

Portland the City in Cinema

Colin Marshall

"I want to give a picture of Dublin so complete," said James Joyce, writing *Ulysses*, "that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book." Could you also, in the same manner, reconstruct a city from the movies made there? What sort of a single work would it take to make that possible? Perhaps a film made out of all the films set in that city? How to categorize such a thing? These questions come straight to mind when I look back at *Portland, the City in Cinema* (Colin Marshall, 2015), a half-hour video essay on the City of Roses as seen in the various movies made there, with the concept of authorship in mind, but the biggest of them asks to what extent we can consider the city itself an author of these films.

Not the author, surely, for the city alone couldn't create a film, but nor, in the cases of these films, could their directors, whether acknowledged "auteurs" or not, have created them alone either. But when seeking out material for this video essay, I looked specifically for movies that could not have been made in any city but Portland: movies whose stories could only take place in the city, movies with an aesthetic sense derived from and reflected by the city, movies that could only have arisen out of the artistic and intellectual context of the city. Given all that, we must, in some sense, give Portland at least author credit for these films, since they couldn't have existed without the city.

I began work on *Portland, the City in Cinema* as a side project of an ongoing video essay series of mine that deals with this same question of city-as-author: *Los Angeles, the City in Cinema*, each of whose episodes examines the variety of Los Angeles revealed on film, in movies new and old, mainstream and obscure, respectable and schlocky, appealing and unappealing — just like the city itself. The number of film shoots that have happened and continue to happen in Los Angeles provide the material for a potentially infinite number of video essays, and I've so far put together episodes focusing on individual Los Angeles films like *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), *Speed* (Jan de Bont, 1994), *Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2004), and *Her* (Spike Jonze, 2014), as well as episodes focusing on Los Angeles locations that have often appeared in films, such as downtown's *Bonaventure Hotel* (a first foray into the idea of a building as author, rather than a whole city).

Any enthusiast of Los Angeles in the movies will sense my main source of inspiration: Thom Andersen's *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (Thom Andersen, 2003), a long-form documentary on the use (and abuse) of the city throughout cinema history, and the first project of its kind to consider Los Angeles in film so directly and actively, though it examined the city less as the author of films — nor, even, as a straightforward setting of films — than it examined the city as a kind of actor in films, albeit one often poorly costumed and with a tendency to slip out of character. *Los Angeles Plays Itself* came out in 2003, and though it remains the definitive statement on its subject, it now bears marks of the past: even after a recent revision, some of the clips it uses still come originally from VHS tapes, and it doesn't include any of the pictures with a Los Angeles consciousness made in the past decade or so, from *Collateral* (Michael Mann, 2004) to *Nightcrawler* (Dan Gilroy, 2014) to *Knight of Cups* (Terrence Malick, 2015).

And so, with an eye toward finding the Los Angeles revealed in such movies as well as doing my part to refine a form made possible by streaming video technology practically unavailable in *Los Angeles Plays Itself's* day, I began work on my own video essays. *Portland, the City in Cinema* marked my first step outside Los Angeles. The offer had come to give a presentation at the Hollywood Theatre in Portland, Oregon — perhaps my favorite city in America to visit, so I wasn't about to turn down the invitation. I could only think of one potential obstacle: I didn't have anything to present. I'd heard from the Hollywood's representative, a fan of *Notebook on Cities and Culture*, an interview podcast I'd been hosting for a few years, before even launching *Los Angeles, the City in Cinema*. But as soon as I got the hang of chopping up and reassembling movies into video-essay form, I realized not that that I could create one on Portland, but that I had the opportunity to debut it in Portland is well.

A video essay on Portland cinema presents a different set of challenges than a video essay on Los Angeles cinema, most obviously because, while Los Angeles may have produced so many movies, Portland may have produced so few. At first I assumed I'd have to lean heavily, even entirely, on the work of two or three highly established human, rather than urban, authors of film, especially Gus van Sant, who even after becoming a major Hollywood director in the 1980s after the Portland-set *Mala Noche* (1985) and *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989) remained a Portland resident and has continued to set around half of the movies he makes in his hometown.

Kelly Reichardt, director of such adaptations of short stories by Portland writer Jon Raymond as *Old Joy* (2006) and *Wendy and Lucy* (2008), has also gained recognition as a Portland auteur, and thus came quickly to mind as a filmmaker with an attachment to the city, or at least with enough knowledge to present a coherent vision of it. And then, thinking further about the most memorable cinematic Portlands I'd seen in the movies in recent years, I realized that a younger generation had produced a small wave of potential Portland auteurs: Aaron Katz, for instance, made his Portland-set debut *Dance Party USA* (2006), followed it up with the Brooklyn picture *Quiet City* (2007) and then returned for the slacker neo-noir *Cold Weather* (2010). Matt McCormick, who became known as a video artist with his examinations of the urban landscape, set his observant sights on Portland's for his own first feature *Some Days Are Better than Others* (2010).

In the same way that the narrative habits and psychological tendencies of an author structure a story of any kind, the features of Portland's urban landscape came to structure the essay: the US Bancorp Tower (best known as "Big Pink"), the MAX light rail system, and of course the bridges spanning the Willamette River. The ways in which the movies use them came to provide its content. Big Pink stands as a point of reference that allows the viewer to place a shot in Portland's geography. The hero of *Brain Smasher: A Love Story* (Albert Pyun, 1993) escapes his power-mad martial-arts monk pursuers by leaping on top of a passing MAX train. The heroine of *Foxfire* (Annette Haywood-Carter, 1996) proves her mettle at the end of the movie by climbing atop the Broadway Bridge.

The Portlanders present at the first screening of the first version of *Portland, the City in Cinema* pointed me toward even more of their city's movies, good and bad, astute and dissolute. These suggestions included a kitsch extravaganza like the (highly un-erotic) Madonna-starring erotic thriller *Body of Evidence* (Uli Edel, 1993), which has a shaky enough grasp of Portland to have its characters somehow drive across two of its iconic bridges in a row, as well as Penny Allen's *Property* (1978), which effectively began Portland's modern

urban cinema in with not just a strong feel for the city and its bohemian appeal but a story rooted in its real estate market and even zoning regulations. As amusing a cast of characters (most of the actors seemingly playing versions of themselves) Allen put together to act out the story, it remains a story written by the city of Portland's urban economics.

Who, then, is the author of *Portland, the City in Cinema*? I've certainly presented myself as its author, and continue to present it and my other video essays as my work, and, I believe — in the same sense that I consider *Los Angeles Plays Itself* to be fully Thom Anderson's work — justifiably so. But surely Penny Allen, Gus van Sant, Kelly Reichardt, Aaron Katz, Matt McCormick and all the other directors (not least *Brain Smasher's* Albert Pyun, perhaps the last of the great B-movie auteurs and one of the first commenters on the video essay after I released it to the public) and their collaborators who've made these Portland count as authors as well. But without the city itself, these films wouldn't exist. In a sense, Portland also created these movies that, should someone one day “drop a big old bomb on this city” (in the words of one of the young hustlers at the center of Gus van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991)), could help to recreate it — and in so doing, become authors of the city themselves.

<https://imeo.com/channels/thecityincinema/145211909>

Works Cited

1. Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of "Ulysses"*, 1934.
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Author bio

Based in Seoul, [Colin Marshall](#) writes about cities and culture. He currently produces the video essay series *The City in Cinema*, and formerly hosted the podcast *Notebook on Cities and Culture* and the public radio show *The Marketplace of Ideas*. He's currently at work on the book *A Los Angeles Primer: Mastering the Stateless City*.

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