vampiri initiates a period when Italian genre productions were trying to avoid appearing as imported foreign films in the US market. They therefore often disguised the Italianicity of their locations, passing off their scenery as the American West or generic modern cities. In this context, we might consider the case of Sardinia, as I have done elsewhere, and its flexibility as a location in which to shoot films. Sardinia appears in so many guises in genre features from the 1960s and 70s, but rarely as itself. It has no noticeable particularity and is often emptied of human settlement. I have argued therefore that many genre films from this period partook in a space-clearing agenda that made the development of (for example) Sardinia's Costa Smeralda possible. They did so by supplying a kind of corroborating evidence for the fantasy that previously nothing existed in or occupied this place.

For a long time, of course, scholars have interpreted sequences or shots depicting empty quasi-urban or rural spaces as indexing the particularly variegated and uneven nature of Italian modernization. My question though is whether we might be seeing something more complex happening here: Is this a shift in the mode of filmic production that responds to, aids and is aided by apparently external political economic structures, such as urban planning policy, shifts in tax schemes, government and local building incentives, and the in-flux of transnational capital and investment (including the Aga Kahn)? Might it be the case that the external political economic structures of the period are neither external to film production nor peripheral to the cinematic image? When we read emptiness as simply an allegory for Italy's delayed modernity, might we risk missing an opportunity to read in the image the actual impulses of later capitalism—in particular, its habit of procuring spaces by demanding space

remain either obviously useful or ready for exploitation, its tendency to define empty space as undesirably vacant?

BC: In the case of the Costa Smeralda we are not talking about extreme places like the volcano at Stromboli but somewhere that gave rise directly to real estate operations. The use of Sicily's Acolian islands – including Stromboli – has a different but related history. The tourism of the Aeolian islands didn't develop fully until the 1970s, even though the islands had featured in prominent films, such as *Stromboli* (Roberto Rossellini, 1950) and *L'avventura* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1960). Speaking of small Italian islands, an interesting case to consider here is Ischia, chosen already in the mid-1950s by Angelo Rizzoli for both his annual vacations and real estate speculation. After having acquired land and constructed from scratch various hotel complexes on the island, Rizzoli launched a publicity campaign through his publishing channels and in the films he was producing. Films such as *Vacanze a Ischia* (One Week with Love, Mario Camerini, 1957), *Appuntamento a Ischia* (A Summer Date, Mario Mattoli, 1960) and *Ischia operazione amore* (Ischia Operation Love, Vittorio Sala, 1966) were conceptualised exclusively for attracting tourism to the island. They were also released alongside the publication of feature articles about VIPs on holiday in Rizzoli magazines.

KS: I remember in some of our first days working together in the Cristaldi archive at the Cineteca di Bologna we started seeing how, with the proliferation of production companies in the late 1950s and across the 1960s, real estate was increasingly the primary occupation of the parent companies of film production units. Property acquisition and real estate development seem to have been forms of both financial speculation and financial stabilisation

for producers (Amato, Cristaldi, Ponti, De Laurentiis) who built new studios during the same years.

This meant that alongside the scenes detailing the explosion of property development found in a film such as *Il boom* (The Boom, Vittorio De Sica, 1963) or at the start of *La Dolce Vita* (Federico Fellini, 1960), we find evidence of Italian cinema's very literal debt to and promotion of gentrification in its industrial history. While De Sica's and Fellini's films bring this building boom on screen in a way that presents the boom almost as an object of study or analysis, the industrial history of film production reveals cinema's own deep structural affinities and parasitical financial relationship with real estate development. We might even go so far as to say that in the spaces shared by these two industrial spheres the image of property is redrawn.

In your archival research, you looked more carefully at the imbricated nature of the real estate and film businesses. Can you give us an overview of how this worked?

BC: Yes, many film producers were also real estate entrepreneurs during the 1950s and 1960s. We can divide these producers into two categories, according to the type of real estate for which they were known: land ownership or construction and property. The first category, which also comes first in the historical chronology, consisted of members of the noble landowning class of Southern Italy. For this group, cinema was only one interest among many, a temporary occupation that provided a means to the more practical ventures typical of their class. The second group of producers was made up of the 'new men' of Italy's economic boom from approximately the early 1950s to the late 1960s. Even while maintaining film production as their core business, these producers invested in construction, a sector of

particularly large expansion in Rome. They did so in order to anchor their investments to something stable and secure.

Included in the first group were, for example, the Sicilians Francesco Alliata, who was Prince of Villafranca, and Pietro Moncada di Paternò—both of whom were descendants of aristocratic families and major land owners. Together they founded Panaria Film in 1946, which produced films such as William Dieterle's *Vulcano* (Volcano, 1950) and Jean Renoir's *La carrozza d'oro* (Le carrosse d'or / The Golden Coach, 1952). In 1954, they created both Al.Mo. Film Produzione Cinematografica, which was responsible for *Vacanze d'amore* (Magic Village, J.P. Le Chanois and F. Alliata, 1954), and Delta Film, which made *Agguato sul mare* (Pino Mercanti, 1955) and *FBI chiama Istanbul* (None But the Lonely Spy, Emimmo Salvi, 1964). By 1957, the latter two companies found themselves in great financial difficulties. Unexpected failures in their film ventures were compounded by bad weather, which affected the agricultural production from which Alliata and Moncada drew the principal funds to sustain their film companies.⁷ To resolve this crisis, the two landowners undertook complex financial arrangements in which they offered their land as collateral to banks (including vineyards, as well as citrus and olive groves)—land that in fact already had first and second mortgages from separate banks.

The point is that this mode of doing business seems tied to what already seemed like an outmoded landowner mentality (i.e., noble landowners are granted financial solvency in a feudal fashion) that was being swept away by the economic boom and the criteria of efficiency, large-scale industrialisation (in publishing, real estate and textiles) and the logic of the market. Moreover, the connection between agricultural activity and film production seemed to damage both types of business: the uncertain outcome of harvests added to the

equal unpredictability of box office returns and created a disastrous multiplying effect if both were failures. In periods of extreme difficulty, land, the quintessential form of property—or 'La roba' (the stuff), as Alliata and Moncada's fellow Sicilian, the nineteenth-century writer Giovanni Verga, called it—emerged as crucial collateral.

By the middle of the 1950s, however, a new type of film entrepreneur appeared, one in step with the times and who demonstrated an ability to manage film production alongside real estate and property development. The example of Franco Cristaldi is illuminating in this respect, because his real estate activities complemented his cinema work, with the former able to supply necessary collateral for the latter. After the success of I soliti ignoti (Big Deal on Madonna Street, Mario Monicelli, 1958), which coincided with the rapid growth of both the Italian economy and the film industry, Cristaldi inaugurated a new policy of production with Vides Cinematografica di Franco Cristaldi sas, a company that allowed him maximum autonomy over decision-making. In order to expand the scale of his production facilities and grow the number of artistic personnel under contract, Cristaldi allied himself with the real estate company Immobiliare La Giustiniana spa, which in 1962 became owner of the land on which the Vides studios were being built. The two companies also presented themselves as a united front when approaching banks: Cristaldi signed a loan when La Giustiniana needed liquidity; La Giustiniana guaranteed Cristaldi's loans for the production of Vaghe stelle dell'Orsa (Sandra, Luchino Visconti, 1965) and La tenda rossa (The Red Tent, Mikhail Kalatozov, 1969). The viability of Cristaldi's property dealings were just as important as the quality of his film projects from the point of view of the banks financing him. Indeed, his requests for loans were never turned down.

KS: In these links that develop between the two industries of cinema and property management/development, your comments suggest, we see a microcosm of a larger set of shifts towards an increased marketisation of the Italian economy and a changed relationship to the flow of capital in Europe and in the world. In other words, what might seem like bureaucratic details from a history of business point to larger and consequential shifts in the economy and the distribution of resources. To me this is what is most exciting about industrial historiography and the structures it is uncovering.

We also found examples of how specific filming locations were constructed on sites that were then later developed by the parent companies for real estate projects. In this sense, location scouting and real estate development went hand-in-hand. From a cynical perspective, real estate development took advantage of the various ways that cinema makes use of spaces. This visual rendering of spaces into meaningful places, readying them for the cinematic gaze, went hand-in-hand with capitalism's intensifying commodification of land.

BC: Definitely. Producers were very aware of the value of landscape, not only as a background for shooting a film, but also as a property venture. The objectives of these ventures weren't necessarily visible on screen, but it could be said they were 'behind the screen'. Many producers established film studios with the intention of a future repurposing of those properties as real estate investments. In the early 1960s, Cristaldi acquired (via an affiliate company) two plots of land in an area of northern Rome, an area not yet touched by the fast urban expansion of the city mainly towards the east and south that had been occurring in recent years. This acquisition of land provided a construction venture with luxury homes aimed at an upper middle-class clientele.

The most sensational case of a cinema studio becoming real estate can be found in Tirrenia. In 1961, after a lengthy period of financial instability, the studios that had belonged to Giovacchino Forzano were acquired and relaunched by Carlo Ponti and Maleno Malenotti, partners in the film production company Cosmopolitan. The potential high value of the buildable land (220,000 square meters, over 54 acres) in the event of sale by parcelled lots was acknowledged already in 1960 by the insolvency administrator⁸.

After a few years, Malenotti withdrew from Cosmopolitan. Meanwhile, Ponti acquired land adjacent to the studios and in 1965 submitted to authorities a building plan for a residential and resort complex of about 700,000 cubic meters. At first, the application was accepted by the city council of Pisa, but it was then rejected in 1978 by the regional government, thus giving rise to a long legal dispute, which eventually ended in compromise.

The paradox is that no film producer could transform the ground on which studios were built into a more remunerative site, because there were often legal impediments to their redevelopment or because in other instances the studios had fallen into disrepair after a long period of inactivity. In the long run, the procurement and management of the production studios revealed themselves to be bad from a business perspective, not only for Ponti but also for Dino De Laurentiis⁹, Cristaldi¹⁰ and Giuseppe Amato¹¹. They were all forced to relinquish their studios for a price much lower than their cost.

KS: This means then that as a creative industry, cinema should not be regarded as simply reflecting the political economy as though it were a given. In other words, cinema's role isn't as superstructure. Films and their mode of production aren't epiphenomenal to the economy. There is something more parasitical about the imbrication of property acquisition, film

production and the cinematic image. Cinema as both a medium and as an industry provides the spaces in which these transformative transactions can happen and in which the accelerating monetization of all aspects of life (in this case land) takes shape.

Producers were key in this process, because they were able to exploit various aspects of film culture to the benefit of property developers. This brings me to one interesting detail that we found together related to the deployment of the star image in these transactions. According to a set of blueprints we looked at, Cristaldi intended to install Claudia Cardinale's home on a plot of land that his parent companies were buying for development.

BC: The house of Cardinale, top Vides star and girlfriend of Cristaldi, was also an important site for the production of Cardinale's star image. In constructing the image of the *diva*, the producer (Cristaldi) and his press agent Fabio Rinaudo dictated every detail of the actress's life, including the house in which she lived. They decided that Cardinale would be given her own home, which would also serve public image goals, bolstering her star persona. A survey of the land would be carried out, having decided that such a house would be constructed as a kind of country cottage. The new house, composed of 25 rooms, would also provide areas suitable for an office and a secretary. A site adjacent to the Vides studios on Via Flaminia was chosen to construct this ad hoc villa. The tranquil style of the villa's architecture and its secluded location were meant to reinforce the star persona that Cristaldi and Rinaudo aimed to create: a simpler *diva*, one with a reserved and professional comportment—still a movie star, but one far removed from the jet set.

KS: In other instances, producers used property as the public manifestation of their entrepreneurial success. A well-fitted modern home, or even an extravagant palazzo,

substantiated their status as powerbrokers. Real estate functioned as a 'mise-en-scène' of sorts for success, but it also offered the potential to broker various transactions and mediate relations between people. Their own properties were display houses encouraging future investment.

BC: Yes, real estate was a means of self-presentation for film entrepreneurs. Aiming for maximum visibility, they needed to flaunt status symbols and a house was one of them. The house became as much an investment in their public image as it was in their finances. In 1964, De Laurentis bought the princely Villa Catena. The Villa dates to the twelfth century and had previously only ever belonged to noble families. He used the villa to entertain representatives from the major American studios, with whom he negotiated coproductions made at Dinocittà studios.

Cristaldi, meanwhile, transformed his villa in Tuscany, originally discovered during the location scouting for *Vaghe stelle dell'Orsa*, into a venue for entertaining film industry insiders. Every New Year, friends and colleagues were invited to the villa for several days of festivities, film screenings and discussions of new work projects, as well as luncheons and dinners. These parties aimed to cement professional relations and friendships, but they also furnished a means of self-representation in that they allowed Cristaldi to showcase his generosity and the efficiency of his endeavours. Everything was organised, down to the smallest details, by Cristaldi himself with the same meticulousness he practiced in his film productions.

KS: These archival discoveries make clear just how much real estate opens up a new perspective on the field of film production: this is a critical site of investigation for the

industrial approach to Italian cinema history and the broader move in film studies towards understanding the politics of production. It also grants us another angle on precisely how producers functioned as 'cultural intermediaries,' to borrow from Philip Drake's analysis of film industries, and it can tell us something about how and why production 'clusters' emerged in certain places and not others. It expands the scale in which we imagine film's modes of production operating. Cinema's already hybrid and multifaceted industrial structures appear reshaped when we take these alliances into account. This approach redraws how we understand the business of film to be implicated in other industrial spheres.

BC: On this subject of industrial spheres, one example comes to mind about how the textile district of Valdagno clearly influenced Cristaldi's business model, the organization of his film production. Cristaldi was related to the Marzotto family of industrialists and knew well how their company was organised, not only because he had been visiting the family since he was a child, but also because he had made documentaries and television commercials for the Marzottos with one of his first production companies, Vides srl, which produced shorts.

Between the late 1920s and mid 1930s, the industrialist and family patriarch Gaetano Marzotto had created a model city called 'Città dell'Armonia' [City of Harmony]: an urban planning experiment integrating the life of industry and its workers around the factory, newly reconceptualised worker houses, health centres, and social institutions and community centres. For Marzotto, this was a way of bettering the life of workers but also exercising a form of social control otherwise known as industrial paternalism.

Cristaldi had this model in mind when he set up plans for an area adjacent not only to the Vides studios but also to Claudia Cardinale's residence, a type of community of and for cinema, assigning plots of land to various stars connected to Cristaldi by friendship or work.

The project didn't come to fruition except for the plot of land effectively sold to Duccio Tessari in 1967. The idea of a community of collaborating residents on one area of land is significant in that Cristaldi often had actors and directors under exclusive contract to him: there was a personal bond and a bond of esteem, but there was also a property held under Cristaldi's strict control and oversight. It was a perfect vehicle for maintaining control over assets through property.

KS: Cinema represents also a mode of production in which the economic and the symbolic seem able to exploit the same material, the same property. But can these forces ever attain full purchase over the moving image? If film theory has taught us anything, it is that the cinematic image never guarantees anything. There is always a dynamic indeterminacy that haunts even the most straightforward cinematic image, even one of a particular location that we know existed. It is that indeterminacy that keeps us looking at film images; it is what keeps them alive and keeps them open to history. This means that cinema's investment in property exceeds any absolute accounting.¹²

The work of Doreen Massey argues that it remains crucial to emphasize the critical instability of place-ness and especially so in the period of globalization. Drawing on Massey, Elena Gorfinkel and John David Rhodes remind us that the instabilities of place can never be fully resolved in the cinematic image. ¹³ If we accept the film image as resistant to reification, then cinema's relationship to real estate will forever remain unsettled. This is where the analysis of the image and the archival work on the film industry come into play; their insights are urgent on their own, but it is also essential to think about them alongside one another.

¹ Ludovica Damiani, Set in Cortina. Il cinema e le Dolomiti. Scatti protagonisti racconti. (Milan: Mondadori Electa, 2010); Damiani, Set in Venice. Il cinema a Venezia scatti protagonisti racconti (Milan: Mondadori Electa, 2009); Mauro D'Avino and Lorenzo Rumori, Roma, si gira! Gli scorci ritrovati del cinema di ieri, 2 volumes (Rome: Gremese Editore, 2012); D'Avino and Rumori, Venezia, si gira! Gli scorci ritrovati del cinema di ieri (Roma: Gremese Editore, 2012); D'Avino, Rumori, and Simone Pasquali, Napoli, si gira! Gli scorci ritrovati del cinema di ieri (Roma: Gremese Editore, 2014). D'Avino, Rumori, Simone Pasquali, Roberto Giani, and Andrea Martinenghi, Milano, si gira! Gli scorci ritrovati del cinema di ieri (Rome: Gremese Editore, 2012); Gabriel Solomons, World Film Locations: Rome. (Bristol: Intellect, 2014); Alberto Zambenedetti, World Film Locations: Florence (Bristol: Intellect, 2014).

² In addition to the IMDB.com 'film locations' tab, other location mapping sites include, itsfilmedthere.com, thecinetourist.net, filmaps.com, and movie-locations.com; sites comparing then and now include, the tumblr feed 'dat scene', datscene.tumblr.com, and the instragram feed 'Hollywood in Real Life', instagram.com/hollywood_irl/

³ There are dozens of travel logs devoted to *Call Me By Your Name* on youtube, here are two popular examples: 'Call Me by Your Name Travel Guide 2018' youtube.com/watch?v=X3BwJBMcn5s; 'Finding Call Me By Your Name | Travel Northern Italy' youtube.com/watch?v=dZjgQ4KkYmg.

⁴David Kaufman, 'The sexiest thing in 'Call Me By Your Name' is the real estate' *Quartzy* December 3, 2017, https://qz.com/quartzy/1144780/the-sexiest-thing-in-call-me-by-your-name-is-the-real-estate/

- ⁵ Schoonover, 'What do we do with vacant space in horror films?' *Discourse*, 40.3 (Fall 2018): 342-357.
- ⁶ Although looking at a different context, Vicky Mayer's recent work offers useful insight on how the film industry fuels gentrification. Vicki Mayer, *Almost Hollywood, Nearly New Orleans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.25.

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- ⁷ Letter from Alliata to Monaco, 27 June 1956, Fondo ACI, Archivio ANICA, Cineteca Lucana.
- ⁸ Letter from Carlo Boidi to Giuseppe Tavazza, 22 February 1960, Fondo ACI, Archivio ANICA, Cineteca Lucana.
- ⁹ The construction of Dinocittà started in January 1962. The studio opened in 1964 e and hosted the production of many American films, several of which were coproduced by de Laurentiis. They were then sold to Giancarlo Parretti in 1989. Today they are the home to the thempeark Cinecittà World.
- ¹⁰ Franco Cristaldi's Vides studios were opened in 1961. The members of Vides International acquired the studios in exchange for the corporate losses that they attributed to Cristaldi and his production choices. The studios were then sold to Sandro Parenzo, who still runs them today as Videa Studios.
- ¹¹ Giuseppe Amato acquired Celimontana studios in 1958 from liquidation of the Mosco Group. In 1960 Angelo Rizzoli's companies acquired 50% of the shares in the company forming a joint ownership arrangement, but following a breakup of the partnership and the death of Amato in 1964, the studios fell into disuse. Today it serve as studios for the Mediaset conglomerate.
- ¹² For more on the question of property see John David Rhodes, *Spectacle of Property: The House in American Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018). Here Rhodes describes filmgoing as a leasing of property: 'Cinema, of course, draws its own property boundaries....[I]n purchasing a movie ticket we pay for the right to occupy a space in order to gaze up at a space we can never occupy'. Cinema has the capacity to make us confront the 'tenuousness of all property relations'.
- ¹³ As Rhodes and Gorfinkel write, 'a stubborn insistence on place might serve as a tactic (and even a topos) with which to resist the forces (ideological, material, rhetorical) that have threatened to flatten our notion of the uniqueness, the power, and the political potential of both place and the moving image'. John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel, *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). For another perspective on these questions and Massey's work, see Malini Guha, 'Cinephilia and the City: The Politics of Place in Contemporary Bengali Cinema', in *Global Cinematic Cities: New Landscapes of Film and Media*, eds. Johan Andersson and Lawrence Webb (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 119–42.