**Out-siders: Auteurs in Place**

by

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For My Family: Elise, Mom, Dad, Lisa, Crew
*Whose love and support never wavers*
*and is always in place.*

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### Introduction: Your Presence Here Shall Be Deemed Your Irrevocable Consent

"Your presence here shall be deemed your irrevocable consent to the unconditional use of your likeness in . . . all media and all ancillary uses and related advertising, promotion, publicity and marketing"

The above is text from a sign used at some Robert Altman location shoots. In the Robert Altman Papers at the University of Michigan I found copies of signs and instructions on making similar signs in materials ranging from the *Tanner* (1988, 2004) series to *Cookie's Fortune* (1999). The line "Your presence here shall be deemed your irrevocable consent" in particular communicates the extent to which a film production takes over local places and the control an auteur can wield over an area. Residents come upon places they interact in on a daily basis to find a sign which states that suddenly the presence of a film crew automatically makes locals submissive to the designs of some distanced author—an outsider. Altman's name does not appear on the sign and thus does not assert any direct authority over the inconvenience the production may cause in the daily lives of locals. Instead the sign relies on his production team to assert his authority for him tacitly. Here, the cold, detached legalese does not communicate any form of camaraderie, but instead forced cooperation. To gain entrance into communities film productions often promise money to local businesses and the chance to see celebrities—even if from a carefully cordoned-off distance—though such attempts appeal only to a small minority, leaving the rest of the populace inconvenienced in their own environments. The Altman sign quite straightforwardly reveals the underlying motivations of commerce/business and the desire

to finish the work at the expense of local daily life. The sign acts as a reminder that whatever work most filmmakers do to involve themselves in a community, such performances are done merely to ingratiate themselves to the point where the production takes over local areas in the most efficient way possible. While this is a fairly bleak beginning to the auteur/place relationship, such signs do not stand in for a production's overall approach to the community. Sometimes such signs fulfill only legal obligations while the production is actually felt to be quite a part of the community. Especially in the case of *Cookie's Fortune*, filmed in small town Holly Springs, MS, I doubt the locals even gave the signs a second thought because Altman's unique production strategies include communities, making his productions notably different than more standard location shoots.

Some productions, some filmmakers, have the ability to consistently treat place in a different manner from the norm, a treatment that recognizes local practices, community identities and cultural idiosyncrasies instead of shoving them aside. Despite the distancing rhetoric on the sign, from my many conversations with those involved in Altman's films and locals present during filming it is clear that Altman's productions have a tendency to be thought of as thoroughly positive experiences for the communities they film in—forgiven for their own trespasses while the same communities refuse to forgive other productions for similar inconveniences. So how can such a divide be successfully negotiated? It cannot merely be that Robert Altman was such a giant celebrity auteur throughout his career that residents in any of the diverse locations he worked in would just graciously bow down to his feet because Altman was not a giant celebrity for significant stretches of his career. Currently, media authorship studies has no adequate means of accounting for Altman's ability to consistently find a way to make films affordably, efficiently and so congenially in locations unused to film productions. I argue

that Altman and the other filmmakers studied here work so consistently on their own projects because they make films in places which engage the specific daily practices, perspectives and identities which make up a location. That is to say, Altman does not make a film in a small town, he makes one in Holly Springs, MS. John Waters, similarly, does not make films in an oceanside city, but in Baltimore, MD with its idiosyncrasy, specificity and local color as part of the tapestry of his narrative and visual presentation. Robert Rodriguez does not simply have a private industry moveable anywhere, but one which requires the setting and culture of Austin, TX.

Whereas "space" stands for a more generic treatment of an area that does not account for local specificity, place houses the relationships we observe, see and remember and is embedded all around us, constantly affecting our environments. To take a more everyday example of how place-based practices appear materially, at the Oklahoma State University campus, the sidewalks noticeably lack a typical grid structure and appear more as random, diagonal shortcuts which is due to the fact that upon obtaining the budget to build the sidewalks the powers that be simply laid them down on the bare patches of dirt that represented the pathways students had already worn into the grass. The distinctive appearance of the sidewalks, a note on every campus tour, comes from a recognition of the importance of how people use their everyday environment.[1] Place is powerful and reflects relationships that matter to a community. Through his history with the city John Waters has made himself a daily part of Baltimore life making his films and projects local events, no matter what condition his career is in. At a recent book signing in Baltimore a man who fell off a roof broke out of a hospital and dragged himself to the bookstore before having his leg properly set because he was so nervous that he would miss the chance to

[1] Though not an expressed influence of the tour, their presentation of the sidewalks almost acts as a material example of Michel de Certeau's work on daily experience and use as seen in Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Randall. (Berkely: University of California Press, 1984).

see Waters (The bookstore let him cut in line).[2] If in studying media authorship we ignore place it suggests that an auteur creates their career, produces their films and exhibits them out of a nowhere. Filmmakers always live and work in places.

Certain filmmakers have turned working in places into an art form all on its own. Virtually any auteur can fill the shoes of the bossy East or West-coast personality who comes in to take over an area during a production. As an example of the more standard industry approach clashing against a more place-based treatment, archival materials on the filming of Robert Altman's *Kansas City* (1996) reveal tense negotiations between Altman's team, performing an extensive cosmetic restoration on the historic Kansas City Union Station, and the production of HBO's *Truman* (1995), that began filming at the same time without the same respect for the place or the attention/work Altman's team put into it. A letter to the organization managing Union Station at that time from a *Kansas City* producer reveals that the *Truman* production began working in areas not cleared for filming, failed to clean up their own materials and even damaged areas without offering to pay for any of it. The letter reads, "From the beginning we have been dealing in good faith with the TRUMAN company but do not feel our efforts have been returned. . . . Given our recent experience with the TRUMAN company, we have little faith that they will work responsibly in Union Station, and we are worried that if they do not follow proper procedures we will suffer for it. . . . TRUMAN has the resources of Time Life and should not be permitted to cry poor."[3] More than simply a status-seeking turf dispute, *Truman* wanted to use the areas restored by Altman's team without thought to realities of the place, such as its

[2] Benn Ray (Owner, Atomic Books) personal interview with the author. Baltimore, MD. August 20, 2013.

[3] Letter from producer Matthew Seig to Andy Scott of the Union Station Assistance Corporation May 8, 1995 found in the University of Michigan's Robert Altman Papers.

cosmetic fragility and that the very production paying for and providing the restoration *Truman* was using was being hindered through the HBO film's use of the place. Other production crews, such as Altman's team, develop strategies that work with place in ways that benefit their production practices and involve the locations and their local histories. As a better example of working with place instead of disrupting it, the Landmarks Commission of Kansas City, Missouri met on July 28, 1995 to discuss the construction of a porch canopy performed by Altman's team. The committee agreed, "Robert Altman staff and Brush Creek Productions should be commended for the degree of historical accuracy employed in the restoration of the porch."[4] It typically takes a special kind of attention and effort to be lauded for doing something that primarily benefits you. In other words, Altman's team performed the restoration for the film, yet it was also considered a community service. The production made the community feel as if their interests were a part of the work of the production. Especially when working on tighter budgets, reaching out to local resources can be an extremely important way to save costs and generate altruistic good will, needed given the inevitable inconvenience of a film production. If a production can offer positive social/cultural connections it can help to offset the attribution or recognition of its more parasitic qualities. Here, Altman's team, working under his name, becomes centrally important as they actually provide the restoration, suggesting the positive relationship his production has to place has more to do with the production environment than it does the actions of a single person.

Accounting for such examples clarifies that media authorship studies need not revolve around a singular authorial agency, but instead the process of production. Not focusing so centrally on authorial agency does not make the question of agency disappear. Media studies has

[4] Meeting report found in the University of Michigan's Robert Altman Papers.

had an authorship problem since post-structuralism. Roland Barthes' killing of the biographical and exegetic author corresponded to the auteur productively leaving the central position it had in the media studies field since Andrew Sarris introduced it in the United States in the 1960s.[5] However, Barthes resonated with media scholars to such an extent that the auteur entered into a nebulous space within authorship studies despite the increased prominence of considering the director the author of a film within the New Hollywood industry.[6] Dana Polan begins his essay "Auteur Desire" with a story where a job interview candidate was asked,

> "If you could do a director's course, what director would you choose?" The candidate took umbrage at the very premise of the question (that it was worthwhile to study directors) and, with 1980s post-structural, *Screen*-theory confidence and even brashness, proceeded to explain that the Author was an outmoded romantic notion, one that deferred attention from the signifying structures of filmic discourse, and so on. After explaining for about five minutes how auteur study was a retrograde approach, she paused and then said, "But if I had the chance, I'd love to do a course on Hitchcock."[7]

Polan points out that despite the auteur becoming methodologically passé, the auteur has never really left filmic or scholarly discourses and has certainly not stopped structuring them. In "Auteur Desire" Polan questions why, if post-structuralism has supposedly proven that the auteur

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[5] Roland Barthes. "The Death of the Author." *Image—Music—Text.* Trans. Stephen Heath. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977). 142-48.; Andrew Sarris. *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929-1968*. (New York: Dutton, 1968).

[6] Colin MacCabe similarly points out that the influence of Barthes caused media studies scholars to ignore standard industry production practices where those involved in the production do look toward the director for their "vision." Colin MacCabe. "The Revenge of the Author." in *Film and Authorship.* Ed. Virginia Wright Wexman. (New Brunswick, New York and London: Rutgers University Press, 2003). 30-41.

[7] Dana Polan. "Auteur Desire." *Screening the Past*. 12 (2001): http://www.latrobe.edu.au/www/screeningthepast/firstrelease/fr0301/dpfr12a.htm

is an outdated and outmoded notion, do auteurs retain such fascination for scholars? He raises the question not to chastise auteur-study, but instead to clarify that more contemporary auteur-based approaches do abandon the more romantic attachments of Andrew Sarris' auteur theory. They instead use archival research and industrial analysis to provide a platform on which to further understand the auteur and the process of authorship. Inspired by Polan, my goal was to do more than search for where authorship has gone and then attempt to resurrect a new position for it, but instead I wanted to investigate where authorship already is and develop new methods for studying it more effectively. For me, studying authorship involves studying the process of making—examining productions to study the creation and development of a text which includes its circulation. Studying the auteur, then, is only a part of studying authorship and involves investigating how the auteur image is formed, sustained and altered.

With my focus on authorship I designed my research around studying a particular type of authorial practice—auteur identification through relationships to place—instead of a singular author-figure. In terms of auteur identification I refer primarily to the filmmakers' self-construction of their auteur persona and how it corresponds to community recognition of the auteur in the communities studied. The filmmakers chosen here are all recognized auteurs whose names and histories categorize much more complicated and distinct practices than the average industry filmmaker. When thinking of case studies, the breadth of the auteur/place connection led me to search for particularly rich and varied examples, arriving at John Waters in Baltimore, MD, Robert Altman in Holly Spring, MS and Kansas City, MO and finally Robert Rodriguez in Austin, TX. Given the focus here on the auteur I examine filmmakers who had a certain degree of independence in their production methods which was emboldened by their relationship to place. Each of these filmmakers uses a distinct, consistent strategy of localizing their productions

with cities in ways that depart from industry standards, yet each makes films which get wide distribution and ultimately compete with more standard Hollywood industry product. All three of these filmmakers use cities, and places within cities, as molding, sustenance and protection for their maverick authorial identities. Furthermore, each does so in a distinctly different way. John Waters embodies the ultimate hometown hero, Robert Altman smoothly transitions from outsider to neighborly friend and Robert Rodriguez establishes himself as the local industrialist. The diverse relationships represented here shows us both the mutability of authorship but also its importance. These three filmmakers all base their careers on negotiating their authorial identity through place in distinct ways. Similarly, the cities all cultivate lively cultural identities in relationship to these filmmakers' associations with them. The comparison further illuminates that auteur filmmakers do not completely control their own authorial identity. Attention to place provides a way to examine how auteurs *attempt* to control their own author-identity and how this identity becomes accepted, submerged, altered and dismantled by communities. To examine these relationships more specifically, this dissertation studies filmmakers with independent identities who use their connections to places to work more effectively and establish their independent auteur identity.

### *Lieu-Stylo*

The category of the auteur in film studies actually provides a unique, split understanding of authorship conducive to studying a process of authorial contributions as opposed to singular agency. Despite the tendency of Andrew Sarris' auteur theory to limit media analysis to the orbit around a director, Francois Truffaut's coining of the term much more closely resembled recognition of the auteur as a type of author *functioning* as opposed to the only way to read a

film.[8] In his original essay, "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema" Truffaut splits the concept of cinematic author into two categories: the auteur, which corresponds more to a medium-specific artist, and the *metteur-en-scène,* which is the more serviceable scenarist. The auteur label offers unique opportunities in studying authorship in that it is a categorization which distinguishes certain kinds of authors from others. Therefore, a filmmaker does not automatically an auteur make, suggesting that authorship studies recognizes a number of different types of authors.[9] I regard the auteur as a category of author connected to industrial and cultural understandings of cinematic authorship. By this I do not mean that all filmmakers are auteurs, nor do I position auteurism as an innate ability of only certain filmmakers. Instead, an auteur represents a filmmaker of particular celebrity, usually denoting an identifiable style, set of themes or body of work that gains renown.

As a label applied to filmmakers, the connotations and functions have changed significantly since Sarris first applied the term and then it gained popularity in both industry practice and popular culture. As Timothy Corrigan notes in "The Commerce of Auteurism," after New Hollywood when directors began leaving film schools with the desire to be auteurs, the label of auteur quickly began to turn the director into a commodity at the level of movie stars. Corrigan argues that the auteur label's function for the industry has always been mutable: "The historical adaptability of auteurism . . . identifies mainly the desire and demand of an industry to generate an artistic (and specifically romantic) aura during a period when the industry as such

[8] Andrew Sarris. *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929-1968*. (New York: Dutton, 1968).: Francois Truffaut. "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema." *Auteurs and Authorship*. Ed. Keith Barry Grant. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008). 9-18.

[9] Graham Petire has also argued that the concept of the auteur should be considered beyond a special, mystical talent held by only a few and that the label of auteur should be opened up to positions beyond that of only the director. Graham Petrie. "Alternatives to Auteurs." *Film Quarterly* 26 no. 3 (Spring 1973) 27-35.

needed to distinguish itself from other, less elevated, forms of mass media."[10] and "If, in conjunction with the so-called international art cinema of the sixties and seventies, the auteur had been absorbed as a phantom presence within a text, he or she has rematerialized in the eighties and nineties as a commercial performance of *the business of being an auteur*."[11] The shift to a more commercial form, however, does not completely erase the previous connotations of the auteur label. The meaning of the term auteur, then, includes artistic, commercial and celebrity recognition of the filmmaker. Furthermore, as Corrigan notes, the shift from scholar-applied artistic label to industry commodity has resulted in a rise in self-nomination—many filmmakers first construct their own auteur identities before the public has a chance to recognize and accept them. In "performing" auteurism, self promotion has become a key path to auteur-recognition. Quentin Tarantino's voracious promotion of himself as a cinematic genius had him laying the groundwork for his own auteurism even before the success of *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) at Sundance. For many, an auteur status is necessary to continue working in their preferred manner, often outside of standard industry parameters.

To continue to unpack what I mean to focus on in studying the functioning of the auteur, Michel Foucault provides the basis for a study that includes textual analysis, but also moves beyond it into various cultural spheres. In "What Is an Author?" Michel Foucault establishes that even after its post-structuralist 'death,' the concept of author continues to function as a method of classification, creating different types of relationships amongst texts. Foucault further elaborates that the author as an understood category relies entirely upon cultural/historical context: "Discourse that possesses an author's name . . . its status and its manner of reception are

[10] Timothy Corrigan. "The Commerce of Auteurism." in *Film and Authorship.* Ed. Virginia Wright Wexman. (New Brunswick, New York and London: Rutgers University Press, 2003). 96-97.

[11] Ibid. 98.

regulated by the culture in which it circulates . . . . the function of an author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society."[12] He characterizes the author-function as both historically and culturally variable, complexly constructed and connected to institutions—thus presenting the author as a shifting discursive construction. If understood as variable within different contexts, what it means to be an author can change significantly in relationship to space/place and time. Therefore, the author-function clearly has implications beyond the text itself.[13]

I touched on the role auteurs now play in their own labeling, though an auteur image must also be defined through the recognition of a filmmaker as an auteur in a social/cultural context. Self-management also proves necessary in order to sustain a career in the public light. In his book on Steven Soderbergh Mark Gallagher writes, "Steven Soderbergh's appraisal of his own career arc changes over time, with different artistic tendencies foregrounded depending on the discursive forum . . . and on his own creative and promotional agendas."[14] An auteur identity is not stable. It must change in order to remain relevant to any society, a task most often put onto the shoulders of the filmmaker seeking to retain their authorial or celebrity status.

Understandably, different contexts have different criteria for recognizing auteurs and different ways in which auteurs can function. For instance Eduard Berlin, a Baltimore local I

[12] Michel Foucault. "What Is an Author?" *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. Ed. Donald F. Bouchard. Trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977). 123-24.

[13] Daniel Herbert and Timothy Corrigan have both also argued for the extra-textual possibilities of Foucault's author-function: Herbert, Daniel Herbert. "Real Monster/Fake Auteur: Humor, Hollywood, and Herzog in *Incident at Loch Ness*." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*. 26 no. 5 (2009): 353-64.; Timothy Corrigan. "Producing Herzog: From a Body of Images." in *The Films of Werner Herzog: Between Mirage and History*. Edited by Timothy Corrigan. (New York: Methuen, 1986). 3-22.

[14] Mark Gallagher. *Another Stephen Soderbergh Experience*. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2013). 37.

interviewed, explained that he had lived extensively in both New York and Baltimore and had found that John Waters functioned in very different ways over the two cities:

> John Waters crosses boundaries in Baltimore because he's from Baltimore. In New York, and I happened to live in New York for 30 years, John Waters doesn't cross boundaries. John Waters' reputation is contained in the queer community, and I use the term queer not in referring to the gay community but in the non-linear sense: oddball film goers, cross-dressers, space cadets. When you're outside of the arts and film community John Waters probably isn't that well known. He has a presence in Baltimore that transcends the presence that he embodies in other cities.[15]

Berlin suggests that because Waters is from Baltimore and makes films there, he automatically speaks to a much wider demographic than he has in New York. In Baltimore, everyone in the city knows who he is allowing him certain flexibilities and freedoms unavailable in other places. Such localized differentiation is true of any filmmaker, though, most importantly, part of the celebrity image portion of being an auteur involves being able to sell oneself to different contexts. Waters' career as a gallery artist, for example, caused a wave of newfound interest in his work at a high society level in places like New York City.

Despite the prevalence of the auteur's functioning outside of the text, the current battle over media authorship studies continues to circulate around the text. More contemporary work on media authorship studies which calls for a return to the focus of the auteur, tends to be far too dismissive of post-structuralism and far too worshipful of auteur-agency. Most discussions about re-situating the auteur fall back on Roland Barthes' iconic essay "The Death of the Author" and

[15] Eduard Berlin (Owner, The Ivy Bookshop) personal interview with the author. Baltimore, MD. August 22, 2013.

assume that since Barthes killed the author scholars have too-literally buried any notion of authorial agency. In *The Life of the Author* Sarah Kozloff argues, "Since about 1970, the dominant strain of film theory has proclaimed that filmmakers have little control over their works . . . seen merely as conduits for broad ideological currents. Filmmakers are neither conscious nor in control of what their films convey: viewers decode their meaning(s). Movies bear the imprint of particular industrial, cultural and psychological ideologies, not of deliberate artistry."[16] While I agree the position of the author has become undefined, I do not think that media studies has denied the existence of authors and their influence nor that Barthes' essay calls for such a reaction. Barthes beneficially argues for movement away from the author as central focus of criticism, instead pushing toward textuality-oriented readings: "it is language which speaks, not the author"[17] and "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing."[18] Yet despite the hyperbolic title, Barthes does not actually move for a total death of the author in criticism or scholarship, but instead a re-focusing. In her book on cinema authorship and the author represented in cinema, Lucy Fischer clarifies, "What Barthes actually sought to bury here were traditional notions of authorship that treated the writer as the godlike authority on his work."[19] Such biographical attention to the

[16] Sarah Kozloff. *The Life of the Author*. (Montreal: Caboose, 2014). 4. While I do agree with her larger arguments, at this point early in the book Kozloff seems to follow other recent work on media authorship which argues for a return to considering authorial intention. While I think Kozloff puts far too much faith into the fidelity of DVD commentary tracks (13) the book ultimately calls for a much more measured and productive approach to authorial agency. For the other work on returning intention to authorship studies see: Paul C. Sellors. *Film Authorship: Auteurs and Other Myths*. (New York: Wallflower Press, 2010). And: Torben Grodal and Bente Larson and Iben Thorving Laursen. Eds. *Visual Authorship: Creativity and Intentionality in Media*. (University of Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2004).

[17] Barthes. "Death." 209.

[18] Ibid. 212.

[19] Lucy Fischer. *Body Double*. (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2013). 1.

author has rightfully been associated with Andrew Sarris' auteur theory in media studies, yet I agree the abandonment of this method should not necessarily coincide with a complete dismissal of the concept of the auteur.[20]

Media studies scholars have too often side-stepped the issue of authorial agency. Presses release scores of filmmaker-specific books each year and most of them find way to circumvent the very author they are writing about. As an example, Robert Self's *Robert Altman's Subliminal Reality* cautions, "I seek less to describe Robert Altman as the cinematic auteur of personal movies than to provide a detailed analysis of how these films both adhere to and embody the characteristics of art-cinema narration."[21] Amounting essentially to auteur structuralism,[22] such an approach really more ignores and limits the entire organizing principle of the book—the filmmaker Robert Altman. He is clearly not the only filmmaker to use art-cinema narration, so some attachment must exist between the categorizing Altman name, and its corresponding functions, and the practices examined. Many studies structured around filmmakers and auteurs continue to exist and focus on interesting aspects of authorial practice, yet pay only cursory attention to the importance of the filmmaker whose name categorizes the study.

Acknowledging the position of the auteur within scholarship and practice does not require giving "control" over the auteur-position or its interpretation to the filmmakers

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[20] Dismissing the auteur in criticism after post-structuralism, others have very productively argued, resulted in a problematic dismissal of female auteurs at a point where they were beginning to get much-deserved scholarly attention. Suddenly disregarding the position of the auteur then left it methodologically more difficult to address these filmmakers and their impact. See: Claire Johnston. "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema." in *Notes on Women's Cinema*. Ed. Claire Johnston. (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1973). 24-31.; Angela Martin. "Refocusing Authorship in Women's Filmmaking." in *Women Filmmakers: Refocusing*. Eds. Jacqueling Levitin, Judith Plessis and Valerie Raoul. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003). 29-37.

[21] Robert Self. *Robert Altman's Subliminal Reality*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002). ix.

[22] Peter Wollen. *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*. (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972).

themselves. On this point I fully agree with Kozloff who asserts, "In actuality, of course biography never really left . . . biographical data informs our reception of . . . films; it helps us place and contextualize what we are seeing."[23] Biographical data can be interpreted by the researcher without standing in for the entirety of the method. Most declarations for intervention into the arena of media authorship studies revolve around the disappearance of agency in authorship studies and how this notion can productively return. While authorial agency has continually been treated as a skeleton in the closet and does need to be addressed, I do not find that the issue of agency holistically defines authorship studies and where it needs to go. Focusing solely on agency limits authorship studies to direct association with a text and there is much more to authorship than its attachment to texts. If uncoupling the text from the author in post-structuralism has offered advantageous methodological opportunities and valuable insights, then uncoupling the author from the text also has similar advantages.

When writing about authorship the subject of agency is, however, unavoidable. Agency is, of course, a quite loaded term. I follow Janet Staiger in her essay, "Authorship Approaches" by saying that it does not need to be a 'bad' term and must be acknowledged when studying authorship. As Staiger asserts, "Authorship does matter. It matters to those in non-dominant positions in which asserting even a partial agency may seem to be important for day-to-day survival or where locating moments of alternative practice takes away the naturalized privileges of normativity. It matters for those who purchase or consume mass media: choosing to see a film directed by Lizzie Borden or Steven Spielberg involves cultivated taste cultures."[24] It is true that the author does not and should not completely 'control' readings of their texts, yet still their

[23] Kozloff. *Life of the Author*. 35.

[24] Janet Staiger. "Authorship Approaches." in *Authorship and Film*. Eds. David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger. (New York and London: Routledge, 2003). 27.

authorial agency continues to be recognized in various cultural spheres, interpreted by them and carries with it certain effects. I also, however, do not mean to equate 'agency' with 'intention' as my focus on authorship is primarily the process of making texts. Auteur agency here will be taken as the direct actions taken by the auteur or through the auteur's name (i.e. their production practices or production team). The distinction is important in that when studying the auteur's functioning in places, most people and institutions deal directly with the production in the auteur's name as opposed to the filmmakers themselves. On the other hand, the auteur does take direct actions in interviews and in the development of the overall production's environment. In terms of "intention," I will clarify during any textual readings whether I have derived meaning through analysis, have evidence of a filmmaker's expressed intentions through commentary or writing, and often how these authorial intentions differ markedly from fan or public readings of the texts.

Janet Staiger develops a method of understanding authorship that I find offers a useful model for recognizing agency in author-studies. Staiger proposes to think of film authorship as performative statements: "The message is produced from circumstances in which the individual conceives a self as able to act. The individual believes in the author-function, and this works because the discursive structure (our culture) in which the individual acts also believes in it."[25] The auteur then results from the perceived repetition of certain recognized statements or, I would add, practices. The "performative statement" approach opens up the possibility of an author's own adoption of the culturally recognized auteur category which must then be recognized in their work by the culture and accepted as auteurist. While a useful starting place, I ultimately extend Saiger's approach by looking more closely at which statements become recognized by different

[25] Staiger. "Authorship Approaches." 50. Staiger borrows the notion of performative statements from: Judith Butler. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'.* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

contexts. She states that the individual (author) and the (our) culture both believe in the author-function, though it must be clarified further how these beliefs can differ while still arriving at the same cultural label. To some extent any auteur must fit themselves into a set of practices that are generally recognized as auteurist. However, focusing on only general auteur-recognition does not properly specify the ways in which a filmmaker's and a culture's more nuanced understandings of the auteur are necessarily different. For instance, John Waters traditionally considered the fact that his films are not in any way political part of his directorial style, whereas his fans considered the fact that they *are* political to be part of the directorial style they recognized. In *Shock Value* Waters writes that at the Berlin Film Festival, "the buffs are unbelievably serious and went crazy when I told them my films aren't political. 'Yes they ARE!!' they screamed, and I backed off a little; I guess you can read anything you want into a screenplay."[26] With the acceptance Waters' films typically give socially taboo content, inherent political messages are not difficult to read into the films. In certain instances, a very clear political message sits in dialogue such as when Aunt Ida (Edith Massey) gives a speech to Gater (Michael Potter) in *Female Trouble* (1974) about how happy she would be if he were queer because heterosexuals live uneventful and boring lives. However, Waters continually claims that he presents these sexual idiosyncrasies because he finds them funny and not to argue for their larger acceptance in society. In complicating Staiger's use of the performative statement concept, I further suggest that the filmmaker's own auteurist image need not necessarily align with what becomes recognized as auteurist by cultural contexts. That is to say, what 'auteur' means in any context can vary greatly. Examination of these contexts is, then, central to understanding how an auteur becomes defined culturally and what the possibilities of this label can be.

[26] Waters. *Shock Value*. 220.

To further explain how the auteur-label can be varied through cultural agency it is helpful to look at how it functions as a structure. I continually refer to the auteur as a label because I find it a much more productive way of discussing the auteur: as an assigned, meaningful category rather than somehow an innate ability of a specialized few. In theorizing how the auteur label, functions, however, I think it is more productive to think of it as a structure, which provides a way of discussing agency in a more meaningful way. It allows for the study of larger structures within which agency functions, such as authorship as understood by the industry or culture, and how these structures become enacted and altered by practices at a more specific, geographic level which is necessary to account for larger changes. The work of William H. Sewell, who builds off of Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, on structure and agency is particularly useful as it claims that structures have a social basis.[27] I follow Sewell's re-defining of the structure to more fluidly account for its set of virtual boundaries and general understanding at a larger scale which then become shifted and changed through localized uses. To account for change in the structure at the local level, Sewell posits a dual-nature to structures arguing that they have both virtual and material components. The virtual rules and boundaries understood socially about the makeup of a structure he defines as schemas while the material components and products of a structure he defines as resources. The dialectical site of agency—the experience of social life—then involves, on one side, the ability of social actors to apply learned schemas and available resources in new contexts, thus altering them. On the other side, Sewell acknowledges the ways in which structures do influence and guide agents amongst certain boundaries, giving them porous, yet still present, limits. Properly understanding a structure in

[27] Anthony Giddens. *The Consequences of Modernity*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).; Anthony Giddens. *The Constitution of Society*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984).

society, then, involves knowledge of its specific functioning in a variety of cultural contexts. In Sewell's recognition of the material component to structure he highlights the importance of spatiality to such study: "A factory is not an inert pile of bricks, wood, and metal. It incorporates or actualizes schemas, and this means that the schemas can be inferred from the material form of the factory."[28] In his example of the factory, Sewell strongly suggests that no structure exists without a material base or without manifesting in a material way which opens up the need to incorporate the study and observation of material spaces in order to fully understand the development and functioning of structures in society. Sewell's duality of structure provides a way to account for the fact that while larger structures might appear limiting and fixed, in actuality they are always multiple, changing and complex. Though I have been using the term "label" in order to further inflect the connotations that the auteur is also a category both institutionally and culturally assigned, there are benefits to understanding how this label functions as a structure. The auteur, when treated as such a structure, does have a generally acceptable definition, but it is a porous one which consistently changes.

Given my choice of filmmakers who exhibit notable degrees of independence from Hollywood it is also worth defining how I use "independence." Independent cinema has always been a tricky turn of phrase as there is little cinema in America which does not in some way involve strong ties to the Hollywood industry. As Emanuel Levy writes in *Cinema of Outsiders*,

> Over the years, the definition [of independent] has blurred as a result of the increasing consolidation of power among Hollywood's majors and mini-majors. In today's [1999] Hollywood, Chris Hanley's Muse Productions and James Robinson's Morgan Creek are both considered independents. Hanley has never

[28] William H. Sewell Jr. "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation." *American Journal of Sociology*. 98 no. 1 (July 1992). 13.

> made a picture for more than $5 million, but has tried to make all his pictures edgy and controversial. Morgan Creek makes genre pictures . . . with large budgets, big stars, and massive marketing.[29]

In a climate where studio money and infrastructure is still needed for wide distribution and marketing, the term independent covers a significant amount of territory. It can mean simply any film, including high-budget, made outside of a major studio which is later sold to a major for distribution, or it can mean a film made by a group of friends exhibited in coffee houses and festivals. Of course Sundance's rise in prominence following the great success of films such as *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* (1989) and *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) began making independently financed festival films a much more stable path of entry into major studio filmmaking and further blurred the line between what was independent of the industry and what was striving for Hollywood. The movement to Conglomerate Hollywood, using Tom Schatz's term, in the mid/late 1980s through to the early 2000s made for a particularly confusing environment for what could be termed independent or studio-based. As Schatz puts it, "The acquisition of successful independents like Miramax and New Line was one of two key strategies deployed by Conglomerate Hollywood to commandeer the indie movement. The other was to launch indie divisions of their own—i.e., quasi-autonomous production-distribution operations that specialized in low-budget, "indie style," target-marketed films."[30] Therefore, independent filmmaking went from being a category outside of Hollywood, to an entrance into Hollywood to, more recently, a label that Hollywood co-opted into itself. Therefore, the meaning of

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[29] Emanuel Levy. *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film*. (New York and London: New York University, 1999). 2.

[30] Tom Schatz. "The Studio System and Conglomerate Hollywood." in *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*. Eds Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko. (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2008). 29.

"independent" becomes particularly slippery in this climate and stands more for how such a label is established in a particular instance, than an automatically clear designation on its own.

Levy goes on to characterize two major approaches to independent cinema through defining it as a film financed outside of the major studios or as a film made in a style/sensibility which differs from standard studio product.[31] The auteurs studied herein could either fit these definitions or not depending on the stage of their career. For this project, independent refers more specifically to filmmakers whose production methods fall significantly outside the industry standard, thus approaching place from a unique perspective can be a key point of definition. I refer to both filmmakers who want to film in unusual locations, well outside of the prying eyes of Los Angeles or New York, and filmmakers who subvert standard industry practices with their own methods. For instance, John Waters' choice to exclusively film in Baltimore has been a struggle throughout his career in that studios and financial backers tend to want more oversight on his films than they easily have while he is in Baltimore. When starting his career, filming in Baltimore with studio backing meant significant cost increases due to transporting crew and personnel. Especially in the period when Altman and Waters were making films, online distribution and Netflix were not viable realities, thus, all of the case studies examined here have necessary ties to the Hollywood studios either through financing or distribution—often both. As Alan Rudolph told me, "It began with Bob, we were the independent. There was no indie film because everyone was dependent on money."[32] I argue that it is their relationship to place found in their production practices and auteur self-construction which sustains their status as independent.

[31] Levy *Cinema of Outsiders*. 1-12.

[32] Alan Rudolph (filmmaker) personal interview with the author. Seattle, WA. March 21, 2014.

For my use of the term "place," I draw from cultural geographers such as Doreen Massey who distinguishes between place and space through their connection to social relationships. Massey conceives of 'space' as, "the simultaneous coexistence of social interrelations at all geographical scales."[33] That is to say, to move to an example from daily life, the complexity of spatial relationships surrounding McDonald's more generally as a company and series of restaurants that use generally comparable spatial practices. McDonald's brings to mind a generic fast food experience. Though a focus on only space does not adequately define the particular McDonald's on, for example, F Street in Hawthorne, NV which, logically, would house different localized practices than the McDonald's on Union Ave in Memphis, TN. As a simple example, the former might be a more rural area, making the McDonald's more popular for families whereas the latter could be known as a place to grab late-night food while out on the town. To address these differences, a 'place,' more specifically, **"**is formed out of the particular set of social relations which interact at a particular location. (The) singularity of any individual place is formed in part out of the specificity of the interactions which occur at that location . . . and in part out of the fact that the meeting of those social relations at that location . . . will in turn produce new social effects."[34] For Massey, a place also involves a multiplicity of changing and contradictory social relationships. In other words, even though many social/cultural contexts recognize McDonald's, the understanding of what that label means and how it becomes used will vary even at a particular location.[35]

[33] Doreen Massey. *Space, Place and Gender*. (Cambridge: Polity, 1994). 168.

[34] Massey. *Space, Place, and Gender*. 168.

[35] For more on the distinction between space and place see Yi-Fu Tuan. *Space and Place*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1977) who offers a very useful, more phenomenological approach.

Massey, however, tends to regard places as *only* multiple to an extent that can subsume acknowledgement of the larger, more stable structures that continue to function despite the chaotic play around them. As an example, she claims that merely travelling through a place irretrievably changes it and while this is a perfectly reasonable argument for a more philosophical or phenomenological study, for my own work this concept taken to this extreme becomes idealistic.[36] I will argue that in Baltimore Waters' name and authorial identity become considered a fundamental part of the identity of the city itself. After a long history of associating Waters with Baltimore his image retains strong, structural elements which exist despite his increasing tendency to spend more time away from Baltimore. Local bookstore owner Rupert Wondolowski thinks Waters remains, "a big influence on inspiring artists and working artists in Baltimore because he shows you can be successful but still remain true to your roots and remain down-to-earth. He's an incredibly approachable, good guy and has just stayed completely true to his roots. To me, that's a Baltimore characteristic. Or at least him being that way has sort of helped keep that a Baltimore characteristic."[37] Waters may very well be approachable when in Baltimore, but with owning four homes and doing consistent speaking tours across the country his time in Baltimore has assuredly changed significantly. His absence will have small effects, such as the lack of more recent stories or the reification of practices, yet the strong, established connection between Waters and the city remains until such smaller effects multiply over time. While I do agree with Massey's distinctions between "space" and "place" at the level of scale, examining film authorship and place, defining the differing scales through only specificity of

[36] This perspective of place runs throughout Massey but can be seen most specifically in: Doreen Massey. *For Space*. (London: Sage, 2005).

[37] Rupert Wondolowski (Owner, Normal's Books & Records) personal interview with the author. Baltimore, MD. August 20, 2013.

location does a disservice to these concepts. While the physical locations which help to form social patterns and distinctions is certainly important, those social practices and patterns which help to further influence and change the physical environment are important as well.

Most importantly, attention must be paid to how places become used, not only Massey's centralization on how places "are." With his theorization of space in conjunction with everyday practices, Michel de Certeau clarifies, "The presence and circulation of a representation . . . tells us nothing about what it is for its users."[38] His interest in use of places manifests largely through taking them as sites of localized resistance to larger disciplinary structures. Each site becomes home to activities which work to either support or destroy dominant institutional definitions, drawing attention to many possible power dynamics in a given location. De Certeau suggests that the concepts of space and place go beyond the realm of scholars and theorists and extend to everyday practices—localities can be *used* as either spaces or places and these choices have varying effects. Massey, however, brings up a good point when she criticizes de Certeau for treating space as a blank page which becomes written upon, meaning she feels he sets his sense of dominant place-formation far too rigidly.[39] I recognize that while place may in fact function very openly, when discussing how spaces or places are both approached and used, they are often believed to be very fixed by those who use them and such distinctions can only be clarified by actually experiencing a place. To put it another way, spaces are not a site of fixed structures, only *perceived* fixed structures; everyone brings some form of fixed perception to a place. We must

[38] Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Randall. (Berkely, CA: University of California Press, 1984). xii.

[39] Massey. *For Space*. 25-29.

realize places are actually open, but at the same time their perceived closure still remains important in understanding how structures function within them.

In addition to intervening in discourses of media authorship this dissertation also contributes to the growing literature on space and media. Edward Dimendberg, in *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*, reveals how *film noir* represents the changing spatiality of late modernity.[40] In *Ambient Television* Anna McCarthy studies how television functions in public spaces, arguing that television has no general set of operations it performs in all places at all times, but instead that television is site-specific.[41] Daniel Herbert examines the video store as a set of both material and spatial practices in *Videoland* through its architecture, geographical location, a study of cultural practices associated with video stores and the interior emotional spaces of those who engage with video stores.[42] David James' work looks at how mode of production relates to large spatial developments of cities, also taking into account how more local place-oriented practices affect spatial dynamics.[43] Michael Curtin's work on media capitals focuses on the globalized spatial logics and flows of capital, culture and creativity.[44] Allen J. Scott combines the study of place with economics in his work on Hollywood arguing that

[40] Edward Dimendberg. *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[41] Anna McCarthy. *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001).

[42] Daniel Herbert. *Videoland.* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2014).

[43]David James. *The Most Typical Avant-Garde*, but also see *Allegories of Cinema*: *History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2005).; David James. *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

[44] Michael Curtin. "Media Capitals: Cultural Geographies of Global TV." in *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*. Eds. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).; Michael Curtin. "Thinking Globally: From Media Imperialism to Media Capital." in *Media Industries*. Eds. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren. (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2009).

cultural economics become tied to and understood through places as much as they are through industries and products.[45] My dissertation advances the discussion of space and media by looking at the intersection of authorship and places.

Before they are exhibited in places films must first be made in places and whether a production takes it into account or not, place can very quickly impose itself onto a production in inescapable fashion. During the filming of the small indie film *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* (2008), star Sienna Miller referred to Pittsburgh as "Shitsburg" in a *Rolling Stone* interview asking, "Will you pity me when you're back in your funky New York apartment and I'm still in Pittsburgh? I need to get more glamorous films."[46] The extremely vocal outcry which followed from every corner of the city made it abundantly clear that local pride meant something very different in Pittsburgh than it did in just any other city. The *Pittsburgh City Paper* clarifies;

> It is, after all, the flip side to the fetishistic glee we get from *positive* national attention. We have an unhealthy fascination with what the world thinks of us. Every mention of the city in *The New York Times* or *Forbes* inevitably prompts stories of our own, in which reporters cover the coverage . . . When the Pirates and Steelers sought millions of tax dollars for new stadiums, a key selling point was that they would market the city to the world.[47]

[45] Allen J. Scott. *On Hollywood*: *The Place, the Industry*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[46] Jenny Eliscu. "Sienna Miller." *Rolling Stone*. October 19, 2006. 88.

[47] Chris Potter. "Who the Hell Does This Sienna Miller Skank Think She Is?: Question Submitted By Pittsburghers Everywhere." *Pittsburgh City Paper*. October 12, 2006. Accessed February 25, 2015. http://www.pghcitypaper.com/pittsburgh/who-the-hell-does-this-sienna-miller-skank-think-she-is/Content?oid=1334104

Paradoxically, Mayor Luke Ravenstahl responded to Miller's comments with, "She was probably in the more elite facilities in and around the city. I think if she would have interacted with regular Pittsburghers, she would have found differently. She needs to get out with us regular folks."[48] Despite Miller's original statement bemoaning the loss of class and glamor, the Mayor, who certainly understands currents of the city better than Miller, recommends that the "real" Pittsburgh identity, the enjoyable Pittsburgh, stands in its lower-class areas. Disregarding place overlooks the fact that auteurs function beyond the bounds of the cultural products credited to them.[49]

## Methods

For my study of the auteur in place I use a diverse collection of methods in order to account for the multitude of ways authorship functions in localized areas. Central to the research of each chapter was a fieldwork trip to each city. My methods include archival research, site analysis, industry studies, textual analysis and ethnographic interviews. This array of methods allowed me to gain a sense of what was happening in filming places, what had happened, collect a wide variety of discourses surrounding the productions and their aftermath, and observe how place-specific relationships find their way into the finished film product. With the focus here on auteurs and city places, the study of production practices figures centrally into my research. I partially model my approach after the work of David E. James. In *The Most Typical Avant-*

[48] John Hayes. "Semi-famous Actress Dumps on the 'Burgh." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. October 6, 2006. Accessed February 25, 2015. http://www.post-gazette.com/local/city/2006/10/06/Semi-famous-actress-dumps-on-the-Burgh/stories/200610060202

[49] Throughout the dissertation I refer to a particular city's "identity." I mean "identity," here, much as I do with the auteur in that it does not stand holistically for every perspective in the city, but that from particular dominant perspectives the particular quality being discussed stands in as a recognized, if not accepted, label associated with that city. If I have chosen to use the term identity in association with a city it means that in my research and experiences I found that particular quality stated tacitly throughout a wide expanse of conversations and city discourses.

*Garde*, where James examines independent cinemas in LA, he, "attempts to understand these cinemas aesthetically, socially, historically, and geographically, by seeing the films in the plurality of contexts in which they, and the various visions of the life of the city they mobilize, were made."[50] Following James, I move away from a central focus on texts and toward a focus on auteur-construction.

Apart from James I also take inspiration from John Caldwell's *Production Cultures* which similarly utilizes a range of approaches in order to study "the cultural practices and belief systems of film/video production workers in Los Angeles"[51] that includes ethnographic observation and interviews. He outlines his methodology as, "an integrated cultural-industrial method of analysis"[52] which includes textual analysis, interviews with workers, ethnographic observation of spaces and economic/industrial analysis. Caldwell specifies, "I have attempted whenever possible to keep these individual research modes 'in check' by placing the discourses and results of any one register . . . in critical tension or dialogue with the others. This method of cross-checking proves useful when interrogating production practices where, for example, the rhetoric of studio press kits does not jive with explanations provided by production craftspeople"[53] I have also been careful to keep the different perspectives of my varied sources in mind and benefit from their differences. Following Caldwell I recognize that all the texts and interviews I used were comprised of negotiated perspectives, making the diverse range of materials all the more important. I greatly admire Caldwell's ten-year study though, as to my

[50] James. *Most Typical Avant-Garde.* 2.

[51] John Caldwell. *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practices in Film and Television*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008). 1.

[52] Caldwell. *Production Culture*. 4.

[53] Ibid. 4.

own methods, my research funds and completion time allowed for only a limited stay in each place. So, while I gained much from my conversations and observations I have to agree with Daniel Herbert in his book *Videoland* where he states that, "I would say that although my fieldwork for this book was 'ethnographic,' the end result is not an 'ethnography' in the richest and strictest sense of the term."[54] In my own research, then, I remained an outsider but encouraged interviewees, ranging from production personnel to on-the-street interviews, to communicate their place perspectives to me. The diverse accounts collected further informed, and in parts contradicted, my more text-based archival and periodical research, taking my investigation of the auteur out of texts and into places.

In cultural studies, the editors of the journal *Public Culture,* Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar and Elizabeth A. Povinelli recognize the need to move beyond strictly text-based research. The editors propose that instead of relying on forms of "reading" coming from literary traditions there may be other ways of analyzing social imaginaries which remain tied to their contexts and which can account for their circulation and transfiguration. Under the concept of circulation they mean not just the circulation of objects but also the interpretive communities built around them. "In a given culture of circulation, it is more important to track the proliferating copresence of varied textual/cultural forms in all their mobility and mutability than to attempt a delineation of their fragile autonomy and specificity."[55] They argue that searching for function can play a more fruitful role than searching for meaning. While this dissertation is not directly doing transnational work, the constantly shifting dynamics of place inherently involve trans-cultural work, and the

[54] Herbert. *Videoland*. 237.

[55] Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar and Elizabeth A. Povinelli. "Technologies of Public Forms: Circulation, Transfiguration, Recognition." *Public Culture*. 15 no. 3 (2003): 391.

theories presented here support examining how structures and cultural imaginaries traverse at the local level. In the field of cultural geography, Henri Lefebvre similarly believes that space and spatial forms cannot be adequately analyzed without accounting for the physical, mental and social.[56] When the auteur, in other words, becomes attached to specific sites, visiting these sites and exploring the retained social relationships to the filmmaker is integral to understanding what function/s the author holds within the negotiations of this place, community and society.

I situate this project as beginning with an examination of how each filmmaker's mode of production interacts with and materially manifests social relationships surrounding the auteur in places. The space/place dynamic plays out very clearly through choices in mode of production and can be a distinct way of differentiating effects of filmmaking approaches independent from the industry. For standard industry productions, filming locations means something fundamentally different than the filmmakers examined here. I refer to standard location shooting as more of a *spatial* one instead of place-based. Janet Wasko's industry analysis describes location shooting in terms very similar to space-based practices:

> Decisions about whether to shoot on a studio lot or another location involve creative judgments, but are also very much influenced by economic factors. A script may call for a specific location; however, recreating the site in a studio or on a backlot may be less costly in the end . . . These days, film production is being deliberately lured away from Southern California by film commissions offering various incentives, as well as the attraction of lower labor costs.[57]

[56] Henri Lefebvre. (*The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

[57] Janet Wasko. "Financing and Production: Creating the Hollywood Film Commodity." in *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*. Ed. Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko. (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2008). 55.

Waskos' discussion of location shooting revolves almost exclusively around economics, which fits the outlook of capital-driven major studios and a more spatial approach to filming locations—where particular identities of that place are treated as disposable or unimportant. Simply filming in a location does not mean a production automatically takes place specificity into account even if the presence of the film has place-specific effects.

Filming spatially simply involves not accounting for any of the place specificities at whichever host location serves as setting for the production. The most common example of spatial approaches to shooting involves filming in a city, such as Vancouver, whereas the setting of the film is located in another city, such as New York City. In this very common case, the city from a whole other country stands in for one of the most iconic cities in the world. The logic behind the switch is that it is far less expensive and more accessible to film in Vancouver in New York City, thus the production can get the footage they need as a relatively reasonable representation cheaper. As a practice, spatial filming allows a lot of stories to get told, though clearly they are most commonly stories where the locations have little to do with the narrative. The importance of fill-in locations like Vancouver, or now Baltimore for Washington D.C., involves their place-specific resources and benefits which aid film productions and make it worthwhile to film there. However, such practices do have cultural effects. People who live in cities tend to think of them as places and take pride in their distinctive qualities. As the Canadian periodical *Maclean's* argues, "When American studios shoot movies north of the border, would it kill them to set one there? That almost never happens. Although Canada is the only country in the world that's lumped into Hollywood's domestic market, apparently we're not domestic

enough to be a place where people would actually live."[58] By filming in a city and calling it somewhere else, Hollywood spatialized filmmaking effectively ignores that city and its residents. In the case of big studio films, overshadowing the host city can appear all the more insulting in that the end result will be a product that typically has international cultural appeal, but communicates cultural value for a city that did not host the production.

The filmmakers comprising the case studies here all take a place-based approach to filmmaking. Importantly, a place-based approach need not be representational. That is to say, in one sense many filmmakers do make place a part of their production methods in order to represent that place and reflect its qualities, making textual analysis an important part of the production analysis performed here. In another sense, longstanding production relationships with cities forge a connection between the specific place identities and the authorial identity of the filmmaker. For example, even though he has not made all of his film in Michigan, Michael Moore's dedication to cities in Michigan and his choice to remain local have caused him to forge a connection between his blue-collar activist identity and areas in the state. Recently in Dec 2014 Moore gave a commencement speech at Michigan State University where he made a case for students to stay in Michigan as he regrets other famous or wealthy former Michiganders who have left the state. Moore stated, "We're remarkable people, we've done remarkable things and we'll do them again."[59] That he was asked to make the commencement speech and given an

[58] Brian D. Johnson. "Toronto and Vancouver: Hollywood Can't Quite Disguise Them." *Maclean's*. February 17, 2012. Accessed February 24, 2015. http://www.macleans.ca/culture/movies/toronto-and-vancouver-barely-incognito/

[59] Kyle Feldscher. "Michael Moore Gets Laughs, Encourages Michigan State Graduates to Stay in Michigan." *MLive*. December 13, 2014. Accessed February 28, 2015. http://www.mlive.com/lansing-news/index.ssf/2014/12/michael_moore_gets_laughs_enco.html

honorary degree at a state school he never attended speaks to the strong connection between Moore and certain areas of Michigan as do his statements which advocate for local pride.

Most of the archival research was performed in the John Waters Papers at Wesleyan University and the Robert Altman Papers at the University of Michigan's Special Collections Library. In order to further inform my diachronic understanding of these cities and productions within them I also devoted time during my research trips to local University libraries or newspapers in the cities/towns I visited.[60] More specifically, I performed research at the offices of *The South Reporter* in Holly Springs, the Miller Nichols Library and Marr Sound Archives at the University of Missouri Kansas City, the University of Maryland Baltimore Library and the Perry-Castañeda Library at the University of Texas Austin. The former filmmaker-specific archives revealed an impressive collection of internal communications such as memos and correspondence. There were also detailed collections of locations used, production notebooks with schedules at locations, correspondence with locations and in some cases even maps which clarified how a given production both used and viewed the city spaces. These documents were integral in finding businesses and institutions with histories tied to these filmmakers and their productions. Access to local newspaper archives gave me a wealth of information regarding local press coverage and debates surrounding these productions. In many cases I was able to find a diverse collection of local periodicals that helped to better round out my understanding of local perspectives during the times of the productions and my visits.

[60] My own research work for Professor Richard Abel, as well as his written work, has taught me the great value of local newspaper and periodical research. See especially *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American 1900-1910*. (Berkely and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1999).; *Americanizing the Movies and "Movie-Mad" Audiences 1910-1914*. (Berkely and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2006). Though I am not constructing a national perspective through local periodical research, Abel's work has taught me that local libraries and archives house an impressive array of historical local documents which can range from neighborhood newsletters to local press, giving a much greater diversity of perspective. On working with multiple extra-filmic sources also see: Barbara Klinger. "Film History Terminable and Interminable: Recovering the Past in Reception Studies." *Screen* 38 no. 2 (Summer 1997). 107-128.

A filmmaker's self-promotion through interviews, public appearances and self-written texts has become an increasingly important site of auteur-definition. In "The Commerce of Auteurism," Timothy Corrigan examines Francis Ford Coppola's own presentation of his work and career through interviews. Corrigan writes,

> An interview with Coppola becomes a media performance focused on the technology and business that define and threaten him . . . . Coppola's interviews often make him into the film itself. He becomes the presiding genius of the film of himself; however, this genius is represented not in expression or productive control but in expenditure and loss; loss of control, loss of money, loss of vision, and loss of self[61]

Here Corrigan displays the different structuring desires of both Coppala's self-representation within the interview context as well as the tangential narrative established through the interviewers. For this project I pulled extensive interview materials from archives and research into periodicals and local newspapers in order to take in a wide range of interviews and stories throughout the career of each filmmaker. These provided important information on how both the auteurs, and the wider press which covered them, changed their framing of their auteur-identity over time. In the case of Waters and Rodriguez especially, they have been heavily involved in self-promotion and I have also looked at how they have represented their careers in their own books, commentary tracks and special features. Their self-expression helps to support the image presented in interviews, but more importantly often includes a much more pronounced didacticism to young filmmakers which in turn reveals much about their institutional relationships and industrial strategies.

[61] Corrigan. "Commerce." 105-06.

The more I researched these productions and their location cities, the more I realized that the auteurs were not the only one with identities. My research was built off of the axiom that places have recognized identities, but that these identities are perpetually in flux due to constant in internal and external influences. This does not, however, stop strong long-held place associations from being present. As a study of *places* instead of spaces the method involved visiting each city focused on in the case studies and talking with locals, arguably the keepers of the sense of place in each area. As far as research funds could be stretched I tried to stay in each area at least a week, longer if possible or if required by my interview schedule. While I was under no delusion that I would become an insider to each place, in an effort to experience day-to-day life as much as possible, and to cut traveling costs, I rode public transportation everywhere it was an option.[62] I found riding buses and rail systems opened up the city to me in a different way, provided people to casually chat to about the area and my research, and gave me a much broader sense of relationships between neighborhoods—integral to the dynamic of any city. In each city I scheduled more structured interviews with a range of local filmmakers/practitioners about the regional industry, municipal leaders, local business owners with ties to the productions studied, people who worked on these productions with these filmmakers and of course locals present during the time of filming. The interviews proved invaluable to my understanding of how these filmmakers engaged, worked and lived in these places.

On each trip I tried to collect as broad a range of interview subjects as possible in order to achieve the most diverse account of both the climate surrounding the production as well as the cultural climate present during my visit. However, each chapter demanded a slightly different focus on interviews as research developed depending on the perceived relationship between that

[62] Holly Spings, MS was the only trip for which public transport was not available.

filmmaker and city. For John Waters, his work to maintain a connection of home and community as an insider in Baltimore gives him a very unique social presence in the city. For that reason, on my trip to Baltimore I focused on neighborhoods with expressed ties to Waters, interviews with local business owners whose businesses were publicly linked with Waters, and this focus also raised the importance of conversations with people on the street. For the Robert Altman chapter, the primary focus on interviews remained local businesses, though in this case were first businesses with expressed ties to the given *production*, not necessarily Altman himself. For both Kansas City, MO and Holly Springs, MS the initial list of businesses and institutions contacted for interviews and visits came from the University of Michigan's Robert Altman Papers archival collection. Through production documents I was able to find businesses which held frequent correspondence with the production, acted as production sites, provided necessary resources or aided in acquiring access to production sites. Early interviews with production personnel Kathryn Altman and Matthew Seig also gave me further contacts and interview options. The Robert Rodriguez/Austin chapter had a subtly, though distinctly important shift in focus. Due to the fact that Rodriguez largely limits his productions in Austin to his own private facilities and personnel, it was difficult to find physical sites which related strongly to his mode of production in the larger city. Furthermore, such a focus would have deterred from the larger point about Rodriguez's production practices, namely his use of Austin as a private industry instead of a place-based setting for his productions. His use of place was less site-specific in the way of Waters and Altman who both use and represent the city, and instead place-specific in the opportunities Austin as a production center offers him. Therefore, the focus of the Austin interviews fell around local industry resources and the relationship Rodriguez had with local institutions.

Finally, when embarking on a project centered around auteurs and places, especially filmmakers and their relationships to cities, likely the first filmmaker/city relationships to come to mind are Spike Lee, Martin Scorsese or Woody Allen in New York and any number of filmmakers in Los Angeles. I chose not to use either of these cities in a case study primarily because each quite often stands culturally as much bigger than any place, event or figure within them. The breadth of importance given to these two cities often puts them in the conflicting position of either standing in tacitly for all cities or interpreted as unusually unique examples. For instance a short essay in the New York edition of the academic book series *World Film Locations* describes New York as obviously *the* site to film in:

> As a five-borough city crammed with people and their stories, and chockablock with actors, writers, producer, directors and designers ready to observe, react to, record and interpret these stories, New York City would, by sheer numbers, have to be photogenic. As a centre of arts, commerce and industry, it would de facto be photogenic. So what if the city's industries are shrinking in the early part of the twenty-first century? The fashion industry continues to thrive—and the models populating it are certainly photogenic. The sprawling, brawling, bawling, crawling, galling, mauling, appalling, enthralling metropolis is one of the most obvious locations for movies to be made and movies to be about.[63]

The author continually describes New York as obviously "photogenic" to such an extent that it seems like it would almost completely overshadow any filmmaker who attempted to take advantage of its pictorial wonderment. Similarly, David James as well as the members of the 'LA School' in cultural geography continually describe LA as a thoroughly "unique" site of

[63] David Finkle. "New York City of the Imagination." in *World Film Locations: New York*. Ed. Scott Jordan Harris. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). 6

study, suggesting that while it is still a city, it has elements that transcend more typical definitions.[64] I have found that each city, neighborhood and street corner is unique and has its own distinctive qualities worthy of examination, but I also agree that LA and NY are global cities, the breadth of which comes in danger of masking some of the more distinct qualities I found more visible in smaller cities.

That being said, an examination of either Los Angeles or New York City could prove extremely beneficial and enlightening working off of methods outlined here, though another point of this project's approach to authorship involved focusing somewhat outside of the industry on filmmakers who define themselves against the industry through their non-standard approach to places. The issue with LA or NY in this context involves the fact that both cities represent the pinnacle of the industry insider. While certainly many artists find new and innovative ways to use and represent each city, the purpose behind this project was not to find interesting filmmakers while the places they worked in were left nondescript. Instead I wanted the chance to discover the cities as just as dynamic and unique as the auteurs. Therefore, instead of relying on cities which serve as the pinnacle of every stage of film production, distribution and exhibition, the cities here remain as much questionable "outsiders" to the industry as do the filmmakers who work within them.

## Chapter Outlines

The chapters are organized through the type of place/auteur connection. Every place seems to have a hometown hero, so beginning with the connection between a celebrity persona

[64] See: James. *Most Typical Avant-Garde*.; Edward W. Soja. *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. (London and New York: Verso, 1989).; Mike Davis. *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. (London: Verso, 1990).

and a city starts with a much more generally accessible auteur/place connection. Each chapter then builds off of and alters basic associations from the previous chapter. For instance, Altman is still a celebrity engaging with places, but not places where he is thought of particularly as a hometown hero. Finally, Rodriguez's socially engaged, yet functionally hermetic private industry site is quite unusual in this country and, methodologically, relies on much more nuanced understandings of the place-author relationship established in the other chapters. While chronological organization is possible, given the overlapping careers of all three case study filmmakers, ordering the chapters on a timeline would impose a false narrative onto these case studies. Their importance lies not so much on when they occurred in relationship to each other, but how each represents the construction of an authorial identity through their engagement with city places.

Chapter 2 features John Waters and his relationship to Baltimore as he stands in for a very relatable and well-known attachment to a city—the hometown hero. In many ways, John Waters typifies the hometown hero, though his unusually close relationship to the city provides an opportunity to observe unique extensions to the auteur/city relationship. While a sense of community pride often follows the recognition of a hometown hero, in the case of Waters this becomes iconography to the point of making him inseparable from the city's local and national image. Waters *only* films in Baltimore—refusing to film anywhere else—and continues to live prominently in Baltimore whereas the more typical story, like that of Baltimore-born Barry Levinson, tends to involve the hometown hero leaving for greater and better things. Waters has continually used associations with the city to further his career and, once he had grown in international popularity, the city in turn has used the Waters name and image to promote itself. His films reflect and reinforce this relationship by acting as observation and commentary on

Baltimore locals for the purposes of comedy. In *A Dirty Shame*, his latest film to date, Waters includes an adult baby as one of the sexual perversions showcased in the film. On the DVD extras as well as his speaking tours he has said consistently, "That's one I can't get behind. I'm not marching for their rights!" The somewhat more traditional values he displays align with his acceptance into the higher class and official Baltimore art scene, where Waters becomes used as a cultural ambassador for the city. When viewed closely, his later films begin to "sell" the gentrified Baltimore back to the very public which stands to lose its culture the more gentrification continues. Therefore, Waters, who as a youth felt like an outsider, found the best way to promote and retain his career was to become a permanent insider.

Chapter 3 moves away from such a tight-knit locational boundary to an auteur who creates a relationship to place, but not consistently any specific place in particular. Unlike Waters, Robert Altman represents a filmmaker without a clear home to speak of. Robert Altman constructed his career around a nomadic linkage of work and family. In part, this connection comes from almost always shooting on location and moving his family wherever he works. To a much greater extent, however, Altman made a family, communal atmosphere key to his mode of production, putting himself into the role of neighborly friend to both his cast/crew and the cities they work in. As part of Altman's process, his interest in capturing his own style of reality or natural life gave him the desire to represent a place as a lived environment, not simply an empty setting for a narrative, requiring he negotiate his outsider status into one of a pseudo-insider.[65] Altman's productions also created an approachable "home" environment constructed by Kathryn Altman who would choose a home for the Altman family which would also be the central hub of social activity for the larger production. The sociable atmosphere, where everyone was given

[65] For more on Altman's interest in naturalized form and capturing "real" life see Robert Self. *Robert Altman's Subliminal Reality*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

equal access and treated at the same level, was cited by everyone I interviewed as the true key to Altman's productions. By the end of production he and his crews were not necessarily seen as full-fledged members of the community, but locals express a belief that he and his filmmaking team took the time to really understand and experience the area. These feelings of community, however, were much more than an idealistic result from a mythical production team that brought caring instead of indifference for the sake of profit. Always struggling for financing, Altman's production team needed to be able to cut corners wherever they could financially and this veneer of neighborly good will made locals more willing to help the production, instead of universally try to take financial advantage of it. Based on two case studies, Holly Springs, MS and the production of *Cookie's Fortune* and *Kansas City*'s relationship to its title city, the chapter focuses on Altman's production method and how it integrates local concerns.

Chapter 4 moves away from the direct representational connection found in the previous two chapters. Whereas Altman and Waters both develop their place-based strategies at least in part to represent the city in a certain way, Robert Rodriguez instead uses the city of Austin, TX as the base for his own private industry while not representing the city. Robert Rodriguez also overtly sells a mystique of hometown, family and place in relationship to his working life, though as a mystique it actually functions much more covertly than either the Altman or Waters examples. For Rodriguez, work life entails having a functional private industry entirely under his control, making him, ultimately, a local industrialist. As a continually growing production city, Austin, TX certainly has the resources available to support such a venture, though as a filmmaking community built around ideas of brotherhood and camaraderie, it could be assumed that forming a *private* industry space might not be so welcome. In this case, however, Rodriguez is continually held up both inside and outside the city as a local cultural leader. The fact that he

has privatized his resources seems to be more of an afterthought. Rodriguez effectively embeds himself within the Austin filmmaking culture, the independent Austin filmmaking identity as a shield to explain his contrary production practices. Therefore, Rodriguez creates and sells a linkage between himself and the cultural identity of the city of Austin as a land of communal-working independent-minded filmmakers. Far beyond just a way to have his own land, the linkage of Rodriguez's maverick private production practices with Austin's inclusive cultural identity also allows Rodriguez to avoid controversy. Rodriguez's loud public voice on alternative production strategies, gained largely through his very public arguments for adopting HD digital technologies and emboldened by his video release "film school" extras, makes his anti-union position problematic as he never acknowledges what unions do for workers. Yet, the environment around Austin, within a right-to-work state, provides Rodriguez with an example of how non-union work can be positive even though such an example disregards the state of the rest of the industry. Rodriguez's ability to point at the city immediately around him as a positive example allows his practices to seem much more universally applicable than they actually are.

Especially amongst the case studies chosen here, which all utilize some concept of home and/or family in their place relationships, this project might seem at first like an investigation into cohesion and togetherness. As a testament to the effectiveness of the place-based methods, on my field research trips I never found anyone willing to say a bad word about any of the key filmmakers studied here. Though even while the tales remain universally positive, these concatenations of filmmakers and cities are not without their downsides. The business of industry filmmaking requires vast resources and selfish time schedules which can easily overrun even a large city environment during a production. Most importantly, productions must necessarily alter a place in order to work. The success of place-relationships found in the

filmmakers focused on here lies precisely in their ability to veil their larger industry methods and purposes with the veneers of home, family and community. These same veneers work as the seeds of their own independent authorial identity.

Effects of a filmmaker last long after a production packs up and moves on. For many cities the presence of a film production has broad significance. Municipal figures tend to view productions as cash cows, stimulating local economies and offering a visual presence to city government efforts to bring economic and job boosts to the area. Many local businesses reap the benefits of servicing these productions or being paid to shut down and offer their business as a production site. The on-the-street local gains stories about degrees of rubbing elbows with celebrities while also finding their daily life disrupted and inconvenienced by the spatial needs of the production in their city. It becomes not so important that *Cookie's Fortune* was in Holly Springs, MS, but instead that Robert Altman was. Such positive reactions sustain the life and prominence of the production in the community in that locals can say not only was a film made there, but that a *good* film was made there by a known celebrity filmmaker. Assumptions build off of the question of why such a noted filmmaker would choose *there* to make a film seen by the rest of the world.

Taking place into account requires that media studies approaches to authorship be rethought. The auteur *is* important, but not simply because the auteur has some degree of control or another over the creation of a text. The impact of the auteur comes from the *perceived* importance this label has for filmmakers, the industry and larger social/cultural spheres. People, institutions and discourses all define auteurs through their production practices whether those are interpreted from onscreen evidence in the text or through first-hand knowledge of how these texts were made. It only stands to reason that media authorship study includes more focused

attention on the processes and places of making than it does the whims and desires of only a select perspective.

## Chapter 2

### Trash Collector: John Waters' Baltimore

"[John Waters] has a presence in Baltimore that transcends the presence that he embodies in other cities."

—Eduard Berlin, Ivy Bookshop Owner[1]

"Decide who you are, and the city will again assume a fixed form around you. Decide what it is, and your own identity will be revealed, like a map fixed by triangulation. Cities, unlike villages and small towns, are plastic by nature. We mould them in our images: they, in their turn, shape us by the resistance they offer when we try to impose our own personal form on them."

—Jonathan Raban, *Soft City*[2]

This chapter could just as easily be titled, "How To Suggest a City's Residents Eat Dog Shit and Be Celebrated For It." If John Waters' career of working in and representing Baltimore shows us anything it is that a hometown hero can get away with a lot in his or her hometown. Waters has taken the more traditional concept of the hometown hero—a resident who rises to wider celebrity—and created an international persona distinctly tied to Baltimore. Scholars and journalists always mention Waters' exclusively chosen city of production, setting and home alongside him making Baltimore indistinguishable from his larger career as an auteur/celebrity.[3] Socially, around Baltimore, locals say that, "John Waters *is* Baltimore," a Baltimore icon, and

[1] Eduard Berlin. (Owner, The Ivy Bookshop) personal interview with the author. Baltimore, MD. August 22, 2013.

[2] Jonathan Raban. *Soft City*. London: Hamilton, 1974.10.

[3] With Waters I've chosen to use the term "celebrity" image alongside "auteur" primarily because he is no longer that strictly tied to filmmaking as a medium. Though it is the area he is most known for, Waters is unmistakably in the business of being famous first and foremost. I retain "auteur" when speaking about his filmmaking more specifically.

that he effortlessly embodies the "true" character of the city[4]. Though the connection between the two began with Waters using Baltimore as a way to better establish his auteur identity, his image and the city have now become inextricable. Despite portraying Baltimore as full of deviants, publically connecting the city to his success provided an opportunity for Baltimore, a city with a longstanding identity complex being stuck between the prominence of Washington D.C. and New York City, to celebrate the identity Waters was already promoting. As a result, for locals, Waters stands for what is *right* with Baltimore. Through promoting his social-outcast characters, Waters focuses attention more onto the place and the general community's acceptance of these characters—in Baltimore social outcasts are unapologetically themselves and may not be beloved by everyone, but are also not asked to change. His films, then, become an argument for Baltimore and the place-specific environment it provides. However, by establishing and nurturing his close relationship to Baltimore, Waters also unevenly matches his auteur-image with the city because as the city changes and gentrifies, Waters must change his image as well or risk being cast out of the new Baltimore character. Waters' career shows that such a sustained auteur relationship to a city requires constant maintenance and attention to place-based dynamics. The level of place provides both the hints of larger social changes to come as well as the last bastion for past local identities to hang on to. As Waters moves from defining the culture of the city to revert to merely representing its disappearing qualities, his career provides an excellent example of how an auteur image does not belong solely to the auteur. Through making

[4] Given how pervasively Waters is celebrated throughout Baltimore it should stand to reason that general statements about how "Baltimore" considers Waters stand in for locals, local businesses and the municipal level. Areas requiring more distinct consideration will be labeled as such. It should also be noted that Waters likely has little direct effect on West Baltimore, though this particular research did not cover areas outside of those with businesses directly connected to Waters—which was essentially everywhere else.

himself along with the city, Waters' image has arguably reversed itself from outlaw shock-master to gentrified naughty boy.

However, Waters is not the only hometown hero Baltimore has, though he is an unusually extreme form of it. Most notably, Barry Levinson has launched a number of important productions in Baltimore ranging from films to television series. The most typical filmmaker hometown hero tale, which Levinson exemplifies, involves an auteur who was raised in the city, maybe began making films there, but who goes off elsewhere to bigger and better things. Staying in Baltimore, by contrast, Waters further endears his work and his image to the city by suggesting there is nothing better than being a local Baltimorean. His pronounced fealty to the city combined with his artistic and box office successes make him a figurehead that both authorities and locals of Baltimore proudly take on.

When looking especially at his early career, John Waters seems like the last filmmaker whom a city would embrace. Waters rose to fame in the early 1970s with midnight movie mega-hit and infamous shock film *Pink Flamingos* (1972).[5] *Pink Flamingos,* along with his earlier films, cemented bad taste as a cornerstone of his auteur identity. He consistently works with depraved depictions of contemporary society, often put in contradistinction to suburbia.[6] He was the filmmaker who would show you the acts you never realized existed. His films up to *Flamingos* display foot fetishism, bloody violence, armpit licking, rosary beads used as a sexual device, a character taking credit for the Sharon Tate murders *before* Manson's arrest and his own

[5] Waters produced *Pink Flamingos* for around $12,000 and in its first year of midnight screenings it took in over $6 million. In some locations the film played weekly for decades and is still a classic midnight movie staple. For more on the production of *Pink Flamingos* and its history see: John Waters. *Shock Value*. (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005).

[6] "Waters has produced an oeuvre over the past twenty-five years based in the pleasures of mocking many of the most cherished institutions of contemporary life (marriage, domesticity, work, glamour) and celebrating the perverse, the marginal and the bizarre" Matthew Tinckom. *Working Like a Homosexual*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002). 156.

arrest for filming a nude scene on Johns Hopkins campus. Waters does not have much content in his films that the average city would be proud to accept as reflective of its own image. The *New York Intelligencer* writes, "Now that *Deep Throat* and *Last Tango* have been milked of all possible shock value, there's a new 'cult' movie in town that goes beyond pornography. *Pink Flamingo* (sic) is the midnight attraction (Wednesday, Thursday and Fridays) at the Elgin . . . Some Elgin regulars have seen it several times; others have walked away in disgust."[7] In reference to Waters' early film *Multiple Maniacs* (1970) *The News American* said: "It was, from what I could see of it later, through squinting eyes, quite 'effective'. But not the sort of thing I appreciate" (Hammett). [8] However, even though his films do not contain particularly identifiable content, they do portray a positive attitude about human figures and the places where they live. In a chapter on Waters Matthew Tinckom explains that despite its low subject matter the films overall have a joyful outlook through Waters' trash aesthetic: "his work embraces all manner of marginal subjects in his beloved Baltimore—eccentrics, the downright mad, transvestites—and seeks to embrace these figures by sharing in their delight in disregarding customary notions of good taste, normative sexuality, and racial identities."[9] Overall, Waters' work is celebratory; despite what broader society might think of these characters, their love and acceptance of themselves could not be clearer. Even if other characters in Waters' films try to limit or chastise any subversive behavior, the place of Baltimore always comes through in the end to accept the

[7] James Brady. "Hard Core Gore". *New York Intelligencer*. April 16, 1973.

[8] Corinne F. Hammett. "Scout Around for Some Ketchup". *The News American*. April 19, 1970. 9E.

For other early reception to Waters' work see: Barbara Castleman. . "Reflections of John Waters' *Pink Flamingos*". *Performance*. September 21, 1972.; Dave Kehr. "Bad Taste is Not Enough." *Chicago Reader*. February 8, 1974. 4.; Michal Makarovich. "Flamingos and feces – A review of John Waters". *The Paper*. April 1972. 6-13.; Carl Schoettler. "Baltimore's Junk Film King". *Baltimore Evening Sun*. March 16, 1972. D1.

[9] Tinckom. *Working*. 157.

free-loving characters. For example, in Waters' latest film to date *A Dirty Shame* (2004), the majority of the characters are considered sexually perverted—in this film meaning fetishistic for the most part—and a growing group of "neuters" attempt to "restore decency" in the community. By the end of the film, all characters, including the neuters, have embraced sexual freedom as everyone parades down a neighborhood street engaging in any number of sex acts. It is precisely this joy of alternative identities that Baltimore businesses, municipal powers and local tourist outreach relish the opportunity to promote.

Of course the people of Baltimore have not literally en masse done the things that Waters depicts in his films. Yet, it is a Baltimore characteristic to exhibit unapologetic, lower-class behavior and allow others to do the same. It is not unusual to find people cursing, discussing traditionally taboo subjects and acting in unusual manners in virtually any public space in the city. Waters' films most often interpret Baltimore's openness with characters who delight in unique sexual behaviors. *Pink Flamingos* has a scene where the villain couple Connie and Raymond Marble (Mink Stole and David Lochary) lick each other's toes while also wearing each other's underwear. The melodramatic groans of ecstasy and lines such as "let me finish you off" suggest that although it is an untraditional sexual act, it makes these characters happy. Through his exaggerated exploitation of unusual Baltimore personalities Waters connects oddity with central qualities of Baltimore. Maryland Film Festival Director Jed Deitz describes the Baltimore character as, "We don't care where we rank. We just like being here. We like the city, we're proud of things and other things annoy us and all that stuff, but it's not like it has to be like anybody else. We're glad it's not like anybody else."[10] Most commonly, Baltimoreans I talked to described their Baltimore-ness through their unique qualities and pride in their outsider-ness.

[10] Jed Deitz (Director, Maryland Film Festival. Baltimore) personal interview with the author. MD. August 19, 2013.

Through their celebration of distinctly taboo practices, Waters' characters represent the felt associations in the city of an unapologetic blue-collar society.

Waters effectively provided an identity for a city at a time when it was in desperate need of one. Municipal leaders made city promotion and community a focal point when Baltimore was still reeling in the early 1970s from local uprisings following Martin Luther King's assassination as well as an economic downturn. David Harvey, a cultural geographer focused on Baltimore's development, notes,

> In the wake of the riots that erupted after the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968, a small group of influential politicians, professionals, and business leaders got together to see if there was some way to bring the city together . . . the riots threatened the vitality of downtown and the viability of investments already made. The leaders sought a symbol around which to build the idea of the city as a community . . . the [Baltimore City Fair] set out to celebrate the neighbourhood and ethnic diversity in the city.[11]

Harvey argues that the increased popularity of the fair worked so well that it shifted to become an entirely commercial enterprise. The wave of attention the fair brought to the downtown area, he argues, led to the creation of today's heavily gentrified, tourist-laden Inner Harbor development—once a hub for Baltimore industry. While not an organized event in and of himself, I argue that Waters has served a comparable purpose throughout his career as a managed and organized celebrity image. After shifting from a subversive local filmmaker to an internationally bankable filmmaker he became another (much cheaper) symbol for the city to promote. He made himself a figurehead for Baltimore individuality and his sustained relationship

[11] David Harvey. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. (Cambridge and Oxford: Blackwell, 1990). 89.

to the city has made him a symbol that residents instinctually rally behind. Though the position of local cultural ambassador has left Waters in an awkward position where his films start to take place in the changing gentrified Baltimore. His later films largely ignore the changing city in order to keep alive the distinctive Baltimore character he helped to popularize, which the gentrification threatens to annihilate. In his position as such a present local figurehead, his refusal to comment on the changing realties of Baltimore puts his image in service of representing a Baltimore that is quickly and quietly being lost as opposed to a symbol which fights against the loss.

We cannot forget that John Waters was the one who began connecting himself to Baltimore once it proved useful to the development of his auteur image and filmmaking career. Described as a controlling director by himself and those who work for him, Waters has always had a strong grip on the management of his celebrity image and uses multiple media to communicate it: books, journalistic writing, gallery shows, films, acting, hosting, one-man show tours. He has a friendly address when representing himself in all of his work which appears honest and open, but is actually very carefully constructed. In his book *Role Models* Waters wrote, "The ultimate level of celebrity accomplishment is convincing the press and the public that they know everything about your personal life without really revealing anything."[12] Waters suggests that perhaps his authorial identity is all a ruse, a way to continue to hold onto his celebrity. If so, it begs us to investigate his connection to Baltimore further. Waters' positions himself as an auteur and helps establish ways in which his image travels, though his commercial aspirations work against the original image he created for himself as well as the Baltimore he claims to represent. If Waters once forced a connection between his work and the Baltimore

[12] John Waters. *Role Models*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2010). 12.

character, the city's reciprocal acceptance of Waters and what he represents causes a shifting of Waters' celebrity image which in turn affects his films and what they can accomplish. The place represented in Waters' films and which is tied to his auteur/celebrity identity was at one time reflective of actual place-based dynamics in Baltimore, however, over the years Waters' places within Baltimore have started to disappear, while remaining paradoxically active in his images of the city.

## Trashification: Representing Baltimore

"Maybe more than anybody he brands the city. Not because he sets out to, but just in some natural way. He expresses something about the city. If there's one individual who can brand the city, John probably comes closest."

—Jed Deitz, Director Maryland Film Festival[13]

The relationship between John Waters and Baltimore can be summed up in the term "management." Each has used the other to aid different practices. I do not mean that Waters' expressed attraction to Baltimore is disingenuous, or that the local public's admiration is misplaced, but instead that their close connection requires constant maintenance. As Waters manages his celebrity he also manages his expressed relationship to the city. As he has grown more successful, Waters often mentions how he attempts to use his political connections to convince municipal leaders to follow his example: "The chamber of commerce should stop trying to hide all the negative aspects of Baltimore and start playing up the seamy side to lure every crackpot in the country to this great city."[14] While his request may sound dramatic and playful, Waters has stated in numerous television interviews and his live speaking tours that he

[13] Deitz. Personal interview.

[14] Waters. *Shock Value*. 76.

has had a personal friendship with the mayor of Baltimore and that he has earnestly fought for this very course of municipal advertisement on multiple occasions. Waters' logic seems to be that since glorifying the perceived oddities of locals has worked for him, the city could be successful using the same strategy. Waters asks the city to adopt *his* Baltimore assumedly at the cost of other aspects. Understanding the implications here involves a closer examination of Waters' established connection to Baltimore and how it changed.

In even his very first films, Waters married his distinctive content to what he perceived as specific qualities of Baltimore. Importantly, Waters' definable filmmaking style comes much more from content than form. He describes: "There's always a war of some kind between two groups of people. The people who win are happy with the neuroses; the people who lose are unhappy with them. The heroes generally lose something in the second act and get it back in the third. That's the way every movie is. They're conventional on that level."[15] Waters' films typically focus on the grotesque qualities of people.[16] His characters embrace an extreme human characteristic such as fame, obsession or religion that defines them. If his characters do change, it is most often to just as avidly adopt the opposite extreme—remaining happily flawed. An example would be Dawn Davenport (Divine), the protagonist in *Female Trouble* (1974), who is obsessed with crime chic. Her only real change involves degree: she begins with juvenile delinquency and progresses to public murder—ultimately dying in the electric chair as the

[15] John G. Ives. *American Originals: John Waters*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1992. 18.

[16] I have always been partial to Sherwood Anderson's definition of "grotesque" and find it applies quite well to Waters' characters: "There was the truth of virginity and the truth of passion, the truth of wealth and of poverty . . . hundreds were the truths and they were all beautiful . . . it was the truths that made the people grotesques . . . the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood." Sherwood Anderson. *Winesburg, Ohio*. (New York: Signet Classic, 1993). 6. Though, Waters characters do not face the same kind of exclusion from society as found in Anderson, thus distinguishing his particular Baltimore-oriented use.

ultimate expression of criminal celebrity fashion. Waters tapped into the culture of Baltimore by simply observing characters around him as he spent time in the failing downtown areas and began to create archetypes for his extreme characters. In response to a question about how his films compare to those of Fellini, Waters states, "Fellini just fills up his films with freaks . . . in my movies freaks don't just take up space; they are the main actors. I still live with the people who have been in my movies. I don't just gather them up when I'm ready to film."[17] His statement is of course not a particularly flattering portrayal of the people of Baltimore, who he claims to represent in his film, or of the people Waters works with, but it does reveal that he feels like he lives with his subjects, observing them as a member of their community, not from a distance.

In reality, a distinction needs to be made between the so-called freaks Waters represented and the so-called freaks he worked with. Waters' cast and crew for his early films were comprised primarily of his friends and as his career continued many of these friends remained a part of the Waters filmmaking family, whom he dubbed "The Dreamlanders." Pat Moran has been his producer and casting director throughout his career along with Vincent Peranio, production designer and art director, and Van Smith, makeup and costumes. His key actors were Mary Vivan Pearce, Mink Stole, David Lochary and of course Divine most of whom he met in school or, in the case of Divine, around his childhood neighborhood in the suburb of Lutherville, MD. As their careers progressed, Waters and the Dreamlanders continually argued that they do not resemble the characters or behaviors in his films. In *Shock Value* Waters reasons, "Some audiences seem to think the actors were actually just playing themselves—a great compliment, but ridiculous. We would all be in jail if this were true . . . we were a dedicated group,

[17] M. Rex Khlar. "John Waters: 'I show them what they don't want to see'". *Performance*. April 19, 1973. 16.

overanxious and driven to share our trashy vision with the world." (8).[18] Waters thus describes himself, and those who work with him, as those who have the "vision," that particular perspective on life in Baltimore that they portrayed but did not live. Whenever Waters discusses his early life in Baltimore, in fact, it is difficult to find a group to which he feels he does belong.[19]

From early in his adult life, Waters negotiated his own identity apart from the supposedly standard categories he found around him, making it difficult to easily identify him as a symbol of anything, let along an entire city. He has been openly gay from the beginning of his filmmaking career—one of the few of his generation—yet he has also maintained a manufactured identity in order to separate himself from standard societal roles. In his book *Role Models* he tells a story about his early aversion to stereotypical identities: "The first time I went to a gay bar I was seventeen years old. It was called the Hut and it was in Washington, D.C. Some referred to it as the 'Chicken Hut' and it was filled with early-1960s gay men in fluffy sweaters who cruised one another by calling table-to-table on phones provided by the bar. 'I may be queer but I ain't this,' I remember thinking."[20] Here Waters recalls that even early on he refused to see himself as a stereotype and instead worked to carve out, shape and situate his own identity. He has long been in the business of creating who he is as opposed to adopting an over-arching label into his lifestyle. As another example, for decades Waters has spent every summer in Provincetown. Even though it is known primarily as a queer community, Waters does not choose to abandon his

[18] Waters. *Shock Value*. 8. Similarly, Waters writes, "I only *think* terrible thoughts, I do not live them. Thank God I am *not* my films. If audiences can laugh at my twisted ideas, what's the great harm? I can't imagine anyone being influenced enough by my work to actually try to emulate the characters' misery in real life" Ibid. 242.

[19] In the third edition of *Shock Value* Waters places a light reference in the Introduction, which overall is more mystifying than explanatory: "I was a yippie sympathizer—*never* a hippie." Ibid. ix.

[20] Waters. *Role Models*. 36.

usual contrary way of living. He explains, "Since I love minorities and Provincetown is a gay fishing village, I hang out in the two straight bars."[21] Waters never really explains *what* he is, only what he is not and most often situates his identity against the place-identity wherever he is.

Similarly, in trying to establish his directorial identity, he began by positioning himself apart from his hometown. Before realizing that a celebrity identity tied specifically to Baltimore could distinguish him as a unique filmmaker who represented the idiosyncrasies of a city, Waters was not always so positive about his hometown. Following the success of *Pink Flamingos* Waters states in an interview, "It's a very sleazy town. It's like the Fifties there, even right now. I was just there for a week, there were people walking up and down the street in pony tails and spiked heels. It's a lower-middle class working town, the downtown area. And plus heavily black, and a lot of hillbillies . . . It's not the kind of town you would just want to move to, because there's no place to go. It's all sort of in people's apartments. There are no bars that are very good."[22] So despite the hindsight of his long, celebrated connection to the city, Waters' early uses of Baltimore involved *differentiating* himself from parts of the city instead of wholeheartedly embracing it. The above quote is of course in direct contrast to his later lionizing of the city, and especially its bars.[23] Given the time, Waters' descriptions of Baltimore as empty, sleazy and a lower-middle class working town do follow the downtrodden nature of the city during this period of its history. David Harvey explains that after 1960 Baltimore lost two-thirds of its manufacturing jobs; the major industry employers which severely cut back or left

[21] Waters. *Roled Models*. 114.

[22] E. J. Kahn III. "The Advocate Interview John Waters: Porno Filmmaker For Hip America." *Provincetown Advocate*. July 12, 1973. 16.

[23] Aggrandizement of particularly Baltimore bars occurs frequently in his writing. *Shock Value* and *Role Models* both have chapters devoted to Baltimore bars and/or people associated with local bars. Similarly, his frequent lists of Baltimore hotspots in interviews often contain a number of Baltimore bars.

Baltimore included shipbuilding, Bethlehem Steel and General Motors, the loss of which put much of Baltimore, especially downtown, into crushing poverty.[24] Waters' auteur-connection to the city begins with him placing himself apart from the downtown Baltimore scene as an outcast who "reads" the city. In the same interview he asserts, "I've had good luck there. I never live there except when we're making a film. I like it there because it's away from everything. There's not too many distractions except the city itself."[25] So despite stating he does not live there, Waters does still connect his filmmaking *process* to Baltimore as place of production and source of inspiration. Waters' early interview comes off as a more of a thoughtful appraisal of the city during that period than his later ruminations on Baltimore which universally praise it. Tying his image to Baltimore came out of a realization at some level that the image of the city did more for him than his filmmaking career could do on its own.

With *Pink Flamingos* Waters struck a chord with locals. The narrative of the film simply involves two matriarchs fighting over who is the filthiest person alive. The film contains a female protagonist played by a man (Divine) dressed in what Waters has frequently referred to as "drag terrorism," a simulated sex scene wherein a live chicken is killed, an incestual act, a forced pregnancy business and, most famously, actual dog-shit eating. Scott Brown, of famed local video store Video Americain, told me that when they saw *Pink Flamingos* people of Baltimore immediately got the joke: "Of course, people don't look like the *Pink Flamingos* characters but there are little pockets of Baltimore where you see those sorts of things . . . . Baltimore is very unpretentious which goes back to its roots as a working-class town . . . It has its own unique

[24] David Harvey. *Spaces of Hope*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2000). 151.

[25] Kahn. "The Advocate." 16.

qualities, a lot of which you'll see in the Waters movies."[26] Jed Deitz similarly remarks, "There is some defiance. Maybe, to be fair, a kind of provincialism, a kind of, 'Who cares, why would I ever go to Rome? I can get meatballs here.' John writes about some of that stuff and I think some people think he's making fun of it, but he's not making fun of them. It amuses him, he thinks it's funny, but he loves this stuff."[27] With *Pink Flamingos*, which actually premiered as an entry in the 3rd Annual Baltimore Film Festival (Mar. 17, 1971), Waters started to get more official local attention to his filmmaking. Following *Pink Flamingo*'s success, a New Line "Dreamland Studios" press release announced the "sneak world premiere" of his next film, *Female Trouble* (1974), presented by The Dean of Students Office of The University of Baltimore.[28] Giving Waters a premiere at a local University provided him with significantly more cultural acceptance than he had ever had before. Until then, his early films all premiered in more underground locations such as coffee houses and churches. Waters had keyed into a vision of Baltimore that locals recognized as an "inside" joke they could laugh at together. At a time when Baltimore's economic and cultural depression needed a stronger community identity, Waters arguably provided them with an image they could latch onto and enjoy. Waters essentially gave Baltimore permission to not be intimidated by its geographical and cultural surroundings—letting the people of Baltimore delight in their difference.

Not long after his success, locals discovered in Waters a filmmaker who represented Baltimore as it never had been before. Barbara Castleman writes, "There's always been a certain indefinable *something* about this town that has eluded and disturbed me, but the other night when

[26] Scott Brown (Video Americain Employee) personal interview with the author. Baltimore, MD. August 25, 2013.

[27] Deitz. Personal interview.

[28] Press release found in the Wesleyan University John Waters Papers archive.

I saw *Pink Flamingos: An Exercise in Poor Taste*, I at last could realize and appreciate the off-beat soul of our dingy mid-Atlantic metropolis. What once repulsed me I now celebrate. John Waters has affectionately created the definitive Baltimore movie."[29] The word most commonly used by locals to describe Baltimore's character, even today, is "quirky" and it is this quality which Castleman and others agree Waters' success allowed the city to take pride in. Most generally, the quirky label stands for Baltimoreans' acceptance of distinctive personalities. Eduard Berlin, owner of The Ivy Bookshop, explained,

> Baltmoreans have a bit of an inferiority complex I guess being between the nation's capital and New York and all that . . . It's totally inappropriate because Baltimore has a lot going for it . . . We don't care what people think of us, but we want them to know we're here. Like the bad kid in the school, he didn't care what you think of him, but he really needs you to know he's there . . . We wear that kind of oddball-ness.[30]

Baltimore retains a strong working-class, blue-collar identity, and locals argue that Waters' popularity provides them with the justification to fully embrace it. The city's response to essentially being within driving/commuter distance of both Washington D.C. and New York City has resulted in a strong need to self-identify—described to me as a decision to not play the first city/second city "game" and instead to present themselves "as they are."[31] Waters' films show an understanding of Baltimore's need to identify itself and provides justification for simply being proud of a more blue-collar lifestyle instead of the need to strive to be the best. The result seems

[29] Castleman. "Reflections."

[30] Berlin. Personal interview.

[31] These remarks came from conversations with Deitz and: Benn Ray (Owner, Atomic Books) personal interview with the author. Baltimore, MD. August 20, 2013.

to be what locals now understand as a special kind of confidence found only in Baltimore—where one can delight in being low class.

Waters exhibited a Baltimore-esque level of confidence in his own filmmaking. Waters wanted to be noticed, wanted to be a filmmaker, and his first steps on that path involved using what he knew, the local color of Baltimore, to get his foot in the filmmaking doorway. As a result, his exaggeration of Baltimore character for his content endeared him to the city while he rigidly constructed a tight authorial role for himself. According to Robert Maier, who worked on many of Waters' early films, Waters acted as his own camera operator in order to make sure he had full control over as many aspects of the production as possible: "It was equally impossible to convince John to shoot different angles of scenes for more flexibility in editing. It's funny considering how much he loved films, how many film books he had read, and how many film magazines he subscribed to, that he didn't seem to grasp basic film 101 directing and editing. It was all about content for him, not technique."[32] His attempt at holistic control could be an example of Waters attempting to write himself into the common myth of the independent filmmaker. If he literally takes on all of the responsibilities then no one else can claim ownership of the film. Waters carefully manufactures a structure of legitimacy to his early auteur-label even to the detriment of his films' form.

Production notebooks and script treatments for even the early films show Waters concocting an authorial identity with ambitions far beyond that of tiny underground films.[33] Detailed treatments, production notebooks and many specific notes on promotional elements show a strategic effort to get his films sold. For the very early *Mondo Trasho* (1969) the

[32] Robert Maier. *Low Budget Hell*. Davidson, NC: Full Page Publishing, 2011. 27.

[33] Production notebooks from the Wesleyan University John Waters Papers archive.

production notebook materials contain an outline of a scene written in a shot sequence—assumedly in lieu of storyboards. The shot list is for an early scene in the film where The Bombshell (Mary Vivian Pearce) has her feet fondled by The Shrimper (John Leisenring):

Scene I
Vivian's feet - walking
Aerial shots of Vivian walking (turning corners)
Shot of fetish scurrying through bushes
Fetish's eyes
Vivian's shoes
Fetish moving closer (appearing excited)
Vivian taking out package of ground beef
Fetish excited face

The simplicity of the film's heavily grainy image and uneven camera work do not suggest such carefully planned-out sequencing, but instead seem improvisational. *Mondo Trasho*, shot silently in black and white for around $2,000,[34] was a very small film made by a group of friends in the late 1960s so even with the work of a detailed shot list it seems unlikely the film would ever look completely professional. Yet, further material in the production notebooks suggest a heavy amount of foresight and legwork in order to get it made. Further adding to his veneer of professionalism, Waters had Dreamland Productions business cards made up sometime in the late 1960s, crafted detailed budgets, had charts of specific prop and costuming needs, location information, casting choices, wrote his own press releases for all his films and created hand-drawn posters.[35] All of his efforts present in the early production notebooks point to a filmmaker attempting to manufacture a professional environment in the expectation of one day working in the industry.

[34] This number comes both from documents in the John Waters Papers archive at Wesleyan University and Waters. *Shock Value*.

[35] Some local media journalists were very impressed with Waters' public relations skills from even his earliest films. "If John Waters ever decides to give up making films, he can always earn a living writing press releases." Anne Childress "Multiple Maniacs' Premiere". *The Screen*.

Waters' growth as a filmmaker went beyond influencing local cultural pride, but also engaged significantly with the development of Baltimore's filmmaking support services. Baltimore was crucial to Waters' development as a filmmaker, especially in creating the ambitious projects he worked on for extremely inadequate budgets. The availability of Baltimore's production resources to a local filmmaker like Waters was invaluable in making his films appear to have much more production value than they actually did.

> [John Waters] realized *Pink Flamingos'* bad sound had to be addressed in *Female Trouble.* UMBC [University of Maryland Baltimore County] had double-system equipment where the sound and picture were recorded and edited separately, which solved the sound problems. This double-system thing was beyond the abilities of the local TV station moonlighters, but the owner of the local film lab advised him to contact UMBC's film department. They had been making deals with independent producers before, and he could probably get one too . . . . the UMBC deal gave John unlimited use of its production equipment . . . and supplied competent people to run it . . . Now that John is an international celebrity, he has more than paid back the people of Maryland, bringing millions of dollars in jobs and tourism to the State, not to mention his occasionally hefty charitable donations to Maryland non-profits."[36] (Maier 13)

Maier's story provides an excellent example of how the Baltimore filmmaking community became involved in Waters' films and, in turn, how his films began to promote and extend their resources. Working with University personnel allowed Waters to train his crew amongst professionals in the field. It also provided the University resources with some amount, even if

[36] Maier. *Low Budget*. 13.

small, of additional funding. Waters used his University connection for at least two films before bringing in more professional industry resources to his productions. Furthermore, after Waters became famous his choice to remain even part-time in Baltimore resulted in both positive attention and further funds/resources to the filmmaking support services already there. Waters, thus, began to write himself into the development of Baltimore by inadvertently, at least at first, building a larger local industry infrastructure through Baltimore-specific resources and training crew. Beyond mere lip service, Waters' choice to continue working in Baltimore, once established as a bankable filmmaker, embedded him into the growing narrative of a changing city—a narrative which would require change from him as well.

## Gentrified Cities, Gentrified Films, Gentrified Stars

"You must constantly reinvent yourself to keep up with the next generation"
—John Waters to James Egan[37]

"Bars have always been a big part of living in Baltimore, and the good ones have no irony about them. They're not "faux" anything. They're real and alarming. True, Baltimore is changing, but what I make movies about is still there, lurking on the backstreets, the unheralded neighborhoods, off the beaten track."
—John Waters[38]

Waters' eye toward professionalism also, eventually, went to his content. After getting noticed with *Pink Flamingos* on an international scale, he cemented his image as a master of shock content with his next two films *Female Trouble* (1974) and *Desperate Living* (1977). Though, once he began making films with studio backing, despite the fact that he continued to

[37] James Egan. "Introduction." *John Waters Interviews*. Ed James Egan. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011). xv.

[38] Waters. *Role Models*. 129.

work on his own projects, Waters started to abandon the notorious content which made him famous—most notable in his films' MPAA ratings which dropped below his previous standard X-rating. Many of his themes remained the same and his films still had some gross or shocking content, but to a much more limited degree. *Female Trouble* has a man sexually pleasuring his wife with a hammer whereas *Hairspray*'s (1988) most shocking/gross scene involves the popping of a pimple. According to Waters, his later films are not an example of him "selling out." Instead he insists that all of his films were made with the goal of allowing him to one day make a living as an independent filmmaker financed by studios. In interviews Waters describes *Pink Flamingos* as the most commercial film ever made: "It had the showmanship, it was made to pack in an audience."[39] *Pink Flamingos* was forged specifically to make those who created it famous. He made *Pink Flamingos* as a "commercial" film in the sense that its purpose was to make money and get people into the theater by whatever means necessary. With a low budget, shock value was the quickest way he found to do that. His goal was always to be a filmmaker and to "go commercial," only with his own films as opposed to being assigned to projects. The authorial identity he adopted was always a mutable one. Later in his career he recognized that the films which initially garnered him fame and recognition could not be made to the same effect once the age of videotape arrived. "Midnight movies were over, you know? I'd be a fool to make a midnight movie now—there's like one theatre in the country that shows 'em. Video is midnight movies now . . . I know the business well enough now to know that that would be like saying I want to make an underground movie. You know, the times are different."[40] Waters' strategy to move with the times created a distance between the rebel he began as and the much more widely

[39] Ives. *American Originals*. 19.

[40] Jack Stevenson. *Desperate Visions*. (London and San Francisco, CA: Creation Books, 1996). 80.

accepted filmmaker he became. If taking account of his career as a mode by which to make himself famous, Waters' transition into less shocking content falls directly in line since, once he has an audience, he can widen his cultural appeal. When Waters went more mainstream it also altered the breadth of his relationship with Baltimore, making him a more acceptable figurehead for a city working hard to improve its own image.

Waters' relative cleaning up was key to his wider acceptance throughout the city. The municipal powers and upper class of Baltimore did not begin as fans of John Waters' films. Understandably, Waters' aberrant content was not the positive image municipal leaders wanted to promote in the late 1960s and 1970s. Waters' early films did little for Baltimore at any level because he did not pay permit fees or spend an amount of money that would have much of an effect.[41] Only with the hindsight of a career that allowed him to get famous enough, combined with his choice not to leave, did Waters become an official hometown hero. Despite the widespread celebration of Waters, the city expressed significant resistance to his films until his productions started bringing real money into the city. Of course his switch to more broadly "acceptable" content helped as well. A press release draft for the PG-13 *Cry-Baby* (1990), which filmed in a number of more affluent areas of the city, hints at a troubled past: "From one end of Baltimore County to the other, the people of the city and its environs could not have been more cooperative. The very residents that, for years, would shun John Waters, are now the people who will accommodate the minor inconveniences of production without a word of complaint. Where

[41] "Dealing with the public on Female Trouble was always exciting. There was no such thing as a film permit in Baltimore. Except for John's films, no one could remember when a film had shot in Baltimore. Everyone thought it was way too ugly for glamourous movies. Being on the guerilla film crew, watching the shocked, bewildered bystanders was a hoot. One memorable shot was Divine 'modeling' on a busy Baltimore street. He was in full drag wearing a shimmering blue sequined gown, with a big hairdo and Van's Clarabelle make-up. We filmed him from the window of a slowly-moving car, so bystanders on the street were clueless." Maier. *Low Budget*. 28.

once they were ashamed, the city is now quite proud of their resident filmmaker."[42] The clash between the rhetoric of the press release with previous pronouncements of Waters' defining vision reveals that Waters gained much wider appeal with his toned down content than he had before. His well-documented struggles with the State censor board reveal that when it came to Baltimore high society and government, his early films and their local success would cause a lot of flinching.[43] Yet after the huge success of the PG *Hairspray* (1988) he could suddenly be held up as a local maker of quality cinema as well as spokesperson for the city. In *Crackpot* Waters writes, "The Baltimore Museum of Art gave me a three-day retrospective of all my work with a black-tie opening . . . Somehow I was suddenly respectable. It was as if, magically, the film had changed content in the cans over the years. Here I was being honored for work I had feared being imprisoned for a decade before."[44] His success led to an acceptance of *all* his work, rewriting past history, and placed it into the upper echelons of Baltimore society where it had before been excluded.

In part, in order to gain a more broadly acceptable relationship with the city his image also had to become more wholesome. A New Line Public Relations statement for *Hairspray* (1988) reads,

> His films have been shown everywhere from the local movie house to the Cinématheque Francaise to the Cannes Film Festival, but they all have their roots in Waters' hometown, Baltimore, Maryland . . . Waters is so attached and loyal to

[42] Found in the John Waters Papers at Wesleyan University

[43] Waters' battles with the State Censor board are legendary and for more information on them I highly recommend his books *Shock Value* and *Crackpot* as well as the documentary *Divine Trash*. Dir. Steve Yeager. Fox Lorber, 1998. DVD.

[44] John Waters. *Crackpot: The Obsessions of John Waters*. New York: Scribner, 2003. 84.

> the city that despite his success, he has chosen to remain a faithful fulltime resident. "I would never want to live anywhere but Baltimore," he says. "You can look far and wide, but you'll never discover a stranger city with such extreme style. I've lived in the same apartment for fourteen years, and now I'm going to buy a house here. It's about as close to reality as I can get." . . . It is the people, more than anything else, that Waters finds so appealing. He finds it a city of great eccentrics . . . "Baltimore keeps me sane" he says. "It's where I write and work, and it keeps me in touch with the real America. New York and Los Angeles are not the real America. And wouldn't it be great," he wonders, "if everyone creative stayed in their hometowns rather than moving to New York or L.A."[45]

Obviously with the PG *Hairspray* Waters reached out to the entirely new, for him, family audience demographic.[46] The more wholesome image required by a PG rating came at least in part through heralding Baltimore as both hometown and current residence—injecting feelings of "home" into his image. His statements about buying a house, setting down roots, not straying too far all point to a much more grounded filmmaker in touch with values related to those of the average American family. Furthermore, the statement stresses the normalcy and middle-America-ness of Baltimore alongside his insistence that the people are unique. As Waters continues in his career he begins to separate the people of Baltimore from the place of Baltimore fairly consistently. He stops focusing on the environments of Baltimore that made the people so

[45] Found in the John Waters Papers at Wesleyan University.

[46] For journalistic accounts of Waters' content-shift with *Hairspray* see: Bill Littman. "What's Going On at the Movies." *The Times*. March 10, 1988. A8.; Lynda Robinson. "Filmmaker John Waters Goes to the Principal's Office." *The Baltimore Sun*. June 19, 1987. B1.; Paul Willistein. "Waters, *Hairspray* redefine 'PG'." *The Miami Herald*. February 26, 1988. 5C.

unique and instead grasps onto more suburban, gentrified environments while suggesting that the unique people continue to exist there unaltered and unabated. This tactic allows Baltimore locals to more clearly distance themselves from the characters he depicts. Whereas they can all see that *some* people might represent the types shown in his films, his rhetoric creates a space where Baltimore the *place* is depicted positively. Highlighting the positive aspects of locations allows anyone who lives there to associate more with the place of his films than the people depicted. That is to say, identification happens with the tone of the film, appreciation of these hyperbolic characters, without actually having to be them.

When it comes to representing Baltimore, Waters is certainly not the only game in town. Benn Ray of Atomic Books, John Waters' fan headquarters in Baltimore, explained to me that, "There are certain people or things that help construct an identity in the city and John Waters is part of that . . . There's a lot of different Baltimores and John represents part of the character and charm that is Baltimore."[47] For example, the areas of West Baltimore depicted by David Simon in his book *The Corner* (2000) and the later HBO series *The Wire* (2002-2008) have little to do with Waters directly, taking on an entirely different tone, yet Waters' attachment to the Baltimore image does hang over certain key elements that make them seem as though they align with the Baltimore character Waters promotes.[48] *The Wire*'s first episode ("The Target") opens

[47] Ray. Personal interview.

[48] Though it repeats other points, it is still worth at least noting Brett Martin's take on *The Wire* draws reference to Waters: "Baltimore had a limited prior cinematic history. There had been *Homicide* and a triptych of films by Barry Levinson, but the city's most significant and sustained exposure to film production had been through the oeuvre of another native son, John Waters. His was about as far from *The Wire*'s sensibility as it's possible to get, but the show nevertheless wound up employing veterans of Waters's experimental, over-the-top films—most notably Pat Moran, a flaming-red-haired barrel of a woman who handled casting of local extras and day players, and production designer Vince Peranio. It is the happy truth that Peranio, the man who taught America what the inside of a realistic heroin shooting gallery looked like, was the same man who taught it kitsch, in such films as *Pink Flamingos* and *Multiple Maniacs*." Brett Martin. *Difficult Men*. (New York: Penguin, 2013). 142.

on a standard-looking crime scene where a young man has been murdered on the street. Detective McNulty (Dominic West) speaks to a friend of the deceased (Kamal Bostic-Smith) on a nearby street corner. The unusual qualities of the scene begin with the dialogue where the friend reveals the victim was known as "Snot Boogie." McNulty reasons, "This kid whose momma went to the trouble of christening him Omar Isaiah Betts . . . you know, he forgets his jacket, so his nose starts running and some asshole, instead of giving him a kleenex, he calls him 'Snot.' So he's 'Snot' forever." After analyzing the unusual nickname, McNulty learns that he was shot because he regularly steals money at local craps games. The friend makes it clear that despite learning that he would join every game only to steal, the crap players always allowed him to play because: 1. they would always catch him and 2. "You got to. It's America man." A more accurate statement might be, however, "It's Baltimore, man." Even though the consequences in *The Wire* are more dark and serious than those found in a John Waters film, the friend describes a rather typical example of both relatable Baltimore quirkiness, in the victim's body-function-oriented nickname, as well as the environment which accepts his unusual behavior. Despite always being robbed, the locals let Snot Boogie in the game, knowing he would try to steal because it was simply who he was ("He couldn't help it"). Detectives in Simon's other Baltimore series *Homicide: Life on the Streets* (1993-1999) often repeat, "Only in Baltimore," meaning that certain types of unusually brutal or grisly crime stand as another, darker, sign of Baltimore quirk.[49] While giving Baltimore a distinctly more dramatic and realistic edge, even Simon's depiction of the city's character is not completely separable from Waters' more deviant one. I do not mean to give credit to Waters for Simon's work, but instead to question to what extent

[49] Simon wrote the source material on which *Homicide* was based. He was not actually an active producer on the show, helmed by Barry Levinson, until seasons 5-7.

Waters taps into fundamental qualities of the city, viewing them comedically, and to what extent Waters' popularization of these aspects of Baltimore have made them a more pervasive touchstone.

Because Baltimore has tremendous respect for anyone who promotes the city, both John Waters and Barry Levinson are held up as favorite Baltimore sons. Each has launched significant productions within the city, helping to bolster the local filmmaking industry.[50] Their separate careers ultimately went hand-in-hand with Baltimore's development as a film production center. Waters' grass-roots trained crew began to establish an itinerant film labor force beginning in the late 1960s. By the time Barry Levinson arrived to make *Diner* (1982), he brought the resources and infrastructure of a studio, allowing locals to use and experience more contemporary equipment and training. Jed Deitz remarks, "The combination was pretty powerful because you had Barry's resources and Waters' no resources and that built two different types of groups."[51] Levinson's studio productions and later television series *Homicide* supported the infrastructure Waters had already begun to build and provided more stable industry-oriented work for locals. The series, not coincidentally, hired a number of Waters' regular crew, most notably production designer Vincent Peranio, casting director Pat Moran and costume designer Van Smith.

Despite both helping Baltimore through filmmaking, however, if asked to compare their relationships to the city, Baltimore residents unanimously agree that Waters has a much closer relationship to the city. Eduard Berlin summarized the difference as,

> I don't think Barry lives here anymore. He wrote a bunch of screenplays that touched a nerve of a lot of people who grew up in Baltimore. So he tapped into a

[50] David Simon technically is not from Baltimore, he was born in DC, though he is still adopted by Baltimore given his work focused on the city and that he began living and working in the city in 1982.

[51] Deitz. Personal interview.

> different kind of Baltimore energy in the same fashion that John Waters tapped into Baltimore energy. If you asked me to rank in terms of visibility… Does everyone know who Barry Levinson is?—probably not. They've probably heard of *Diner*, but everyone knows John Waters. He's bigger than his art whereas Barry Levinson is his art.[52]

Berlin clarifies that because Levinson is not visible in Baltimore, his art stands in place of any physical relationship with the city. Comparably, because Waters is present his relationship to Baltimore can also be personal, extending beyond his art. In my conversations about Barry Levinson in Baltimore, people saw Waters as more representative because he was *there*. Almost everyone I met throughout the city, including people on the street, had a story of personally meeting and casually interacting with Waters while going about their daily lives. Waters' identification with Baltimore has transformed him into the symbol, brand and identity so many locals referred to him.

Through staying in the city Waters has created an entirely different sort of author/place dynamic. The vast majority of people I talked to in Baltimore had personal experiences from singing karaoke with him, chatting with him at a neighborhood bar, running into him at the local book store and simply seeing him at the movies. Waters is present in Baltimore as a community member which is both significant and unusual. Robert Altman and Robert Rodriguez can be referred to as community members in their own way, but neither have the presence that Waters does. Rodriguez symbolically represents Austin filmmaking to some, yet remains for most a distant, albeit friendly, celebrity. Altman, similarly, may have been more accessible than the average in throwing frequent parties while filming, yet he also remained more a friendly

[52] Berlin. Personal interview.

celebrity than a community insider. Interviewees enjoyed telling stories about their experiences with all of these filmmakers, but with Waters in Baltimore, those interviewed were always protective over Waters and his image. Much of their felt closeness comes from his presence, but also the known history he has with aiding the city and helping it improve through his film work.

For Waters the production strategy of self-training of course began out of necessity as he could not afford to work any other way. In the early low-budget days, he cut many corners that he could not, when working for a studio. As an example, an early production notebook for *Mondo Trasho*, handwritten on yellow legal pads, has a budget list wherein under the "Cost" line for wardrobe Waters wrote, "Shoplifting."[53] When he began working more and more with studios, his productions obviously had to function more above board, follow union regulations and apply for permits requiring the need to develop further services to continue filming in the city. He effectively trained support services to work with the film industry—something many cities even with film incentives struggle to maintain. Jed Deitz, Director of the Maryland Film Festival, explains why these productions were so important to the city:

> Because if you do something as big as they've done, then you're hiring enough crew so that those people stay here. Then a student filmmaker fresh out of college can get help from people who are around who really know what they're doing. Having these productions here also trains all the vendors, everybody around. Other states offer tax incentives, but then people come in and nobody knows how the film business works. You talk to a lumber yard here, and they know what

[53] Throughout *Shock Value* Waters discusses the importance and frequency of shoplifting and petty crime amongst the culture he and his friends made for themselves during this period.

you're talking about. They know you're going to call in the morning and double that order of 2X6's. There's no school for any of this stuff. It's a craft business.[54]

Comparing credits from Waters' films to below-the-line workers on other productions in Baltimore reveals many similarities. Through Waters' writing, the testimony of crew in special features and interviews, and my own interviews in Baltimore, it became clear that many of these cross-listed workers began on Waters' productions. In speaking to the owner of Baltimore restaurant Sacha's 527, Sascha Wolhandler explained that she began cooking for Waters' films, and has since developed a side-career out of making food for productions.[55] To be clear, she specializes in making on-screen food, not necessarily craft services, requiring her to know the art of making food that photographs well under a wide variety of conditions. Through her work and training with Waters she has become the go-to service provider for on-screen food in media productions in Baltimore. She has also worked with Barry Levinson, who also shot scenes for *Tin Men* (1987) in her restaurant, *Runaway Bride* (1999) and continues to work for *House of Cards* (2013) and *Veep* (2012). Waters' willingness to reach out and create on-the-job training to the local community for support services gives Baltimore the tools to sustain a competitive production environment. Without a filmmaker based in the city, Baltimore would lose much of the local training and economic stimulation to productions that bring in primarily outside workers.

As a result of his increased studio support in the 1980s, the city began to latch onto Waters because he had developed a history of filming in Baltimore, brought international attention to the city and then significant production money. In an interview, Waters said,

[54] Deitz. Personal interview.

[55] Sascha Wolhandler (Owner, Sascha's 527) personal interview with the author. Baltimore, MD. August 27, 2013.

"[Baltimore's] been very good to me. The mayor tells me to keep making movies. When we made *Polyester*, they gave us cops, buses, everything. They really stood behind it. I really love Baltimore. There's a great tolerance for eccentrics there. I think they figure that they're for anything that comes out of there. I think they like the fact I've stayed. They have a good sense of humor about the whole thing."[56] When speaking of eccentrics, Waters invokes both the real-life characters he can draw from as well as the city's tolerance of him as a celebrity whose image attracts fans of the unusual. His statement also reveals the mutually beneficial relationship created between Waters and the city at the municipal level. Seeing the benefits the Waters label has already cast, such as training a crew base and media production infrastructure, providing jobs for local workers, stimulus to the economy while also giving them free publicity, the city began to treat Waters as an investment interest, helping aid him in any way they could.

Waters' crew firmly established themselves in Baltimore, making it all the more necessary for him to continue supporting the local industry he helped to build. Pat Moran in particular has gained notoriety in the industry as *the* Baltimore casting director.[57] Figures like Moran, Peranio and Smith all point to how Waters' guerilla-style do-it-yourself filmmaking not only resulted in life-long careers for his friends, but also built an infrastructure for industry film production. Furthermore, Waters has also been very active in municipal politics especially in advocating competitive tax incentives for runaway productions.[58] On the cultural side, Waters is

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[56] Scott MacDonald. "John Waters' Divine Comedy." in *John Waters Interviews*. Ed. James Egan. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011. 82.

[57] "Moran, who first gained fame . . . as one of John Waters' Dreamlanders, is an Emmy-winning casting director who has worked on nearly every film and TV project to hit Baltimore in the past quarter-century" Chris Kaltenbach. "In Pat Moran's Office, a Collection Sprinkled in Stardust." *The Baltimore Sun*. September 14, 2013. Accessed July 8, 2014. http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2013-09-14/features/bs-sc-take10-moran-20130914_1_canton-office-game-change-chihuahuas

[58] Barry Levinson was also very involved in the push for tax incentives. Deitz. Personal interview.

a member of the Maryland Film Festival board, holds a screening event at the festival every year, is a member of a number of Baltimore museum advisory boards and has been involved in the development of the Maryland Filmmaker Industry Coalition. His community involvements show a difference between paying lip service to a hometown and actually being there. Water has become a defining part of the city, particularly at a time when Baltimore has undergone massive changes which threaten to diminish the blue-collar identity Waters so popularized.

Over the past three to four decades Baltimore has undergone extensive urban development and gentrification.[59] Discussions of Baltimore gentrification often begin around the Inner Harbor area. Once a derelict former port and warehouse district, it now boasts tourist attractions, restaurants and shopping across its entirety. David Harvey characterizes Harbor Place as an urban spectacle, designed to force a feeling of community and serve as distraction from social change. Harvey describes it as, "an institutionalized commercialization of a more or less permanent spectacle . . . judged by many as an outstanding success (though impact upon city poverty, homelessness, health care, education provision, has been negligible and perhaps even negative)."[60] The primary goal of such a place, as Harvey argues, is capital accumulation and to attract a desired type of person—in other words gentrification. Harvey argues that municipal interests in Harbor Place also led to the increased importance of managing the city's public image into that of a fun tourist town.[61] Locals in Baltimore certainly see it as exactly that. John

[59] My use of the term gentrification tends to follow David Ley's definition as, "the wider processes of economic, social, and political transformation in the downtown and inner city that have both triggered and followed upgrading and reinvestment." David Ley. *The New Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. 3. Ley, as does Harvey, includes both renovation and redevelopment under the umbrella of "gentrification." For me, as well as the theorists mentioned here, interest falls primarily on areas where such changes have resulted in displacement and a "re-classing" of the area.

[60] Harvey. *Condition of Postmodernity*. 90.

[61] "This thrust had the additional virtue of projecting a new persona for the city. The 'armpit of the East' had been the out-of-town image of Baltimore in the 1960s. But by transforming the entertainment spectacle into a permanent

Waters has claimed that locals never visit the Inner Harbor, and no one I talked to admitted to doing so, beyond perhaps for a special event. Waters says, "I don't think anyone is ever going to make movies about the new Baltimore. I mean this creeping Harbor Place that's taken over everywhere makes me nervous. It's very soulless. You could be in any city in the world. You feel like a travelling salesman."[62] Waters' description of Harbor Place eerily mimics Marc Augé's concept of the non-place—areas of transition which lack or overshadow specificity and identity.[63] Waters expresses unease which corresponds to the fact that Harbor Place represents a Baltimore that has subsumed the local character Waters celebrates.

Waters' reaction, however, seems to be to simply ignore it. Obviously, ignoring Harbor Place does not mean it is not there. At stake in ignoring increasingly gentrified areas such as Harbor Place and Hampden is the cultural specificity which retreats along with former residents. In *Gentrification: A Working-Class Perspective*, a study of the effects of the revitalization of Glasgow Harbour on the neighboring working-class neighborhood of Patrick, Kirsteen Paton comments that in a gentrifying neighborhood, most often the original, lower-class residents can no longer afford to remain an active *social* part of their own neighborhood once new businesses start to creep in. The loss of social inclusion and presence of former neighborhood residents, then, most often leads to a loss of neighborhood identity and a corresponding drive to retain that identity.[64] As testament to her claims, the fact that neither locals nor Waters continue to visit the

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image, it became possible to use it to lure in developer capital, financial services, and entertainment industries . . . the imaging of Baltimore itself became important. The mayor, the media, and civic leaders set out on a binge of civic boosterism that would brook no criticism . . . if people could live on images along, Baltimore's populace would have been rich indeed." David Harvey. *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography*. (New York: Routledge, 2001). 139.

[62] Found in the John Waters Papers as a clipping without full citation information: *Baltimore Magazine*. Dec 1989.

[63] Augé, Marc. *Non-Places*. (London: Verso, 2008).

[64] Kirsteen Paton. *Gentrification: A Working-Class Perspective*. Burlington, VT and Surrey: Ashgate, 2014. 169-72.

Inner Harbor area suggests that it has lost any kernels of the Baltimore identity it once had. Yet Waters' films and local small business owners continually claim that Baltimore will inevitably always be Baltimore throughout the city regardless of gentrification.

Baltimoreans remain adamant that the quirky elements of Baltimore will remain, despite the fact that they are slowly but surely disappearing. When asked about gentrification, most responses I received agreed that gentrification has white-washed some of the local color, yet with the fervent denial that the local color will ever leave entirely. Benn Ray of Atomic books states,

> There's always a worry when we talk about the development . . . as more and more of this takes place the harder and harder it is to find these weird spots. I don't think they're ever going to be eradicated. That was a conversation that we've had in this neighborhood for a long time about the stores and the people moving into the neighborhood. You have certain people and certain families that at least throughout our lifetime are still going to be here and that's not going to change.[65]

It is important to keep in mind that Ray, also the President of the Hampden neighborhood Business Association, is a small business owner, as were many I talked to, whose stores and restaurants enjoy the increase in business redevelopment brings. However, it is difficult to say why so many will in the same breath bemoan the consistent loss of local color and also deny the possibility that place specificities will permanently erode. For me, this was most evident in the Hampden district where the effects of gentrification between my visits in 2010 and 2013 were striking.

[65] Ray. Personal interview.

Beginning as a lumber industry ghetto, Hampden later became the neighborhood that most exemplified the sensibilities expressed in Waters' films. Working class locals became known as a people who outwardly expressed their distinctive personalities. Scott Brown told me a story that encapsulated Hampden and its presentation of Baltimore character:

> There was a guy playing trumpet out in the street and he was terrible, but he had a bucket out in the street for people to throw money into it. No one was throwing money into it. He was terrible by any standards and people even walked by yelling, "You suck! Shut up!" but he was unperturbed. He just kept on going. He kept on playing the trumpet badly, no one putting any money in, nobody paying attention to him. That guy, to me, is Baltimore because people do their own thing here without really caring what anybody else thinks. That incident to me encapsulates Baltimore. Both the people yelling at him to shut up because he sucks but him also continuing in the face of adversity. That goes back to Baltimore as a working-class town, as unpretentious.[66]

Brown's story serves as a site of convergence for both "typical Baltimore" and "John Waters' Baltimore" because it is typical of things you can see in Baltimore and is likely something you would find in the background of a John Waters scene. However, the Hampden celebrated in such stories does not particularly resemble the Hampden found today, which has become rampantly gentrified—washing away the formerly alternative identities. Supposedly the Hampden Village Merchant's Association keeps an eye on the neighborhood's historic local color.[67] As part of its mandate the association keeps chain stores and restaurants out of the neighborhood in order to

[66] Brown. Personal interview.

[67] Ray. Personal interview.

help retain its distinctive identity. However, its introductory webpage paints the neighborhood as generically as possible: "Over the past several decades, Hampden has reinvented itself as a thriving community of independent and locally-owned businesses . . . the neighborhood continues to grow as an eclectic mix of working class folks, artists and young professionals. Located in the geographic center of Baltimore City, Hampden is a unique and popular neighborhood that is also noted for its numerous critically-acclaimed and award winning shops, eateries and businesses."[68] Despite the frequent use of the word "unique," the website does not give a sense of anything about Hampden that is particularly unique. Instead, it presents Hampden as a lively and generally welcoming shopping community, completely obscuring any sense of local color. Most strikingly, the website does have a John Waters page, though it only attempts to connect the neighborhood to his much later, and more sanitized, film *Pecker* (1998) which filmed there.[69] The page lists active Hampden businesses used in the film and a few businesses that Waters has recommended in press interviews, but again gives no sense of John Waters' Baltimore or what it means to connect Waters to this neighborhood. The gentrified presentation of Waters and Hampden culminates in a completely antiseptic picture at the bottom of the web page featuring Waters sitting outdoors in a suit and ball cap enjoying a glass of white wine.

Beyond small business owners, other Baltimoreans are firmly aware of gentrification. Scott Brown claims, "The best and the worst of gentrification is that the property values go up. People who've owned their row houses in Hampen for generations, their property taxes have shot way up and there's a lot of resentment in a lot of communities, Hampden being the main

[68] Ben Claassen III "Hampden History." *Hampden Village Merchant's Association*. Last modified 2015. Accessed March 8, 2015. http://hampdenmerchants.com/hampden-history/

[69] Ben Claassen III "John Waters' Guide to Hampden." *Hampden Village Merchant's Association*. Last modified 2015. Accessed March 8 2015. http://hampdenmerchants.com/maps/

one—and Fell's Point. That's really the one beef I hear from people."[70] Along with raised property taxes and cost of living, renters in gentrifying areas often face newborn elitism as the class-tenor of a neighborhood changes.[71] Returning to the subject of Harbor Place, in 2001 Harvey pointed out that despite all the money spent there, the impact on areas of Baltimore that need it had yet to be seen even two decades later: "The redevelopment has certainly brought money into the city through a rapid growth of the convention and tourist trades. But there is no guarantee that money stays in Baltimore. Much of it flows out again, either as profits to firms or payments for goods . . . evidence is hard to find, but the Inner Harbor may function simply as a harbor, a transaction point for money flowing from and to the rest of the world."[72] Further, despite the creation of downtown jobs, the average wage had gone down dramatically, requiring more families to be two-income households.[73] And finally, "There are some 40,000 vacant and for the most part abandoned houses in a housing stock of some 300,000 units within the city limits (there were 7,000 in 1970). The concentrations of homelessness . . ., of unemployment, and, even more significant, of the employed poor . . . are everywhere in evidence."[74] Harvey presents a much bleaker view than the "Disneyland" of Harbor Place reveals and, especially since Harbor Place is continually held up as a pinnacle of the success of gentrification, makes further efforts seem particularly dubious and mis-placed.

[70] Brown. Personal interview.

[71] For further discussion on this point see Ley. *New Middle Class*.

[72] Harvey. *Spaces of Capital*. 142-43.

[73] Ibid. 144.

[74] Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*. 133.

Apart from financial and social concerns, however, lay distressing cultural ones as well which many locals seem to be largely ignoring or putting up with. David Ley explains, "The argument for historic preservation conceals the fact that with gentrification almost nothing is preserved. The original households are replaced, and the meaning of the structure is redefined from a working-class use value to an aestheticized symbolic value . . . yet what is celebrated is the authenticity of the renovation, its fidelity to what has gone before . . . the transformation of buildings is declared to be an act of fealty to the past."[75] Neil Smith, who criticizes "new urban pioneers" agrees that the victim in smaller neighborhood-oriented redevelopment projects tends to be the local color.[76] The loss of place identity can be expressed architecturally through systematic renovation—such as the elimination of Baltimore form stone—or through the working class population being forced out through raised cost of living and property tax.[77]

Waters addresses cultural changes due to gentrification most prominently in *Pecker* (1998), set in Hampden. *Pecker* is about Baltimore native Pecker (Edward Furlong) rising to prominence as a photographer. Embraced by the New York high art scene, Pecker abandons the big city and high society for his hometown, ultimately combining the two worlds in a festive gallery show at the end of the film. Pecker's father, local bar owner Jimmy (Mark Joy), spends much of the film ranting about another bar across from his, The Pelt Room, which allows

[75] Ley. *New Middle Class*. 310. Also: "Such transformations are wrought through the 'creative destruction' of the landscapes that went before. The tensions and contradictions entailed in the continuous pressure to reorganize the city's spaces make for complex and unpredictable interactions . . . When working class communities built up over many years are torn apart through property development, gentrification, and the like, we can hardly avoid seeing ourselves as victims of accumulation rather than as its avatars" David Harvey. *The Urban Experience*. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). 250.

[76] Neil Smith. *The New Urban Frontier*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

[77] Formstone is a type of stucco used prominently in Baltimore's past. To cover cheap, porous brick work in lower-income areas. Barry Levinson's *Tin Men* (1987) which is about Baltimore aluminum siding salesmen, was originally written to feature formstone salesmen. Also see Harvey. *Condition of Postmodernity*. 78.

strippers to appear bottomless. The offending bar mimics Waters' own descriptions of beloved Baltimore from his book *Crackpot*: "My favorite 'exotic dancer' in town was Zorro, a very butch local girl who looked exactly like Victor Mature. She'd stomp around the stage naked after removing her cape and mask, sneer at the audience in pure contempt and snarl, 'What are you lookin' at?"[78] In *Pecker* a character recreates his past experiences: exotic dancer, T-Bone (Mo Fischer), yells at and taunts the leering men as she aggressively disrobes. Despite celebrating the figure of Zorro in his writing, however, Waters also ends the film with the sanitization of the Pelt Room's practices. The film ends with a big gallery show in Baltimore held at a bar and reveals that Jimmy successfully stopped the practice of fully nude stripping when T-Bone jumps on a table to dance, leaves all of her undergarments on, and Jimmy gives an approving smile while spectators whoop and holler excitedly. Paradoxically, Waters builds his narrative resolution around the "classing up" of activities which for many, including himself, once defined Baltimore—what the character of Pecker claims he returns for. Similarly, in today's Baltimore, despite recognizing the gentrification process at work, local pride seems to keep residents from believing that any changes in daily practices would become all-encompassing. His later films include the positive elements of Baltimore character typically credited to him, but lose much of the subversive, social boundary-crossing found in his earliest work. In his films' presentation of Baltimore, it would seem that Waters supports the idea that gentrification can come and somehow the local color will stay.

Since his auteur-identity revolves around Baltimore, it puts Waters in a position to influence how the city is perceived. Waters presents Baltimore to the rest of the world, but, more importantly, back to Baltimore itself. By accepting Waters as a local image-maker, Baltimore

[78] Waters. *Crackpot*. 75.

tacitly accepts the vision of the city Waters puts forth, which continues to champion the blue-collar identity that is increasingly becoming a myth, as the physical traces of the old Baltimore character slowly but surely get eradicated through gentrification. Neil Smith argues that one of the results of myth involves a loss of geographic specificity, "Myth is constituted by the loss of the *geographical* quality of things as well. Deterritorialization is equally central to mythmaking, and the more events are wrenched from their constitutive geographies, the more powerful the mythology. Geography too becomes cliché."[79] Smith refers to a loss of place dynamics which get overwritten by the mythologized culture of feeling. Of course, Waters does not have complete control over how someone perceives the city, but people do accept his films in some ways as valid representations outside of the places themselves. My interviews revealed strong feelings that Waters represents the city. Local Leah Burns said, "He makes such a point to make his films about Baltimore. They're filmed here, they're us."[80] Local restaurant owner Sascha Wolhandler agreed, "He's an extraordinary spokesman for Baltimore. He likes to showcase Baltimore, the different parts of Baltimore, the Baltimore neighborhoods, albeit sometimes in his films they're kind of quirky. He is a great spokesman for Baltimore."[81] Scott Brown similarly stated, "He's definitely an ambassador."[82] If Waters is accepted as image-maker of Baltimore, not only in terms of what he does but the way in which he represents the city, his work can then begin to represent the city "better" than the neighborhoods within the city represent themselves. Waters' work creates a myth that the old Baltimore character continues to thrive and that the gentrification has not been *so* culturally pervasive. Though Hampden does not particularly

[79] Neil Smith. *New Urban*. 12.

[80] Burns. Personal interview.

[81] Wolhandler. Personal interview.

[82] Brown. Personal interview.

resemble the neighborhood found in his film *Pecker*, the film stands as a much more widely understood representation of the area than does the actual neighborhood today—which comparably fewer people have seen. His films do not tend to focus on large city problems and when they do, such as in the previous example from Pecker, the narrative "solves" them by the end of the film. Waters, in standing in for the city, acts as another tool with which socio-cultural problems can be absorbed. In this way, Waters inadvertently aids that which threatens to rob his city of the very character he celebrates.

In other ways, Waters' strong industry and political ties to the city give his films another weight entirely. Waters' friendships with the mayor and other municipal leaders make him a voice of the city that has strong ties to regulatory channels. In his book about Chinese cinema and the city, Yomi Braester argues, "The city and the cinema are more than complementary manifestations of material structure and artistic imagination. They are also more than parallel spectacles of modern life. Rather, they play an active role in the imposition of government power, the formation of communities, the establishment of cultural norms, and the struggle for civil society . . . urban design must include cultural restructuring."[83] While the power relationships between the public/city/art in China and in Baltimore are very different, Waters' shift to representing a more wholesome Baltimore does play into the gentrification of Baltimore in interesting ways. This is not to say that one necessarily caused the other—Waters was not pressured by the municipal government nor was the population of Baltimore instantly appeased by only Waters' later films—but the continued, and even increased, embrace of these films as they represent a more unified, above-board and gentrified Baltimore signals a growing acceptance of the class shifts occurring in Baltimore neighborhoods.

[83] Yomi Braester. *Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010). 4.

Looking at Waters' films, tensions surrounding gentrification can be seen in both the content and the ways they were produced. Profound changes in Waters' treatment and relationship to the city can be treated through his career. *Pink Flamingos* (1972) promotes a critique of contemporary society through the subversive use of places in the city. *Pink Flamingos* thus serves as an important visual record of a Baltimore that no longer exists. The film captures Baltimore as it was before massive residential and commercial gentrification. Most striking has to be early shots of Divine walking through the city on a hill overlooking a Harbor that still resembes a dilapidated port instead of the current white-washed tourist attraction. Beyond the look of the land, Waters' characters also continually undermine their surroundings instead of fitting into them. An early scene in *Flamingos* has Divine strutting around downtown shops to the soundtrack tune of Little Richard's "The Girl Can't Help It," while she performs actions that use these spaces in a contradictory manner such as relieving herself in front of a gated mansion or stealing meat from a butcher by placing it in her crotch. Working without permits, Waters and crew were left using any available location they could find and escape notice and condemnation in, making the film more focused on generalized spaces (butcher shop, park, shopping district) where characters exhibit place-specific practices as an argument for establishing the Baltimore/Waters character. Just after Divine's scene, Raymond Marble (David Lochary) walks through a park flashing women with a turkey head tied to his penis. Beyond challenging the more traditional notion that a park during the daytime is "safe," this action also undermines the normal act of flashing in that the highly unusual turkey head probably draws more attention than the penis. The characters of the film continually delight in their own delinquent actions, requiring nothing of Baltimore but to exist in it. In these early films Baltimore is not portrayed as any more accepting than any other place would be, but the characters do not care, culminating in the

revelation that after the murder of their nemeses the Marbles, Divine's family will now move to Boise, Idaho.

In later films, Waters' characters directly affect their environments less and less, making Baltimore more of a home to subversive characters than a place shaped by such characters. Waters' *Pecker* (1998) captures a noticeably different and more widely acceptable view of the city than the earlier *Pink Flamingos*. Now working with a big studio and significantly more money, Waters has permits and his status as local celebrity/hero affords him the freedom to shoot virtually everywhere, allowing him to make a film that noticeably incorporates the entire city. With this freedom to use recognizable places, though, Waters seems more intent on communicating Baltimore to the outside world than on challenging social hierarchies. *Pecker* opens with a short scene where Pecker photographs the George Washington Monument in Baltimore. Above a ground-floor museum rises a column on top of which stands a statue of the figure of George Washington holding a scroll that points South. This is iconic Baltimore for a few reasons and communicates a number of things about the Waters Baltimore identity. The Baltimore Washington Monument of course now stands in contradistinction to the much more internationally iconic Washington Monument in Washington D.C., despite the Baltimore version predating the other by 60 years. Given the identity crisis which Baltimore has with D.C. it stands to reason that visually asserting a claim on the figure and monument of George Washington would serve as a way to locate the narrative in Baltimore, the home of this particular monument, *and* assert an insider's perspective in giving prominence to Baltimore's national identity. The twist on this shot which evokes a Waters/Baltimore sensibility involves the position from which Pecker views the statue. When observed from the East side Washington holds the riding crop, which angles somewhat downward, makes it appear as though the statue is of George

Washington sporting a large, uncircumcised, erect penis. Thus, Waters at one and the same time claims Baltimore identity through representation of their monument and at the same time subverts the idea that any contest exists with Washington D.C. by presenting a statue that clearly D.C., or assumedly any other city, would be unwilling to claim. A close-up of Pecker's satisfied grin after capturing the picture is not one of subversion, but instead content happiness with a place that affords him such perspectives. Whereas *Pink Flamingos* had a tone of redefining Baltimore, *Pecker* lands in a Baltimore that has been thoroughly defined already.

While pre-defined aspects of the film merely mimic Waters' changed relationship to the city, it has also lost any critique of place or space that may have once existed in Waters' work. *Pecker*, set in Hampden, also does not reveal to us that Waters' Baltimore is one that is disappearing. Instead it celebrates finding that old character within the, at that point, early-gentrified confines, whereas *Pink Flamingos* celebrated such distinction rampantly on the surface. With his increasing respectability, Waters began to appeal to a wider expanse of Baltimore. Waters' love for the distinctiveness of his city could, in certain ways, be contributing to its diminution. This possibility is emboldened by his relative silence on the gentrification of Baltimore and its effects. Waters does not stand alone here, however, nor would it be reasonable to blame him for what is happening to the city. But in aligning with the city and its development so specifically, he has inadvertently written himself into this narrative. By doing so, he has allowed his image to be taken by the people and institutions of Baltimore to be used in a variety of different ways over which he has little control.

## Representing Waters

"Culturally, [Baltimore] is one of the great centers of American bad taste. John Waters's movies are classic Baltimore—you can't imagine them anywhere else,"

—David Harvey[84]

"[John Waters is] part of the community. There's not a separation."
—Benn Ray, Owner Atomic Books[85]

If you travel around the city of Baltimore long enough you will run into John Waters. To clarify, in Baltimore it is very difficult not to run into John Waters—in one form or another. Baltimore has so completely embraced Waters' sensibility that most of the major neighborhoods in Baltimore, such as those now known for tourism like Fell's Point and Mount Vernon, have businesses with direct ties to Waters. Some business owners who know him from the 70s love to tell stories about "the old days." Other stores proudly and lovingly display photographs, and some sell Waters' signed books and movies. At its heart, however, his presence in Baltimore is more than just a celebration of a hometown hero. Baltimore has adopted parts of Waters' identity for different municipal and business purposes—uses which become uniquely affected by Waters' unusually close relationship to the city.

Typically, a person reaching celebrity status becomes "unapproachable"—he or she become somehow greater or "better" than the average person. Stars quickly must ascribe to a series of constructed lives comprised of both the roles they play and the appearance of their private image, which is often also a construct. Star studies clarifies that celebrities of any kind typically exist just out of reach of the general public. We feel some form of personal attachment, yet also at some level realize the constructed nature of stardom and its distance from us. As Richard Dyer writes, "We all know how the studios build up star images, how stars happen to turn up on chat shows just when their latest picture is released, how many of the stories printed

[84] Harvey. *Spaces of Capital*. 7.

[85] Ray. Personal interview.

about stars are but titillating fictions; we all know we are being sold stars."[86] Celebrities sell their approachable star images to sell their products, at once using their charm to connect with audiences; yet the constructed nature of their identity pushes people away at the same time. John Ellis explains the dual nature of star images, "The star is ordinary, and hence leads a life like other people, . . . is present in the same social universe as the potential film viewer. At the same time the star is extraordinary, removed from the life of mere mortals, . . . is separate from the world of the potential film viewer."[87] Public appearances become very carefully organized in order to maintain a give-and-take quality to the celebrity. After living in Pittsburgh for four years, I knew many people who knew someone who knew someone who had once spotted the reclusive George Romero somewhere, but in Baltimore it was difficult to find someone who had not *spent time with* John Waters, making him a star unlike any other. Due to such camaraderie, interviewees expressed extreme devotion and hyper-awareness of protecting his image—as anyone walking through the city attempting to get interviews about the filmmaker can tell you. While locals seem to feel that Waters is personable and open to them, at the same time he is an international reflection of the positive qualities of Baltimore, which they fervently protect assuming outsiders will be unable to properly understand.

In one sense, this close relationship allows Waters to work more efficiently in the city on location shoots than would normally be the case. The people of Baltimore seem far more willing to be inconvenienced for a Waters production than they would for any other. As with any production, even Baltimoreans have mixed reactions when it comes to giving up their daily routines; however, when it comes to Waters those frustrations are noticeably tempered. Robert

[86] Richard Dyer. *Heavenly Bodies*. (London: Routledge, 2004). 14.

[87] John Ellis. "Stars as a Cinematic Phenomenon." in *Stardom and Celebrity*. Ed. Sean Redmond and Su Holmes. (Thousand Oaks, CA and London: Sage, 2007). 92.

Maier, former production manager, reports that when *Polyester* was shot in the early 1980s it provided a good example of the tipping point most productions have to play. He refers to "cinematic immunity" as a term for the ability of productions to get away with inconveniencing the public. "Cinematic immunity is the concept that movie making is so important to our culture that normal rules do not apply to people making movies . . . Cinematic immunity works for a while, because no one knows really how long it takes to shoot a movie scene, and how disruptive it can be . . . Rather quickly the novelty for the neighbors wears off, and having a movie in the neighborhood becomes a real inconvenience."[88] Maier's explains the concept very generally, but in actual practice many qualities can affect what he refers to as cinematic immunity. Here Maier stresses the length of the shoot, though other factors could obviously raise or lower local tensions, including the level of the inconvenience (e.g. street closures, night shoots) and the celebrities involved to which the neighborhood has access. As a Baltimore hero, Waters gains extremely significant amounts of cinematic immunity throughout the city. As a resident explained to me, during the filming of *Serial Mom* (1994), his neighborhood was inhabited for weeks to the extent that on certain nights he could not even drive home after work to park his car.[89] Furthermore, the lights used for the significant amount of night filming shone directly into his bedroom window, and he and his wife were often kept awake. Despite these inconveniences, however, the man had fond memories of the experience. Friends whom he had not seen in years came over in hopes to get a glimpse of Waters working, and he ended up with a cache of stories in which any local Baltimorean would likely have interest. Waters functions, then, as a cultural currency in Baltimore, and the resulting goodwill of both the city and the community allow him

[88] Maier. *Low Budget*. 178-79.

[89] Anonymous interview. Baltimore, MD. 08-2013.

to film much more efficiently, helping him retain his independent filmmaker status—the cheaper cost leading to increased artistic freedom.

Changes in the industry have resulted in Waters virtually abandoning filmmaking ever since *A Dirty Shame* in 2004. In recent interviews, Waters explains that his independent filmmaking history has caught up with him in that being independent now requires either much more money, to fund your own projects, or far less money than he is able to deal with at the current stage of his career. He began as an independent filmmaker completely outside the industry and gradually became an independent filmmaker who worked with Hollywood, but made only his own projects. In order to retain his artistic independence, he now believes his status as independent filmmaker works against him because films are no longer made the way he learned to make them: "They all want it to cost under a million dollars and I'm not doing that. I can't do that anymore. I can't go backwards . . . I like writing books just as much as making movies. They pay better these days. It's not so different from a movie. You got the character, you have the plot."[90] The point here seems less about filmmaking or creating than it does about what medium will allow him maximum visibility. He works to retain auteur-visibility and shrewdly determines how other media can be used to sustain his filmmaker persona. Waters also does nationwide speaking tours, often on or near college campuses. He does standup comedy-style shows where he speaks about his films and his life. In one of his recent Christmas shows he admitted that he did them as a form of "fame maintenance."[91] Paradoxically, working on films

[90] Nigel Smith. "John Waters: 'I Like Writing Books Just As Much As Making Movies.'" *Salon*. July 4, 2014. Accessed July 8, 2014. http://www.salon.com/2014/07/04/john_waters_its_not_just_me_david_lynch_hasnt_made_a_film_in_years_partner/

[91] This occurred at his Royal Oak Christmas Show near Detroit 15 Dec 2012 though he has also been repeating the phrase "fame maintenance" consistently in interviews about his book *Carsick*.

was the job that initially kept him most visibly in Baltimore. Gallery work, writing and speaking tours all require him to travel extensively in order to keep his image active in the greater cultural consciousness. At the current stage of his career, Waters relies on the good will he has forged with Baltimore to keep him as connected and celebrated there as ever.

Waters always connects his films to Baltimore, but he does not actually live there full-time. In books (*Shock Value*, *Crackpot*, *Role Models*) and many interviews he refers to Baltimore as his "primary residence," though likely his meaning of that term differs from what the average person would think of as a primary residence. Later in his career, around the time of *Role Models* (2010), Waters clarified that he has homes in Provincetown, where he has spent every summer for decades, and San Francisco as well as an apartment in New York. When James Egan asked about a future John Waters Museum in Baltimore Waters responded, "No, I don't see that. Why would it have to be in Baltimore? I mean, I live in a lot of places. New York, Provincetown, and now San Francisco. I'm not saying it shouldn't be in Baltimore."[92] His response is surprising given how much credence *he* has given Baltimore throughout the years. To be clear, he still does live in Baltimore for significant periods of time and houses his assistants and main office there, though with four homes he obviously cannot live there for the bulk of the year. Waters' statements from later in his career suggest that the most important thing he developed with Baltimore was a routine. For locals, Waters "lives" in Baltimore because he is seen throughout the year, even if not spied as regularly as maybe he once was. By standing in for the city as spokesperson, image and hero, Waters' continual presence has lost its immediate necessity as

[92] James Egan. "Where Will John Waters Be Buried?" *John Waters Interviews*. Ed. James Egan. (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011). 226.

long as he continually, even if briefly, revives it. Further, because his image has proven so useful to the city, Baltimore plays its own role in keeping Waters active despite his presence or absence.

Around 2008, Baltimore's city government website posted a list entitled, "John Waters' Baltimore" which features names and descriptions of locations around Baltimore making up a sort of tour of the city.[93] Though taken down in 2014, when the city revamped its website, the list served as an interesting example of how the city manages its relationship to the filmmaker.[94] However, while the list is devoted to Waters, known primarily as a local filmmaker, most sites contained on the list do not connect directly to his film work. A few of the places on the John Waters tour were filming locations, but many more were described as restaurants, hotels or shops where he likes to visit or hang out. All filming locations included were also current businesses which appeared as themselves in the films such as Bengie's Drive In (featured in *Cecil B. Demented*) and The Holiday House (a biker bar featured in *A Dirty Shame*). Other entries include bars (Dimitri's Tavern, Club Charles), book shops (Atomic Books, Normal's, Ivy Bookshop), hotels (Tremonet, Inn at the Colonnade), cultural events (Maryland Film Festival, Baltimore Book Festival) and restaurants (Rocket to Venus, Sascha's 527). The only thing that bound together all of the locations on the list was that they were places John Waters had at one time or another promoted in interviews. The list was in no way comprehensive, however. When I visited locations people gave me dozens of suggestions of "better" places where he hung out more. Also, the list focuses on currently active businesses and does not include many Waters filming

[93] This list was very rarely updated so the beginning date of it is derived from the fact that the listing for Bengie's Drive In, one of the included local businesses, mentioned *Iron Man* (2008) and *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008) as coming attractions, suggesting this was the year it was created. I first accessed it in 2010. The only update I saw to it between 2010 and 2014 was the removal of Café Hon from the list following the fervent controversy over the owner trademarking the term "Hon," as chronicled on Gordon Ramsay's *Kitchen Nightmares*.

[94] From what I could find, the list was likely culled from a couple of *Baltimore Sun* articles based on interviews with Waters about his favorite places in Baltimore. This suspicion was confirmed by Rupert Wondolowski of Normal's Books who had noticed the inclusion of his business on it.

sites such as the street where Divine ate dog feces or the Enchanted Forest amusement park used in *Cry-Baby*, which is long abandoned. The latter are places with material connections to the films and are still in existence today, suggesting the main purpose behind using Waters' name here was to draw tourism specifically to businesses *the city* had an interest in promoting.

The more one examines the list, the less and less it begins to look like an actual John Waters-sponsored tour and the more it seems an attempt by the city to haphazardly apply the Waters label "safely" onto the city. A number of places were functionally outdated by the time I visited them in 2013. For example, The Inn at the Colonnade, now a DoubleTree, told me they had a complete overhaul in ownership and staff to the extent that no one had been there longer than 3 years. Similarly the Tremont Hotel had since become an Embassy Suites. Waters recommended these hotels based on experiences he had in their previous incarnations and due to their local history, which the new hotel chains threaten to erase. Neither reflected the sort of Baltimore color the original Waters recommendation was based on, nor did they particularly reflect the qualities of the Baltimore celebrated by Waters. The only film titles of his mentioned in the list's introduction cater to their Broadway musical adaptations, *Hairspray* and *Cry-Baby*. Not coincidentally, these are the only films Waters has made that received less than an R-rating by the MPAA. The list quickly establishes a dual relationship to readers. Fans of Waters, who already know his work, will come across it with avid interest in being able to more fully "understand" the auteur they already admire. Those not as familiar with his *oeuvre*, but interested in visiting sites in Baltimore can still be "safely" impressed by the fact that Baltimore has such a close connection with a local filmmaker—giving a dash of Hollywood glitz to the tourist experience. In reality, the places on the list vary widely in terms of neighborhood, class distinctions and local character, even though the written commentary attempts to characterize

each place as equally interesting and neutral. It provides an example of using the Waters name as a draw to outsiders and also an even-handed smoothing out of the city. If John Waters is accepted as an artist who represents the city, then he inadvertently becomes a tool used for that very purpose—in this case, to represent the city as the same instead of unique.

Most small business owners, mainly the shops and restaurants, either saw a good amount of tourist business because of the list or, once I informed them they were on it, reasoned that the list had likely contributed to the Waters fans who would come by. For the individual shop owner, the Waters recommendation means different things. Rupert Wondolowski of Normal's Books & Records notes, "It's fairly consistently over the years helped us draw in new people. People find out that he shops here so there might be John Waters paraphernalia around or a John Waters 'spotting.' Just having his stamp of approval is a big gain and help and it brings new people in."[95] The Waters stamp of approval leads to new business from fans both inside and outside Baltimore communities. Either they feel akin to his style and take his recommendation or they are tourists who want a chance to run into a celebrity. All shops state unequivocally that Waters is very generous in terms of signing merchandise for them to sell, which can of course then fetch a slightly higher price. There is also a great deal of pride in being a business beloved by Waters. With all those who describe Waters as a brand, icon, symbol and speaker for the city, there is perhaps no surer way to positively connect your business with Baltimore than to have a connection to John Waters.

Waters also has a homogenizing effect different than that suggested by the city's tour list, which is perhaps best seen through a close examination of two Baltimore bookstores which appear on the list. Atomic Books overtly situates itself alongside Waters' celebrity in Hampden

[95] Rupert Wondolowski (Owner, Normal's Books & Records) personal interview with the author. Baltimore, MD. August 20, 2013.

as a form of headquarters for Waters' most ardent fans. The bookstore in fact gains its headquarters designation directly through Waters himself, who has his fan mail sent there. After examining the interior of the store, I found that Atomic Books highly capitalizes on its official connection to Waters. They outwardly portray his auteur persona to cultivate an image aligned with the alternative genres and demographics commonly associated with his fans, which also aligns with their identity as an independent bookstore selling unusual fare. Waters' image appears openly throughout the store in artwork portraying his visage, actual Christmas cards sent by Waters which are framed by the store, and autographed Waters merchandise, as a fundamental part of Atomic Books' interior design. Owner Benn Ray told me that when you work there, "You're going to get all kinds of crazy phone calls asking for John Waters, asking for his home number, asking for his address, asking when he's coming in, when we'll see him again: we can't give out any of that information . . . we've had people from Spain, Australia, Japan, you name it to come here because they see it as a connection to John."[96] With such a close connection, it would be extremely difficult to remove Waters' image from the identity of Atomic Books. Yet, the bookstore does have an identity beyond Waters. Ray states, "We tend to be a destination for a lot of people for a lot of different reasons. Independent comics artists from all over the country come here when they're in the area, horror fans, you name it because we have sections for a lot of stuff."[97] Waters is not necessarily known for either independent comics or horror films, not that fans of those media could not also be Waters fans, but there is no integral connection there. So, essentially, Waters originally connected with the store because his image did not conflict with either the store's content or its location. In fact, to the latter point, given that

[96] Ray. Personal interview.

[97] Ibid.

Waters directs all queries to them, it has only increased the institutional status of Atomic Books in the city.

The Ivy Bookshop provides an interesting counter-example in that it is an independent bookstore that caters to an entirely different clientele, and yet connecting Waters' name to it only seems to help the store. Despite the fact that The Ivy Bookshop sits only three miles away on the same street as Atomic Books, it contains no visible connections to Waters. Located in the traditionally more upper-class area of Mount Washington, along with the store name that evokes the stylish LA restaurant, The Ivy Bookshop situates itself as a high-end independent bookseller found in an upscale shopping complex. This is not the type of place normally associated with Waters or his fans. In fact, other bookstore owners, whose stores have more fringe or underground type of identities, expressed surprise to me that such a place would appear on the Waters list. After talking with the owner and employees, the most direct connection to Waters lies primarily through his patronage of the store. Whereas Atomic Books both cultivates and advertises its connection to Waters, The Ivy Bookshop provides an example of how a store can take on a contrary identity through the cultural status of one of its users. The vast majority of patrons of The Ivy Bookshop most likely shop completely unaware of any connection to Waters, yet knowledge of his patronage does prove significant for a minority of users. Though the employees were not aware of the list, all of them immediately knew who he was and had personal stories about him. The Ivy Bookshop does not seem to be using Waters' celebrity in any direct manner, but appreciates any new customers attracted to the shop. Actual connections to Waters in the place of the shop lie primarily through social relationships with the author.

John Waters is alive throughout Baltimore whether physically present there or not. His history of attachment with the city has made him an integral part of daily life. Seeing the level of

attachment the people of Baltimore feel toward John Waters is truly striking. They have described him as icon, neighbor, symbol, friend, hero and just an all-around good guy. Despite not making any films there for the past 10 years, Waters has been able to keep active in the public eye for over 40 years. Part of his longevity involves his forged connection to Baltimore which has made him an important cultural figure. Waters demonstrates that the auteur from a city can also be the auteur for that city. That is, an auteur can become an integral part of constructing a sense of place identity on a national and international as much as local level. While a remarkable achievement, Waters' history as a filmmaker also clarifies that sometimes the very elements that garner fame are what need to be jettisoned in order to hold onto fame. Attaching a career to an entire city requires broader appeal which in turn requires Waters to back off from his shock value celebrations that so connected him to Baltimore locals in the first place. In cleaning up their acts side-by-side, both Waters and Baltimore face the possibility of over-writing the distinctive cultural elements that defined them so successfully both locally and abroad. The fate of Baltimore and its identity remains to be seen, but John Waters will definitely be, either actively or inadvertently, a part of it.

## Chapter 3

### Home is Where the Production is: Robert Altman as Neighborly Auteur

"[*Cookie's Fortune*] will forever be remembered in this town and stamped this town in many ways. Those who have pride in our town see the respect that film has."
—Mayor Kelvin Buck of Holly Springs, MS[1]

"Not that many people may know he's from Kansas City . . . It wasn't like he was in and out of Kansas City all the time. He came in for this period of time to do the movie, but it's not like he was around a lot before that or after that. But when he was there he was there in full force."
—Andy Scott, Former Director of the
Union Station Assistance Corporation, Kansas City[2]

As the above quotes suggest, Robert Altman's relationship to place through his productions was dynamic and complicated. While those from Holly Springs refer to Altman's production of *Cookie's Fortune* (1999) as familial and special, those in his actual hometown of Kansas City see an ambiguity in terms of his "there-ness." As Scott states, when Altman was in Kansas City making *Kansas City* (1996), he could not have been more present, but the associations typical of one's home, were not as evident as in a filmmaker like John Waters from the previous chapter. Robert Altman is most often defined by scholars as an auteur through his non-standard narrative and formal choices, including overlapping dialogue, large seemingly chaotic sequences, free-moving camera, and the lack of a conventionally satisfying ending. Therefore, studies of Altman's production practices most often focus on how he and his crews

[1] Mayor Kelvin Buck personal interview with the author. Holly Springs, MS. February 24, 2014.

[2] Andy Scott. (Director of the Union Station Assistance Corporation) phone interview with the author. Kansas City, MO. January 21, 2014.

technically accomplish these effects—multi-track recording, direction to actors, philosophies behind narration and use of the zoom lens.[3] While fundamental to the ways in which audiences experience and appreciate Altman's cinema, studying Altman's technical feats has over-written the unique place-based production strategies that are key to his ability to function as an auteur. When asked about working on an Altman set, crew members quickly dismiss the many formal qualities of Altman's films that scholars have latched onto so vociferously. Instead, they focus on the constructed social community as the driving force behind Altman's overall style and process. While Altman himself referred to this atmosphere as his work/life balance, it also proved strategic in injecting both production personnel and local communities into his version of "home" life. When asked the meaning of the term, "Altmanesque," frequent star cast member Lily Tomlin poignantly replied, "Creating a family."[4]

Altman's name, then, does not just act as a moniker for a set of formal stylistic choices, but also a set of place-based production practices. His productions created active social groupings to enhance a communal sense of working among locals. In essence, Altman quite openly made his work his life by adopting a much more transitory relationship to the concept of "home." Through the largely uncredited work of Kathryn Altman, his wife, the Altman productions became synonymous with the idea of home for Altman, his family, the crew and cast working on the film. His unique style of working and living inflected the Altman name with associations of family and comfort to an unusual extent, especially when compared to standard industry productions. The communal environment also led to a feeling of camaraderie with the

[3] See Self, who studies Altman's films, their more art cinema mode of address and offers a detailed account of these perspectives. Robert Self. *Robert Altman's Subliminal Reality*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 2002).

[4] Ron Mann. Dir. *Altman*. (Epix, 2014). Netflix.

production for locals, who gave the filmmakers a pass regarding the intrusion on their everyday lives. Finally, it is important to note that Altman's work/life connection was not an even balance. Stories from Altman's family life as well as extended stories of communities he worked in reveal that Altman prized the work of filmmaking above all else. Therefore, Altman actually focused on filmmaking and relied on Kathryn Altman to balance the more gendered labor of homemaking for their children and also the production-oriented labor of maintaining the more "family" atmosphere so crucial to his success.

Robert Altman's consistent choice to film on location is key to his well-studied style of production that strives to capture his version of a more natural reality. The most frequently cited example of Altman's reality involves his use of overlapping dialogue—presenting conversations closer to "how they actually happen."[5] Even basic conversation, for Altman, does not involve one clear message, but a series of contradictory and overlapping ones. His son and frequent camera operator Robert Reed Altman concisely describes the Altman-style: "On *The Long Goodbye* the camera never stopped moving—dollying, zooming—he wanted the action to be caught as if by accident. He hated things being mastered, two-shot, 'hit your mark,' 'say your line.' He wanted the feeling to be natural and more relaxed—observational."[6] Altman's formal style is built around his desire, as an observer, to just let life happen while not interfering or commenting upon it. Therefore, instead of seeking entrance as a member of communities he filmed in, Altman provides a stage for local perspectives in order to observe contradiction. His films always contain scores of disparate characters constantly in conflict throughout large group

[5] Altman endlessly makes a connection between his filmmaking style and better representing "reality." The example of the overlapping dialogue occurs in most of his commentary tracks, many interviews and most documentary features made about him. Self provides, again, a good example of approaching Altman's formal style as a different kind of reality. In Self's case, he compares Altman's signature style to an art cinema mode of address which he refers to as Altman's "Subliminal Reality." Self. *Robert Altman's Subliminal Reality*.

[6] Ron Mann Dir. *Altman*.

scenes, yet Altman's scenes never reveal the resolution of these conflicts. The display of conflict and difference occurs both through the content and form. The Easter dinner scene from *Cookie's Fortune* provides a particularly good example. In reflecting its setting, the film focuses on small town life and how its idyllic exterior becomes ruffled through a murder investigation. After her death, local police turn Cookie's (Patricia Neal) home into a crime scene while her niece Camille (Glenn Close) immediately strives to take ownership over the beautiful antebellum home, as next of kin, to raise her own local social standing. The Easter Dinner scene, roughly halfway through the film, begins with a shot from outside Cookie's house looking into the dining room window, where Camille and her society friends eat around a well-stocked dining room table. Despite Camille's attempts at high-class ambiance, though, the shot begins with a "Sheriff's Line Do Not Cross" yellow tape obstructing a full view of the dinner. The discrepancy between the sign and ornate dinner reveals tension between two perspectives on the property: Camille's small town high society and the local authority's crime scene—the latter either uninterested or unable to keep the house secure as such. While yellow police tape continues to be present around the exterior of the room in shot after shot, the area around that table embodies Camille's desired high class presentation with ornate serving dishes, antiques and a fancy tablecloth.

Camille also has a distinct lack of control over the flow of conversation. The dialogue centers around both Camille and her sister Cora (Julianne Moore) discussing the production their local theater troupe is about to premiere, though each woman has a distinctly different interpretation. Speaking through Altman-style interruption, already confounding the polite atmosphere established by Camille, Cora takes over a description of their production of *Salomé* and adopts an uncouth tone and graphic description clearly inappropriate for that dinner party: "I play Salomé and I get to dance, and ask King Herrod for the head of John the Baptist on the

silver platter. Wait 'till you see that head. It looks so real with the blood coming down on the plate!" Camille soon takes back the conversation to a discussion of art stating, "I'm partial to Oscar Wilde's version, of course I did revise it a little." This simple exchange of dialogue serves to re-establish the relationship between two characters who have been in conflict since the beginning of the film and who remain so throughout. Neither Cora, Camille, nor any other character in the film change to any significant extent. Altman's characters do make choices which affect them, but their actions do not provide neat resolutions. Instead, actions serve to reaffirm the complexity Altman observes in life.

*Cookie's Fortune* in particular shows Altman's production strategies at work in using local community resources and outreach to construct conflict in the form of the production as well. In the staging of *Salomé,* Altman hired a local theater troupe to mount a production of the scenes shown in the final film, allowing the director of the theater troupe to direct that theatrical staging as it appears in the final film. Therefore, Altman works to include a section of the film with a directorial style not his own, embedding both difference and local perspective directly into the larger tapestry. As just a short example from the *Cookie's Fortune* production, it serves to once again show that Altman's productions do not attempt to take over the place as a setting for the narrative, nor do they impose a linear argument onto that place. Instead, Altman's productions observe the meeting of different perspectives in order to tell stories. His portrayal of the contradictory nature of place occurs precisely in the lauded formal elements of his films such as party scenes and overlapping conversations which often highlight characters' conflict in their desires to assert their own perspectives.

To industry producers and studio heads Altman's observational stance quickly labeled him a maverick, and to make films his own way Altman had to distance himself from Hollywood

through alternative production strategies and physical relocation. Alan Rudolph recalls that working outside of Hollywood was integral to Altman's work/life strategy: "If you're in a studio, you're in a studio and if you're in a studio it's Them . . . I don't think it ever would enter into his mind to shoot on a soundstage unless it was something you had to do . . . . locations were as important as anything else to him in the film."[7] For Altman, his desire to make alternative cinema that would compete with Hollywood product often kept him fighting to get his next project funded and likely bred a certain amount of paranoia over control. Therefore, one primary reason for Altman's consistent and varied location shooting was to simply be out of Hollywood, to situate his productions geographically away from the studios' influence. The latter part of Rudolph's statement further suggests that Altman's use of locations was part of his overall process—the specific location was more than an arbitrarily chosen site upon which a script was applied. The "importance" of the location that Rudolph alludes to comes through in a closer examination of Altman's production strategies and engagement with place.

Robert Altman's films continually highlight the complexities of filming locations—making it seem as though he produces films *with* communities instead of just *in* communities. The films often portray local neighborhood hangouts, dialect, slang and local myths, which give a greater sense of an "insider" perspective than found in most films. In thinking about these issues in relationship to his work on *Nashville* (1975) as Assistant Director, Alan Rudolph describes an implicit sense of fidelity to locations.

> One thing we never did with Bob . . . was come in and say [to them], "We're here, you're going to change for us!" It was always about adapting to what was really there. Always about how can we find what we're after without insulting what

[7] Alan Rudolph (filmmaker) personal interview with the author. Seattle, WA. March 21, 2014.

> they're here for. That's not an articulation you verbalize, that's a feeling the community has for you. People on *Nashville* who had no stake in it were helping, contributing, creating . . . it's about trying to find your reality in their reality—find your formula in theirs . . . Bob was [about], "How can this specific, random story we're trying to tell. How would it have happened in this real setting?"[8]

Rudolph positions Altman's productions as something other than the standard, which act more like invaders who come in, take what they want, represent without regard to the place and unceremoniously leave. In one aspect, the filming philosophy Rudolph outlines provides an artistic narrative to Altman's productions—that he had a desire to naturalize his process, which would result in a unique authorial signature. In another, Rudolph also distinctly places himself, the crew and even the local community as co-enactors of Altman's artistic desires. Though Rudolph points out positive associations with the film *while the production was present*, he is reacting to the now commonly known history among *Nashville* fans that musicians in Nashville quickly disowned the film and its depiction of local music after its release and wide popularity. As Rudolph put it, "We wanted to shoot in the Grand Ole Opry and they hated us, but they didn't know they hated us until later . . . Everyone from Nashville could see what the scenes were about, but they were so happy being in them they didn't think about what it meant. Because Altman's scenes were so much about everyday life, you just kind of disappeared into them if you were a part of it."[9] Here Rudolph clarifies that the Altman production process left the local community almost trance-like and, while the production was still present, Nashville accepted them. But, their acceptance quickly waned after the production environment left and the film

[8] Rudolph. Personal interview.

[9] Ibid.

gained popularity. I chose *Kansas City* (1996) and *Cookie's Fortune* (1999) in Holly Springs, MS as case studies for this chapter because I wanted to explore communities where the memory of Altman's production was much more present, yet where significant time had also lapsed in order to gauge how attitudes may have changed over time. I found that as his methods developed, the communal feelings tended to become longer-lasting.

The uniquely inclusive Altman environment begins with the crew. Stephen Altman, his son and production designer, revealed that Altman took crew accommodations out of the usual hierarchies present on industry shoots making the crew feel much more present and important than on standard industry shoots. On Altman location shoots, the crew stayed in the same hotel, in the same kind of room, received the same per diem and ate with all of the cast and personnel.[10] Producer Matthew Seig recalls hearing from first-time Altman crew members that they had never before worked on a set where the director and cast eat with the crew.[11] Because of an all-inclusive atmosphere during the production, much of the crew felt above the normal below-the-line hierarchy regardless of where their names would inevitably appear in the end credits. As an auteur director, Altman's name became associated with all such practices and made crew much more willing to work with him in order to share in the friendly environment.

A feeling of camaraderie and togetherness was very important to Altman, who felt it was both conducive to his style of filmmaking and made for a better overall work environment. Biographies and studies of Altman have focused on his strategy for dailies, making it a common touchstone in conversations about him. Rudolph remembers, "Bob wants everybody to come to dailies for the collective energy, the collective thrill. But it's more than that. He wanted a

[10] Stephen Altman (production designer) phone interview with the author. August 13, 2013.

[11] Matthew Seig (producer) phone interview with the author. New York City, NY. August 1, 2013.

democratic sense where everybody was rooting for everybody else, where you didn't bring your ego to dailies . . . There was this camaraderie, this spirit, so that nobody felt more important than anybody else. He really wanted it to be a team rooting for each other instead of about me and mine."[12] The terms "democratic" and even "communist" were both often used when I discussed the atmosphere on Altman sets with crew members.[13] Rudolph's statement encapsulate the idea that Altman worked to make a creative atmosphere where everyone felt equally inspired to succeed.

In order to accomplish his manner of working, Altman's ability to function as an auteur who provides such a communal atmosphere relies on an untraditional conception of home. Upon gaining success in Hollywood, Altman left his hometown of Kansas City and never looked back until it became opportunistic to make a film there. Upon leaving his hometown, Altman did not adopt a new place as home, but instead began creating a concept of home which would travel with him. Altman turns each set into a place of social living instead of a standard film production work space. In Mitchell Zuckoff's Oral Biography of Altman he cites a number of stories which point directly to Altman's irremovable, and at times problematic, linkage of work and home. In discussing the book project Zuckoff explains the difficulty of trying to separate Altman's work from his life:

> It soon became clear that the lines between his life and his work weren't just blurry, they were almost non-existent. After he returned from flying bombers in WWII, planning and making movies defined nearly everything he did. The films

[12] Mitchell Zuckoff. *Robert Altman: The Oral Biography*. (New York: Knopf, 2009). 216.

[13] From what I could gather, those who used the term "communist" were using the term in a very colloquial and inaccurate way to describe a sense of everyone being treated equally.

> he eventually made weren't overtly autobiographical—not even *Kansas City* . . . he didn't need to make movies about himself because the entire process of filmmaking *was* his adult life.[14]

Kathryn Altman described their life in terms of always moving on to the next production. Once they finished one, they would head "home" to begin planning the next one and create a new home at that shooting location.[15] In Zuckoff's book in particular, it becomes clear that Altman's amalgamation of the normally much more separate spheres of work and life led to significant disruptions in standard hierarchies of family and job. In interviews, Altman answered questions about his artistic devotion with a remark about how if he was told he had to give up his family in order to continue making films that he would miss them, but he would choose his work.[16] In the context of an interview Altman's retort can come off as tongue-in-cheek, though the Zuckoff book contextualizes his comment further. Some of Altman's children recall him approaching them when they were young and directly telling them that his work was the most important thing and if he had to leave them behind then he would.[17] While certainly a highly problematic

[14] Zuckoff. *Robert Altman*. xi-xii.

[15] Kathryn Altman. (social coordinator) personal interview with the author. New York City, NY. July 29, 2013.

[16] For an example of an interview response: "If they should ever say to me, 'You'll never see your sons again or your wife unless you get out of the business of making movies,' I'd say, 'Sorry, Michael, Bobby, Mathew, Kathryn. It will hurt me not to see you again. But good-bye.'" Aljean Harmetz. "The 15th Man who Was Asked to Direct 'M*A*S*H' (and Did) Makes a Peculiar Western." in *Robert Altman Interviews*. Ed. David Sterritt. (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2000). 18.

[17] Here is Stephen Altman's account: "We weren't his priority. His priority was himself and his job. At one point, I think I was around ten, though maybe I was a little older, he had everybody sit down in his Malibu mansion, the movie-star house, and told us all that if it ever came down to it and he had to choose between all of us and his work, he'd dump us in a second. We were like, 'Oh, okay.' And we went back to playing. But it was something I remember always. I understood where he was standing for the rest of our lives, and kind of treated it accordingly." Zuckoff. *Robert Altman*. 235.

statement for a parent to make, it does specify the extent to which he would go to retain his preferred style of living.

Such stories clarify that Altman creates not so much a work/home balance as a work/life balance where the concept of "home" naturalizes the focus on work as a way of life. Significantly, most of Robert Altman's children went on to work with him in some capacity once they got older, and their new positions as colleagues caused a distinct shift in their interpersonal relationship. His son Robert Reed Altman, who became a camera operator, stated, "My relationship with my dad? You know, he was working so much I don't really know . . . . My relationship with him was pretty amazing as far as working together . . . he wasn't my father during those periods, he was the director Robert Altman and I was working with him and for him."[18] Given that all of the children express much fonder memories of Altman while working for him, it seems that he considered more traditional family elements, such as children, much more acceptable if they did not distract from the completion of the work. Altman sets up a dynamic which established the *feeling* of home, created by Kathryn Altman, in order to most efficiently, comfortably and affordably make the kinds of films he wants to make.

Although he does move to new locations frequently and acts as an observer, it would be a mistake to consider Altman a tourist. While the figure of a tourist implies travel, it also connotes a distinct level of disengagement from both work and home life. John Urry defines the tourist's social practices as: "The journey and stay are to, and in, sites which are outside the normal places of residence and work . . . There is a clear intention to return 'home' within a relatively short period of time . . . The places gazed upon are for purposes which are not directly connected with

[18] Zuckoff. *Robert Altman*. 236-37.

paid work and normally they offer some distinctive contrasts with work."[19] Urry divorces tourism and work here by stipulating that the social practices surrounding tourism involve a distance from them, a transitory experience where tourists seek to collect signs of the culture, but not adopt it.[20] Urry also clearly delineates the acts of tourism as outside of everyday experience, which is precisely the type of experience Altman taps into. Altman works in these places and his involvement with the communities signal his production as something much more than standard tourism. As local Holly Springs resident Lucy Carpenter stated, "He just blended in with us. We just felt like we were part of them,"[21] local Mark Millar further defined the *Cookie's Fortune* production against *Heart of Dixie* (1989), another major production that had been in Holly Springs: "The *Heart of Dixie* crew wasn't friendly. There was no interaction with the community. *Heart of Dixie* didn't hold a premiere in Holly Springs. The Altman crew mingled. It was a community-wide thing."[22] Carpenter, Millar and other locals retain a distinct air of respect for Altman and his production, as opposed to the indifference shown to other productions which have come through the area—the latter treated much more like tourists.

Instead of a tourist, one could think of Robert Altman as a nomad. Altman mines the outsider position and in presenting cinematic contradictions of places he clarifies that truly belonging is not the goal. As Johannes von Moltke states in his work on the *Heimat* film, "Homelessness provides a superior epistemological vantage point from which to gauge the meaning of home" (5). Though I would not describe Altman as "homeless" per se, the absence of

[19] John Urry. *The Tourist Gaze*. (London: Sage, 1990). 3.

[20] Urry. *Tourist*. 3-4.

[21] Lucy Carpenter. (Circuit Court Clerk Marshall County) personal interview with the author. Holly Springs, MS. February 25, 2014.

[22] Mark Millar. Personal interview with the author. Holly Springs, MS. February 25, 2014.

a particular location for his home life does make his lifestyle something other than standard. While talking to me about his cousin "Bob," documentary filmmaker John Altman stated, "That was a man who was always observing." Importantly, Altman's observing is fundamental to his role as an *individual* author, but his production methods, which characterize the authorial identity of his production are formed around groups. Therefore, Altman's nomadic, communal home dynamic affords him the opportunity to better practice the observational elements found in his more personal directorial style. Robert Altman constructed an alternative practice of "home" which creatively emphasized his interest in observing the chaos of life as well as supported an alternative set of production strategies which allowed his under-funded projects to more efficiently acquire the industrial and community resources needed.

The Altmans' strategy of a travelling home-life suggests that the concept of place has some freedom from specific location. Since Altman constantly traverses locations, it would be easiest to assume that his version of home-life is more spatially oriented than place-oriented. However, space/place definitions hinge around social relationships/practices, and places are not fixed locations, but fluid ones. Therefore, Kathryn and Robert Altman's construction of home really falls between space and place. The social relationships present in the constructed home life of the Altmans are not the more generalized relationships found at the level of space. They may travel with a standard set of practices which make "home," but they treat each home as an individual place *and* their treatment of what they regard as home is quite specific—a communal, social work environment. Thus, if cultural geography has shown us that places provide opportunities to study conflicting social relationships at a given location, the case of the Altmans reveals there is something to be gained from relaxing the tie to a particular location from social relationships scaled at the level of place. That is to say, the Altmans travel with their own set of

social relationships surrounding "home" which they re-invent in the environments they work in as opposed to simply forcing pre-conceived practices onto a location. They take their constructed filmmaking community, Altman's more personal conception of home, and seek to make a neighborly connection with location-specific communities where they work. The Altmans surpass typical outsiders in that they work to appear as part of the community. Feelings of neighborly outreach also aid their local business needs such as negotiating location permits, altering private/public locations or inconveniencing the local public. Much like place, their conception of home has a secondary element to it that remains mutable and ready to embrace new place perspectives, while maintaining their overall focus on work/home. To suggest that place associations must remain fixed to a specific location makes it remarkably difficult to study how social relationships travel. Suggesting that social practices remain bounded to a location threatens to ignore outside influence and perspective in order to unevenly highlight the influence of local place perspectives.

The nomad's relationship to home or homeland is a complicated one. By definition the nomad is without the usual understanding of home, yet this does not mean that the nomad is without a home. The nomad's insertion into a place can serve as much more than a trespassing interloper. Instead, the nomad can act as a mirror onto that place, displaying contradictions that lie unobserved, unremarked and which sit at the heart of other local anxieties. Whereas the Hollywood film often takes the form of that unwelcome interloper that rewrites the place for its own purposes, a filmmaker like Altman is an example of an auteur entering a location in order to use it *as* a place. He makes the place his home for the period of production and uses his narrative to showcase observed complexities in the local dynamic which ultimately serve to complicate and expand the narratives the production came to shoot. Combining these areas of home and

work strategically has many effects and implications, the first of which being that constructing this environment certainly cannot be accomplished alone.

## Home-maker: The Altman Family Touch

"[Kathryn] was the protector of the home court. She was the other shoe."
—Alan Rudolph, Filmmaker[23]

"I don't think there's any line item credit that's big enough to encompass what she did"
—John Altman, Filmmaker[24]

In my research it quickly became clear that any focus on Altman's production strategies would be completely lacking without careful attention to the role of Kathryn Altman. John Altman's quote perfectly encapsulates the feelings and testimonials provided by other crew members with whom I spoke. It was difficult for them to separate what they regarded as the most effective qualities of Robert Altman's productions from Kathryn Altman's central influence. Most crew members used words and phrases to describe Kathryn's role as "everything" or, "he couldn't have done any of it without her." Former Kansas City Film Commissioner Patti Broyles Harper stated, "She's an executive producer. If you try to think of the many roles that she fills everyday… I would say that there's no one position."[25] When I asked Kathryn Altman a similar question she referred to herself as a kind of "social coordinator," a label that many others have described as both technically accurate and woefully incomplete.[26] If, as I claim, the most

[23] Rudolph. Personal interview.

[24] John Altman. (filmmaker) personal interview with the author. Kansas City, MO. October 13, 2013.

[25] Patti Broyles Harper (former Kansas City Film Commissioner) personal interview with the author. Lawrence, KS. October 13, 2013.

[26] More accurately, I suggested the label "social coordinator" and Kathryn agreed with it. She described her work more specifically as, "Well, it's just social stuff. Dinners and kind of open houses. Actors would come to town and I would make them comfortable, we'd entertain them." Kathryn Altman. Personal interview.

effective qualities of Altman's filmmaking are defined by his social production practices, then Kathryn Altman's central role in creating the social, family atmosphere was also consequently a central role in the productions as well.

Kathryn Altman, as an un-credited worker, exemplifies the tendency of collaborators to create an environment defined as conducive to the creativity of the auteur, and yet not consider this creative labor in its own right. Beginning her work with Altman in the late 1960s, her labor would most likely have fallen under the label of housewife, though her active involvement in these productions also serves to extend beyond the traditionally-regarded limits of that role to such an extent it would demand re-definition. In her book *Feeding the Family*, Marjorie L. DeVault refers to the practices surrounding the label of "housework" as "caring work." We must acknowledge, as she puts it, "caring work in all its complexity, as activity deeply compelling for those who do it and critically important for group life. Though necessary for maintaining the social world as we have known it, caring has been mostly unpaid work, traditionally undertaken by women, activity whose value is not fully acknowledged even by those who do it."[27] Again, even though Kathryn Altman's work unquestioningly exceeds the standard definition of "housewife" or "caring work," these traditional labels also cannot be ignored as their connotations and social expectations likely contribute heavily to how her work has been treated and remembered. While Kathryn Altman's work certainly has not gone unacknowledged, it has certainly not been *fully* acknowledged, evidenced by her absence in virtually everything ever written about Robert Altman and his filmmaking process. DeVault's characterization of housework as central to the forming and sustaining group life is also key here because Kathryn maintained multiple family spheres. She did not simply make a home for her family, but

[27] Marjorie L. DeVault. *Feeding the Family*. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991). 3.

performed those functions while *also* making sure that familial feeling was a part of the production experience for all those involved—two quite integral endeavors. Creating a home environment for the production involved planning event spaces, cooking for large groups of people, hiring caterers, making her an integral piece of the production schedule.[28] Those involved in Altman productions credit her with further managing tempers/arguments during filming and performing community outreach. Her ability to manage her labor under the impression of an easy-going, inclusive family-oriented production environment is perhaps the greatest feat of them all.

Even more than providing an easygoing spirit—or "home-life"—Altman's work/life strategies had very practical elements, and the social aspects Kathryn engineered were central. The family environment was also a key aspect to Altman's work strategy. Matthew Seig theorized,

> Why Robert Altman always did [location shooting], and there is a real logic to that, was that he gets the cast and crew away from their daily life and focused on the project and creates that family atmosphere that Altman's really known for. That was a part of the process of making the film . . . location shooting does have this huge social advantage: get people to concentrate, may even get them to hang out with each other as a social unit.[29]

[28] To clarify, by saying she was an integral piece of the production schedule I mean that she was essential, but her work was often expected to fit into the existing schedule. When talking about the Holly Springs shoot she told me, "God I can't tell you how many dinners we had at our house. I was always trying to find somebody within the area that could take a last minute 12 for dinner. I found these two housewives who had a little business on the side doing parties and things. If I gave enough notice they could pull together and I'd help because I knew the whole house." Kathryn Altman. Personal interview.

[29] Seig. Personal interview.

As Seig points out, Altman's strategies revolve around the concept of daily life. Everyday experiences become structured by the Altmans through not only removing cast and crew from their known environments, but also embedding them into the new environments in an agreeable way. Discovering new environments together causes the production team to bond and further encourages them to socially interact with local communities, encouraging good will toward the production.

The most frequently cited element of this overall social environment has to be the famous and frequent parties which occurred. Once the location was chosen for the shoot, Kathryn chose a place for the Altman home, which she would continually manage throughout the shoot (Fig. 3.1). It was always the central hub for the production, and every week she hosted a large party with all of the cast and crew invited.[30] Kathryn mentioned that these had a dual purpose for Robert. First and foremost, both were famously social and enjoy interactions through parties—it was their preferred way to live.[31] Secondly, Robert Altman apparently liked production questions to be asked in a party atmosphere where everyone was around:

> We'd make sure we made a big barbeque there and then Bob would invite everyone to come out and he'd be behind the barbeque cooking the stuff and then people would have to come to him to say, "by the way that part, should I be

[30] The parties were mentioned over virtually all of the interviews, though the more specific information here comes from Kathryn Altman. The guest lists of the parties would change depending on what needed to be accomplished at what time, but from all accounts it sounds like it was common to have a party at least once a week (outside of dailies and meals) where everyone on the film was involved. Kathryn Altman. Personal interview.

[31] 'Bob really loved people. It's the old story, when people would say to me, "Oh it's Bob's birthday, what can I possibly give him?" I'd say, "give him a party" and that was the happiest thing; he liked it. And he worked well that way too, because he'd have conversations with the actors. They'd come over and feel comfortable. We tried to make a comfortable atmosphere so they would not feel like they were on the spot. And that all worked together and that was his policy for dailies. You may have read this or heard it at the symposium. He invited everybody to dailies, he wanted everybody to come . . . he thought that it worked better, because he was so big with ensemble, so he just thought that everybody would get to know what everybody else did." Kathryn Altman. Personal interview.

> looking for…" In other words, he felt that way everybody got to talk to him enough rather than him having to go person-to-person and still make it social and still get their point, get their questions asked. That was a little theory he had and it seemed to work well.[32]

Alan Rudolph similarly revealed that Altman made cast and crew approach him in a party setting because it reflected his desire to work creatively in a more active atmosphere where ideas had to go out to a group, rather than in isolated conversations.[33] Altman preferred creative questions be placed in a social environment—retaining the key Altman themes of complexity and observation. Kathryn Altman, Alan Rudolph and Matthew Seig's statements all point to pragmatic production strategies that evolved out of making their social preferences a central part of the Altman location environment—using basic elements of their preferred home-life for practical strategic effects in getting the films made.

Beyond weekend parties, Kathryn Altman was busy arranging almost nightly dinners for smaller groups of cast, crew, or local figures. Often at the last minute, she would find restaurant reservations, organize caterers, cook and plan large parties. While on the surface social planning may seem like a secondary or tertiary concern, with such close connections between the creative work and the social life, entertaining could not have been more central. Robert Reed Altman states,

> She's always been like the queen mother in charge. She always made sure everything was running smoothly, that Bob was happy, that he could throw his parties and his gatherings with people . . . It was a continuous job for her, all the

[32] This particular story was in relationship to *Nashville*. Kathryn Altman. Personal interview.

[33] Rudolph. Personal interview.

> parties, all the entertaining, all the things to remember. She'd help Bob remember all the stuff on the social front, which was really the base to everything. Even though Bob had his office and the people who worked for him, there was also the whole other side, which she definitely took care of and made sure was running smoothly. Every time we'd move from one house to another to go on location she'd find the right house, she'd get all that stuff together, make sure it was good for entertaining, that it had what we needed. She kept this whole family together. Because like we said earlier, Bob was always just making the movies. She really had to run everything. She's like the grease between all the metal gears that kept everything running smooth and perfect.[34]

Here he not only praises Kathryn for her work but also describes her work as a necessity. A very common thread among conversations about Kathryn is the idea that none of it could have existed without her. Despite Robert Altman's preference for a social environment, all agree that its real creator was Kathryn Altman. On one side she created and maintained the atmosphere which he found to be most creative for him to work in. On another, she was in charge of the very aspects that made Robert Altman's films most memorable for those who worked on "his" productions.

The Altmans' culture of social interaction both explicitly and implicitly involved local communities. City officials, location property owners and other locals involved in the productions, were often included in these festivities in strategic ways. As John Altman put it, "The right people were always fetted, or given access at the right time."[35] Beyond simply

[34] Zuckoff. *Robert Altman*. 263.

[35] John Altman. Personal interview. Matthew Seig backs up John Altman's claim while also asserting that the main purpose of the parties was for the overall production environment. From my overall conversation with John Altman I would have to say that he would be in full agreement with Seig on this point: "they would spend a lot of money going to restaurants and inviting local people and making people feel a part of what's going on. But mostly it's

inviting locals, however, the Altmans also made sure to involve their social environments with local communities. Dinners, parties and production needs all took advantage of local businesses, restaurants and caterers. Altman also used the strategy of offering dinners with known celebrities, including himself, in order to get local powers on his side by inviting municipal leaders or local business owners to dinners and making them feel included. I do not mean to suggest that such gestures were only superficial, however. Most Altman productions involve a story of how a local resident who worked with the film ended up as a lifelong friend. The Altmans' collected friends talk about not only being included during the original production where they met, but also became included in future productions simply as friends. Patti Broyles Harper relays that, even after shepherding the production through Kansas City in her position as Kansas City Film Commissioner, the Altmans maintained a social relationship with her:

> When [Bob and Kathryn] come into a community it's one of their standards to become familiar with the community and do things in the community and for the community . . . even in Holly Springs, MS and Chicago, and wherever else I followed them around—it was so fun—they did that everywhere . . . . When I visited on the set of *Dr. T and the Women* they made it a point to engage with the community. We went to a ranch for a big barbeque. Things like that. In Holly Springs, we did things in the community. Kathryn and I went to the Elvis impersonator's house . . . they just do things in the community . . . They seek out

about the cast and crew, the film unit itself . . .But yeah, they would have their dinners with the mayors or whoever." Seig. Personal interview.

> local things to support and check out. There didn't seem to be any type of exclusion.[36]

Broyles Harper also notes the desire of the Altmans not to move into a community and take over, or carve out a small area for only themselves, but instead to interact with the new community and learn about it. Taking the time to experience the environment showed a level of interest in each location as well as respect for the existing local character.

Crew also strongly felt a part of the linkage between Robert Altman's work life and home life, and they recognize Kathryn Altman's central role in that environment. Many interviewees used the term 'family' to describe the atmosphere of an Altman set such as when Matthew Seig said, "When people talk about the Altman experience or way of doing things is the Altman family. Family is often a mom and a dad. Kathryn handled that whole social part of it, made everyone feel welcome, have parties and dinners . . . That was just part of the process."[37] Despite the strong connection between family and work, no one I talked to made the mistake of defining Kathryn Altman as a housewife. They all recognize that the broad-spanning home environment was central to Robert Altman's branded method and it was a method which she was a full partner in creating. Robert Altman is established as an auteur filmmaker, but his distinctive style of filmmaking required the carefully maintained social atmosphere which Kathryn Altman monitored, controlled and maintained. While Altman was making creative, formal choices in filmmaking, the environment for him to most effectively realize these choices was provided by Kathryn Altman.

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[36] Broyles Harper. Personal interview. The Elvis impersonator's house she refers to is actually a privately owned and operated Elvis museum run by a man who has turned his actual residence into an Elvis museum that he claims is open 24 hours a day 7 days a week. It is regionally famous and most everyone I spoke to Holly Springs recommended I go there.

[37] Seig. Personal interview.

## No One Jogs in Red Banks: *Cookie's Fortune* in Holly Springs, MS

"Unlike many movies set in 'Anytown USA,' *Cookie's Fortune* will provide a true sense of place and a real glimpse of everyday life in Holly Springs"
—*The South Reporter*, Holly Springs' Newspaper[38]

"Location filming is authentic—if we had to build Holly Springs in southern California, it would be cost prohibitive and you still couldn't get it as 'right' as the town itself. It gives a heightened sense of place and atmosphere"
—David Levy, Producer[39]

"A customer from Red Banks came in the drug store and asked Bob [Lomenick] how everybody liked having the Hollywood stars around. 'What's that Chris O'Donnell look like. He's a little short boy, isn't he?' the Red Banks customer asked. 'Well somebody saw this guy jogging in Red Banks the other day. 'We were meetin' down at the BP and decided it must be one of those actors. 'Nobody jogs around Red Banks. We just don't do that.'"
—*The South Reporter*[40]

The case of Holly Springs, MS and *Cookie's Fortune* outlines how Altman's production strategies function in a real community. Though not the first production in small-town Holly Springs (pop. 7,500), the social climate of *Cookie's Fortune* has given the film a distinct and lasting position in the community. While other large productions have breezed through town, the result on locals seems to be vague memories and relative indifference. When asked about *Cookie's Fortune*, however, everybody has a set of tales to tell. Yet today the film no longer "appears" in Holly Springs, existing only through local stories. Even though many locations in the film can still be found throughout the town, there are few outward displays of the film's presence. This ephemeral quality of Altman and the film's legacy in Holly Springs are indicative

[38] Vicki Carlton. "Action! Movie Coming to Town." *The South Reporter*. April 16, 1998. A1.

[39] Linda Jones. "Behind the Cameras On the Set of 'Cookie's Fortune.' *The South Reporter*. June 25, 1998. A5.

[40] Walter Webb. "If You're Jogging in Red Banks, You Must be a Movie Star." *The South Reporter*. June 4, 1998. A4.

of the functions of Robert Altman's production practices, which promote neighborly good will, yet often leave with few physical remembrances. Overall, the *Cookie's Fortune* shoot in Holly Springs provides an almost idyllic example of how the Altman production strategies function.

Surprisingly, given the town's small size, Holly Springs has been the site of a number of productions.[41] Most notably *Heart of Dixie* (Martin Davidson, 1989) and *Big Bad Love* (Arliss Howard, 2001) filmed sizable amounts there. Both before and after *Cookie's Fortune* the area housed productions for television, commercial work and the occasional film, often shared with Oxford, MS only 30 minutes away. According to local sources, the producer for a recent HBO pilot that filmed in Holly Springs stated that productions target Holly Springs because of its authenticity.[42] While many small towns have Main streets that have been either almost completely abandoned or almost completely gentrified, Holly Springs' town square thrives almost as if it has escaped from time. The area gives the feeling of reaching back into the past and experiencing prosperous small-town America in a way that has become increasingly difficult to find. Further, the fact that it has a Film Commissioner and experience with productions makes many aspects of the town a boon to industry shoots interested in its aesthetic qualities. Even with all these productions coming through, however, *Cookie's Fortune* remains a high point for the local community beginning, for this discussion, with its representation.

On the surface, with its celebrity director and ensemble cast of stars, *Cookie's Fortune* has the appearance of big Hollywood encapsulating a small Mississippi town. However, the film

[41] On the size of the town Kathryn Altman said, "You have to fly into Memphis to get there and then drive. They don't have a theater, they don't have a restaurant. They have a little counter coffee shop. They have beautiful antebellum homes—really exquisite . . . They have supermarkets, drive thru, but the commercial places are nil . . . Very small town. People were so happy to have us there . . . Glenn Close got so comfortable there. She was there with her daughter and had friends in and out. She'd ride her bike through the town and the neighbors would wave at her. It was very gracious." Kathryn Altman. Personal interview.

[42] Marie Moore (Holly Springs Film Commissioner) personal interview with the author. Holly Springs, MS. February 24, 2014.

did not 'take over' Holly Springs in order to force an idyllic narrative onto a small town environment. Due to the intricacies of Holly Springs, Altman's attention to the town as place inflected his typical formal stylistic choices, combining narrative cohesion and an interest in portraying "real" Southern small-town life. Altman's place-centric focus appears in his famous approach to scripts. On the subject of scripts Altman says that, "the danger of writing a script is that everybody has the same voice. I think when they don't have the same voice it makes the film better. So when you have five different sources in there, five different voices, it seems closer to reality . . . many writers have hard feelings about what I do to their scripts, but my idea is, it's not their script. Their script is my tool to work with."[43] Altman allows for a lot of improvisation surrounding the scripts he works with, part of which logically involves utilizing the time he, the crew and cast spend in local communities. As an example, on the production of *Tanner '88*, where the script was written in the midst of the production process, Matthew Seig explained, "Bob would do that a lot. You get there and you see what's cool. There was a lot of just general, 'Let's explore the place' and then find things and tell Gary what we'd found."[44] Keeping loose with the script not only kept Altman distinct from standard industry practices, but also allowed for greater attention to the local environments and how to best portray them accurately.

When asked about the film's accuracy locals agree that to some extent it does represent the town and they are proud of that. Most of the Holly Springs residents I talked to owned their own VHS or DVD copy of *Cookie's Fortune*. The hotel I stayed at in the Holly Springs town square actually provided a copy of the film for visitors to watch. Mayor Kelvin Buck gave a good outline of the most popular response: "the characters have a resemblance to people here.

[43] Zuckoff. *Robert Altman*. 81.

[44] Seig. Personal interview.

The plot could easily be seen played out in real life in Holly Springs."[45] Local Mark Millar's experiences with the film point to how the Altmans' use of local resources can add to the feelings of authenticity through forged connections with the town. Millar's family owned a number of clothing stores in the area which the production ended up using for wardrobe and material, and Millar's wife, Maia Millar, began catering for dailies and other parties, working closely with Kathryn Altman.[46] Whereas the production team could certainly handle costuming on their own, the use of local shops at the very least suggests an interest in authenticity not just to be copied, but physically. Residents all saw some form of their daily lives represented on screen, whether that was in specific content elements, such as the depiction of race relations, the frequency with which characters just 'stop by' to say hello or the general 'feel' of the film—taking a slower pace as more representative of small town life. Of course locals also see differences where the "outsider" status is more apparent, such as in scenes where characters make catfish enchiladas—a dish unknown to locals.[47] However, given the retained good will toward the film in the community, locals emphasize positive elements while the negative elements tend to be trivial items at best.

*Cookie's Fortune* does have the qualities of an Altman film, but due to Altman's work to portray life in Holly Springs, his directorial style alters slightly to accommodate the small-town nature of the place. Introductions to characters in other films throughout his career often occur at a frenzied pace. In both *Nashville* (1975) and *Prêt-à-Porter* (1994), many characters initially interact through chaotic arrival scenes at airports where individuals from distinctly different

[45] Buck. Personal interview.

[46] The role of local caterers mentioned in: Millar. Personal interview.; Kathryn Altman. Personal interview.; Linda Jones. "'Caterers to the stars!' Maia and Diane Cook!" *The South Reporter*. 16 July 16, 1998. B1.

[47] Moore. Personal interview.

contexts intermingle often with multiple conversations happening at once. *Cookie's Fortune*, while still an ensemble cast, has much more individually presented characters. The film introduces characters in separate places within Holly Springs in comparatively contained conversations. While other Altman films have many disparate conversations at once, the overlap found at the start of *Cookie's Fortune* occurs in much more scene-specific scenarios where the characters remain focused on their immediate environments. In the early play rehearsal scenes Camille (Glenn Close) directs actors in her local church production of *Salomé*. Multiple characters do cross-talk, but all conversations surround the play. As Camille directs Patrick (Randle Mell), multiple overlapping conversations focus exclusively on developing the play, such as Camille discussing the look of a prop disembodied head, or characters giving tips to Patrick on how to act the scene. The conversations still provide the more 'real life' character development Altman's known for, but the singularity of subject within the scene at the same time gives a slower feel to the normal pace of an Altman film. By contrast, one of the first scenes in *Nashville* has Opal (Geraldine Page) talking to people in the music business while watching a live taping of Linnea Reese (Lily Tomlin) and a gospel choir. During this introductory scene, conversations about gospel, missionaries and Kenya combine with the direction of the choir as well as singing. The disparate subjects help to convey the frenzied nature of the Nashville community: full of celebrity, self-importance and politics. In the desire to convey Holly Springs, Altman's treatment of the area changes to accommodate felt associations with the real environment.

Locals also commonly describe *Cookie's Fortune* as a production in which the community *wanted* to be involved. The extras release forms found in archival materials state that for participation in the film residents would not receive payment, but instead would note their

church so that it would receive an unspecified donation from the film.[48] Not paying individuals certainly saved the production money, and when asked about this practice as an incentive in 2014 residents insisted that nobody who participated in the film was interested in money; they just wanted to be involved in the Altman community. Mayor Kelvin Buck reasons more specifically, "That was done to attract those who wanted to do it for the love of the town."[49] Elder of the First Presbyterian Church, Lucy Carpenter, explained that the church itself decided on the payment strategy.[50] Local testimonials point to it as an important decision which involved the community and was not just a convenient happenstance. As a production strategy, placing responsibility for remuneration within the hands of a locally respected institution takes into account resident concerns and perspectives instead of the more common narrative of Hollywood productions throwing money around. The strategy of not paying individual extras indicates that Altman could use the good will engendered by his production practices to the advantage of getting his tightly-budgeted films made.

When speaking about the production, despite having many positive stories about parties and experiences, residents are often quick to break away from describing the feelings of belonging and similarity to noting apparent differences between their own lives and the more glamorous lives of the Altmans. The story from the start of this section regarding identity in Red Banks is a good example. Beyond finding it in the local newspaper, locals repeated that story to me several times during my visit. All of the expressed interest in the story leads me to the conclusion that locals did have a particular fascination in identifying the 'Hollywood' present in

[48] Robert Altman Papers. Special Collections Library. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2014.

[49] Buck. Personal interview.

[50] Carpenter. Personal interview.

Holly Springs during that time. That they were in whatever fashion allowed to take part in these usually strictly cordoned-off practices seems to add a lot of good will to memories of the film. Stories involve a lot of crossover between being both outside and inside the world of the production. Resident Mark Millar notes the nonchalant day-to-day character interactions with stars: "Everybody was friendly. Actors would come out and eat with us. One day Chris O'Donnell was in the café eating and got up to answer the phone and take an order when the café was slammed. We were working right alongside them."[51] Such stories set the stage for a community, that the production and even those least likely to become part of small town life—namely the larger-than-life stars—quickly became integrated into the community.

Despite the frequent felt associations to the film expressed by locals, it would be very easy to visit Holly Springs and be completely unaware that anything had ever filmed there. When asked about the presence of the film in the community, Holly Springs residents who worked on or experienced the film production almost universally agree that the film is still present there. However, they also often express uncertainty in how to describe that. Though the city does have significant tourist outreach, unlike John Waters in Bsltimore *Cookie's Fortune* and film tourism do not appear to be on the list of potential draws to the Holly Springs community. Instead the Holly Springs Tourism and Recreational bureau brochures and website prize its history as a Civil War site.[52] Other enticements to the area include a number of summer festivals such as an annual Kudzu festival and historic tours of antebellum homes in the area.[53] Furthermore, despite the

[51] Millar. Personal interview.

[52] "Holly Springs." Last updated 2015. http://www.visithollysprings.com/

[53] Kudzu is a vine-like plant prevalent in the area and adopted as a source of local fame. I was told that Holly Springs is the only place where you can get Kudzu jelly. Kathryn Altman told me it was a Japanese plant introduced along the Mississippi in order to control erosion and it just took over everywhere: "You can't control it." Very likely in tongue-in-cheek honor of the area, and almost symbolic for this project, Robert Altman's production company for *Cookie's Fortune* was entitled Kudzu. Kathryn Altman. Personal interview.

prominent presence of historical markers throughout the town, nowhere do signs point out the former presence of a major film (Fig. 3.2). Locations used by the film have been left to fall apart unless they were already businesses before the film arrived (Figs. 3.3-3.4). The expansive and impressive former cotton compress building used for the exterior of Theo's Bar in the film, and according to Altman the very reason why he chose Holly Springs for this production, has been left completely vacant and decaying (Figs. 3.5-3.8).[54] Even though the production was considered an extremely important and positive influence on the town *while it was there*, the lack of any continual physical presence suggests that its positive qualities for the community lay in the social community it fostered, not the sites used. While those were largely areas already in disuse before the film came in, its absence has not had much notable effect, though in the case of *Kansas City* we will see that in different community environments attention to more fleeting social gatherings instead of longer-lasting relationships can have important effects on community development.

In broader contexts it would seem as though *Cookie's Fortune* has been largely forgotten in film culture as well. The Region 1 DVD has quickly and quietly become a collector's item, listed as out-of-print, and provides one reason for scrounging the depths of video store going-out-of-business sales. Coverage of *Cookie's Fortune* takes up fewer than 3 pages in Mitchell Zuckoff's expansive oral biography of Altman,[55] making it one of the most limited treatments in the book—noticeably smaller than the attention to the films before and after it, *The Gingerbread Man* (1998) and *Dr. T and the Women* (2000) which were not considered particularly successful

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[54] From Robert Altman's commentary track on the *Cookie's Fortune* DVD. "The color of the red, the shade of it, was amazing to me. In fact that building is probably the reason why we selected this town of Holly Springs [to film in]"

[55] Zuckoff. *Robert Altman*. 460-62.

either. These facts are virtually unknown in Holly Springs, however, where despite the film's lack of visual presence in the town's well-documented history, the townspeople continue to offer up the film as a source of local pride. Whenever I brought up the endangered status of the film, the statement was met with some surprise, yet not much chagrin. For Holly Springs, *Cookie's Fortune* DVDs represent a positive endorsement for their town, but primarily because the experiences surrounding the *production* are what continue to hold meaning for them, not the film text itself.

The production strategies surrounding a 'Robert Altman Film' provide an enlightening example of what mutual benefits can come out of large film productions moving into communities, but the very unique social qualities of Altman's production also show ways in which the *auteur*-function plays into this process. *Cookie's Fortune* continues to derive far more positive feedback than other films shot in Holly Springs due both to the experiences it offered and the status of those who came in to offer those experiences. The more communal strategies allow for cheaper and easier use of sites for the production, but beyond good stories there are few lasting effects. Holly Springs, though, did not need *Cookie's Fortune*. The town certainly enjoyed the experience and in turn does not mind that former production sites have fallen into ruin and that the film itself becomes more obscure with each passing year. Turning to the production of *Kansas City* reveals how Altman's productions engage with a much more socially/politically diverse environment where both the city and locals have more at stake.

## Good Work: Robert Altman's Auteur-ial Impact on *Kansas City*

"A good road isn't good for everybody."

*—Nippon: Furuyashiki Village*[56]

The *Kansas City* production was conveniently timed for both Robert Altman and Kansas City. For Altman, expectations could not have been higher following *The Player* (1992) and *Short Cuts* (1993), and the return to his hometown sparked a good deal of interest in this production. For Kansas City, Altman's 1930s period film arrived at an opportune time to draw attention to long-neglected historical sites within the city—namely the old Union Station and the 18th & Vine Jazz District. Both areas were dilapidated and needed extensive restoration and community-building work in order to gain the necessary financing. Therefore, Kansas City had much more at stake in hosting a major film production than did Holly Springs. Due to the depressed conditions of the two primary production sites, both were completely open for Altman's team to use as they wanted. Therefore, despite the cost of cosmetic restorations, the production ultimately saved money in not having to periodize and then restore a working train station and historic neighborhood to their original conditions. In terms of film production, Kansas City had rich resources to offer as well with a recently-created city Film Commission and the availability of crew and support services from the local commercial-making industry. It also offered a wide variety of location choices. As the former city Film Commissioner put it, "Kansas City has a wide variety of locations within an hour of a major airport. You can go from an old New York City look to farmland to the tiniest town ever, to a ghost town, to a small thriving town and everyone is open to talking with you about it."[57] For everyone involved *Kansas City* seemed like a guaranteed success.

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[56] In the film, about a small mountain town in rural Japan, a villager expresses his anger at what the construction of a nearby road has done to local's abilities to apply their trades in traditional, effective means. Shinsuke Ogawa. Dir. *Nippon: Furuyashiki Village*. Ogawa Productions, 1984.

[57] Broyles Harper. Personal interview.

However, as excitement built, the city and local news media began to herald the film as its savior, a role the production could not hope to fill on its own. In the end result, Union Station, on the West end of the city, was saved after the film arguably aided public relations efforts. Yet, little ultimately came from comparable attention that the production gave to 18th & Vine because even after the positive wave of the Altmans' social community, the city at large could not overcome longstanding prejudice about the area. The situation details how localized Altman's effect on communities can be. His productions do seem to spread feelings of good will and camaraderie wherever they go, but their place-based nature tends to also keep them quite isolated to the communities they directly engage with at the time. In other words, their experience does not automatically communicate as everyone's experience. Much like Holly Springs, the arrival of a big-budget film was welcome for both its financial and socially beneficial effects. Unlike Holly Springs, however, the sheer size of Kansas City and the extent of its urban development needs meant that the personal touch of Altman's social production strategies had a much smaller and more fleeting effect. As a result, *Kansas City* drummed up a great amount of positive attention to struggling locations, leading to the hope that the production would fix them. But, the lack of sustained presence by Altman's production meant that the film ultimately could not accomplish what the city authorities suggested it would, despite their attempts to turn the Altman social machine to good use.

Archival and reception research on the relationship between Robert Altman's production of *Kansas City* and the city it represents evokes a striking tale of equality. The film production's desire to represent the city in a coherent visual style brought attention to long-needed historical/cultural redevelopment projects across the city and thus, supposedly good times were had by all. However, actually standing in Union Station today on the West side of Kansas city

and then on the corner of 18th & Vine on the East Side, less than 2 miles away, suggests that this tale is at least in part illusory. Physically occupying each place, you would likely feel as though you were in two distinctly separate cities. Union Station would have you in the midst of the active hustle and bustle of a number of profitable commercial retailers in a gorgeously restored and expansive atmosphere (Figs. 3.9-3.10). 18th & Vine would have you standing on a nearly vacant corner where the disparity between commercial gentrification on one street and condemned buildings on the other could not be more apparent (Figs. 3.11-3.12). In its desire to present a holistic historic representation of the city, the production of *Kansas City* had to negotiate the city's geography in a way counter to the daily lived experiences of those who reside there. Positive local media coverage extolled the extent to which the film worked with city officials. Upon gaining entrance to communities, Altman's typical social atmosphere took over to garner further good will. Despite the promises of the press coverage, however, the film did not act as the great equalizer it was heralded. A more place-oriented examination of Kansas City reveals that the film production instead became used to perpetuate longstanding race and class boundaries embedded in Kansas City's uneven urban development history.

To explain the geographical divide more clearly, Troost Ave., a relatively straight North/South road currently acts as a widely understood marker between East and West sides of the city. When planning my fieldwork research trip to Kansas City, I found my attempts to look for hotels, research sites and restaurants were met with the almost constant warning to never travel East of Troost for fear of crime in the area. The area East of Troost amounts to roughly 10 square miles and the 18th & Vine district sits squarely in the midst of that. While the warnings express concern over the lower socio-economic class of the area, given that historically this was the segregated district for Kansas City up until the 1960s, race is an irrefutable element as well.

In the 1920s, 18th Street became the local business district, the heart of the rapidly growing segregated area in Kansas City. The subsequent abolishment of strict segregation provided by the Civil Rights Movement actually brought mixed feelings to the. Famous Negro Leagues Baseball star Buck O'Neil describes, "[Racial segregation] was a horrible thing, but a bitter-sweet thing. We owned the Street's Hotel. We owned Elnora's restaurant. The Kansas City Monarchs were our team. The money we made in the community, stayed in the community. When we traveled we spent money in other black communities and it came back when they came to Kansas City.'"[58] Once segregation ended, the area quickly began to lose its identity and prominence as the more middle class families East of Troost began to leave, making it more difficult for remaining businesses to sustain and cultural uneasiness toward the area has never left. Today, even though there *are* areas East of Troost with statistically high crime, the 18th & Vine area actually has significantly low crime statistics in comparison to the rest of the city—much lower than the downtown area just West of Troost. As a *Kansas City Star* article from 2006 states, "Violent crimes, including rapes and assaults, have dropped this decade in more than 70 percent of neighborhood clusters in the urban core. They're down 24 percent around the 18th & Vine district"[59] The article draws specific attention to 18th & Vine both because the city wants to promote and rebuild the area commercially and also because stigmas about anything East of Troost are so pervasive. For my own part, I can say that while at 18th & Vine I felt just as safe as I did anywhere else in the city.

[58] Buck O'Neil, interview by Chuck Haddix, December 15, 1994, Kansas City, Missouri. in Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix. *Kansas City Jazz: From Ragtime to Bebop—A History*. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). 25.

[59] Jeffrey Spivak. "Believe it, KC: We're Steadily Improving." *The Kansas City Star*. December 2, 2006. 1.

However, visually, 18th & Vine was like being somewhere else. In comparison to nearby communities, the area around Troost Avenue is particularly empty, containing multiple blocks with a noticeable lack of structures and people until Vine Street—about 5 blocks down. Local filmmaker Rodney Thompson describes the frustration felt in the area about its proximity to the prosperous Crossroads District: "right down the street is an area called Crossroads that begins on this side of Main Street which is maybe 10 blocks and it's thriving. On first Fridays you can barely drive through there because people are walking, there's a lot of galleries there and they have wine tastings and they allow them to walk around with liquor so you can barely get through. It's thriving and it's barely a stone's throw away."[60] The Crossroads district is recognized locally as a grass-roots artistic community, celebrated for its innovation and repurposing of the area. Notable in its proximity to 18th & Vine, both neighborhoods are on 18th Street and yet are separated by the boundary of Troost Ave. However, even though this boundary may not be visibly marked, its presence is constantly asserted in the unwillingness of the patrons of one area to travel mere blocks to the other. The block of 18th Street at Vine sports a new museum complex and restored buildings, but despite the high commercial gentrification disparity when compared to areas immediately around it, 18th & Vine is a very lonely place to be.

Robert Altman's specific style of nomadic place-based auteurism continually brought the grandiose qualities of Hollywood productions into communities which had little experience with stars, celebrities and movie-making, but were interested in the expected economic benefits. Historically Altman productions have played important roles in the development of more place-based support services for runaway productions. As two notable examples: *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) brought a lot of attention to filming in and around Vancouver, and his production

[60] Rodney Thompson (filmmaker) personal interview with the author. Kansas City, MO. October 10, 2013.

of *Thieves Like Us* (1974) sparked the creation of the Mississippi State Film Office.[61] In order to house a large production, cities need to provide production support services, which can range from hotels and available locations to building supplies and ancillary production studios. A large film production can attract further productions and in turn spark the development of a better local infrastructure, evidenced in Austin, TX in the next chapter. However, despite large productions' tendency to support these services and the local economy, they often expect access to public sites for shooting locations and then use them in nontraditional and limiting manners. The practice of "taking over" a business or street often clashes with local regulations and ways of life. Resulting conflict can create resentment between productions and locals where the economic and cultural benefits do not outweigh the disruption of daily lived experience. Altman's social-based production practices, however, often act to assuage these disruptive feelings more often than not, making his productions more mobile in their ability to work with cities in the early stages of developing film industry support services. The tendency of communities to latch onto his productions and celebrate them can lead to unique connections between the film and ongoing community development. As seen in Holly Springs, the film's social climate becomes written into the history of the community even if the physical presence of the film does not. Trying to work off of such success stories, the much large Kansas City's municipal government and new media attempted to stress the positive effects an Altman production would have on communities it worked it, yet the reality was significantly more muted.

Even before the production's arrival, the city seemed to be constructing a narrative where *Kansas City* becomes the answer to the city's urban development problems. When the production arrived, Kansas City had a newly developed city-funded Film Commission located under the

[61] On the creation of the State Film Office see: "Pick Mississippi as Movie Locale". *The Clarion Ledger*. 130 no. 413. January 20, 1973. 14.

Economic Development Council. As the first City Film Commissioner explains, "[The EDC] were very forward thinkers and their minds were totally open to the business of film and the economic impact it would have on the community . . . [we] erred on the side of the movie makers because there's so much value to having them in your area. Employment, very little infrastructure required on their behalf, they come in, spend money and they leave the area for the most part better than they found it."[62] Even though the city could certainly have offered studio spaces and post-production resources through locally-available commercial facilities, Broyles Harper makes clear that they were much more interested in attracting films to locations. She reveals the assumption of the Film Office was that productions would automatically improve and 'clean up' areas of the city. Consequently, Altman came in at a time when Kansas City was ready to fight for a large film production and work hard to keep it satisfied in order to further justify the goals of the new office.

For Robert Altman, the choice of Kansas City for the film, originally entitled *Blondie*, initially had little to do with any hometown associations. Stephen Altman and producer Matthew Seig both claim that Robert Altman's choice of Kansas City was more coincidental than a grand homecoming. Stephen Altman relays that, while he was born in Kansas City he and his family had never really been back until:

> A couple years before we made the movie . . . they had something where they were going to give [Robert Altman] the key to the city . . . The whole way in and all the way through we just kept looking around going, "Oh my God, Kansas City is just this huge back lot" . . . it's a depressed city . . . all the streetlights are old

[62] Broyles Harper. Personal interview.

> and all the buildings are old and period. Then he had this script he'd had in mind for quite a while and he's just going, 'We could do *Blondie* here!'[63]

Matthew Seig similarly backs up this story, which paints the approach to Kansas City as very detached, more of an opportunity than thematic synergy.[64] Altman chose Kansas City, and consequently renamed the film, because it was the most efficient location to get the film made. The sites were not chosen because the filmmakers specifically wanted to support areas of Kansas City economically, but instead were chosen because these sites were cultural hotspots in the 1930s and their dilapidated status made them much easier to appropriate for filming. Despite Kansas City being his hometown, then, Altman approached this production similarly to his others—as an outsider.

The distanced connection between Altman and the city did have its effects. Namely, only about half of the locals I spoke to knew Robert Altman was native to Kansas City—typically those who admire cinema or work in the local industry—and fewer than half had actually seen *Kansas City*. Altman arrived as an international celebrity who, it turned out, was from Kansas City making a film about Kansas City. Even today, those of Kansas City who do not know Altman was born and raised there still recognize the name of Robert Altman positively regardless of whether or not they like his films because they know he made a film there about their city. Lisa Shockley, Curator of Collections for the Kansas City Museum and Union Station, describes fundamental ways in which Altman's name continues to circulate: "I think Kansas City is proud of Robert Altman because he didn't want to hide that he was from here. By making a movie and calling it *Kansas City*, I think that made him go up in a lot of people's esteem and

[63] Stephen Altman. Phone interview

[64] Seig. Personal interview.

how they looked at him. I don't know how many people have actually seen that movie . . . but I think it makes people think, 'Yeah, he's ours.'"[65] According to Shockley, longstanding respect for Robert Altman came out of the fact that he brought the production there and that it was a production about their city's history. Few praise the film itself. As a much larger city than Holly Springs, locals' felt connections to the film are rarer as a much smaller minority got to experience directly the Altman's constructed social atmosphere.

Despite not having the same effect as in Holly Springs, the Altman social production environment was still very much active in Kansas City. The combination of their community outreach and the increased media attention to Altman's history with the city combined to open some doors for them. Kathryn Altman notes that while there was some effect to Robert Altman's history with Kansas City, it did not fundamentally change the way they worked: "It probably made it a little easier. People were more willing to bend a little for whatever they were asked to do or have."[66] Film Commissioner Patti Broyles Harper recalled, "We did some things with music with the jazz community and opened that to the public . . . [The Altmans worked] with Bob Butler at the time, who was the writer at *The Star*, who was a huge Altman fan . . . and casting totally involved the community . . . all the extras just weren't extras and that kind of thing involved so much of the community and everybody was excited about it. It was a fun time."[67] As Broyles Harper notes, re-invigorating community pride became an important strategy for *Kansas City* in all of the areas it filmed in.[68] Part of the casting process throughout the film

[65] Lisa Shockley. (Curator of Collections Kansas City Museum and Union Station) personal interview with the author. Kansas City, MO. October 15, 2013.

[66] Kathryn Altman. Personal interview.

[67] Broyles Harper. Personal interview

[68] Similarly, Andy Scott describes a series of events and parties tied to the production's time at Union Station which strongly resembles Holly Springs stories: "While working on the project we had several other different kind of photo

involved highlighting local historical pride in order to get the extras excited and more involved in the project. The jazz shows were offered to the public and presented as attention to a local history that was quickly being forgotten and cast aside. Furthermore, the Altmans forged a relationship with a member of the local press, who would undoubtedly write positive stories about the film based on his experiences. Community outreach which focused on history became all the more important in the case of *Kansas City* because Altman was using virtually forgotten areas of the city to portray its past—not its present.

Altman's attitude toward Kansas City as a convenient setting for his narrative, along with the desire to present a historical re-construction of the time when he grew up, meant the present climate could not have the same prominence in the narrative as seen in *Cookie's Fortune*. As a period film, Altman's *Kansas City* depicted 18th Vine at a time when it *was* thriving, meaning that the film text did not readily engage in the economic disparity the production had to negotiate in 1990s Kansas City in order to use the locations. The film references the long-established race and class conflicts in Kansas City by depicting segregation, but the production's work to periodize locations masks the lasting effects of segregation present in these very locations at the time of filming. *Kansas City* presents a much more 'separate but equal' treatment of these two places. The film is set in the 1930s when, under political leader Tom Pendergast, the clubs, alcohol and gambling on the East side made the area sustainable and racial segregation laws kept the area populated. The character of Johnny (Dermont Mulroney) thematically encapsulates the problematic assumptions the West side of Kansas City makes of its East side. In order to rob a

shoots or other things that happened that were related to a one-off this or that, people related to dignitaries or other stuff that would come through or take a tour. There was a lot of interaction, collaboration, cast parties, they were very nice and invited us to things. In the credits we're listed in appreciation. Everyone was very generous and family-like, which was nothing but a pleasure to be a part of. It was a lot of hard work, but it was worthwhile too." Scott. Phone interview.

wealthy East-side gambler, Johnny puts on blackface as an attempt to disguise his racial identity which he surmises will allow him to 'pass' as an African American. Though we first meet Johnny during the robbery while he is in blackface, the camera clearly shows a medium shot of Johnny's bright white calf peeking out between his socks and pant leg showing that he was not particularly careful in the application of his disguise. Furthermore, in comparison to African American characters in the scene with him, Johnny's treated face appears to have no features or distinctive range of natural skin tone, giving him an entirely unnatural look. Upon simply questioning the robbed gambler, local club owner and East side gangster Seldom Seen (Harry Belafonte) uncovers the entire plot in moments due to the fact that Johnny used lampblack, a soot-like substance that rubs off in the scuffle, to color his face with and quite shrewdly refers to him as "Amos and Andy" due to the fact that the lampblack is so black it makes his attempt to color his skin outrageously artificial. In short, Johnny profoundly underestimates the intelligence, efficiency and professionalism of people living East of Troost because of assumptions he makes about their race and his ability to mimic it. The East side gangsters immediately gain the upper hand by kidnapping Johnny, which, while recognizing themes of social difference, also blurs the line of segregation in the city by suggesting that the power of the East side gangsters can easily reach to areas outside of the segregated East of Troost line as if no racial boundaries existed.

Overall, the film also visually presents these different sides of the city in very evenhanded ways. Indifference toward local concerns also appears in the film's easygoing presentation of 18$^{th}$ & Vine's historic jazz community which at that present time was swiftly slipping away and, due to the social abandonment of 18$^{th}$ & Vine, had become far less localized. As a result, the production hired a number of jazz musicians from outside the Kansas City area instead of focusing on primarily local musicians. Furthermore, the film's ultimate lack of success

meant that those few they did hire locally saw little, if any, benefit to their career as a result. Chuck Haddix, music consultant for the film, explained, "They hired a few local musicians, but not really—that was kind of a point of contention. Of course Kevin Mahoganey's in there, they had to have Joe Turner so they hired Kevin Mahogany. But they used pretty much musicians they brought in."[69] Therefore, despite the story of a noted filmmaker's grand homecoming to present the history of his hometown, the production often focused much more on finishing the film through the most efficient means available than on actual local representation. In other words, Altman's film worked to sympathetically and historically represent the now faltering 18th & Vine community in a positive light, yet to do so they covered over the contemporary problems in the area. For the Altman team, the aim was to get the film made, not to impact urban development despite the expectations of the city. Without sustained attention and support for 18th & Vine the production could not hope to effect redevelopment. The only thing the film realistically provided was positive attention and small economic remuneration.

*Kansas City* gives no geographic sense of East and West, a division that could not be clearer in the daily lived experience of the city. Given the urban dynamics of the 1930s, the thriving Jazz District East of Troost looks remarkably similar to the downtown locations assumed to be in the West side. Exterior scenes depicting the 18th & Vine District look virtually identical to later scenes in the downtown areas. The only noticeable difference comes in the predominant skin color of extras populating the streets. Even at the level of class, early exterior scenes outside the Hey Hey Club on the East side have many African American extras walking around in furs and high fashion clothing, mirroring later scenes outside of a voting hall where high society Caucasian women stand outside on the West side of the city waiting to vote,

[69] Chuck Haddix. (Director of Marr Sound Archives) personal interview with the author. Kansas City, MO. October 11, 2013.

wearing similar furs and outfits as those found on the East side. The buildings in both scenes resemble comparable period facades, primarily differing in the lack of signage on the West side as opposed to the bright club signs of the East. A scene later in the movie at The Ship Bar, on the West side of the city, has a very comparable interior style to the jazz club, The Hey Hey Club, featured on the East side. Both are unusually dark, following the overall visual style of the film. Yet, The Ship Bar has very large, open front windows not found at The Hey Hey Club. Thus, to retain their visual style, the filmmakers make sure to evenly portray the interiors, seamlessly bridging the gap between different sides of the city. Furthermore, The Ship Bar is revealed to be the headquarters for a voter-tampering scheme which can easily be compared to The Hey Hey Club thematically in that the latter club serves as a headquarters for local gangster Seldom Seen (Harry Belafonte). Overall, the film highlights how these areas of the city are *equally* corrupt, sophisticated, civil, and frivolous albeit in different ways. Though in the 1995 the two sides of the city had no sense of equality visually or otherwise and in order to create its active hustling and bustling East side, the production had to make significant cosmetic changes.

The city and local news media continually used Altman's presence to signal social change and urban development throughout the city, creating a narrative which suggested the film was actually performing the needed urban renewal. Altman's social production strategy made each community feel more involved and consequently gave the appearance of even-handed treatment to the city's areas normally in tense political conflict. Press articles of the time, especially from local press such as the *Kansas City Star*, trumpet the homecoming of the long-lost local filmmaker and present a tale of riches and happiness for all. An example of the 'do-no-wrong' nature of the film sold to Kansas City appears in a Downtown page Commentary column which details,

> It took Hollywood to discover the 4600 block of St. John Avenue . . . The [*Kansas City*] crew tore down an overhang from the brick storefronts on the south side of the street. Lo and behold, long-forgotten stained glass windows emerged . . . Truth is, if you like cities and neighborhoods and nostalgia, the 4600 block of St. John has always been a gem. And there are dozens of blocks like it. But sometimes it takes an outsider to find the stained glass beneath the faded boards.[70]

The column constructs a narrative where the film production, often described amorphously as if such things would be true of *any* film production, becomes the savior of the neighborhood which had failed to recognize itself. The writer admits the area always had robust character even before the production found the windows, yet states that somehow the admirable character was only apparent *after* the production revealed stained glass windows—giving the production credit for recognizing the inherent value. The film-as-panacea rhetoric is common in local press of the time and the constructed benevolence placed onto the film continues to live in remembrances of the production and its possibilities.

The city's municipal powers were heavily invested in using *Kansas City* as an opportunity to promote Kansas City as a new runaway production destination. Mayor Cleaver, his wife and Film Commissioner Patti Broyles Harper (then Patti Watkins) spent $2,500 of the Film Commission's budget to attend the Cannes Film Festival with Altman in order to further promote Kansas City as a production site: "Anticipating queries from curious producers, Watkins has come to Cannes with 2,000 information sheets detailing Kansas City's amenities, film production history and cinematic resources."[71] Articles printed during the production and post-

[70] Barbara Shelly. "Commentary." *Kansas City Star*. July 27, 1995.

[71] Robert W. Butler. "At long last, 'KC' is in the Cannes." *The Kansas City Star*. May 12, 1996. 1.

production phase universally laud the benefits the film brought to the city. Aggrandizements of the production's benefits to the city also noticeably avoid any different treatment of the Union Station area or 18th & Vine, suggesting the same story at play. The production supposedly raised local awareness of each area's rich history and brought out significant community pride. For the city, the film gave the opportunity to both advertise the attractions Kansas City had to offer film productions and sell citizens on the benefits of restoring Kansas City's history.

When it came to actual urban development the production did not perform extensive restorations making its ability to effect long-term urban renewal minimal. Instead, Altman's production did what film productions do—restored things cosmetically so they last for the length of the shoot. Stephen Altman describes their decision to use Kansas City in very practical terms which show that the production's primary focus was on finishing the film efficiently—not engaging directly with urban renewal projects: "You get into a depressed city and half the buildings are empty so no one's going to care if you close the street down. The glass is still there and the old signs are still up so you don't have to do every single thing. So that was one of the reasons why we went there. Any functioning train station would've cost me more money because of all the modern stuff that you have to take away."[72] None of these restorations would provide the necessary foundation work needed on Union Station, which had been left completely abandoned for decades, nor would they make the facades added to fill out the 18th & Vine area permanent. What the production did do, however, was draw attention to these sites as neglected and in danger of disappearing forever into something even less than a memory.

Local periodicals reveal that, for citizens, the concept of urban renewal had long kept the East and West sides of the city in tense negotiations. Obviously, while certainly in deteriorating

[72] Stephen Altman. Phone interview.

condition, neither Union Station nor 18th & Vine were completely dormant. Large-scale city investment and attention was underway in both areas. Upon arrival, the *Kansas City* crew encountered a rich history at the Union Station site involving both its decline and efforts to restore. The main benefit Union Station had over 18th & Vine was its position on the Western side of city, where locals were more likely to spend redevelopment money. After a Canadian business company, Trizec, bought the 15 acres comprising Union Station in the 1980s, part of the tax incentives associated with this deal were pursuant to Trizec renovating the 825,000 sq ft of the Union Station building into something the public could use.[73] After Trizec built its own offices and parking nearby, leaving Union Station to all-but collapse, the city sued in order to reclaim its historic public institution.[74] As part of the lawsuit negotiations, a non-profit company was formed to manage the property—the Union Station Assistance Corporation. The USAC, directed by the Mayor's former chief of staff Andy Scott, began a number of outreach programs in efforts to secure funding for a full restoration of the building with plans to create uses for the structure that would make it financially self-sustaining. Therefore, when the film *Kansas City* arrived to Union Station, it came in the midst of municipal attempts to draw attention to the building. The film production's $140,000 in cosmetic restoration gave public tours a new edge in visually presenting what the site could look like with enough funds to provide a full restoration

[73] These specifications come from: Scott. Phone interview; Shockley. Personal interview. For a history of Union Station's development see: Jeffrey Spivak. *Union Station Kansas City*. (Kansas City, MO: Kansas City Star Books, 1999).

[74] During this period Union Station did still serve as a stop for a few trains, though the larger building was left to fall apart. Lisa Shockley explains, "At its heyday, around the time of WWII or slightly after there were about 200 passenger trains a day going through Union Station, by 1974 there were 6. Now I think there are 4 or 6. As people started getting their own cars, as airplanes came in, rail travel just wasn't that important to people anymore. So, there was this little plastic bubble thing they put up in the lobby of Union Station. People could walk in one of the front doors, straight in this little self-contained area, get their ticket and head out to the train." Shockley. Personal interview

(Figs 3.13-3.17).[75] The momentum from the film's involvement with local culture led directly to the passing of a bi-state tax which would go to the restoration of Union Station. 20 years and $180 million later the building is fully restored and almost completely self-sustaining through the commercial businesses, restaurants/shops, and Amtrak currently functioning in the building.[76]

The film's full effect on Union Station's rise from the ashes ultimately is uncertain. When I visited, the space held a number of plaques about Union Station histories and timelines, but none mention the film *Kansas City*. Those who shepherded the renovation, however, spoke about the filming with excitement. The former Director of the USAC Andy Scott, who worked with the film, stated quite clearly that,

> The movie didn't get the bi-state done. It was nice to have the movie, but at the end of the day in my view when you look at the hardcore realities of these projects there was never anyone I recall saying or even thinking, "Wow, having the movie here made the difference. That got this all done." There's too many other bigger things beyond the cosmetics of the movie. We'd already started using the building and having thousands of people coming in before the movie showed up and all having positive reactions. It was all a good thing, it helped in a variety of ways and was, again, a lucky break.[77]

[75] This restoration cost comes from the Set Construction Cost Reports found in the Robert Altman Papers at the University of Michigan.

[76] Through interviews I heard figures ranging from $160 million to over $200 million. The most common figure given by those involved in the redevelopment of Union Station is approximately $180 million. A Union Station History pamphlet created by Union Station Kansas City, Inc. in March 2012 estimates $118 million from the bi-state tax, $100 million from private donors and $40 million from private funds which would bring the cost of restoration up to $258 million.

[77] Scott. Phone interview.

Despite getting some credit in the local media for aiding the salvation of Union Station, the film was not in Kansas City to save its buildings or communities. The Altmans' social environment did not extend far beyond simply getting their film made. As Scott points out, the best the film could do was draw positive attention and then it was the job of others in the city to use that positive attention to gain funds for further restoration. 18th & Vine missed the sustained attention because, while the production treated it just as any other area in the city, the production was not in the business of changing the political climate in Kansas City—what 18th & Vine really needed.

18th & Vine has long been a primary area of contention in Kansas City urban renewal politics. By the time the production arrived, many of the buildings in the area were vacant or condemned, requiring the production to make full facades lining each street to give the appearance of a 1930s active business and club district. Through city elections and local media, people in the wealthier West side of the city expressed frequent unwillingness to invest in forms of urban renewal for the predominantly African American East side. In 1989, the Cleaver plan, proposed by then councilman and soon-to-be mayor Emanuel Cleaver, allocated $20 million dollars for improvements in this area, centering around the creation of a large museum complex which would include construction of the Jazz Hall of Fame, the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, a new space for the Black Archives of Mid-America and, finally, restoration of the historic Gem theater (Figs. 3.18-3.19).[78] This plan was met with criticism almost immediately with protesters claiming that the money would be better spent restoring Union Station if the city was going to spend money on urban renewal. In a number of cases, this sentiment was expressed

[78] Brandon R. Reynolds. "The Jazz District Authenticity Problem." *The Atlantic Cities*. Arts & Lifestyle. February 21, 2012.

by pointing out that Union Station benefits "all" of Kansas City, whereas 18th & Vine only benefits the East side because white people do not like to go there. As an example of this problematic assumption of race, one local protestor wrote into *The Squire* "If we are to have a Jazz Hall of Fame, I'd plop it somewhere white people aren't afraid to visit."[79] Such statement were not uncommon at the time, nor are they uncommon today. In one of my interviews when asked about the uneven development at 18th & Vine the interviewee responded, "They have nothing to be bitter about; it's their own goddamned fault!"[80] Repeatedly, the West side of Kansas City has preferred to take the stance of, at best, indifference to the East side and, at worst, completely turning their backs. The arrival of a film which was sold as a panacea gave the West side of Kansas City the perfect opportunity to do exactly that.

For those based in the 18th & Vine district the municipal attention sparked a different reaction. After the announcement of the Cleaver Plan, resident groups around 18th & Vine used the attention as a way to bolster their almost lost history and neighborhood pride. 18th & Vine was officially added to the National Historic Register in 1991 and a short-lived *18th & Vine* District newsletter began in the early 1990s as well, which gave local communities access to development projects and a forum to discuss concerns.[81] Community excitement and movement toward development, however, was largely isolated to that area until the arrival of the film in 1995. Stephen Altman describes the region at that time as, "Very depressed, there wasn't much left in that whole area. They were just trying to keep and maintain one little section of that, their

[79] From a *Squire* article found without citation information in Chuck Haddix's files at the University of Missouri Kansas City's Marr Sound Archives.

[80] I chose to leave this interviewee anonymous, but for the purposes of this discussion I will reveal that he or she was interviewed West of Troost.

[81] *18th & Vine*. 1 no. 2 March 1992.; *18th & Vine*. 1 no. 3 March 1992. I found the newsletters in Chuck Haddix's files at the University of Missouri Kansas City Marr Sound Archives.

heritage that was down there . . . It was one of those things where nobody cared."[82] Instead of the money and exposure promised alongside the Altman production, however, success in these urban renewal projects would require local community interest to use the production as a sounding board—generating interest in making the cosmetic improvements permanent and functional.

In other words, 18th & Vine required the same kind of outside support it needed before the film arrived. The effect ended up being much more an easing of tensions, than an active support-building venture. As Matthew Seig put it:

> Our film gave a lot of different people and a lot of different groups and government agencies an opportunity to generate interest in the history and find ways of preserving, raising money. They were anxious to piggyback on us and use the spotlight we were able to provide to help draw attention to historical preservation. I think we were at the right time and place for them to use. How successful they were? Like I said they were a city having a great deal of problems.[83]

It is likely no coincidence that major construction on the museum complex did not begin until the film was wrapping up production. The change in attitude about the area in the press with the presence of the film was likely used by municipal interests as an opportunity to finally build the complex in the context of the highest public opinion the area had probably ever had. However, the attention the film brought to 18th & Vine seemed to only give a positive public relations spin to the financial attention the area was already getting rather than add to it. That is to say, the

[82] Stephen Altman. Phone interview.

[83] Seig. Personal interview.

approximately $20 million dollars allotted to benefit the area in the late 1980s was not bolstered in any significant way by the presence of the film.[84]

Once the production left and work on the museum complex was completed, city-wide financial attention seemed to quickly turn away from 18th & Vine. Correspondence documents in the Robert Altman Papers reveal that the local development organization the Black Economic Union petitioned to leave the facades and updates put in by the film production on Vine Street, claiming the city had invested in restoring and saving the buildings they were attached to—which, unfortunately, never happened. After hearing about the petition, the production team was elated, as this saved them striking costs, but Stephen Altman also sent the Black Economic Union a list of what improvements were made and what further work needed to be done in order to make them permanent. He estimated the facades would last 6 months to 2 years as they stood. Amazingly, almost 20 years later, they are still there albeit in horrible disrepair (Figs. 3.20-3.24). Jazz historian Chuck Haddix theorizes:

> The facades become a metaphor for the 18th & Vine redevelopment effort . . . It's not a restoration project, it's a development project. They tore buildings down, they've torn down a lot of buildings in that area that were historic buildings. They tore down a whole block of functioning buildings to drop the American Jazz Museum there. So it becomes a metaphor for issues in the 18th & Vine area in general—it's all a façade.[85]

[84] Chuck Haddix claims that the area has received $80 million from taxpayers since the late 1980s, including the ultimately $24 million used for the museum complex. Though I have yet to find where this number came from, I do know that the city has been supporting the museum since it opened due to lackluster attendance. As will be seen, however, this is certainly not even close to the open public support received by Union Station. Haddix. Personal interview.

[85] Haddix. Personal interview.

Haddix speaks to the history of 18th & Vine being ignored and covered over, though the same can be said about the people currently living in that area as well. The redevelopment the city wanted to tie to the film was certainly meant to address both, but the renewal did not progress far beyond what the film provided—a series of façades that hide the realities of the present conditions.

For many in the area it is unclear where exactly everything went wrong—why such a big film production failed to have a larger impact on 18th & Vine. Chester Thompson, current President of the Black Economic Union, relays a common sentiment about how desires surrounding the film changed: "I remember when the film was being made . . . I only saw that as a positive for Kansas City and a chance to bring out the 18th & Vine history through film . . . But I'm not sure now looking back over all of this time that it's what it should have been. The people who were responsible for down here should have leveraged on that fact, but I'm not sure they did."[86] It is clear that not everyone was looking out for 18th & Vine. Agreements found in the Robert Altman Papers archive reveal that in order to use the vacant properties on Vine Street, where the existing facades are located, the production paid the Black Economic Union, then under different leadership, only $2,500 and provided them with a screen credit. Producer Matthew Seig agrees that this is a number which could have been better negotiated by the BEU as it was remarkably cheap for the production.[87] Based on these decisions it seems as though the prevailing assumption from the Mayor's Office about 18th & Vine was that all of the attention

[86] Chester Thompson. (Black Economic Union President) personal interview with the author. Kansas City, MO. October 10, 2013.

[87] I asked Matthew Seig about this donation. I found record of in the Robert Altman Papers and whether or not this was involved with paying them to use the properties. He responded, "Yeah probably, I don't remember in general, but that would've been a bargain." Seig. Personal interview.

combined with the museum complex would be all that was needed to jumpstart the re-invigoration of the area.

Locals in the 18th & Vine area remember the filming, and remember it positively, but the facades created 20 years ago are now more of an embarrassment than a source of neighborhood pride. As an author for *The Atlantic Cities* states in 2012, "the weird thing about the Jazz District now is that in between these big restored buildings, those flat, fake Hollywood storefronts remain, placeholders until something real can move in there."[88] With the visual marker of the facades, the film has, then, unintentionally aided the community by leaving a physical register of neglect and lost opportunity. Those working on the production have very positive feelings toward the city. Though they did not view their work as directly involved in urban renewal projects at the time, there is a sense of pride that goes along with their place in Union Station's successful history. As to 18th & Vine, Stephen Altman shared an interesting story about what working in an economically depressed area allowed him to do as a production designer: "One of the things I hate most about film work is all the waste we do. We're like eco-terrorists ripping through the forest to build our fake sets and then just throwing them away making it so nobody else can use them, so this felt rather good. I quite enjoyed that . . . I'm rarely able to leave anything. I've done sets like this all over the place. Every time you've got to strip down and restore it."[89] In both cases, then, the production personnel retain a sense of pride in incidentally "helping" the city through helping themselves. Overall, the filmmakers certainly cannot be held accountable for the state of the city and its politics. However, the fact that urban development becomes a key aspect of selling the film to the city does enter the film production into these

[88] Reynolds. "Jazz District." 2.

[89] Stephen Altman. Phone interview.

debates in an active way, questioning what the presence of a major production actually does for communities they film in.

## Conclusion

Simply because Altman is an observer does not mean that his films reveal the one and only long-forgotten truth of any place he films in. Neither does the Altman production team swoop in and automatically make everything better. The nomadic and transitory nature of his work/home life mirrors the lasting presence of the film within each location—there are some good stories to tell but life goes on as it was. Despite the many positive associations Holly Springs residents have with *Cookie's Fortune*, it remains primarily as a set of anecdotes and fond remembrances. In Kansas City, the production arrived as an agreeable hiccup in the midst of larger problematic economic redevelopment plans. Obviously Altman's presence did not fundamentally change the dynamics between long embittered regions of the city. Instead, the presence of the film now offers a lens with which to better see the unequal treatment. Unlike Waters, Altman's film productions are unable to provide the benefits that come with the enduring presence of an auteur in a city. Thus, it is far more difficult for his films to have lasting community effects such as those seen with Waters in Baltimore, where sustained attention on industrial media-making helped the city build a more solid industry support structure.

While Altman's production is in town, however, its effects are certainly not insignificant. Altman's mode of production in many ways streamlined location shooting to turn what normally becomes perceived as burdensome and self-indulgent to excitement and community celebration. The Altmans' strategies reinforce his unique auteur identity within the industry where "working on an Altman film" refers more to the social process of making the film than it does the final

product or its subsequent effect. The social strategies used by the Altmans seem particularly effective at endearing locals to the production, though the case of *Kansas City* raises a number of interesting dynamics. It is difficult to chastise a film production for not taking a more active interest in urban renewal because they would seem to be too different, yet in hindsight so much of the film's presence was sold on this promise by the city and media. Instead of embedding *Kansas City* into local environments as an entertaining historical narrative, at 18th & Vine the film's presence now serves as a reminder of how little attention the areas most in need of improvement receive when a film comes to town. Any positive attention the Altman social production experience brought to 18th & Vine left along with the filmmakers and the ultimate commercial failure of the film. Overall, by leaving, Altman's productions have no real way of sustaining in these communities. Even in Holly Springs, only positive stories have remained with no real physical markers. Altman's more transitory career clarifies a difference between taking an interest in a community and caring for one. For these communities, the downside of the Altman production is that despite the good time everyone had, it will leave and take all of the attention with it.

## Chapter 4

### Master Plan: Place and Industry

"My real fear for Austin is that we become one of the backstabbing filmmaking communities. So far, it's not a competitive sport here and people like Robert [Rodriguez] and Rick [Linklater] are setting that example. I think anybody *can* come, but if you're looking to be the next Michael Bay then it probably won't work."

—Charles Ramírez Berg, Joe M. Dealy, Sr.
Professor in Media Studies, University of Texas Austin[1]

Originally recognized as the young filmmaker who produced *El Mariachi* for only $7,000, most of which was earned through selling his body for scientific testing, Robert Rodriguez is now known as the voice of the HD digital revolution working from his own studio in Austin, TX. Rodriguez's facilities include sound stages with green screen, and rooms with editing, sound mixing and visual effects capabilities—some of them built into his home. Since the start of his career he has differentiated himself as working more "freely" at the level of production, meaning on his own terms instead of according to the standard practices used in industry productions. Since his early adoption of HD cameras, Rodriguez argues he carved out his independent position through his use of HD technologies, which allowed him to make competitive films at a fraction of the usual cost in Los Angeles. Crediting his success only to technology, however, overlooks how both his career-long focus on privatized production practices and his choice of home base in Austin, TX, have helped him maintain his auteur-

[1] Charles Ramírez Berg (Joe M. Dealey, Sr. Professor in Media Studies, University of Texas Austin) personal interview with the author. Austin, TX. April 18, 2014.

persona and his independent position. His geographical freedom from Hollywood has allowed him a substantial degree of leeway in both oversight and production practices.

Rodriguez's films fall well within the realm of commercial cinema, and in line with his product he adopts a more Hollywood-like, spatial approach to filming in Austin.[2] Similarly, regarding his studio, he tends to portray Austin as only a happenstance setting for his enterprise, but there is little doubt that Austin's plentiful resources and filmmaking community also fundamentally contribute to his unique studio setup. The location of Rodriguez's Troublemaker Studios in Austin is much more than a coincidence. Austin includes geographical, cultural and historical support to an extent that would make it very difficult for Troublemaker to be successful anywhere else. Given his commercially-oriented filmmaking, Rodriguez actually has little interest in *representing* place especially when compared to John Waters and Robert Altman; instead, he shows that an auteur's relationship to place can still be embedded without a primary focus on representing it. Rodriguez utilizes an environment with substantial place-based resources and further takes advantage of the culture of independent, communal filmmaking found in Austin. Therefore, despite all of the effort to make a fully-functioning *private* industry, Rodriguez does not do it alone. To understand the way Rodriguez works requires a much greater understanding of the filmmaking culture he has inserted himself into.

In not representing Austin, Rodriguez has a very different relationship to his home city than either John Waters or Robert Altman do. The previous chapters reveal that Altman and Waters readily acknowledge, either through their work or directly in interviews, that the place they film in has significance for them. However, in looking at the *Spy Kids* franchise audiences

[2] *Texas Monthly* has described Rodriguez as, "a genre filmmaker who quoted heavily from other genre movies, someone big studios could count on to work with small budgets." Carina Chocano. "King of Dreams." *Texas Monthly*. April 2014. 172.

will see little of Austin in these films, despite the fact that all four installments filmed there at least partially, if not primarily. As a fantastical series, there is no narrative need for Austin to figure prominently, yet I argue the films Rodriguez makes and the ways in which he makes them would not be as effective outside of the Austin environment. Furthermore, as opposed to especially Waters, Rodriguez often obscures Austin when talking about his work. In interviews, tech-promotion speaking events, home video extras and writings, Rodriguez has continually argued that a primary reason for his success is distance from Los Angeles, not necessarily presence in Austin. His most common argument involving Austin is: "If you can set the precedent of how you work and [the studios] buy into that, you're home free. By staying in Austin and coming up with ways to save money, I make their money back."[3] He argues that being away from the business and the unions affords him the creative freedom he needs to thrive, but leaves out any further specificity of how the place of Austin aids his endeavors. Austin, here, is just a placeholder for "not LA."[4]

Furthermore, while Rodriguez enjoys the diversity of types of locations around Texas, he continually expresses disinterest in the idea of using specific locations. When discussing the shooting of his award-winning short film *Bedhead*, Rodriguez stated, "Just from shooting *Bedhead* in my backyard, I knew it would be easy to create your own reality. There's a lot of

[3] O'Hare, Brian. "Moving at the Speed of Thought." in *Robert Rodriguez Interviews*. Ed. Zachary Ingle. (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012). 134.

[4] Rodriguez also uses his "Not LA" status to acquire some of his projects, most famously Frank Miller's *Sin City* series. Miller frequently noted that he had no interest in ever allowing Hollywood to make an adaptation of his graphic novel series, but Rodriguez used his outside-Hollywood status to his advantage in convincing Miller: "Miller was impressed with Rodriguez's approach, and with his decidedly 'un-Hollywood' Troublemaker Studios setup . . . 'I had to convince Frank that it wouldn't be like the Hollywood experiences he'd had,' Rodriguez recalled." Jody Duncan. "Cool Cars, Hot Women and Hard Bastard Men." *Cinefex*. 102 July, 2005. 16.

wacky locations in Austin that feel like they're someplace else."[5] For Rodriguez, even in the early stages of his career, the importance of Austin was its spatial diversity that would allow him to cinematically represent anywhere *but* Austin. I argue that both Rodriguez's production process and auteur-identity require the place of Austin in that his attachment to place comes through in his interest in place-specific resources. Therefore, while previous chapters may have focused somewhat more on the positioning and perspectives of the auteur-figure, for this chapter establishing Austin's filmmaking community and resources plays at least as important a role as does Rodriguez himself. To remain primarily focused on Rodriguez would diminish the very qualities of Austin that he neglects to mention.

Rodriguez's use of Austin and its cultural identity has served his private industry very well, though Rodriguez tends to heavily overshadow the importance of Austin to his work with his attachment to HD technologies. His "place"-ment in Austin, TX further affords him considerable freedom in terms of labor regulations, such as in advocating for non-union labor, and other cost-saving production practices, but in making industry standard practices more fluid, he also risks setting a problematic precedent in opening workers up to the very risks from which such limiting industry practices protect them. He may stand as a symbol or example for Austin filmmaking, but his habit of not representing the city places him more off to the side of other figures in Austin such as Richard Linklater, who express their ties more openly. Rodriguez's celebrity identity and practices become absorbed into Austin's more free-spirited culture of maverick, communal filmmaking. His geographical base within the Austin community has him

[5] Christian Divine. "Deep in the Heart of Action." in *Robert Rodriguez Interviews*. Ed. Zachary Ingle. (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012). 62.

leading by example, and he does reportedly involve himself in community filmmaking events.[6] Though, overall, his associations with Austin seem to have less to do with his actual production practices than they do with his ability to sell his more self-driven filmmaking strategies. As a place, Austin provides abundant filmmaking resources, but also a cultural narrative within which Rodriguez can insert himself and make his filmmaking seem much more communal than it actually is.

## A Fruitful Environment

> "This is a town that had a lot of film already as a significant part of its identity . . . Could [The Austin Film Festival] be anywhere? I think we could have, but I think at the time that we started Austin was just starting to get recognized as a town that was an interesting place to go and a creative place so that sort of fell into our zone as well. So, could we be anywhere? Yes, but would we have been as successful somewhere else? I'm not so sure that we would have."
>
> —Barbara Morgan, Austin Film Festival Director[7]

It is necessary to leave Rodriguez explicitly for a moment to focus on Austin's filmmaking environment and how it has built the culture that Rodriguez's more maverick identity fits into. Austin is a lot bigger than Rodriguez. It has a lot to offer: physically, in terms of available land, technically, in terms of trained production support services; and culturally, in terms of an active film-loving and film-producing community. In interviews, local industry workers continually refer to Austin as a Hollywood of the South, or Hollywood of the middle. The designation serves both to bolster the capabilities of the industry there yet also distinguishes Austin as the Hollywood of another place. When looking more specifically at a production

[6] Charles Ramírez Berg clarified in our conversation that Rodriguez often makes himself available for local filmmaking events involving other Austin directors such as Richard Linklater and Mike Judge. Furthermore both Barbara Morgan and Janet Pierson confirmed that Rodriguez is often available for events connected with the Austin Film Festival and SXSW Film Festival. Ramírez Berg. Personal interview.; Morgan. Personal interview. Janet Pierson (South by Southwest Film Festival Director) phone interview with the author. April 29, 2014.

[7] Barbara Morgan (Austin Film Festival Director) phone interview with the author. May 8, 2014.

center, it is worth looking at Allen J. Scott's definition of place found in his study of Hollywood and Los Angeles. He defines place as, "a concentrated locus of conventionalized human practices whose characteristics leave deep traces on the form and cognitive meanings of products (and above all *cultural* products) as they emerge from localized systems of industrial activity."[8] Scott clarifies that no two industries or centers of production, provided they exist in different places, can be alike. They will necessarily imbue their products, or mode of production, with some trace of the local culture. But this does not answer the question: why is there a need for a Hollywood of the middle? Michael Curtin emphasizes that the needs of the media industry require some form of hub: "Attracting and managing talent is one of the most difficult challenges that screen producers confront. At the level of the firm this involves offering attractive compensation and favorable working conditions, but at a broader level it also requires maintaining access to reservoirs of specialized labor that replenish themselves on a regular basis. This is one of the main reasons why media companies tend to cluster in particular cities."[9] Curtin's use of "talent" includes the workforce, and he also lists creativity as a key resource needed in media industries. In the case of filmmaking, we can assume this includes a workforce that subsumes its creative work under the label of the film's director or stars. Not all workers are interested in an itinerant lifestyle, and some prefer having a central place which draws in work and allows them to remain relatively fixed. From the side of producers, it only benefits them to have a larger pool of available, trained workers from which to choose. Thus Austin, as a media production center, provides precisely this kind of cluster of resources.

[8] Allen J. Scott. *On Hollywood: The Place, the Industry*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005. xii.

[9] Michael Curtin. "Thinking Globally: From Media Imperialism to Media Capital." In *Media Industries*. Ed. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren. (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2009). 113.

The specificities of place have an effect on the characteristics of any industrial center, but the unusual thing about Austin is its rampant success as a production center when it geographically falls well outside major media industry headquarters. Austin filmmaking institutions focus on production and production support services, which provides an example of "flexible specialization."[10] Michael Storper and Susan Christopherson argue that the shift to an increased reliance on independent production in the film industry following the forced dismantling of vertical integration led to a method of production organization they call flexible specialization, which refers to the tendency of independent production companies to work with specialized subcontractors. "In such flexibly specialized systems production is organized around the interactions of a network of small firms," they argue, "These small firms specialize in batch or custom production of general classes of outputs . . . the production system as a whole is flexible because each production project can be organized with a different mix of specialized input-providing firms."[11] Therefore, both the system and individual firm have a greater ability to change with the industry, technology and the market than would a more rigidly-structured integrated system.

I would further argue, that such practices have helped to establish differently-placed satellite production centers like Austin, which can provide a hub of firms specializing in various production activities, to have the flexibility to forge a place-oriented identity based on its local resources. To characterize Austin, local industry workers describe it as maverick, creative, friendly, communal, liberal and resourceful: "Austin's always been kind of a magnet for creative

[10] Michael Storper and Susan Christopherson. "Flexible Specialization and Regional Industrial Agglomerations: The Case of the U.S. Motion Picture Industry." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. 77 no. 1 (March 1987): 104-117.

[11] Storper and Christopherson. "Flexible Specialization." 105.

people, but all those kind of people have been attracted to the place. I think it's the environment, the educational thing, the political—it's very liberal not only politically, but culturally;"[12] "We have a community of people who do things on their own merit and also don't necessarily follow the common zeitgeist. We get a lot of creative and innovative people—people doing things in a completely different way, affecting the industry;"[13] "There are a lot of arts and there are a lot of non-profits in Austin. I think it's just because it's a town of people who care about their causes and there's really a need to hear every voice . . . I think because of that in terms of the film industry it's a really friendly film industry."[14] It became clear that success in Austin requires an outlook and approach that matches the cultural atmosphere of the area—anyone who demands Austin provide the same resources as LA, in other words, would not be very productive there. Having different "Hollywoods," then, can allow for a greater diversity of choices for a greater diversity of types of talent.

Hard work has long been a focus of the Austin environment and film work in particular has been extremely important to the Austin culture and economy. Therefore, Austin provides an enviable amount of support services to film productions and the local city and state Film Commissions work specifically to keep local film workers employed on projects. Today, City Film Commissioner Gary Bond estimates, Austin has around 600-700 fully-trained crew who work full-time on film productions.[15] Also, of course, the University of Texas Radio/TV/Film

[12] Gary Bond (Austin Film Commissioner) personal interview with the author. Austin, TX. April 15, 2014.

[13] Morgan. Phone interview.

[14] Katy Daiger Dial (Community Education Manager Austin Film Society) personal interview with the author. Austin, TX. April 17, 2014.

[15] Bond. Personal interview.

department began training filmmakers and scholars as early as the 1970s.[16] Having this longstanding infrastructure makes this area much more attractive to film productions than the vast majority of cities. All contribute to Austin's thriving film culture, creating a nexus for film workers and fans.

The Austin Film Commission began out of necessity because Texas became a popular site for location shooting starting in the 1970s. As late as the mid-1980's, Austin performed only the basic functions of a Film Commission—checking that productions had insurance and permits—were performed by the City Inter-governmental Affairs Officer.[17] When current city Film Commissioner Gary Bond took over the position in the mid 1980s, [18] it seemed as though the city was not quite aware of what they had with the success of early films like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). Bond argues such successes drew attention to the area, but at the time filmmaking was viewed by locals as a lower-class industry, which all changed when the climate was ready to embrace any form of economic boon:

> I've said too many times that nothing succeeds like success. Once you start doing something, it began to kind of get on a roll and coincidentally Austin had overbuilt the hotels, there was a real estate bust, and oil bust. . . Austin kind of took a downturn and the city was very receptive to anything that would generate a

[16] On the development of the University and its programs Charles Ramírez Berg explained: "I think the idea from way back, 60s and 70s, was to have a department that was broad enough that it would have social science, humanities and production faculty members instead of, you know you see so many departments that lean one way or the other all the time. So it has been a challenge for us to keep that balance, but speaking for myself, I'm invested in that diversity because I think it's all important . . . I think it was a little bit 60s/70s idealism and that kind of openness, and I do think as Austin developed all of that… it was synergistic—this department in this place at this time when things are happening." Ramírez Berg. Personal interview.

[17] Bond. Personal interview. He told me this position was most likely held by the Inter-Governmental Affairs officer because the position had direct ties to liaising with the State government which had its own Film Office at that time.

[18] Bond began working for the city in the capacity of Public Relations specialist and garnered the added job of Film Commissioner likely due to his degree from UT Austin in Radio, Television and Film. Bond. Personal interview.

> little more economic development. Their hotels were running at 25% occupancy so it was a perfect storm for me signing up with the Association of Film Commissions . . . and beginning to actually market the city as a film location.[19]

The marketing of the city began not only a shift in the municipal practices toward film production in Austin, now enticing and promoting instead of simply regulating, but also a change in the local cultural embrace of filmmaking. As Bond describes, the influx of productions caused the development of support services and local crew, ultimately organizing Austin into a film production center. "I think it was a happy accident. Again, it's the success. It's also a very imitative industry. People came here, did a movie, it went well for them, they went back to talk to their 35 friends in Los Angeles and then they wanted to hire the same people, stay in the same hotel, go right in the footpath that came before them."[20] The influx of much needed money into the local economy led to a wider acceptance of filming which, in turn, led to more productions and more locals becoming involved in especially the work of support services. From the perspective of the Film Commission Austin offers temperate weather, a diversity of locations within easy driving distance and an abundance of available land. Beyond its competitive tax incentive, the Film Commission sells Austin as having the production benefits of Los Angeles while also offering more freedom to independent, community-minded filmmakers.

That is not to say, however, that Hollywood remains absent from Austin. By necessity it must have some form of presence in order to keep the production environment sustainable and controlled. The Texas Film Commission lists at least 16 annual festivals centered on or related to

[19] Ibid.

[20] Bond. Personal interview.

film in Austin.[21] With a third of the weeks in the year taken up with film festivals, they are an integral part of Austin's identity. Janet Pierson, director of the South By Southwest Film Festival paints Austin as *the* site for their festival: "I think Austin is a crucial ingredient to this particular festival. Certainly any of the programmers here or any of the people here could be successful in other areas, but I think we're extremely mindful that we're doing this in Austin . . . It's a very creative place, it's a very relaxed place . . . People get things done, but they get things done having a good time and I think that works for SXSW as well."[22] In describing why Austin remains their location, Pierson also begins to define Austin culture. If "quirky" was the buzz word for locals in describing Baltimore, "creative" has the same amount of strength in Austin. More specific to the community, one of the most common elements folded into the Austin definition of creativity is work ethic—as though it is not enough to have innovative dreams, but one must also work in a hard and savvy manner to enact them.

The film festivals are not only a time to celebrate Austin's distinct character, but also paradoxically a time when its limitations become most visible. Barbara Morgan of the Austin Film Festival explains, "This is a town where festivals in general are actually an industry which is unlike pretty much anywhere else. In that sense there's competition amongst events because we're all using the same resources around here, going after the same sponsors . . . but in the same token it's a pretty friendly town. We're competing with music festivals and sports festivals, just general art festivals that go on in this town."[23] Morgan describes festivals in Austin as their own industry and, again, that a festival in Austin has something about it different from a festival held

[21] "Texas Film Commission." http://gov.texas.gov/film

[22] Pierson. Phone interview.

[23] Morgan. Phone interview.

anywhere else. Festivals are inherently conflicting environments. As Daniel Dayan notes in his study of the social construction of the Sundance Film Festival, "There were forces in the festival that insured coherence. But there were other forces that were discordant. Organizers were constantly trying to balance the world of film making and the world of distribution; the emotionality of an occasion and the structural requirements of an industry; the geography of locality and the geometry of networks."[24] As Dayan puts it, major film festivals involve inherent discrepancy between local celebration and industry domination. Many people describe the Austin festivals times when the industry "descends" onto Austin; but they also say the invasion enables them to keep their Los Angeles contacts active. The major film festivals in Austin both celebrate the local industry and pay fealty to Hollywood by offering services such as a platform to promote or even sell films, both of which are practices which acknowledge the position Austin plays as a production satellite in relationship to headquarters Los Angeles.

As a longtime resident of Austin, it stands to reason the independent spirit championed by Rodriguez is admired by and mirrored in locals who work in the media industries there. Rodriguez continually insists that the most productive part of Austin for his own work comes out of it not being Los Angeles. This sentiment is echoed throughout the city, however, underneath the animosity toward LA also lies a recognition that media work in Austin is still industry work and requires LA in order for Austin to remain so culturally distinct. Many continue to respect Hollywood and their way of working, but see Austin more as an alternative choice instead of as a promised land. The partners of local production company ProductionFor told me a number of stories about how they ended up in Austin instead of NY or LA.

[24] Daniel Dayan. . "Looking for Sundance. The Social Construction of a Film Festival." in *Moving Images, Culture and the Mind*. Ed. Ib Bondebjerg. (Luton, Bedfordshire, UK: University of Luton Press, 2000). 45.

> I was faced with the decision: do I go to a very expensive city that's seen as the hub, or one of the hubs, for film production and struggle for five years of my life just to pay rent to try and make a name for myself, or do I go to a city that I really love going to, has quite a bit of work that I could potentially do, and be in a much more comfortable position . . . There is this sense that people get where you have to go to a certain place to make a name for yourself. That it's about where you are when you're there, not the content you're creating. It's not about how powerful is the story you're telling or how proficient you are at using a certain camera. It's now like, "Well I'm there, so that's my shot because everyone gets a shot out there." Which is such a lie.[25]

Narratives from local industry workers such as these construct Austin as a place where those who want to work can work. The same locals, in turn, paint LA as the place where people go to be stars as opposed to those who lead happy and fulfilling lives. As other partners at ProductionFor were ready to caution, Austin, realistically, is a place like any other in that it serves those people who respond well to its resources—one cannot go to Austin and be guaranteed a job. While Austin does offer unique opportunities for independent production, surviving there full-time as an industry worker still takes significant ingenuity and dedication. Ramírez Berg states, "I think the difference in Hollywood filmmaking is on the surface it seems like everybody's friendly and nobody ever says no, but the reality is everybody is desperate for that one job. There's 10,000 people for one job . . . It's so much more cutthroat and competitive. Where here, the idea is, 'Oh, it's not either me or you make the movie. It's you're making a

[25] ProductionFor. Personal interview.

movie? Ok, I'll come and help.'"[26] Such statements clarify the extent to which Austin locals want their industry to be something different from Hollywood—a more communal and friendly atmosphere. Therefore, the identity surrounding Austin's media industry environment comes out of media industry workers trying to differentiate their city from Hollywood much more than it is just a happenstance result of independent artists needing an anywhere to go to.

Understanding the limitations of Austin requires a closer look at its function as a reliable headquarters for *production* and to clarify how it does not function as a complete industry all on its own. In *Global Cities* Saskia Sassen argues that the overall increase in mobile and decentralized production has resulted in the increased centrality of local headquarters.[27] Even with expanding production locations, the growing profits and power remain centralized in the headquarters' host city. The importance of the headquarters on the city within which it sits similarly becomes all the more relevant and important. Allen J. Scott, in *On Hollywood*, theorizes that the result of the increased de-centralization of production in Los Angeles is an increase in the headquarters-function of Hollywood itself—that it increasingly provides management services in support of widespread runaway productions rather than acting primarily as a center of production upon which the industry depends. Scott explains, "So far, runaway production has not seriously undermined the vitality of the Hollywood film industry," which he bases on two inferences: "first, that the towering competitive advantages of Hollywood in pre- and postproduction work will continue to prevail; and, second, that films requiring close supervisory control and complex customized inputs at all stages of production will continue to

[26] Ramírez Berg. Personal interview.

[27] Saskia Sassen. *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

constitute a significant core of the industry's product range."[28] Both pragmatically and ideologically, Hollywood remains the center—the home base which sets the standard for the approval of both development and practice—allowing a city like Austin to function more as a satellite production center, the product of which continues to feed back into Hollywood. Sites attractive to runaway productions today have tax incentives, but they also often provide other cost-saving opportunities such as local crew, limiting the cost of transporting and housing professionals from LA, and other production or even post-production support services. In this area, Austin has created an impressive resume, yet it still cannot function on its own as a complete industry from research and development to dissemination. Austin remains a place that entices filmmaking to it, yet at the same time does not at this time realistically represent *another* Hollywood or even competition to Los Angeles.

Austin lacks many of the managerial services located in Los Angeles such as distribution, financing and talent representation. Still, Austin-based artists must forge relationships with agents, major studios and conglomerates based in LA. Austin is not a place where just any rogue filmmaker can create solid ties with the Hollywood industry. As Gary Bond points out, "Good ones can. It's always best if you can bring your work with you. People who bring their LA contacts and come back here usually have no problem. It's like everywhere, it's a business of networking and who you know."[29] Despite Austin having its fair share of venture capitalists, local media industry workers report that not a lot of local money gets invested in film productions, making it difficult to secure steady production work all of the time. Already established filmmakers have a much easier time living and working in Austin comfortably

[28] Scott. *On Hollywood*. 55.

[29] Bond. Personal interview.

because they have contacts in the heart of the industry who represent them there despite their physical absence. Going back to Bond's point, it takes established filmmakers like Rodriguez and Linklater to support the Austin filmmaking infrastructure to a certain extent. Especially Rodriguez, who seems to always have a production ready to go in Austin, provides consistent work for local crew, yet at the same time does not have the demands of a major studio. Most importantly, in order for Austin to provide such opportunities and function as its own complete media industry it would have to relinquish the more artistic identity fashioned and lauded by locals because it would take on both the responsibility of fully representing its industry and more of the financial risk.

### The Rodriguez in Austin, or the Austin in Rodriguez

"I do think it's significant [Robert Rodriguez and Richard Linklater] are here. Just in the way that they are demonstrating over and over again that you don't have to be in Hollywood. That's the headline to me."

—Charles Ramírez Berg[30]

"[Rodriguez] is a little more edgy. His product's a little more edgy . . . I really like him because he's not much of a hassle. He'll come out, like with *Sin City*, he'll do a week of establishing shots, take it back and put it all on his green screen at his studio so there's not as much impact on traffic."

—Gary Bond, Austin City Film Commissioner[31]

Austin allows Robert Rodriguez to work in his preferred manner of production—one that work efficiently, cheaply and with a maximum amount of creative control. Rodriguez chooses to work in a place where he does not have to follow the same rules as he would in Los Angeles nor is he beholden to the same kinds of oversight more typical industry filmmakers have. For him, less-

[30] Ramírez Berg. Personal interview.

[31] Bond. Personal interview.

restricted union labor, flexible budgeting and increased control all seem to connote "freedom," making it important to examine what type of freedom Rodriguez really is after, what he actually achieves and how he achieves it. Rodriguez's filmmaking philosophy can best be summed up through a word oft-repeated throughout his interviews, special feature and other modes of self-representation: creativity. Well before his introduction to HD digital cinematic technologies in the early 2000s, Rodriguez consistently promoted a philosophy of "creativity" as key to effective and efficient filmmaking. The term has obvious associations to art and artistry, though such a definition does not fully encapsulate what he means by the term. For Rodriguez, creativity embodies production practices that fall outside of the industry standard, yet produce similar results—a commercially viable film. Practices he puts under the label of creativity include: working in many departments simultaneously, relaxing union regulations, and generally eschewing industry bureaucracy. The first accolades of his career revolved around his ability to make a feature film so cheaply. *The New York Times* reported that, "[Rodriguez and Gallardo] managed to come up with $9,000. They made [*El Mariachi*] in fourteen days . . . and when they had finished editing they still had $2,000 left over."[32] Rodriguez made sure to quickly align the discussion of cost-saving with a positive evaluation of himself as a filmmaker; in the same article where he is quoted as saying, "My film has a good story . . . audiences realize money has nothing to do with that. Otherwise *Hudson Hawk* would be the best movie ever made."[33] Locations for Rodriguez's films throughout his career take advantage of access to filmmaking resources that specifically sidestep Hollywood regulations and often remain unique to those places. The way

[32] Gregg Barrios. "A Borrowed Camera, $7,000, and a Dream." in *Robert Rodriguez Interviews*. Ed. Zachary Ingle. (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012). 4.

[33] Ibid. 3.

Rodriguez describes hunting for locations continually involves pragmatics instead of aesthetics. In *Rebel Without a Crew* he states it is, "easier to write a script if you already have seen all the locations and elements you can work with. I tend to work the few assets we have into the script to feature our production values more."[34] Creativity for Rodriguez, then, is a marker of authorial "freedom" to make non-standard production choices. His concept of creativity has defined his relationship to the industry since the start of his career—namely as someone who claims to be able to make competitive Hollywood genre films better (more cheaply) than Hollywood. Rodriguez's embrace and reformulation of Austin's cultural concept of "creativity" interweaves within his own self-selling gives him a way to carve out an amenable position in this community for his own style of filmmaking, and also offers a certain shielding from criticism. He shows that Austin's ideals can just as easily be framed as Rodriguez practices.

Rodriguez's well-advertised connection to Austin as place of home and work seemingly aligns with the methods of John Waters in Baltimore as well as Robert Altman's more peripatetic ways. Beyond building his production facilities into his home, Rodriguez has also worked with his family throughout his career; his ex-wife Elizabeth Avellán is now a major Austin producer with whom Rodriguez still works.[35] However, while certainly embedded into the Austin environment, Rodriguez does not represent Austin's cultural identity in the same way as Waters. Whereas Waters becomes an almost singular moniker for a wide expanse of Baltimore due to his involvement in developing its media image and Altman creates a family environment in order to engage with new places, Rodriguez establishes his authorial identity in line with Austin's already

[34] Robert Rodriguez. *Rebel Without a Crew*. (New York: Plume, 1996). 24.

[35] Rodriguez also has a habit of involving his children, extended family and friends as actors or even story writers in his films. His apparently very loyal crew is often referred to in journalistic pieces as family-like. On this family feel *Empire* writes, "Rodriguez's legend paints him as a one-man band, a lone wolf like the black-clad hero of his Mexico trilogy. *Empire*'s time at Troublemaker, though, reveals it's much more of a family affair." Nick De Semlyen. "Two Days at the World's Coolest Studio." *Empire*. April 2010. 145.

existing media infrastructure in order to take advantage of its production resources. For example, Austin also prides itself on creativity, though based on a more traditional definition than that of Rodriguez. Austin creativity involves bold artistic expression by more independent means, a sense of friendly community and hard work. As a cultural movement and local industry, Austin is much bigger than Rodriguez and, even in just taking account of the filmmaking community, his presence there is really more of a notable blip on the cultural radar of the city. Despite Rodriguez's tendency to prize the abilities of the individual over that of place-based resources, the Austin that aids Rodriguez's independence is not only what *he* created in it, but is more so the abundance of available filmmaking resources and the cultural environment already in place.

Much like Baltimore, some of Austin's more active filmmaking resources can be linked to a local filmmaker—though that filmmaker is not Robert Rodriguez. Richard Linklater is thoroughly embedded into Austin's filmmaking production resources, whereas Rodriguez fits much more into the cultural environment. There are ways in which Richard Linklater could be compared to a John Waters-esque hometown-hero, though it would not be accurate to say that the Linklater/Rodriguez dynamic mirrors the Waters/Levinson one. It is impossible to adequately discuss the development of filmmaking resource institutions in Austin without accounting for Linklater. When speaking of Austin, of course, Rodriguez tends to fit himself in more arbitrarily. He states, "Now that I have soundstages there and a loyal crew that knows how I work and we all work in a relaxed way, why go somewhere else? . . . I enjoy being in Texas, where you've got a lot of different cultures and you can make it Anywhere, USA, or you can be specific and give it some swagger like we did in *From Dusk Till Dawn*. Or just completely made up like we did in *Sin City*."[36] Rodriguez's most notable contribution to Austin resources is as a figurehead—

[36] O'Hare. "Moving." 134-35.

making himself available for local events and acting as an example of maverick Austin-esque filmmaking. Infrastructure built by Rodriguez tends to be incidental, such as his employment of the local trained workforce and the companies he builds to further his own projects.

In 2003 Rodriguez partnered with Univision to launch a new television network called *El Rey* designed to cater to an English-speaking Latin American audience. As a massive undertaking, while Rodriguez continues to build its original content much of its schedule features grindhouse and sci-fi/action genre films and syndicated series. Rodriguez's launching of the *El Rey* television network will likely contribute substantially to Austin's media production environment, in part because Rodriguez cannot conceivably provide all the management and content necessary to fill an entire network. Similarly, whenever he embarks on increasingly ambitious projects for himself, he does correspondingly increase the production outputs in Austin, yet they tend to be considered extensions of Rodriguez's private production practices instead of more widely available resources:

> It is undeniable . . . that Rodriguez has become, intentionally or not, the sovereign ruler of his own private fiefdom. In addition to Troublemaker, he owns Quick Draw Productions and Quick Draw Animation. He founded Tres Pistoleros Studios, a TV and film production company, with [John] Fogleman and [Cris] Patwa, and recently, with Tim League of the Alamo Drafthouse and Fantastic Fest, he started Mercado Fantastico, an international co-production marketplace where genre films are bought and sold. What began out of necessity as a scrappy, DIY, guerilla approach to filmmaking has evolved into an economic engine

> complete with an infrastructure, which has helped transform Austin into an important filmmaking hub.[37]

In terms of the joint ventures, it is unclear what role Rodriguez continues to play in them—whether he is an active board member or a figurehead used to draw attention. It is worth noting that while it was difficult to bring Linklater up in an interview and not have the person tell me he was an active board member of the Austin Film Society, no one thought to mention Rodriguez's continuous involvement in any local organization. Linklater's trajectory in Austin sits alongside Rodriguez's where both represent different elements of Austin character and also have different effects on the larger community. Whereas the latter built up his own infrastructure which corresponds to Austin's maverick identity, the former built community-based resources which match the more pervasive sense in Austin of communal independent filmmaking.

Though born in Huston, Linklater and Austin have become inextricably tied through his altruistic work in the filmmaking community, which has resulted in a great number of public outreach options and support services for local filmmakers. Linklater's work at connecting Austin filmmaking to the Austin public began when Linklater co-founded the Austin Film Society out of a desire to extend his own film literacy.[38] Many locals in the industry feel that the Austin Film Society (AFS) represents the larger push of what Austin's filmmaking culture wants to be. The AFS is a non-profit organization, created in 1985 by Richard Linklater, Charles Ramírez Berg, Louis Black and Lee Daniel, which provides many support services to productions of all kinds. It has come to represent Austin filmmaking due to both its impressive

[37] Chocano. "King." 172.

[38] For more on the formation and development of the Austin Film Society see: Alison Macor. *Chainsaws, Slackers and Spy Kids*. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010). 89-94.

professional infrastructure as well as the legacy of its origins. As Ramírez Berg explained, "The way that started was just guys hanging out watching movies. It was Rick, basically back in the film days wanting to educate himself on film history. His way of doing it was, 'Okay, let's show all the Ozu's we can get our hands on!' . . . Next thing you know that ends up being Austin Film Society."[39] In an effort to fund the project, the AFS opened the screenings up to the greater Austin community, charging a small fee which would be used to pay for the film print rentals. Starting communally reinforced the local ties to sharing film appreciation and intellectual engagement. Though of humble beginnings, the Austin Film Society grew along with Linklater's filmmaking ambitions to become a major Austin institution and thus a major figurehead for Austin culture.

From its start the AFS was open to public involvement and this spirit remains. Today's AFS has grown immensely, perhaps culminating in their repurposing, building and operating the non-profit Austin Studios, a production complex with soundstages, warehouses and office buildings available for local and runaway productions. AFS also administers the Austin Film Society Grant which provides production and post-production funds to regional independent filmmakers. Katy Daiger Dial, Community Education Manager for AFS, explained to me that the beginnings of the organization have actually helped it become a major local filmmaking resource:

> [Austin Studios] is actually city of Austin property and is leased to us, the Austin Film Society, with the sole purpose of creative media production. So we're very honored and we're in a very lucky situation that the city has this vision of creative media and film in general. This is the former Austin airport that we're on, in 2000

[39] Ramírez Berg. Personal interview.

> when a lot of it was already demolished they were like, "Let's do something else with this property," and the Austin film community said, "Yes, we can use it!" and we, the Austin Film Society, became the stewards of this property . . . ." I think because we originally started with a community vision that helped the city say, "Ok, I think this is the group to be the stewards."[40]

Beginning AFS with an eye to public outreach and local filmmaking ultimately led to the city government casting the organization effectively as stewards not just of airport space, but the public face of Austin filmmaking as a whole. Sticking to its roots, the AFS continues to exhibit films five nights a week at The Marchesa Hall and Theater, which they exclusively program. The AFS-as-screening-club ballooned out into an organization which used these screenings to raise funds that help Texas filmmakers, giving incentives for productions shot in Texas and promoting Texas media workers. AFS also conducts outreach through its Education Department, which teaches media literacy in after-school programs with ASID.[41] Such an openly altruistic and dominating strategy, especially in its stewardship of the largest studio space in the city, connects the name of Linklater fundamentally to the Austin film industry at large. Furthermore, Linklater has remained an active board member of the AFS throughout its history, allowing the success of his own career to benefit the notoriety and infrastructure of the AFS for the purposes of helping local filmmakers.

Interestingly, Rodriguez and Elizabeth Avellán also had a role to play in the development of Austin Studios, though it is a role which firmly upholds the position Rodriguez most commonly seems to take when it comes to the greater Austin community. Though often

[40] Daiger Dial. Personal interview.

[41] Ibid.

expressing indifference toward Austin, Rodriguez's position as a figurehead has served the community as an example of how to create a functional industrial infrastructure. In the late 1990s, Rodriguez and Avellán had an expressed interest in creating their own studio and sound stages. Since Austin had recently replaced its existing airport in the mid-1990s, the old Governor's airplane hangar was left virtually abandoned.[42] Rodriguez and Avellán decided to use Rodriguez's noted history of success as a prolific filmmaker, as well as his consistent use of Austin's resources, to convince the city to lease them the space. As Macor explains, "The couple's use of local crew, locations, and businesses also suggested they were committed to shooting and staying in Austin. Rodriguez's earlier movies earned impressive profits, and with another film on the way . . . Los Hooligans production company looked to be a good risk."[43] Interestingly, the benefit here to the greater city of Austin was use and payment for its resources, though, around the same time the AFS was working on a similar venture with a far different outlook—Austin Studios. The AFS began to look at the larger former airport space adjacent to the site of Rodriguez and Avellán's hangar for the site of their non-profit Austin Studios. In order to complete the proposal, the AFS drew upon work recently done by the Rodriguez team: "[AFS] worked through the end of 1999 and into the holidays to draft a proposal that incorporated, among other details, data from feasibility studies gathered by Avellán and her assistants when she and Rodriguez initially were planning to build their own studio."[44] Therefore, Rodriguez's push to create a private studio space out of an old airplane hangar proved fundamental to the creation of the substantive, local non-profit Austin Studios. It is only one

[42] Macor. *Chainsaws*. 279-80

[43] Ibid. 280. Los Hooligans is the name of Rodriguez's early production company.

[44] Macor. *Chainsaws*. 295.

example of how, throughout his career in Austin, Rodriguez has continually helped the city as an effect of helping himself.

The difference between Rodriguez and Linklater locally in Austin informs their representations of the city as well. Rodriguez continually expresses an indifference to place. Linklater, on the other hand, has made films that have put Austin "on the map." The dynamic between the two is particularly interesting since Rodriguez has made every one of his films in Austin since the early 2000s, while Linklater films in Austin only intermittently. Linklater's *Slacker* (1991) showcases the actual streets of Austin, using long travelling takes to give the journeys of the characters a real geography, thus creating a specific map of the city. Most notably, a number of scenes in the film return characters to a restaurant integral to the local University culture of the time—Les Amis.[45] The return to the restaurant three times showcases its importance to the communities displayed in the film, while also acting as host to conversations about Austin culture and society. Linklater also features a host of local characters such as students, musicians, media lovers and conspiracy theorists. As a result, *Slacker* provides a very real sense of place in Austin at that time.

Rodriguez's films, on the other hand, tend to function more on the level of standard industry uses of space; he has locations where he needs to shoot scenes and simply uses what is available. The director's commentary track on *Planet Terror* (2007) provides a good example of his approach to locations—focused on efficiency and utility, but not on fidelity to geography or place dynamics. When speaking about a scene in front of a police station Rodriguez states, "We

[45] From the Criterion Collection DVD of *Slacker* which contains a trailer for a film about this restaurant *Viva Les Amis*. Before the trailer a title card reads: "For twenty-seven years, Les Amis was a landmark in Austin, Texas. The restaurant's proximity to the University of Texas attracted the creative energy of professors, students, artists and slackers. The café served as a location for three scenes in *Slacker*, whose cast was comprised of many Les Amis regulars." *Slacker*. Dir. Richard Linklater. Criterion Collection, 2004. DVD.

proceeded to shoot this over several months. We shot a few nights here in front of the real building, then another day somewhere else, then another day somewhere in my backyard so it's all over the place. But because the action goes by so fast . . . you don't really notice the changing choreography. The only angle really worth looking at in this place was towards the building."[46] His final statement about worth obviously focuses on the presentation of the narrative, while overlooking any worth that could be present in the place dynamics—Rodriguez's artificial world creation overtakes any treatment of local cultural elements.[47] To be clear, there is technically nothing wrong with filming in this manner, but the point here is to elaborate on the fact that Rodriguez severs a potentially strong link to place evident in Waters and Altman. In other words, Rodriguez's career shows us that there is more than one way to film in a place effectively. Uniquely, Rodriguez inserts his more spatial-style of filming within such a place-oriented environment and uses his relationship to Austin for its production resources. The case of Rodriguez shows that his "there-ness," his consistent presence, means much more to the community than the actual films he produces. By embedding himself in that community, Rodriguez ties himself to the legacy of Linklater, the AFS and other local independent filmmakers who embody the communal, altruistic forms of Austin more concretely

The prominence of the careers of both Linklater and Rodriguez along with their presence in Austin led them to become representatives for Austin's positive qualities as well as positive developments which occur in the Austin filmmaking scene at large. Janet Pierson of the South

[46] *Planet Terror*. Dir. Robert Rodriguez. Genius, 2007. DVD.

[47] It is also worth noting that *Planet Terror* was only one half of the larger *Grindhouse* (2007) project which combined Rodriguez's *Planet Terror* with Quentin Tarantino's *Death Proof* (2007) along with a number of grindhouse-style trailers done by other filmmakers. In Tarantino's film, also shot largely around Austin, place plays a much more important role. Almost indicative of *Slacker*, the opening of Tarantino's film involves lengthy travel through recognizable Austin environments, spackled with conversation about the culture and culminating in long scenes at two Austin restaurants: Guero's Taco Bar and the Texas Chili Parlor.

By Southwest Film Festival describes Linklater in similar terms to those seen with Waters in Baltimore. In characterizing him, Pierson casts Linklater as the representative and model of Austin filmmaking: "He's unpretentious, he's real, he just works and he's a good guy. I think that quality affects the greater community. I think it attracts those people that are attracted to here. As opposed to some other kind of figurehead who would maybe be more egotistical, it would change the climate."[48] Therefore, as Linklater's connection to Austin becomes more and more established, Austin in turn becomes willing to accept the positive qualities attached to Linklater's authorial persona as part of its own identity. Rodriguez's entrance can then take advantage of those qualities already present, as well as add to them.

Both Linklater and Rodriguez are held in equally high esteem by local industry professionals I spoke to despite Linklater's much more altruistic community-based work and Rodriguez's much more private and exclusionary production practices. Katy Daiger Dial said, "In Austin there's no difference. Both of them are known as being very loyal to their crew. In Austin they're both seen as hiring a lot of locals and are just constantly making movies."[49] Within Austin, there is a feeling that Rodriguez does also contribute to the community. At the level of public figure, Rodriguez does make himself very present in Austin. Troublemaker Studios hosts all of the SXSW filmmakers at their facilities every year for a barbeque, and local institutions such as UT Austin and the Alamo Drafthouse have frequently found Rodriguez to be available for speaking engagements and events. Ramírez Berg explains,

> There's a way in which Robert might actually hire more people because he makes all these films here. Rick makes some of his films here, but then goes to Greece

[48] Pierson. Phone interview.

[49] Daiger Dial. Personal interview.

> and England to make other films. He balances that out by the Austin Film Society and all the stuff he does there. Robert has his community contributions as well. He donates to local charities, he's really generous with his time. Two years ago when all the El Ray stuff was coming together he emailed me and said, "This whole thing is happening and I really want to tell your students about it." So we get an auditorium and he does a wonderful talk. Nobody paid him, he gets nothing out of it other than giving back to the University of Texas and its students.[50]

The balancing act Ramírez Berg describes positions both filmmakers as community leaders and professionals. If Linklater's more public outreach somehow appeases any resentment that might be felt by the local community from his occasionally leaving to make films elsewhere, something about Rodriguez's work-style seems to "represent" Austin more to its residents, which may offset the comparison of his less-than altruistic production environment. Rodriguez's constant production schedule is well respected throughout the city and does provide consistent, stable jobs. Linklater and Rodriguez are both easily catalogued as independent filmmakers, even mavericks, but Rodriguez's fun-loving genre pictures—on top of his extremely active hard-working schedule—has significant meaning to locals who also appreciate his refusal to submit to regulation.[51]

### Free Association: Robert Rodriguez and Artistry through Industry

"The thing that I kind of realized at a certain point, that made me so incredibly proud of Robert, was the fact that Coppola's dream that he had had with American Zoetrope is Robert's reality.

[50] Ramírez Berg. Personal interview.

[51] The team at Austin-based commercial production company ProductionFor expressed similar conclusions: "I really like his attitude of, 'I'm doing this over here.' He has enough of a following that he makes commercially successful films, he's started his own network. I think it's really good for our community having guys like him and Linklater around, even if they do stuff outside of Texas also. They also hire a lot locally." ProductionFor (Chris Blankenship, Erik Daniel, Nelson Flores, and Clint Howell) Personal interview with the author. Austin, TX. April 16, 2014.

What Coppola wanted to do with Zoetrope—have a studio and a crew more or less on call, actors more or less on call, where you can just make movie after movie, follow your own artistic impulses, that's Robert's reality. Robert has done that."

—Quentin Tarantino[52]

While the seductive confidence and grandeur of Tarantino's claim does encourage a comparison between Robert Rodriguez and Francis Ford Coppola, the goals of the two filmmakers differ markedly. Robert Rodriguez's particular form of creative freedom is decidedly not the same kind of "freedom" Coppola was looking for. Coppola sought to change the environment of the Hollywood industry, making it more accepting to artistic ambitions instead of commercial ones, whereas Rodriguez uses the already established place of Austin to aid his own career. In other words, Coppola based Zoetrope Studios in California in order to have an effect on the filmmaking culture there, whereas Rodriguez moves to Texas because it provides an environment already conducive to the way he wants to work with the present Hollywood industry. However, both argue for their practices using the terms "artistry" and "creativity," which reveals most sharply that the terms are mutable and depend heavily on context. Beginning with the comparison to Coppola allows us to pull Rodriguez away from the myth of the struggling artist constantly thwarted by the industry to what the label of "artist," or "auteur," does for Rodriguez's almost hermetic production process in Austin. The comparison also highlights the importance of selling oneself as an artist, thus creating both an eager audience of followers from film to film and a basis for cultural importance. In short, the label of "auteur" affords filmmakers certain professional "freedoms," and self-nomination has become an integral part of auteurist filmmaking. Rodriguez's career in particular provides an enlightening example

[52] Macor. *Chainsaws*. 291.

of how auteurs self-negotiate shifts in labor practices, technology and place of production in order to affect their artistic independence in relationship to Hollywood.

Coppola and Rodriguez both utilize, formulate, and promote different auteur images to aid them in realizing their divergent production goals. After rising to prominence in the age of New Hollywood, Coppola saw the opportunities available to young filmmakers and had a mind to reinstate the grandeur of Old Hollywood but where artistry would take center stage instead of profits. For Rodriguez, the only artistry he expresses much interest in is his own and how he can work most efficiently apart from studio practices. With American Zoetrope Studios Coppola framed his methods around certain studio-era practices for the purposes of improving the industry at large through enabling broadly-defined artistic creativity. Through interviews with the filmmaker and his staff Scott Haller explains,

> [Coppola] has envisioned a different future, and he has engineered a brave new world at Zoetrope . . . The concept is this: an updated version of the old studio system, complete with contract players, contract writers, senior filmmakers on hand such as Gene Kelly, and a distinctive studio signature on each film it makes. With Zoetrope, that imprint should stand for projects believed to be too uncommercial, too expensive, or too unusual by the major studios. (53-4)[53]

With his summary of the project, Haller specifies that while Coppola outwardly draws on old Hollywood techniques, he also offers his resources to non-standard productions. His goal was to create an environment where filmmakers who "deserved" the label of artist could freely practice

[53] Scott Haller. "Francis Coppola's Biggest Gamble: *One From the Heart*." in *Francis Ford Coppola Interviews.* Ed. Gene D. Phillips and Rodney Hill. (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2004). 53-54.

As Peter Cowie describes it, "The dream was called Zoetrope . . . Francis yearned to go back to the basics, to create an environment where young, independent filmmakers could work with state-of-the-art equipment without the disagreeable pressures of the big studio environment." Peter Cowie. *Coppola*. (New York: Scribners, 1990). 54.

their craft. For instance, the "electronic cinema" Coppola advocated as Zoetrope's production method was meant to use technology to allow filmmakers access to state of the art equipment without the time constraints and hassles traditionally associated with bottom-line-centric industry production up to that point.[54] For Coppola, being an artist meant having the freedoms of both time and finances with which to create. Despite Coppola's lofty goals, a cinematically "artistic" sensibility was not economically sustainable in a commercial industry without consistent blockbuster-sized hits.[55] The resulting failure of his film *One From the Heart* and American Zoetrope Studios along with it essentially forced Coppola to work for studios in order to pay off his debts. Coppola's vision fundamentally clashed with the context he surrounded himself with—Los Angeles and the film industry—whereas Robert Rodriguez's methods ultimately align with industry concerns, namely profits.

In interviews Rodriguez continually prioritizes the individual while frequently decrying the industry. In fact, the current narrative surrounding his own studio is that it was essentially built slowly but surely by accident—as if Rodriguez had never intended to create a self-sufficient place for his production needs:

> It was never exactly Rodriguez's intention to build his own studio, but that's essentially what he did. Money from each successive movie was reinvested in the space. First, it was soundproofing, then air-conditioning, then a lighting grid. The

[54] For more information on Electronic Cinema see: Raymond Fielding. "Recent Electionic Innovations in Professional Motion Picture Production." *Journal of Film and Video*. 36 no. 2 (1984). 43-49, 72..; Michael Nielsen. "Hollywood's High Frontier: The Emergence of Electronic Cinema." *Journal of Film and Video*. 36 no. 2 (1984). 31-42, 72.

[55] Drawing from Jon Lewis, Timothy Corrigan explains, "The very sort of movies Coppola had once believed would foster a new American auteur industry—led to an industrywide focus on blockbuster box office revenues. The success of auteur films in the 1970s did not, as Coppola hoped it would, give auteur directors increased access to film financing to produce and distribute such 'big' films." Timothy Corrigan. "The Commerce of Auteurism." in *Film and Authorship.* Ed. Virginia Wright Wexman. (New Brunswick, New York and London: Rutgers University Press 2003). 103.

> post-production and visual effects on *Spy Kids* were so involved that they required a tailor-made digital facility in order to be cost-efficient, so he built that too. The setup suited Rodriguez's renegade vision of himself. "You're way off the reservation," he told me. "You're not in L.A., where people would say, 'That's not going to work,' or 'Oh, you can't do that.' No one is there to tell you no." Three years after leasing the hangar Rodriguez was shooting *Sin City* and walking from his office to his green screen—the biggest in Texas at the time—when suddenly the thought popped into his head, "Oh my god, I've got my own studio!"[56]

The Robert Rodriguez persona, promoted by himself, the media and his fans, sells the idea that he has successfully built a private industry in Austin, TX that allows him to "do" Hollywood better than Hollywood does—making both popular and populist films. However, unlike Coppola Rodriguez has not built from the ground up in order to fundamentally change the game, but instead continually takes advantage of infrastructures put into place by others before him in order to allow him to play the existing game better. Rodriguez's personalization of production facilities in Austin, TX allows him to forge an alternative industrial mode of production which produces film products that compete with Hollywood at the box office.

Two of the largest all-encompassing myths surrounding Rodriguez involve his independence and the ways in which HD digital technologies specifically afford him this independence. While suggesting that Rodriguez has achieved an autonomous "outsider" status is an attractive comparison to make for someone like Tarantino, one cannot honestly refer to Rodriguez as a true outsider. He obviously still has an established relationship to the Hollywood

[56] Chocano. "King." 172.

industry for both financing and distribution. Nothing about Rodriguez or his public statements tend to suggest that he has any desire to escape the Hollywood industry system altogether either—he makes his living this way. While the most commonly cited influence on the seemingly "progressive" movement of Rodriguez's career has been HD digital technologies, these do not solely explain how he gained the freedom to make such big movies with so little oversight.[57] If access to digital technologies really were all it took to gain creative freedom, however, it is unlikely Rodriguez would have achieved the type of independence and industry standing needed to experiment with such cutting edge and (initially) expensive technologies when he did. This independence instead relies much more on Rodriguez's longstanding relationship to technology as part of his alternative production practices. These practices remain consistent throughout his career and once combined with place based resources and cheaper production technologies, actually allow for his relative autonomy. The films of his 'Mariachi' trilogy (made intermittently between 1992-2003) epitomize different stages of his filmmaking history and show how his consistent production philosophy becomes more effective in the contemporary industry environment when combined with these new resources.

*El Mariachi* (1992), initially made as the first film of a trilogy aimed for the niche Spanish Language home video market, famously propelled Rodriguez to industry stardom due to the technical competency of the film produced for only $7,000. The story around the film was one of cost-saving, and it was in this aspect that Rodriguez's ingenuity was prized, leading to predictions that Rodriguez would change the industry forever. As Kenneth Korman of *Video Magazine* stated, "the incredible tale of twenty-five-year-old Robert Rodriguez, and his homemade movie *El Mariachi*, has taught Tinseltown a lesson in filmmaking it won't soon

[57] As will be discussed, the most frequent source for these claims comes from Rodriguez himself.

forget."[58] Though the film was not widely regarded as a phenomenal piece of filmmaking in its own right, Rodriguez became known because it displayed a project far more technically advanced than his budget would have allowed by industry standards.[59] In this case, Rodriguez's low budget for production came primarily from a lack of crew (doing the vast majority of jobs himself), utilizing available resources in Ciudad Acuña, Mexico, editing in camera while shooting to create more setups quicker and editing the final version of his 16mm film on a video master instead of film. Industry periodicals quickly began referring to Rodriguez in the language of an auteur because the focus of the attention on him was so connected to his abilities as a filmmaker instead of the actual film he produced.

Rodriguez and star/producer Carlos Gallardo's choice to film *El Mariachi* in Acuña highlights the importance of location to Rodriguez which lies outside of the more standard artistic attachments to authenticity or aesthetics. The most important qualities of the town specified by the filmmaker involve resources and access, both of which come through a hometown association provided by Carlos Gallardo. Rodriguez credits Gallardo's attachments to the city with allowing them to function more efficiently and unofficially: "The town was a beautiful, natural location and the townspeople were used to seeing us running around with Carlos's video camera. So we'd get away with staging elaborate stunts in the middle of a busy street."[60] Gallardo also worked as a production assistant on *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992), which filmed in the area, and this gave him vast knowledge of available local resources. Consistently, the choice of location for Rodriguez revolves around the ability to cut financial and

[58] Kenneth Korman. "Mr. Mariachi." in *Robert Rodriguez Interviews*. Ed. Zachary Ingle. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012. 6.

[59] It should be noted that since its release the story of the film and the career it bolstered have given it considerable positive attention to the extent that the Library of Congress has inducted it into the National Film Registry.

[60] Rodriguez. *Rebel*. x-xi.

scheduling corners, such as obtaining/side-stepping permits, local permissions and even actors. That the film has a significant feel of authenticity to it, then, arrived more as a happy accident than a necessary element. Comparing *El Mariachi* to Rodriguez's later films clarifies his preferred use of locations, which develops out of his preferred production strategies.

After the success of *El Mariachi* Rodriguez capitalized on his burgeoning auteurist label by installing pedagogical messages to young independent filmmakers in interviews and the media he produces. He takes on this didactic persona in speaking tours, books, DVD commentary tracks and on self-nominated "Ten-Minute Film Schools," which come as special features on the DVD releases of his films. In one sense, Rodriguez directly uses these forums to argue for the validity of his mode of filmmaking above that of Hollywood's. For example, in the film school for *Desperado* (1995), Rodriguez outlines his strategy of shooting a scene first on video, which is much easier and cheaper to shoot and edit, as a sort of visual storyboard which helps to make the expensive shooting with full cast and crew much more efficient. To take it in another sense, however, these "film schools" ultimately present Hollywood studio filmmaking and independent filmmaking as not completely separate spheres. Rodriguez continually argues for the productivity of his own methods, while at the same time arguing that his methods are the way Hollywood should also be working; *Desperado* provides a good example.

The next Mariachi film, *Desperado*, made with Columbia Pictures, offered Rodriguez a platform to demonstrate how his "creative" philosophy works much more efficiently and affordably than the Hollywood model he eschewed. Despite Korman's previous statement about Rodriguez teaching Hollywood unforgettable lessons about working more efficiently, Hollywood obviously never learned the lessons to begin with and just expected Rodriguez to cease all of his cost-saving measures and use their more standard practices. Upon finding a new talent, the

expectation was that Rodriguez could simply fit seamlessly into a more standard production model, even though his individualized production model was exactly what drew Hollywood to notice him in the first place. As a result, Rodriguez now had a new relationship with Acuña. Whereas the location had once afforded great savings in time, money and bureaucracy, it now caused endless amounts of problems. In an interview with Charles Ramírez Berg, Rodriguez explains how the inability to use the location through his own practices fundamentally altered its presentation: "On *El Mariachi* I just used the local townsfolk, and the town. I didn't build any sets or anything, because it was so low-budget. So it had a real feel of the border because it was the border. But in *Desperado* the border didn't seem as real because I had to import a lot of talent, a lot of SAG [Screen Actors Guild] actors, so it felt more artificial."[61] Despite the fact that *Desperado* was filming in the same town, Rodriguez claims that dividing himself from the local place-based resources utilized on the first film fundamentally alters the location.[62] As evidenced previously, Rodriguez continually shows an indifference to accuracy of location throughout his career, making the above statement ring particularly untrue. Most likely, extolling the natural and realistic benefits of the area served him as a rhetorical tool to work the way he preferred, while the authenticity mentioned here in the first film was more of a happy accident.

Rodriguez began to stress his notion of "creativity" and economy when he compared his own practices to Hollywood's: "I see so much waste; the big movies often seem static and tired. Maybe they are too polished. They've removed the grit that comes from making films the hard way, by running around fast and sweating it out, forcing yourself to be creative with a lower

[61] Charles Ramírez Berg. *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion & Resistance*. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002). 246-47.

[62] Similar stories appear in Alison Macor's account of the *Desperado* production, these stories pointing to, again, the central appeal of a location to Rodriguez lying in its use and not aesthetics. Macor. *Chainsaws*. 141-48.

budget."[63] (Haile 17). The tales connected with *Desperado* through interviews with Rodriguez and other crew members, portray the negative effect that control over production practices has over an independent filmmaking vision. That is to say, Rodriguez repeatedly spells out how integral his own production process is to the filmic outcome. To take a specific example, editing while shooting was much more difficult when having to justify it to studio executives watching dailies that, compared to typical examples, lack significant coverage.[64] But what the dailies missed were the before-mentioned visual storyboards Rodriguez created on video in advance in order to save time and money on the set. These practices, designed around efficiency, are the real centerpiece to Rodriguez's own self-representation as an auteur. In this case, these practices and his marketing of them have an element of self-fulfilling prophecy in that his practices do save a lot of money and yet still produce high quality results. Rodriguez's career stands as a testament to the fact that a key component of auteur filmmaker involves finding new strategies for productivity. After the success of *Desperado*, Miramax gave Rodriguez a deal supplying him with the degree of "freedom" he desired from industry interference such as final cut and the ability to work in as many different departments as he wished without issue.[65]

As part of his self-promotion, Rodriguez often argues that any young filmmaker can replicate his practices, though these exaltations too often simplify his training and accomplishments. Most clearly, Rodriguez grossly oversimplifies the amount of expertise needed to operate cinematic technologies effectively.[66] In his "film schools," Rodriguez often suggests

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[63] Michael Haile. "From Rags to Riches." in *Robert Rodriguez Interviews*. Ed. Zachary Ingle. (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012). 17.

[64] Rodriguez tells many similar stories in *Rebel Without a Crew*.

[65] For more information on this deal see: Macor *Chainsaws*. 146-49.

[66] In terms of effects, Rodriguez was always interested in cutting corners and found ways to make even pre HD-camera effects more suitable to his cost-efficient-oriented production practices. "I wanted to learn how to do it

that believable industry-grade digital effects can be achieved by literally anyone with a computer and some spare minutes—something which any film with poor digital effects will show you actually requires training and trained personnel to even begin to approach properly. In the "Ten Minute Film School" for *Planet Terror* (2007), Rodriguez attempts to explain the digital effect of Cherry Darling's (Rose McGowan) machine gun leg in a way to make it accessible to young filmmakers. His commentary explains that they fit her with a colored cast, rendering her lower leg immobile, while showing an image of McGowan in a crouched position holding the cast toward camera.[67] Then, to explain the effect of putting on the leg Rodriguez creates the sounds of machinery (whirrs, ticks and explosive sounds) with his mouth while the image shows the digital transformation. His noises significantly infantilize the effect-making process because, while he makes the noises, the image onscreen shows the cast being digitally deleted, a square matrix inserted over the plane of the image, a black and white version of the machine gun popped onto the blank space, an animation of her moving the gun, the addition of color, color grading, and finally the digital degradation he used on the movie to give it an old film sort of feel. The entire process takes ten seconds in the film school and in no way explains that further work needs to be done in terms of modelling, the intricacies of color grading, and animation just to name a few. Rodriguez does not ever seem to acknowledge these resources and training, however, instead focusing more on the illusion that anyone could make films just as he does. It is impressive and entertaining, but seems particularly un-useful as a lesson beyond the encouraging inspiration.

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myself and create shortcuts so that I could create over 500 effects shots and make a low budget family movie, because family movies run over $100 million quite often . . . I think that the future will belong to filmmakers in the new wave who realize that they expand their vision by using hd computers and off-the-shelf equipment. Special effects are accessible. Unfortunately there is a mental block because people think that effects mean a big budget." Alex Green. "Robert Rodriguez, Writer/Director." *Reel West Magazine*. Jun/Jul 2001. 10.

[67] *Planet Terror*. Dir. Robert Rodriguez. Genius, 2007. DVD.

Sections which recall his earlier pre-digital film schools come off as far more accessible, but the focus on post-HD seems to be that Rodriguez has more of an investment in arguing for the wider adoption of that technology than in the promotion of independent filmmaking. Interestingly, his "film schools" have stopped since the industry has much more standardly appropriated HD filmmaking—the last school appearing on the release of *Shorts* (2009). The lack of his didactic features could be simply coincidental in that he soon after began the extremely laborious task of launching his own television network, *El Rey*, but the timing is worth noting.[68]

In a text-version of a "Ten-Minute Film School," found in his book of filmmaking tips, *Rebel Without a Crew*, Rodriguez attempts to assure readers that he does not provide unhelpful advice:

> If it seems that I'm oversimplifying even these basic aspects of filmmaking, I'm not! I think it's best not to concentrate your energy on all the pain-in-the-ass details that aren't that important at this point in your career. I'm telling you what you need to know in order to get by, so you can free yourself up to concentrate on what's really important: the pacing, the characters, the story. No one will ever care that your movie has great F-stops.[69]

While assuredly many industry professionals would disagree, especially with his latter statement, Rodriguez goes on almost immediately to contradict himself by advising, "You should learn every aspect of the filmmaking process no matter what area in film you think you want to go into. If you work each job yourself you'll have a better sense of what you really want to do. Later

[68] When asked, Charles Ramírez Berg theorized that the *El Rey* TV network was most likely the reason for Rodriguez's sudden lack of attention to home video features, though this was a supposition. Ramírez Berg. (Personal interview).

[69] Rodriguez. *Rebel*. 205-06.

on, if you're directing a movie, you'll know the needs of the sound recordist, the camera operator, etc."[70] So, in essence, Rodriguez argues that the filmmaker's energy should be liberally applied everywhere all at once. Placing these two arguments so closely together, however, does have the benefit of pointing out that Rodriguez expresses less of an interest in what would more broadly be considered creative or artistic labor and instead departmental efficiency—getting the film done quickly and cheaply over getting it done well. The Rodriguez "schools" of filmmaking assume talent as a given, offering nuts-and-bolts centered advice on how to cost-cut through bureaucratic disruption.

Rodriguez's adoption of HD filmmaking took his film school address to a much wider audience and began to give HD technologies credit for almost all of the "creative" labor his studios produce.[71] *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* (2003) has great significance for Rodriguez's career in that it is the film he used to "experiment" with what HD digital cameras could do for him. He argues they are automatically conducive to "creativity," thus allowing him to work faster, cheaper and more intuitively: "HD is very freeing and is more like going back to the

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[70] Rodriguez. *Rebel*. 206.

[71] Given his early adoption of the technology, Rodriguez became a common touchstone for discussions about the shift in the wider industry to adopting HD digital production more standardly: In a discussion of the HD Digital effects used in *Planet Terror* to create an effect of Tom Savini's finger being bitten off Caetlin Benson-Allott argues, "Savini's missing finger thus suggests the digital castration of latex effects by CGI, the end of a certain material era in film history, and a passing of the torch from one era of exploitation filmmakers to another." Caetlin Benson-Allott. . "*Grindhouse*: an Experiment in the Death of Cinema." *Film Quarterly*. 62 no. 1 (2008): 23.

To contrast, John Belton much more productively analyzes the highly stylized *Sin City* as an example of what HD technologies can do: "The bursts of color in *Sin City* . . . do not represent narrative possibility . . . they are hallucinatory fragments of color that exist in a diegetic limbo—neither quite inside the story space nor outside of it . . . At the same time, the color draws the eye to it like a magnet, pulling the spectator out of the diegesis into moments of pure graphic spectacularity . . . . Instead, it explores the new possibilities made available by digital technology for the fragmentation of the image into distinct picture elements, opting for heterogeneity rather than homogeneity. To this extent, it resembles avant-garde film in its exploration of an uncharted area in which previous codes and conventions have been left behind." John Belton. "Painting by the Numbers: The Digital Intermediate." *Film Quarterly*. 61 no. 3 (2008): 62-63.

basics of filmmaking, where it's fun again. It's just so much easier to shoot in HD. I was able to light and even DP myself because I was able to see what I was getting on my monitors . . . We moved a lot faster and it was a lot more satisfying."[72] Here, Rodriguez gives credit to the increased on-set visibility of HD monitors for allowing him to function in multiple roles—suggesting that this was something he had been somehow barred from before. The example outlines how quickly Rodriguez gave the technology credit for his already established alternative practices. Thus, his argument changes from one of how to work more efficiently outside of industry bureaucracy to how to place these desires onto HD filmmaking technologies. Suddenly the *technology* demands a new mode of working and one that conveniently mirrors Rodriguez's philosophy. His "film schools" even began didactically "selling" HD cinematic technology to fans addressed as burgeoning independent filmmakers not as spectacle, but as a panacea for independence.[73] His focus on technology as cause of ingenuity also begins to take the place of the specificity of his locations as well.

Like the other films in the trilogy, *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* was shot in Mexico, though Guanajuato, and was the last of Rodriguez's films to be shot primarily outside of Austin. The fact that it marked his first experimentations with HD digital filmmaking technologies is no coincidence as the variable locations HD cameras and green screens afforded him gave him the freedom to stay put in an environment he knew was conducive to his work. Through his discussions and film schools Rodriguez strongly suggests that the creative control discovered through shooting on HD cameras in *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* fundamentally altered the way

[72] Brian McKernan. and Bob Zahn. "A Digital Desperado" in *Robert Rodriguez Interviews*. Ed. Zachary Ingle. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012. 76.

[73] This direct address occurs in virtually every one of the "Ten Minute Film School" features found on the DVD releases of his films post-*Spy Kids 2* as well as many interviews post-2002s.

he thought about his own production practices including his approach to location shooting. Rodriguez claims that when asked to do another Mariachi film, HD technology was the primary thing which got him to go to Mexico: "I just thought it was such a hassle to shoot on film, and to go down there again and make a movie in Mexico . . . Then when those HD cameras came around, suddenly all those projects I thought were just impossible felt suddenly doable."[74] After using his production of *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* to test HD technologies, Rodriguez embraced the ability to make any location look like anywhere, thus allowing him to stay in one place with the most beneficial local resources and to form a standard crew.

Rodriguez would have us believe that his standard crew is anything but "standard" regarding the way in which they make films. Relaxing distinctions between production departments has been a longstanding battle with Rodriguez and standard industry practices. It also marks his central issue with unions. Given standard Hollywood production practices and union regulations, crew members can only work in their assigned department, designations Rodriguez prefers to leave fluid for himself and his own crew because doing so saves time, money, and personnel (Rodriguez often works as writer, director, producer, director of photography, editor, head production designer, director of visual effects, and now often composer of his own scores). He describes himself as non-union in interviews and has personally left both the WGA and DGA while he claims to also expect his crew to bend union regulations. In interviews Rodriguez romanticizes the benefits of non-union production which he calls key to his production philosophy:

> Everyone on my crew does multiple jobs . . . everyone becomes one of those 'slash' people—set decoration/art director/whatever. I figure, I'm doing fifty jobs,

[74] Keith Phipps. "Robert Rodriguez." in *Robert Rodriguez Interviews*. Ed. Zachary Ingle. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012. 70.

> so everybody else has to do at least three! But they are all excited about that. In fact, they don't even want to work on other movies now. And if they do, they come back saying: 'It's unbelievable! No one wants to do anything, no one is excited—it's such a drag!' The way we work always feels like your first movie; and ask any director what his favorite movie experience was, he will probably say his first film when everybody did everything. Everyone pitching in—that's the way it should be.[75]

Rodriguez does point out possible positive qualities to loosening the union restrictions on departments, though his expressed aversion to unions overlooks issues such as worker rights and the infrastructure to demand living wages and proper working conditions. All evidence suggests Rodriguez does responsibly follow union-based guidelines, but so much of selling his own process involves no thought to what adopting his new de-regulated standards might mean in different environments.[76] Rodriguez argues that the way he operates should be more widely adopted, because nothing in his arguments acknowledge that not every filmmaker/producer, and certainly not the industry, can be trusted to respect worker's rights without the strength of something like a union looking out for them.

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[75] Jody Duncan. "Working at the Speed of Thought." in *Robert Rodriguez Interviews*. Edited by Zachary Ingle. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012. 101.

[76] Attempting to find out particulars about Rodriguez's actual practices with the Texas IATSE has proven to be a lengthy project in and of itself. No one I spoke to in Austin claimed to know the particulars surrounding this relationship, and for what they did know no one wanted to go on the record about anything union-related. I can say that I have been told by a reliable source that Rodriguez productions *are* union productions, in that he registers them with the union, and that he works with a union crew. This of course clashes with what he describes as his actual practices—crew working in multiple departments—which could lead to the conclusion that he has formed some kind of individual deal or understanding with the local IATSE, or he is simply stretching the truth, but I cannot confirm either.

As a right-to-work state, Texas allows for more play with union regulations than Los Angeles. How, then, does it deal with this potential? Currently, the industry self-regulates. Texas encourages out-of-state productions with over $1 million budgets to use union labor or run the risk of the production unionizing, so many of the larger productions have a basis in the union.[77] The local industry workers I spoke to seem to see the right-to-work environment as opening a door to training: that those wishing to break into industry work can go onto a non-union, albeit professional, shoot to gain experience. Furthermore, even non-union personnel in the area know what the union guidelines are and are most often unwilling to accept anything less. The board of local production company ProductionFor explained, "Just from being on a lot of commercial productions, even if you're working with a non-union team there's still kind of a standard . . . If you have a big crew, someone is either in a union, but they're playing on a non-union set, or they've been around enough to know that's just kind of what you do. There is this system of common practice that's still employed on non-union stuff."[78] These union regulations place the employer/employee relationship in a tenuous balance—as long as enough large employers do not step over their bounds to exploit workers, it gives the workers little to no incentive to push unionization. Charles Ramírez Berg states, "I think that's a good way to put it: it kind of regulates itself. People like Rick and Robert understand that if you're going to get good and qualified people you need to pay them."[79]

Within this context, Rodriguez clearly sees no problem in loudly advocating for non-union industry filmmaking, but this does not change the fact that other industry environments

[77] For some discussion of the history of union and right-to-work development in Texas see: Macor. *Chainsaws.* 236-38.

[78] ProductionFor. Personal interview.

[79] Ramírez Berg. Personal interview.

and employers will abuse workers for capital gain without the protection of a worker's organization. Macor gives the example of a prop-master, Ken Rector, who came to film production already in a union from his work in the theater; she relays, "He shared the commonly held view among union members about Texas's right-to-work status: 'We called it 'right to work for less' because it usually equates with a businessperson wanting to pay a below-scale wage. And for the most part that's always how it's been interpreted from a labor standpoint.'"[80] Rodriguez's heralded opportunities, the result of being non-union, could be more justly achieved by altering union regulations to include work in other departments as long as hours, workload, pay and training are carefully monitored. Through my conversations in Austin no one had a bad word to say about Rodriguez, his company or his filmmaking practices. Everyone seemed to regard his stance on unions as reflecting only the looser environment a right-to-work state provides and admired his renegade stance. That his strategies align with the Austin cultural identity has arguably kept his statements insulated amongst an environment that determinedly self-regulates and are seen quite positively by the local filmmaking culture. Moving non-union practices outside of Austin and into the larger institutional or national discourses surrounding filmmaking practices, however, might not be so innocent.

An example of how free-play with regulation became problematic for Rodriguez occurred in his production of *Frank Miler's Sin City: A Dame to Kill For* (2014). For the post-production work Rodriguez entered into an unusual relationship with a growing visual effects company. Instead of paying for visual effects work on the film through his budget, Rodriguez convinced Prime Focus World to invest both money and effects work into the film in exchange for equity in the production. *The Wrap* values the investment at somewhere between $16-$19

[80] Macor. *Chainsaws.* 237.

million.[81] Before the release of the film, the production sold the deal as a positive and another example of Rodriguez's unique way of working through bucking the trends in the system. In *The Wrap*'s discussion with producer Aaron Kaufman they report, "Kaufman argued that Rodriguez regularly raises money in unconventional ways to maintain his artistic freedom and ownership stake in his films, something he could not achieve with a studio backer. 'He's doing some bold things that allow him to make his movies where he wants to make them, when he wants to make them and how he wants to make them.'"[82] Referred to as a "bold thing," the deal becomes inserted into the maverick Rodriguez narrative where because Rodriguez does unusual things and makes profitable films, even risky decisions seem gold-plated in that he has a tendency not to fail. Yet, this particular story will prove that Rodriguez's practices are not infallible and serve primarily to shield himself from professional or financial disaster through opening up other parties to increased risk.

In one sense the deal with Prime Focus does seem idealistic. It is liberating to think of a powerful visual effects company offering professional services as equity for a small independent film which cannot afford it. Though in this case the film was not a small independent film, but instead a big-budget film, requiring a much more hefty investment on the part of the VFX company. On paper, a sequel to a highly successful film, albeit the original was almost a decade ago, with a well-known cast including Bruce Willis, Jessica Alba, Eva Green and Josh Brolin certainly could sound like a guaranteed hit. But, the larger budget means a bigger gamble and a

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[81] Brent Lang. "Robert Rodriguez's 'Sin City 2' Brings Prime Focus on Board as Investor." *The Wrap*. July 2, 2013. Accessed September 5, 2014. http://www.thewrap.com/movies/article/sin-city-2-brings-prime-focus-board-investor-exclusive-101016/

*Deadline* estimates Prime Focus' stake in the film at $12.5 million. David Bloom. "Focused on 'Sin:' Prime Focus Swaps VFX, 3D Work For Film Stake." *Deadline*. August 21, 2014. accessed September 5, 2014. http://deadline.com/2014/08/sin-city-2-prime-focus-world-namit-maholtra-visual-effects-822967/

[82] Lang. "Robert Rodriguez."

highly stylized 3D film like this, which involved all green screen shots, demands a level of visual effects work surpassing anything any visual effects company has ever attempted to handle. Most importantly, all reports suggest that equity-oriented deals have historically gone very poorly for the VFX company involved. *Variety* reports,

> First, the f/x-for-equity swap hasn't been a success for vfx studios. The two vfx companies best known for swapping services for equity, Digital Domain and Rhythm & Hues, both went bankrupt. DD's stake in "Ender's Game" was thought to be one of its major assets coming out of bankruptcy, but the film flopped. If 'A Dame to Kill For' dies in theaters, PFW could suffer a significant loss.[83]

*Sin City: A Dame to Kill For* did not perform well, taking in only $39 million worldwide from an estimated $65 million budget, and received scathing critical responses, making it unlikely that Prime Focus will receive anything for their work on the film.[84] The deal has now become a cautionary tale for why trading effects work for equity should not be embraced.

Despite the often conveniently strong ties between Rodriguez's presentation of his own practices and the cultural philosophies of filmmaking in Austin, the extreme risk here, unevenly placed upon the effects company, seems to stand in opposition to standard operating procedure around Austin. The Austin media industry shows a dedicated effort to protecting the worker through standards such as strongly encouraging productions over $1 million to unionize as well as the attention shown to employing local crew by the Film Commission. Rodriguez instead puts visual effects workers in danger, shielding his studio, by taking a $65 million production and

[83] David S. Cohen. "Prime Focus Makes Big Bet on 'Sin City: A Dame to Kill For.'" *Variety*. August 12, 2014. Accessed September 5, 2014. http://variety.com/2014/artisans/news/prime-focus-makes-big-bet-on-sin-city-a-dame-to-kill-for-1201281233/

[84] Box office numbers from boxofficemojo.com. Budget estimate from imdb.com

requiring a private VFX company to put themselves completely at risk to finish it for him. This type of negotiation reveals the rift, albeit currently unperceived, between Rodriguez and Austin. His focus on place seems less about culture and community than it does about forming his own production resources amongst an agreeable environment. The choice of Austin, then, is not arbitrary, but has more to do with what it allows him to accomplish as a filmmaker—the corners he is able to cut. His use of Austin includes not only looser labor regulations, but also locally available support services, companies specializing in technological innovations, exhibition sites and a local identity which can be aligned with his own practices. Perhaps in the latter sense Austin fills in for Prime Focus World as a buffer between Rodriguez and full responsibility. I do not mean to vilify Rodriguez, but instead want to enforce the fact that Rodriguez's connection to place is primarily one of business and self-interest. As a figurehead, along with Richard Linklater, he has proven to successfully represent aspects of the Austin culture which the city's filmmaking industry can sell more broadly. Rodriguez continues to find value in asserting that in order to make films he must have his own brand of creative independence—the form of which, as we have seen, involves alternative production practices, new technologies and spatial re-location. His career shows the dynamic at play between arguing for artistry, while also finding ways to enact this independence through available material resources. At its most positive, his extremely vocal didacticism makes Rodriguez a poster child for theorizing how differently creative filmmakers might go about realizing their visions within the Hollywood industry. The combination of the two strongly-defined filmmakers in Austin is credited with the more recent move of other established filmmakers to Austin such as David Gordon Green. By remaining present in Austin, Rodriguez gives the impression that he contributes to the communal Austin environment, but if he were to leave, it is unlikely that anyone would notice for very long.

## Conclusion: Placing Authorship

For too long the auteur has been the baby thrown out with the poststructuralist bathwater. Many scholars tacitly take studying the auteur as a limiting scholarly practice despite that fact that filmmakers' names continue to structure texts. While not reverting back to Sarris' "auteur theory," this dissertation has shown that despite what some scholars may feel is limiting, industry practice is continually at odds with post-structuralism and needs to be acknowledged. Given the pervasive desire of culture and industry to assign authors to works, this dissertation has examined what labels such as auteur and author provide and has not attempted to abolish the practice of assigning them. There is no need to eschew what is already there. If the name of the auteur becomes the label for how the majority of a production is understood, it stands to reason that it can only be beneficial for scholars to better understand how such labels function and what comprises them. Therefore, I do not call for a return to the primacy of the auteur as a central figure of study, but instead as an authorial label through which many production practices are negotiated. My methods recognize that auteurs are consistently constructed and recognized in both industry and culture while remaining open to how the auteur label functions differently in diverse cultural contexts.

In order to achieve my goals, I have recast authorship studies in this dissertation as a study of productions and how the auteur label functions within them. Examining authorship as a process of making instead of an assignation of credit productively shows that authorial positions are constructed through various social contexts constantly in flux. The production process is the

area where filmmakers largely develop and begin to wield the functions of their auteur persona, thus this process is key to understanding how authorship is defined at any given moment and any given place. Along such lines, this dissertation has shown that auteurs can work and function quite differently under the same label. Robert Altman developed a highly unusual production process hinged around social gatherings with communities that helped to differentiate him as an institutional auteur, allowing his career to survive and resurface even after continual financial failure. On the other hand, Robert Rodriguez has made a hermetic environment shielded by a larger community which requires him to continually produce financially-successful films in order to remain private and autonomous. Once working more consistently with studio backing, John Waters' production process became quite standardized (i.e. no more shoplifting), however, filming only in Baltimore had profound effects on his career and choices as an auteur. A person is no longer an auteur only if they qualify for the label through a rather rigid set of practices and have it bequeathed upon them by an intellectual. With this dissertation I have shown the greater importance of examining how an auteur label is constructed and how, as a label, the auteur subsumes labor and artistic contributions which need to be examined in order to better understand the production process.

For this dissertation I chose writer/directors who traditionally act as a controlling force on set, but I did not do so to preclude the possibility of utilizing my method for studies of other production personnel. The focus on the more traditional auteur-position of writer/director began through a desire to point out the extent to which crew labor and contribution gets subsumed under the auteur label. I gave noted attention to Kathryn Altman's role in the Altman production process precisely because that social process, which is credited to Robert Altman, was materially produced by her. John Waters routinely mentions that his regular crew, production designer

Vincent Peranio and casting/producer Pat Moran, who I referenced in Chapter 2 had become such fixtures for him because they knew how to achieve "his" preferred aesthetic. Yet Waters' positioning of them as somehow his begs the question of how much of his aesthetic relies on the artistic sensibilities of these crew members. The work Waters' preferred crew have performed on other local shoots, such as *Homicide: Life on the Streets* and *The Wire* strongly suggests each has a set of valuable, transferable skills and a career they can call their own. In other words, crew have authorial positions even if that position is considered in service to an auteur. Their careers, choices and actions are available through the interview and site analysis work performed throughout this dissertation.

The focus in this dissertation on the relationship between the auteur and place begins to show the value of geographic-oriented authorship studies. It reveals that place serves as a highly influential concept of authorial definition and functioning. A "Christopher Nolan film" does not magically arrive at the theater without first going through a production process in different places. Shooting Gotham as Chicago or Pittsburgh can have profound effects on a production and a text. For instance, in using Pittsburgh for *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) allows the hostage-based narrative to utilize Pittsburgh's geography onscreen where the three rivers section off the city and keep it neatly visually bounded. Shot during the Occupy Wall Street movement, the production had to negotiate its shooting schedule geographically around Pittsburgh and New York City with social movements in mind. Only through place-based attention to the production environment can we truly understand production decisions and how the filmmaking "style" connected to Nolan's name actually functions. While any director who gets their name listed before their film's title in the trailer may be recognized as an auteur-star in virtually any location, respect for the position of the auteur relies on a multitude of different local interests. In

Baltimore, the fact that so many locals said automatically that "John Waters *is* Baltimore" serves as an extreme example of how auteurs can connect to places. However, as Eduard Berlin made clear in Chapter 2, Waters receives a much more nuanced form of respect for his position as author in New York City, where he is primarily known only to obscure art communities. Indeed, the identities, productions and careers of all the filmmakers studied here cannot be properly understood without dedicated attention to place.

A study at the level of place reveals specific choices made by filmmakers and their productions that can help to explain change. For instance, Rodriguez's choice to base in Austin, TX in the mid-2000s was notable due to the extent his facilities there allowed him to function autonomously. Whereas Rodriguez most often credits a desire to stay close to home as the reason for locating in Austin, this explanation does not account for the material realities and filmmaking resources of the city which provide far more incentive than simply familial whim. To simply accept the given narrative of family togetherness misses that, in studying Rodriguez as an auteur, his move also made his authorial name far more distinctive through this more solid association to a place (he is the guy who made his own private studio in Austin) than it was beforehand (he is the guy who makes action movies).

Forming my study of the auteur not around the specific person, but instead the auteur label, allowed me to open up my methods and gain great insight into how far authorial labels travel. If focused on the person, I would have felt the need to talk only to those who had direct correspondence with him or her. While I did speak to many friends, acquaintances and business associates of the filmmakers studied, I also talked to community leaders, local cultural institutions and simply people on the bus as I went from here to there in the places where these filmmakers worked. Such conversations were vital to gaining a sense of cultural and community

perspective and prepared me for a range of approaches to each figure. Through my process of interviewing locals I confirmed that the place was far more important to residents than were the filmmakers or stars with whom they may have had the opportunity to come into contact. For locals, the auteur is most important for what they are perceived to bring to the place, not for simply being a celebrity. Those filmmakers who recognize, at some level, the difference between simply being a celebrity and attending to a place have far more room to construct beneficial place relationships.

The focus of this dissertation on place clarifies the importance of local research in learning how production infrastructures operate in different contexts. To learn how a production or auteur interacted within the environment of a community, it is important to learn about that community beyond simply accessing the local newspaper. The people I talked to and the environments I walked through were rich with stories and opinions about the films, filmmakers and productions I was studying even despite the fact that I visited them years removed from the relevant productions actually being in town. It would have been easy to say that every community would unquestioningly latch onto the Altman social experience during one of his productions, but I instead found that the Altman of Holly Springs was not the Altman of Kansas City. One was a neighborly celebrity filmmaker, the other a distant hometown hero. Whereas the film produced in the former city became a pride-filled symbol for the town, the latter became largely forgotten throughout the city and, in many cases, not even ever viewed. Visiting different neighborhoods in the fieldwork cities led to a number of striking revelations that are not available without dedicated place-based research. Without visiting people, businesses and institutions connected to the Altman production in Kansas City and discussing their perspectives I never would have found the links between the production and local redevelopment issues. At

the level of news media the story of *Kansas City* was overwhelmingly positive and suggested that the film only helped to mollify long-standing local tensions. The more official account was torn apart upon visiting Kansas City and speaking to my very first interview.

Furthermore, actually visiting the locations, sites of production and neighborhoods added tremendously to my understanding of how each auteur functioned in communities. The appearance of former production sites was truly striking. As the photographs taken during my research on the Robert Altman chapter suggest, actually being in the geography of the neighborhood and seeing the discrepancy of long abandoned production sites on one side and fervent gentrification on the other brings local concerns and perspectives into very sharp light. Locals could point out the window or draw upon nearby examples instead of having to re-create and explain entire contexts to me. Furthermore, in a study based in large part around interview subjects, the respect I garnered by actually coming to their neighborhoods in order to perform my work was highly evident. In the few instances where I had to perform telephone interviews the distance between myself, the caller and our cultural contexts was far more evident in comparison.

Most importantly, however, my methods have revealed the constant presence of place in media studies research and our need to acknowledge it. Whereas the auteur is a concept that certainly travels across places, it also must exist in places. Studying the auteur in place reveals differences in what distinct places consider auteur qualities and, as a result, subtly alters how each auteur can function in each place. Stars, theaters, audience members, newspapers and productions all exist in places and their relationships to them have effects. Cultural geographers from Edward Soja to Michel Foucault have stressed that academia has developed a tradition of

focusing on time at the expense of space.[1] As Soja has pointed out, we do not exist in a field of time that moves across flat, un-dimensional space, but instead we exist in space/time: "We make our own history and geography, but not just as we please; we do not make them under circumstances chosen by ourselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the historical geographies produced in the past" (129). I would further argue that place plays a very important role in studying spatio-temporalities. While the perspective of space allows for the study of larger movements and changes, the level of place allows us a lens for how certain changes can manifest and develop. Waters did not become Baltimore in a day. Instead, in his desire to be a filmmaker, he began his career by trying to differentiate himself from the cultures of the city. His first effort, as seen in Chapter 2, was to distance himself from Baltimore and its communities, in the form of an outsider commenting on the city. As he continued to work and live in the city, as opposed to the rural suburbs where he grew up, he saw that his first notes of acceptance came from Baltimore—where his films began to screen at the Baltimore Film Festival and receive local acclaim. Then, upon becoming a true blue Baltimore filmmaker Waters found the city had begun to change significantly, focused more on gentrification and an image of tourism. In order to maintain his close association with the city and continue his more mainstream career Waters' films began to become more about nostalgia than they were a document of city communities. It would be easy to claim that Waters' films changed simply so that he could make more money and be mainstream, but this would not really account for why he never began making studio-led projects or filming outside of his home city.

[1] "Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialecttical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic." Michel Foucault. "Questions on Geography." *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. Ed. C. Gordon. New York: Pantheon, 1980. 70.

More sustained attention to place dynamics in Baltimore clarify the choices he made and some of the changes in his career.

One of the more clichéd lines found in home video special features since their inception has to be that, "the city played its own character in the film." By now it is clear that cities do not play characters; the places and people of cities are not separate elements to be taken apart from the other aspects of the film, but instead comprise a meaningful part of all elements of the production. Cities and towns, when considered as places, are not actors, nor merely settings, but instead collections of unique social practices that inter any production that works within them. Typically, cities are not treated with the praise held for celebrities, nor are they even necessarily given a credit beyond perhaps a municipal office getting a "special thanks." Yet would the film be irretrievably different if shot somewhere else? Absolutely. Cities, and places, influence texts and productions regardless of how much direct attention is paid to them.

As any other reader would be aware, issues of race, ethnicity and gender appear throughout case studies and in each chapter, the focus on place as defined through social relationships led me to recognize a number of social identity issues. Through place-based research I was able to more thoroughly engage with such already present issues when they directly impacted my focus with each chapter. As an extended example, race appears in one way or another in all of the chapters. In the sections on Baltimore, I noted that John Waters does not particularly seem to represent West Baltimore, the area of Baltimore most often credited to David Simon's work. My initial plan of seeking out businesses with expressed ties to Waters kept me to Mid, East and suburban Baltimore. Without this initial focus I am not sure that the extent to which such areas of the city seem to exclude West Baltimore would have been so apparent. With the recent 2015 Baltimore riots, the way the media invoke Waters as a figurehead

for the city falls very much in line with my own analysis based on his films and my interviews/experiences in the city. For instance, there is this highly problematic opening to Juliet Linderman's AP article on the riots: "Baltimore is crab cakes, the cobblestone walkways of Fells Point, a vintage baseball stadium, the retro weirdness of John Waters. Cherry blossoms line the streets of its affluent neighborhoods. They call it 'Charm City.' But there is another side of Baltimore that is far less charming. And on Monday, that side burned."[2] Lindeman begins her article by describing a Baltimore that excludes most of its African American population and which entirely ignores its uneven development problems and it is *that* Baltimore which Waters gets unquestioningly tied to. In Baltimore, Waters is clearly a symbol for unity, and unfortunately it is the more gentrified unity that excludes most of Baltimore's large African American population.

The Robert Altman chapter recognized and examined racial dynamics in Kansas City, though I chose to downplay the discussion in the section on Holly Springs, MS in order to remain tied to my main focus. I do not mean to suggest race could not be a part of that section, but as such a small southern town it is a decidedly different situation. Altman touched on local racial difference in the film through the character of Willis (Charles S. Dutton) who is something of a lower-class rambling character portrayed as friendly, well-meaning, alcoholic and is also the character who is wrongly accused of a crime. That is to say, on the surface in the film and Holly Springs people of different races get along very well, but institutional forces and class positions still combine to reveal a problematic past history. For Robert Rodriguez, race has figured fundamentally into his career as a Latino filmmaker, though the extent to which Austin plays into that history more specifically is currently unclear. He is certainly known for both inspiring and

[2] Juliet Linderman. "Riots in Baltimore the Product of Anger, Deep Dysfunction." 28 Apr. 2015. ABC News. http://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/riots-baltimore-product-anger-deep-dysfunction-30655694

encouraging Latino filmmakers and film workers—his *El Ray* network alone is built around the idea of promoting English-speaking Latino culture. I question in what ways his own career is emboldened by such work and how much that might overshadow those he tries to help, but this was an issue at least as large as Rodriguez's authorial persona and spanned many more places than the focus of this dissertation allowed for.

At a more specific level, this dissertation has looked at outsiders of varying degrees who work to become insiders, also to varying degrees. It shows how difficult the gap from outsider to insider is to manage, yet also how beneficial the attempt can be. Waters is now considered a Baltimore insider, a local, but it has taken many years, a notable career and sustained attention to the city and its resources for him to be considered both a celebrity and an everyday resident. Robert Altman may have not been considered an actual member of the communities in which he worked, but his presence undoubtedly had a positive local impact when compared to other more standard productions. Communities accepted him as someone who recognized the place and its unique, everyday qualities. In engaging with place in a specific manner, these filmmakers tap into local desires for larger recognition of their communities, thus further cementing their community identities. Those I talked to continually lionized media that they feel portrays them well and demonized media that do not. All of the filmmakers studied in the previous chapters find benefits to shooting in specific locations that they treat as places in one way or another, but in order to create these benefits some form of personalization with place needs to happen.

Clearly the relationships of all these filmmakers to place involves some iteration of the concept of "home." I would argue that for each filmmaker the idea of home that they work with is significantly different, yet seems to be a productive way to connect their image to place in a personal way. They all blend their home and work lives in some manner. John Waters, an expert

at dividing his public and personal life, has both a public and private life as a citizen of Baltimore, both of which he brings out into the city. He has been known for socially drinking one night a week, though recently is seen more widely in official appearances such as in interviews and local public events. City residents recognize his doubled Baltimore-self and respond by fervently protecting what they believe is the more private and personal Waters. Perhaps the tendency to protect is due to an inherent understanding that one element that keeps Waters local is his ability to have a private life there. Though not working in his original hometown, Rodriguez establishes his "family" very notably within the place of Austin. By building his production facilities either in or near his home, Rodriguez necessarily involves his family in his work. Furthermore, by using a consistent crew and by always having projects ready to go Rodriguez sustains a working family that also, given the location of his studios, become a part of his daily "home" life. Though the larger Austin community does not have access to Rodriguez's home or work, they do recognize what he has built and approve of its family-like nature as another symbol related to Austin culture. While working, Altman provided communities access to his home life, as for him they were one and the same. Even if that access is limited, Altman established himself as a sort of neighbor-figure who welcomed sociability. The case of the Altmans, of course, provides the most intriguing element to a discussion of place and home where they suggest that "home" can be an attitude. Set of practices or feeling one brings to a place, instead of needing to be a specific geographical location.

My research has also established the importance of presence to place-acceptance and how it can meaningfully impact place relationships. All interviewees noted that was the most engaging and unusual quality of these auteurs. In the case of Altman, who was never present for too long, the connection to his "there-ness" involved the fact that in Holly Springs for example,

many locals got to actually meet him or see him out and about—he interacted in the place instead of simply acting as if local perspectives did not matter. Though Waters is now less present in Baltimore than he once was, he is still careful to maintain his home base in Baltimore and stays locally visible when in town. In Austin, it meant a lot to the people that Rodriguez in one way or another produced all of his films there. He may not provide the same kind of altruistic community services as Richard Linklater does, but he continually hires locals, speaks well of Austin, and has an image which connects to Austin's own maverick filmmaker identity. A connection to place, in other words, requires presence. The decaying buildings found at Altman production sites speak volumes as to the longevity a filmmaker's material presence might have in a community where they are not present.

To end, it seems pertinent to return to the Altman sign which began the Introduction: "Your presence here shall be deemed your irrevocable consent." Taking this sign metaphorically, a similar warning could sit at the border of each of these cities, waiting for unsuspecting filmmakers to arrive. John Waters is now always in Baltimore whether his physical presence graces the city or not. His image appears throughout the city and his merchandise is sold at any store which sells media, and you can still see the occasional pink flamingo out and about. By creating so much industrial infrastructure for himself in Austin, Robert Rodriguez has effectively bound himself there. Beyond his facilities, however, he is also an expected cultural element—a figure to represent certain ideals of the local filmmaking community at events such as film festivals and other film-related events. In Kansas City, Robert Altman is regarded as a notable filmmaker who brought attention to the city's communities in need, regardless of the uneven result of that attention may have been. In Holly Springs, Altman's only material presence is in the *Twilight Zone*-like fact that most locals own a copy of the same obscure movie. The stories of

Altman's time there, however, stand to last for many years to come. Places are just as able to hold onto auteurs as the filmmakers are able to capture their images onscreen. Place, therefore, provides the researcher with a tremendous wealth of perspectives and approaches to studying authorship, filmmakers and filmmaking. All authors are somewhere, and it is time for us to figure out where that is.

## FIGURES

**Figure 3.1:** The Altmans' home during the Holly Springs *Cookie's Fortune* shoot. Kathryn always chose a home fit for entertaining large numbers of guests and often centrally located for ease of access (Photo taken by author).


**Figure 3.2:** An example of historical markers found throughout Holly Springs. This particular sign sits outside a house used in the production as Camille's house (Photo taken by author).

**Figure 3.3:** Location used for the Catfish shack in *Cookie's Fortune* as seen in 2014 (Photo taken by author).

**Figure 3.4:** Exterior of Police Station in *Cookie's Fortune* as seen in 2014 (Photo taken by author).


**Fig 3.5:** Exterior of Theo's Bar as seen in 2014 (Photo taken by author).

**Figure 3.6:** Exterior of Theo's Bar as seen in 2014 (Photo taken by author).

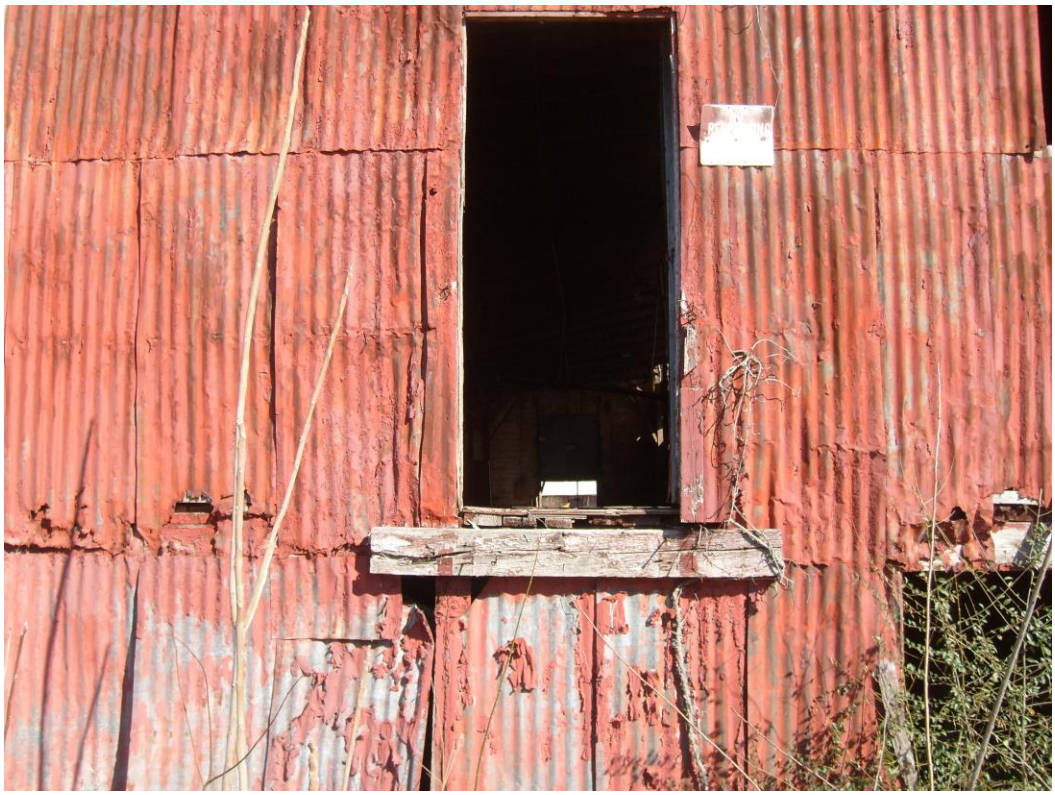

**Figure 3.7:** Exterior of Theo's Bar as seen in 2014 (Photo taken by author).

**Figure 3.8:** Exterior of Theo's Bar as seen in 2014 (Photo taken by author).


**Figure 3.9:** Union Station front entrance 2013 (Photo taken by author).

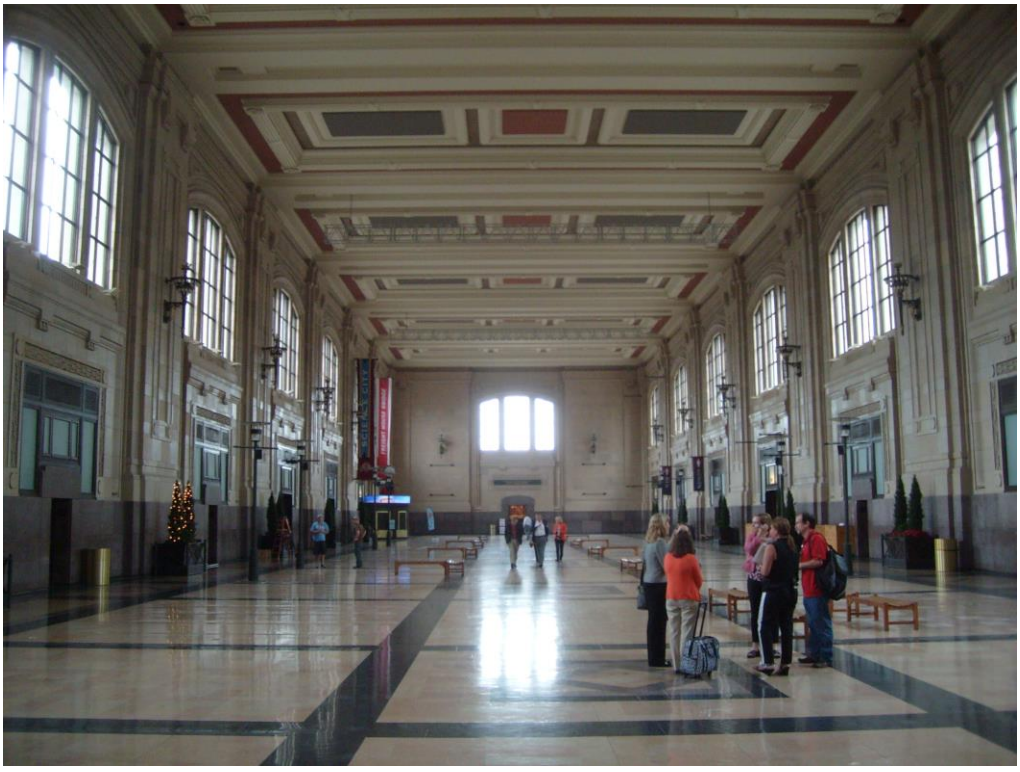

**Figure 3.10:** Union Station restored interior as seen in 2013 (Photo taken by author).


**Figure 3.11:** 18th & Vine looking down 18th Street next to the Jazz Museum (Photo taken by author).


**Figure 3.12:** The view of the street right next to that of the previous photograph, Vine Street at 18th & Vine. The facades represent buildings that do not exist and are no longer habitable (Photo taken by author).

**Figure 3.13:** Restaurant near the entrance of the restored Union Station as seen in 2103 (Photo taken by author).


**Figure 3.14:** Opposite view from Fig 3.13 of Union Station's restored interior. The entrance to the AMTRAK area of the station on the far left (Photo taken by author).

**Figure 3.15:** Restored interior of Union Station as seen in 2013 (Photo taken by author).


**Figure 3.16:** Interior of restored Union Station main floor shopping areas as seen in 2013 (Photo taken by author).

**Figure 3.17:** Restored rear exterior of Union Station as seen in 2013 (Photo taken by author).

**Figure 3.18:** View looking at 18th & Vine. The restored historic Lincoln Building is on the left and the Jazz Museum on the right. The Museum's property extends all the way to the end of the block at Vine Street (Photo taken by author).

**Figure 3.19:** The restored historic Gem Theater, directly across the street from the Jazz Museum on 18th Street (Photo taken by author).


**Figure 3.20:** Certain production design elements remain on Vine Street almost 20 years later even though the buildings remain empty (Photo taken by author).


**Figure 3.21:** Other signs and façade exteriors show the wear of neglect (Photo taken by author).

**Figure 3.22:** Façade exteriors on Vine street are in most places literally falling apart (Photo taken by author).

**Figure 3.23:** One façade on Vine Street sits next to a vacant lot . . . (Photo taken by author).

**Figure 3.24:** . . . and yet the building is no longer there (Photo taken by the author).

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