



THE ARCHIVE
CITY: READING
LIVERPOOL'S
URBAN LANDSCAPE
THROUGH FILM

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The Archive City – Reading Liverpool’s Urban Landscape Through Film

Les Roberts & Richard Koeck

At a site earmarked for redevelopment on Lime Street, a virtual panorama of Liverpool’s famous waterfront rises from a busy stretch of pavement leading to and from the railway station. For the urban *flâneur*, the iconography of this symbolic cityscape (enlisted to promote Lime Street’s status as ‘Gateway to a World-Class City’) is momentarily woven into the otherwise prosaic fabric of everyday urban space. The panorama’s transitory location inhibits any lingering or reflection. Yet, pause for a moment and lend the image a more incisive gaze, and what immediately becomes apparent is the striking particularity of the viewer’s perspective. It is an image of the city, photographed at dusk, in which nearly all of its most prominent landmarks – the Three Graces, both cathedrals, St Nicholas’ Church, St John’s Beacon (all ‘theatrically’ illuminated) – are clustered together in perfect configuration. Geographically such a view is only possible from a singular vantage point on or across the river, yet at the same time it represents an image of the city in which maximum legibility – i.e. the ability to ‘read’ the cityscape as ‘Liverpool’ – has been invested. This economy of legibility (branding the city for global consumption) constructs a vision that is at once totalising and particular: a virtual city whose centre is everywhere and nowhere.

The idea of cityscape legibility, first proposed by Kevin Lynch in his book *The Image of the City*,¹ is one of which filmmakers with a keen eye for location and landmark have long been aware. The rich symbiosis between the

virtuality and materiality of the cinematic city has proved increasingly fertile ground for groups such as artists, architects, geographers and historians, as well as for those marketing city destinations to potential tourists (a case in point being the hugely successful US advertising campaign in 2005: ‘You’ve seen the films, now visit the set’...). Never has ‘reading’ the city been so thoroughly informed by the language and geography of cinema. Yet in our everyday travels through the symbolic and material landscapes of urban living, there is also, as the cultural theorist Ben Highmore has observed, a fundamental *illegibility* that confronts us²: a city composed of multiple or fragmentary readings; of contradictory rhythms, temporalities and structures of feeling; a city that defies, to use Lynch’s term, instant ‘imageability’³ – a city, in short, *in need of legibility*.

In the case of Liverpool – a city whose proud cinematic heritage boasts footage shot by early film pioneers such as the Lumière Brothers and Mitchell and Kenyon – the project of ‘mapping’ the city in film becomes, in the first instance, an exercise in rendering legible historical fragments of the urban landscape; extracting, if you will, these virtual gazes from the obscurity of the archive, and then reconstituting them in their social, historical, and geographical contexts. Reading Liverpool as an archive-city – a cinematic repository of iconic, forgotten, or half-remembered glimpses – demands not only a process of rendering present the spaces and moments of the city’s past, but also, and more crucially, of plotting their absence, palimpsestically, within the multi-layered textures of the city’s present. This offers a more radical potential for imaging the city; one which disrupts the corporate legibility of a consumer-led vision of the city, allowing instead for an altogether more oblique engagement with its urban form and spaces of memory: city projections defined less by the stasis of nostalgia, or the flux of simulacra, than the rhythms and syncopations of *absence*.

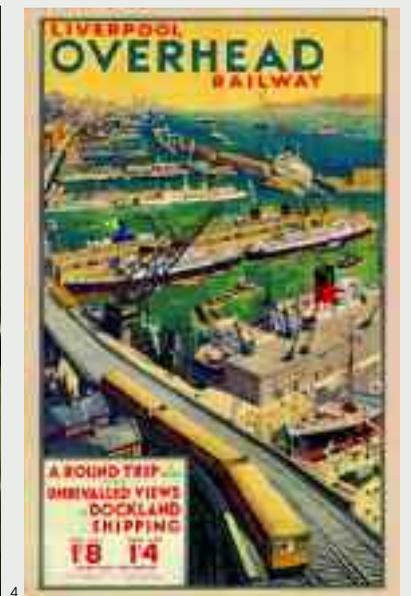
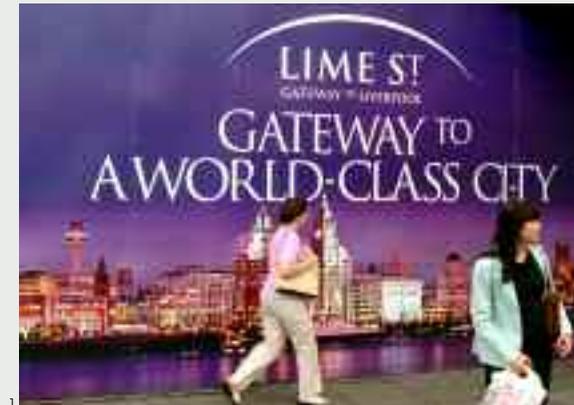
For a post-industrial city whose transitional hub and axis of orientation is and has been its historic waterfront, the spectral presence of absence has remained a powerful constituent in the shaping of Liverpool’s affective and emotional geographies. From the disjunctive layering of the city’s architecture to its embodied routes of memory and migration, the interrogative presence of a spatial or temporal *other* has proved a persistent theme in the city’s cultural rendering. Nowhere is this more evident than in post-war representations of the city in film.

Consider, for example, Terence Davies’ elegiac journeys into childhood remembrance. In the opening moments of *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988), the director’s

¹ Lynch, Kevin, *The Image of the City*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960.

² Highmore, Ben, *Cityscapes: Cultural Readings in the Material and Symbolic City*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

³ Lynch, *The Image of the City*.



1
**Gateway to a
World-Class City**

2 *previous page*
Forgotten landing stage
Princess Dock 2006

3
The Long Day Closes
Still frame (1992)

4
**Liverpool Overhead
Railway**
Advertisement (1950’s)

autobiographical study of working-class family life in post-war Liverpool, a mother calls up to her children from the foot of the stairs. The camera remains fixed on the empty staircase as she exits the frame. When the children descend we hear the sound of their footsteps, yet the staircase remains empty. It is an image-space that offers no visual presence; a memory caught in the act of remembrance itself, temporally detached from all but the present.

Insofar as they throw past and present into reflective dialogue, Davies's intimate landscapes of memory chart an absence that is as much spatial as temporal in origin. Liverpool is presented as a place of returns – a city one comes back to to confront the trauma of its associated memories (in this case those of a violent and abusive father), but also to dwell once again in its more tender and epiphanic moments. In *The Long Day Closes* (1992), Davies's follow up to *Distant Voices*, remembrance drifts amongst oneiric landscapes of childhood reverie: subtly shifting patterns of light on a carpet; the transcendent sociality of cinema and song; the textures, rhythms and 'countless alveoli' of intimate space.⁴ The wider social geography of the city rarely intrudes on the beautifully composed *mise-en-scène* of these films. The action centres almost exclusively on the domestic home and localised places of leisure such as the cinema or pub. Like the films' narrative, the urban landscape that is evoked is one comprised of ellipses, both spatial and temporal. In the same way that, as Marc Augé has noted,⁵ the oblivion of memory – i.e. that which is forgotten – shapes the form and substance of particular remembrances, it is the historical and geographical lacunae in Davies's films that inform the director's singularly personal and subjective rendering of the city's presence. His is an image of the city in which the architecture of everyday domestic life, such as a staircase can be as iconic and as redolent of time and place as any public building or notable landmark.

In films where Liverpool's urban landscape commands broader legibility – that is, where recognisable landmarks and locations are incorporated into the filmic narrative – the tropes of absence and return become more self-consciously woven into narratives of the city itself. These cinematic landscapes establish sites of focused gathering in or around which particular identities and histories of the city – as a place of mobility and transition – are assembled. Films such as *Waterfront* (Michael Anderson, 1950), *The Magnet* (Charles Frend, 1950), *Violent Playground* (Basil Dearden, 1958), *Beyond This Place* (Jack Cardiff, 1959), *The Little Ones* (Jim O'Connell, 1965), *Ferry Cross the Mersey* (Jeremy Summers, 1965), or, more recently, *Letter to Brezhnev* (Chris Bernard, 1985), *Shirley Valentine* (Lewis Gilbert, 1989), *Blonde Fist*, (Frank Clarke, 1991) and *Across the Universe* (Julie Taymor, 2006), all, to a greater or lesser degree, present an image of the city as a place of arrival and departure: a gateway to or from Elsewhere. It is not altogether

surprising therefore that it is Liverpool's iconic waterfront that functions as its most prominent trope of transition in the city's imagining.

The iconographic nature of this landscape can be traced to early postcard images of the city and grew from an emergent 'tourist gaze'⁶ that quickly oriented itself around the river and docks. The Liverpool Overhead Railway, which, until its demolition in 1957, ran all the way along the dockside, played a crucial role in instilling what Wolfgang Schivelbusch describes as a 'panoramic perception' of the city and its waterfront.⁷ It is surely then no accident that the first moving images of Liverpool, filmed by the Lumière Brothers in 1897, were shot from the Overhead Railway (then just four years old) looking out over the busy docks. This panoramic view of the waterfront, captured in the nascent years of film, can be paralleled with that experienced by the dockworkers and travellers riding the newly-constructed railway. Together, these 'mobile, virtual gazes'⁸ informed an image of the city in which the dynamism and prosperity associated with the waterfront had become emblematic of the progressive rhythms of modernity itself. As Guiliiana Bruno notes, 'moving panoramas were instrumental in developing films that eschewed static, theatrical views in favour of architectural motions... [the panorama] incorporated site-seeing journeys and the spatio-visual desire for circulation that had become fully embedded in modernity'.⁹ In 1897 Liverpool truly was a 'cinematic city'.

The birds-eye-view or panoramic shot from a high-angle position has since become a familiar cinematic convention to quickly situate the viewer at a distinct geographic location in which the action takes place. We all have seen films which open by showing a single or series of *vertical landmarks*, such as the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben or the skyline of New York. Cinema has played an influential role in transforming these architectural landmarks into iconographic symbols that describe, or render legible, the characteristics and collective memories of the cities they represent. Liverpool has a number of architectural landmarks of international stature which have been portrayed in film: two outstanding cathedrals, a number of neo-classical marvels such as John Wood's town hall and Harvey Lonsdale Elmes' St. George's Hall, as well as, of course, its world famous waterfront ensemble – the Three Graces. However, there are also a number of filmic examples in which these traditional landmarks are marginalised or even absent. In contrast to most other filmic cities, filmmakers have exploited Liverpool's *horizontal landmark* – the waterfront docks – an urban-architectural feature which, as we have noted, has drawn the attention of filmmakers since the very earliest days of the moving image.

In *Waterfront*, Michael Anderson's 1950 melodrama of working-class life on the docks, the waterfront functions as a narrative expressive space – a horizontal landscape that is

not only unique to Liverpool, but also suggestive of a set of urban-industrial values associated with it. The film starts (and ends) with an impressive pan over the docks and the railway, shot from an omnipotent high-angle position. Instead of seeing familiar waterfront landmarks, such as the Liver Building, we are introduced to a vast maritime-industrial landscape in which steamships enter and leave the docks, factories exhaust their fumes, and the Overhead Railway rattles along its elevated tracks. The content of the picture and the movement of the camera itself render Liverpool as a dynamic, ever-changing site, a representation which belies the film's overwhelming sense of stasis and entrapment, which we will return to below.

Made in the same year, the title sequence of the Ealing comedy *The Magnet* reveals an equally impressive opening and as such is yet another example that uses the dockland as landmark site. Interestingly, the pan (right to left) starts with an image of the Anglican Cathedral which then dissolves into a longer shot over Princes Dock. While the portrayal of the cathedral on its own, from this distance and point of view, would perhaps be ambiguous in terms of its location, the shot of the docks situates the viewer unmistakably and instantly in Liverpool. Although these images of the dockland do not consist of singular landmark buildings, they nevertheless contain a number of legible urban-architectural elements, such as *paths* (Overhead Railway), *nodes* (the tunnel exit), *edges* (the waterfront and river Mersey). These urban features are not only in themselves important constituents to the city's perceptibility, but also, when composed into a single shot (such as that of an all-embracing pan), they are instantly recognisable urban attributes of Liverpool's waterfront.

Looking back over a century or more of Liverpool on film, the industrial legacy of the docks has, from the very outset, shaped a compelling cinematic landscape of mobility and transition in which the fortunes and vicissitudes of the city and its inhabitants have remained inextricably tied to those of the waterfront. While the Lumière film captures an early and resplendent 'moment of presence', in films such as *Waterfront* (set in the period of economic depression between the wars), the idea of *mobility* takes on altogether different connotations. As with its 1980s counterpart, *Letter to Brezhnev* (set in the Thatcher years of high unemployment and industrial decline) tropes of movement and transition are expressive of an inherent contradiction: one born of *immobility* and stasis. The desire to 'move on' or escape draws attention to the constraints, boundaries and limitations of the here and now. Transition in this sense reflects more a condition of liminality: of lives suspended or caught 'in-between' moments of presence. The dialectic between mobility and stasis, departure and entrapment is in part reflected in the gendering of the dock's (post)industrial landscape, and becomes particularly evident in the way in

which female and male citizens are portrayed inhabiting contrasting patterns of mobility. *Waterfront* and *Letter to Brezhnev* (as well as more recent films such as *Dockers* (Bill Anderson, 1999)) provide a good illustration of this. The plot of *Waterfront* begins somewhere in the 1920s. Nora and her family live in a poor housing estate near Liverpool's waterfront. The aforementioned panoramic shot is accompanied by Nora's voiceover which reveals the extent to which she sees herself rooted to this site: 'That's what you might call inevitable, I suppose; because I was born and brought up in this part of Liverpool; right on the waterfront; almost among the docks.' Nora's sense of stasis and entrapment is explored in the opening minutes of the film. One morning, while being on the grounds of her school, she is visited by her father. Talking to her through the railings of an iron fence, he explains to Nora that he has signed on a ship about to leave Liverpool. This is of course a traumatic moment for Nora, as she realises that she and her mother are about to lose the family's only source of income. What makes this scene so memorable is the way in which it is cinematographically portrayed. Cutting back and forwards between the two sides of the fence, this architectural feature becomes more than a simple dividing line between opinions. Nora is neither able to keep her father from leaving, nor is she able to follow him, which, visually paired with vertical iron bars, leaves the implicit impression of being imprisoned by, and entrapped on, Liverpool's waterfront.

True to its title, *Waterfront* not only starts, but also ends with shots along the shore of the river Mersey. Once again, and after a jump in time of perhaps twenty years, Nora is being left behind in the port of Liverpool when her husband, who, after years of unemployment, finally finds work on a commercial liner. As she bids farewell to her husband, who is seen crossing the empty space between her and the ship, it seems as if Nora has resigned herself to her fate. *Waterfront* portrays the period between the two world wars as a time of socio-economic uncertainty for the inhabitants of Liverpool. Seen in this context, Ben's departure can be interpreted in terms of a regained economic stability for Nora and her family as well as a promise of a better future. Interestingly, similar visual motifs are evident in *Letter to Brezhnev*. Kirkby girl Elaine falls in love with Russian seaman Peter, who, after a brief romance must return to his home country. The pivotal farewell-scene takes place at a landing stage of one of the docks. Once again, as in *Waterfront*, the fence is part of the composition of the image,

4 See Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994, p. 8.

5 Augé, Marc, *Oblivion*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

6 Urry, John, *The Tourist Gaze*, London: Sage, 1990.

7 Schivelbusch, Wolfgang, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialisation of Time and Space in the 19th Century*, Leamington Spa: Berg, 1986.

8 Friedberg, Anne, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1994, p. 2.

9 Bruno, Giuliana, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film*, New York: Verso, 2002, p. 20.

THE MAGNET

MADE AT EALING STUDIOS, LONDON, ENGLAND.



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with

MEREDITH EDWARDS
GLADYS HENSON
WYLIE WATSON
THORA HIRD
JULIEN MITCHELL

as the grown-ups

and

WILLIAM FOX

KEITH ROBINSON THOMAS JOHNSTON
DAVID BOYD GEOFFREY YIN
MICHAEL BROOKE, Jr.

as the boys

THE EVENTS AND CHARACTERS PORTRAYED IN THIS FILM ARE FICTITIOUS AND ANY SIMILARITY TO ANY INCIDENT, NAME OR INDIVIDUAL IS COINCIDENTAL.



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6
Waterfront
Still frame (1950)

7
Letter to Brezhnev
Still frame (1985)

8
Waterfront
Still frame (1950)

9
Letter to Brezhnev
Still frame (1985)

which in this mid-1980s production is perhaps an oversimplified visual reminder of the iron curtain that divided East and West. Importantly, it is again the waterfront which becomes the symbolic ground on which male protagonists *have to leave*, while female protagonists are *unable to leave* Liverpool. As Peter crosses the empty space towards his Russian ship, he is visually consumed by the enormous difference in scale between him and the ships, until vanishing almost completely.

Of course, the coda to *Letter to Brezhnev*, in which Elaine, despite all the odds stacked against her, flies out to Moscow to be reunited with Peter, sets the two films apart, both dramatically and historically. The reclaimed mobility of the 1980s protagonist (albeit one that has her chasing after her man) highlights, by comparison, the constraints and relative lack of agency in movement experienced by women a generation or two earlier. Women whose matriarchal domain, as films such as *Waterfront* and *The Long Day Closes* powerfully attest, was the spatial (and existential) interiority of a domestic environment in which men were conspicuously absent.

Moreover, insofar as Elaine's story can be read as a symbolic narrative of the city itself, it is an ending in which Liverpool is depicted as once again entering a state of transition. The destination to which she is travelling is Elsewhere: another time, another place, *another city* yet to be realised.

In an essay exploring the iconography of Liverpool's urban landscape in film, in particular its waterfront, it would perhaps be remiss to omit mention of *Ferry Cross the Mersey* (Jeremy Summers, 1965), a film little seen since its release in 1965, but one which in many ways encapsulates a can-do spirit and optimism that stand in marked contrast to the prevailing themes of absence and stasis. Produced by Brian Epstein, the film has few pretensions to be anything other than a vehicle for its stars, the Merseybeat group, Gerry and the Pacemakers, after whose famous song the film is titled. In this respect it is a film that bears close family resemblance to *A Hard Day's Night* (Richard Lester, 1964) and *Help!* (Richard Lester, 1965), both of which starred The Beatles (playing themselves). While in these latter films the city itself does not feature in any significant way, in *Ferry Cross the Mersey* Liverpool is cast in a central role, portraying a vibrant, creative and dynamic city that had begun to define itself in relation to an emerging pop and consumer culture, oriented in particular around its music and fashion scenes. The city portrayed in the film is one that had begun to exert a centripetal force, attracting people to its waterfront and spaces of culture. Such a reading of the film is literally translated onto the screen when Gerry Marsden and his bandmates make a symbolic passage across the river, Liverpool's waterfront landmarks framed prominently in the background.

The trope of the ferry crossing also has the effect of drawing on a wider cultural geography of the city, one that acknowledges the spatial and symbolic importance of key locations 'cross the Mersey, such as Birkenhead or New Brighton. Viewed thus, 'this land's the place I love...', from the song, may be interpreted as a tribute to an idea of place that has the Mersey *at its centre* rather than at its edge. In addition, as with the corporate image of the waterfront discussed earlier, the ferry journey enables the city to be visually objectified and apprehended *from a distance*. Again, in marked contrast to the other examples, in *Ferry Cross the Mersey* the waterfront is depicted as ostensibly a place of arrival: a gateway *to* rather than *from* the symbolic city. This more positive connotation is further enhanced by the way both men and women are portrayed in terms of their mobility.

By the 1960s, Liverpool is no longer seen as a city of mass transportation (the Overhead Railway, for example, is conspicuously absent) but one that is increasingly being explored by individual motorists. The city is filled with scooters and automobiles; modern means of transport that signal an active engagement with the physical fabric and boundaries of the city. If compared with previous representations of the city's youth culture in film, most memorably that of *Violent Playground*, made in 1958, it becomes clear as to the extent to which *Ferry Cross the Mersey* was conceived in part as a reaction against the restricted mobilities and lack of opportunity attached to the city's spaces a decade before. In *Violent Playground*, situated in the entropic spaces of a city housing scheme (the actual location was Gerard Gardens), youth alienation gives way to violence and arson, representing an altogether different engagement with the physical fabric of a city in which individual agency manifests itself in destructive rather than creative forms of expression.

The self-conscious portrayal of Liverpool in *Ferry Cross the Mersey* is thus one that is hallmarked by redemption from the past, and as such is indicative of a city in a state of transition. Forty years on, as Liverpool once more finds itself in the midst of change and transition, this search for presence represents a structure of feeling that carries a particularly contemporary resonance. The city's 800 year anniversary in 2007, and its status as European Capital of Culture 2008, have sparked the unfolding of massive urban architectural developments currently under way. In this light, the virtual panorama discussed at the beginning of this essay is already today an obsolete representation of the city and will itself need reevaluation in the near future. In transforming the symbolic and material landscapes of Liverpool, the projection of an image of the city thus reflects the need to sustain a legible visual identity that somehow transcends the flux of rapid economic and cultural change. Paradoxically, such a durable vision is more likely to lie in the *illegibility* and *absence* of a cinematic city that is recognised to be in a state

of constant modification and transition – a visual identity that therefore needs to be sought not so much in the *permanent* but the *ephemeral*.

In its century-long transition from ‘gateway to Empire’ to ‘gateway to a world-class city’, Liverpool’s historical accretions of urban and cinematic space have continued to play host to its diverse, and at times conflicting, rhythms and mobilities. By reading and celebrating Liverpool as an *archive city*, not only can we (re)glimpse the image-spaces of the city’s near and distant past, but also, and more importantly, we can (re)incorporate these absent spaces and moments within the real and imagined landscapes of the city’s present and future projections.



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Filmography

Across the Universe (Julie Taymor, USA, 2006)
A Hard Day's Night (Richard Lester, UK, 1964)
Beyond This Place (Jack Cardiff, UK, 1959)
Blonde Fist (Frank Clarke, UK, 1991)
Distant Voices, Still Lives (Terence Davies, UK, 1988)
Dockers (Bill Anderson, UK, 1999)
Ferry Cross the Mersey (Jeremy Summers, UK, 1965)
Help! (Richard Lester, UK, 1965)
Letter to Brezhnev (Chris Bernard, UK, 1985)
Shirley Valentine (Lewis Gilbert, UK, USA, 1989)
The Little Ones (Jim O'Connell, UK, 1965)
The Long Day Closes (Terence Davies, UK, 1992)
The Magnet (Charles Frend, UK, 1950)
Violent Playground (Basil Dearden, UK, 1958)
Waterfront (Michael Anderson, UK, 1950).

10
Ferry Cross The Mersey
 Still frame (1965)

11
Violent Playground
 Still frame (1958)

12
Liverpool
 City in transition (2006)