On-Location in the Pacific Northwest: Cultural Policy, City Branding, & Regional Identity in Film and Television Production in Seattle & Portland

The Pacific Northwest (PNW) is an emerging place for film and television production, but the region (excepting Vancouver, BC (e.g., Tinic, 2005)) is largely underexplored in Media and Communication Studies. Recently, a number of cities in the PNW implemented cultural policies aimed to increase on-location shooting for film and television production (Giegerich, 2013; Riddell, 2014; Suddath, 2012). These cultural policies aim to promote the region as a site of tourism, employment, and investment and to help transition post-industrial cities and towns into spaces of creative entrepreneurialism to compete in a global economy. The Seattle Film Office website, for example, states, “Film productions not only create local jobs, but they also generate a tax base and promote a positive image of the city that in turn stimulates tourism and gives back to the city” (“Seattle Film Office: Filming in Seattle: Economic Impact Study,” n.d.). As cities must compete globally to attract ever more scarce funds for investment, development, tourism, and even basic services, media production—both as an industry that can encourage community members and citizens to tell their stories and a medium of representation for communicating those stories—has come to be an essential means for constructing a unique city identity and brand (Christoperson & Rightor, 2010; Greenberg, 2008; Sassen, 2000).

This project intends to study cultural policies aimed to increase film and TV production in the PNW and their resultant media production practices in Seattle, WA and Portland, OR. These two cities have seen an upsurge in film and TV production and, especially, have been the site of debates over increasing on-location shooting in the region (Horn, 2014; Owen, 2014; Petrone, 2012; Riddell, 2014; Washington Filmworks, 2014). The project aims to understand the extent to which recent local media production in PNW cities is cultivated as a means to construct a distinct regional identity that implicates how the PNW is seen by outsiders as well as those living within the region. More specifically, the project attends to how production practices themselves do more than just represent city space to residents and outsiders; it also considers how these practices play a direct and material role in the production of and struggle over local city spaces, as they become intertwined with urban planning and economic development projects in both Seattle and Portland. Ultimately, the project hopes to provide insight into how media production practices contribute to the built environment, lived experiences, and cultural geography of the PNW, with a specific emphasis on how these practices intervene into struggles over city space in the current conjuncture. While the PNW is often imagined as a white space void of racial antagonisms (Hardwick, 2011), the project attends to how racial and ethnic hierarchies within the region are played out in debates over on-location shooting and how these struggles implicate practices of city branding and the production of regional identity.

With regards to research methods, the project will take a production studies approach to the practices of media production within these two cities, focusing on micro-level industrial practices related to on-location shooting and “midlevel fieldwork in industry analyses, which accounts for the complex interactions among cultural and economic forces” (Havens, Lotz, & Tinic, 2009, p. 237). Specifically, in-depth interviews with film and television producers, state and regional film commissions, tourism agencies, and governing bodies in Portland and Seattle will be utilized to assess the political, economic, and cultural dimensions of film and TV production. These interviews will be complemented with participant observation conducted during visits to active filming sites. Additionally, residents and neighborhood organizations that reside in areas that have a high occurrence of on-location shooting in their neighborhoods will also be interviewed to attend to the ways in which media production implicates the lived experience of (mediated) city space. These interviews will complement a discursive analysis of cultural policy, urban planning, and legislative documents regarding film and TV production in the region. This methodological approach is similar to that which I conducted for my dissertation research, which resulted in a number of journal publications (as listed in my CV).
Existing media scholarship on media production in the Pacific Northwest has focused largely on media production in Vancouver, BC. This research accounts for the political and cultural economic dynamics of Vancouver’s ascendancy to “Hollywood North,” as a site of “runaway” film production and how this has affected cultural politics within Vancouver and greater BC (Spaner, 2003; Tinic, 2005). So too, media scholars have begun to recognize the ascendancy of Seattle as a site for the production and distribution of independent film (Erikson, 2011). This work complements historical scholarship on the significance of film exhibition spaces in the early development of Seattle (Lagos, 2003). Scholars have also attended to the textual and aesthetic dynamics of the PNW that has made it a site of much film and television fodder. In particular, Seattle’s representation in numerous film and television productions has constructed for many global audiences what they believe to be the cultural space of the PNW (Horton, 2013), even though most of these productions were filmed on a Hollywood set or were represented in the production as another place. Nevertheless, film and TV production is understood to benefit Seattle, which has sought to capitalize on its representations to attract business, tourism, and investment (Lyons, 2004).

This project adds to this existing research by 1) elucidating the cultural and economic forces that contribute to the upsurge of on-location shooting in the PNW; 2) lending insight into how media production practices that result from this inhabitation of media industries in local city spaces implicate the production of a distinct identity and brand for the PNW region, more generally, and for Seattle and Portland, more specifically; and 3) situating how cultural policy and media production practices intervene into the lived experiences of city space in the PNW and the extent to which this aligns with efforts at cultivating a city and regional brand. In so doing, the project will contribute to literature on media production in the PNW in three distinct, though related ways: First, it will provide insight to an understudied region in media production studies and thus demonstrate the economic, cultural, and political dynamics of contemporary “runaway” film and TV production (i.e. production that occurs outside Hollywood) and its impact on local city spaces and regions; second, it will provide analysis that will benefit local policy-makers, industry professionals, and communities in assessing the possibilities and limitations of filming in the PNW and the potential impacts this filming has on our local communities; and third, it will provide critical media scholars a useful case study for assessing how to study relationships between media and urban space in the context of contemporary practices of media production. In offering these contributions, this study will also help to further the University’s and College’s missions of supporting engaged scholarship, as the results of this project can provide valuable information to policy-makers, industry professionals, and community members on best practices with regards to film and TV production in the PNW.

The expected outcome of this research project is both academic and applied. First, I expect to gather research data and conduct analysis during the summer of 2015. The result will be a conference paper submission to the Society of Cinema and Media Studies Conference (submission Fall 2015) and a journal article to be submitted to the International Journal of Cultural Policy (expected submission date is Winter 2016). Each of these venues are invested in research on media industries and cultural policy and are thus exceptional fits for this research on media production in the PNW. I also plan to translate my research findings into an applied context through the Pacific Northwest Media Research Consortium, which is a collaboration between media scholars, the media industry, and policy-makers who seek to promote an active and vibrant media culture in the PNW. This venue will provide a wider distribution of my research to policy-makers, industry professionals, and communities and, thus, ensures that it can inform future film and TV production in the region.

References


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http://blog.washingtonfilmworks.org/2014/06/03/seattle-film-community-discusses-the-
future-of-film-with-mayor-murray/