

# IMAGINATIONS

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## “Introduction”

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# INTRODUCTION: PERCEIVED PERIPHERALITY AND PLACES IMAGES: THE CITY, THE REGION, THE BORDER

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*The most interesting things are happening at the margins.*

- Yuri Andrukhovych (Pomerantsev)

In their forward to *Cinema at the Periphery*, editors Dina Iordanova, David Martin-Jones, and Belén Vidal relate an anecdote about *Forgotten Silver*, a 1995 mockumentary produced by Peter Jackson and Costa Botes that cleverly inverts the history of the cinema, placing New Zealand at its centre:

*They detailed the discovery of a cache of rusty film cans in rural New Zealand, a find that was later identified by scholars as the films of pioneering ‘Kiwi’ filmmaker Colin McKenzie, who had died in 1937. With tongue firmly planted in cheek, Jackson and Botes lovingly parade experts such as film historian Leonard Maltin and movie mogul Harvey Weinstein before the camera to attest to how these cans of decaying nitrate reveal McKenzie to be the true Father of the Cinema. McKenzie’s many technical discoveries included the invention of celluloid film, sound recording, and the first color films made from local New*

*Zealand berries. McKenzie was not just a technological innovator but also a pioneering storyteller who originated the close-up, montage editing, and the genres of slapstick comedy and costume drama. Most significantly, he was a pioneering businessman who began the globalized film trade with breakthrough financing deals with the Soviet Union. (Bierman 56)*

Our special issue takes this fictional inversion as its starting point for an investigation of place imaginaries. In drawing attention to the way postcolonial rewritings of history remain mired in geopolitical power dynamics involving centrality and peripherality, the contributions here, like those in Iordanova, Martin-Jones and Vidal’s volume on cinematic peripheries, seek to demonstrate that “the revision and questioning of established canons has been the driving force behind some of the most innovative theory and practice”

(Jordanova, Martin-Jones, and Vidal 1), and not only in film history.

Jordanova, Martin-Jones and Vidal place themselves in the tradition of Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's 1993 edited volume *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media* and 1994 monograph *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, which were formative in helping Film Studies make the postcolonial turn and open itself towards World Cinema, just as there was a similar push in the discipline of Comparative Literature towards World Literature (cf. Andrews, Damrosch). These scholarly moves can be understood as part of the hegemonic Anglo-American academy trying to accommodate larger globalizing trends in a manner it could live with politically. In a kind of "wish it and it will be so" click of ruby slippers, both absorb the world's cultural production into its fold by making it available in English translation or with English subtitles. That these processes of translation continue to be necessary to keep the originals alive in the new global world system is incontestable. Whether they also serve to flatten the "vibrant multitude of creative voices and forms of expression that originate and dwell beyond and outside the commonly celebrated cultural hubs" (3) is debatable and remains to be seen (cf. Braz).

Of interest to us in this issue is the question of what effects the technological changes in late modernity to the new global world system have had on place imaginaries. If a place like New Zealand continues to figure as very remote in the global cultural imaginary, why is this so? Has there or has there not

been any reconfiguring as the time-space compression of globalization and internet culture has interacted with real-time geographical realities? Are there historical precedents or mythologies that have managed to live on and exert a discernable influence? Unlike the *Cinema at the Periphery* volume, we don't try to bracket the centre out. Rather, we wonder in how far an overarching understanding of centrality has continued to persist in the face of technological time-space compression, and for this, we explore two key axes of centrality: Eurocentrism, on the one hand, and urbanity, on the other.

One can only read so many times about the growth of cities and the fact that an increasing percentage of the world's population inhabits them. Nevertheless, in the case of our contributors, cities matter and are what we all call, however uncomfortably or with tongue in cheek, home.[1] The idea for this issue took shape virtually, in the electronic inter-urban "cloud" that connects and allows for instantaneous contact between Auckland, Edmonton, Toronto, Paris, London, and Moscow. For each of these cities centrality and peripherality are questions of context, and the ethnic and cultural mixes in each have come to call Eurocentrism into question in interesting ways. Auckland and Edmonton are viewed unquestioningly as peripheral by those in Toronto and Paris but not by those in Rotorua and Vegreville. Within Canada Toronto is centrality writ large, but from within Toronto, one cannot but be aware of terrible feelings of peripherality vis-à-vis New York and London. Vienna and Moscow have tended to be considered

peripheral in comparison with Paris, even when they served as the capitals of powerful empires. Taken together, these cities confront us with the comparative relationality of the imaginaries with which they are commonly associated.

This relationality disrupts the routine way that cities are often metonymically articulated to nation states, but cities, we find, also work to restructure the experience of peripherality because they are anchored in hinterlands, less clearly demarcated but culturally equally significant regional spaces of identity. Regions interact with, support or counterbalance national imaginaries. Shifting geopolitical contexts (the fall of the Iron Curtain, American border protection after 9/11, the growing global significance of the Asia-Pacific, etc.) throw into relief the redrawing and resignifying of regional alignments. This special issue is interested in cultural representations that show how the nexus of the urban/regional and centrality/peripherality is negotiated in articulating spaces of identity across geopolitical borders, and thus draws our attention to the intricate interplay between the urban and the regional, how they can both work with and against the national, and to what degree they challenge or reinforce the longstanding histories of colonialism that have gone into the making of Eurocentrism.

Specifically, the contributions in this special issue explore the place imaginaries produced by the relationality of Europe and Oceania and take us from the far reaches of New Caledonia to contemporary London. The first three

articles are set in Oceania, the next two deal with cultural crossings between Oceania and Europe, while the final three take us to Europe and its branching across the Atlantic to the new world. We open with Raylene Ramsey's situating of the influential writer from New Caledonia, Déwé Görödé, among the shifting tides of postcolonial and feminist sentiment that helped the island be reconfigured as "less a distant appendage of France or Europe, or a far flung island in a vast Pacific ocean than an integral part of what the Tongan writer, Epeli Hau'ofa called 'Our Sea of Islands'". As Ramsey demonstrates, a powerful sense of place emerges as Görödé's "writing practices renegotiate the urban/regional or Noumea/Bush/*Tribu* nexus to counterbalance or contest national (French) imaginaries". Next, Deborah Walker-Morrison surveys Maori filmmaking to show how it articulates "the centrality of land and water to an evolving sense of individual and community identity" in (re-) constructing Aotearoa as *Tūrangawaewae*, or, as Walker-Morrison puts it, "*our Place to Stand*" (italics added). In the final contribution on cultural production in Oceania, Felicity Perry takes us from the region's periphery to the political centre of New Zealand, its capital Wellington, and offers us an incisive analysis of the city's very specific sense of fashion, which, as her title reveals and her article explains, involves black wool and vintage shoes.

In the second section, Ellen Carter and Angela Kölling offer us two case studies on cultural migrations between New Zealand and Europe. Carter's subject is the French novelist Caryl Férey's

sensationist novel *Utu*, in which, as she laconically sums up, “*Pakeha* (New Zealander of European origin) policeman Paul Osborne investigates a cannibalistic Māori separatist sect”. Carter’s interest is in cross-cultural reception between places of unequal cultural power relations, and her empirical study of French and New Zealand readers’ responses to the novel is instructive, conclusively demonstrating how “geographically and culturally-situated elements differently influence cultural insider and outsider readers, with the latter more likely to change their opinions than the former”. Kölling’s case study is of NZ@Frankfurt, that is, of New Zealand’s being featured as Guest of Honour at the 2012 Frankfurt Book Fair. Her interest, and entry-point, is translation and the personal engagement of translators that too often remains the invisible enabler of such an event. As in the case of Férey’s *Utu*, we see that the centrality of German-language readership influences the image of the periphery in the translations of “New Zealand literature” that appeared in Frankfurt and in how that anything-but-straightforward category was interpreted. She finds in Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s work on “collaborations between transnational investment groups and local interest groups in the Indonesian rain forest... a valuable warning against assuming that such collaborations are based on common viewpoints or goals” and in Tsing’s concept of friction a useful alternative metaphor to illuminate the translators’ usual invisibility.

The final section of articles focuses on the European centre from the perspective

of its peripheries and explores the role that peripherality has played in a range of media. Susan Ingram’s subject is one of the monumental films made on the outskirts of Vienna in the early interwar period and how it helped a young Hungarian filmmaker make his way to Hollywood and shaped the thematics of the films he made there, the much loved *Casablanca* in particular. Elena Siemens then examines another cultural production whose space of performance contributed to resignifying a well-known text in terms of centrality: namely, a staging of *Dr Zhivago* in a Soviet-built suburban theatre in Moscow. Finally, just as the last contribution in the first section takes us to the capital of New Zealand and shows us how an imaginary of peripherality plays itself out in terms of fashion, in the final contribution to this section, Markus Reisenleitner takes us to the London of Guy Ritchie’s 2009 action thriller *Sherlock Holmes*, and in comparing its urban imaginary with that of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, he demonstrates how “a persistent dichotomy of technology vs. occult knowledge... seems to be intimately connected to the persisting imaginary of London as a global city”.

The issue is supplemented by one of the features *Imaginations* encourages in its issues: namely, a spotlight on and interview with a guest artist. We were very happy that *Imaginations* suggested we feature the work of photographer Katrina Sark, as the sensitivity to the specificities of place that radiates from her perspectival, humanistically modernist images is very much in keeping with our thematics.

Taken together, the contributions take us on a journey that shows us how centrality can operate in the most peripheral of places, while at the same time centres are riven with peripheral divisions. We see that under the conditions of (increasingly late) modernity, both urban and regional culture has served as a contact zone and port(al) of entry characterized by cultural exchange, hybridity and cosmopolitanism, borders in a cultural and identitarian, rather than strictly geopolitical, sense that one is tempted to describe as geo-aesthetic.

Wrapping things up, we would be remiss not to acknowledge the forces and circumstances that turned this special volume from a possibility into a reality. The initial impetus was provided by a series of panels at the Crossroads in Cultural Studies conference held in Paris in July 2012, which brought together participants based in New Zealand and Canada, who related to Parisian centrality in very different ways. Our thanks to all those there whose incisive observations and animated discussions encouraged us to pursue our explorations of place images. Our thanks also to the editors of *Imaginations*, whose networked approach to cross-cultural media we were delighted to discover is very much in the same spirit as ours, and to managing editor Daniel Laforest in particular, for his guidance in bringing our work to your screen.

## Endnotes

[1] I would like to acknowledge Aleksandra Bida's influence on my thinking of cities as multi-scalar homes and congratulate her on the successful defence of her dissertation, "Mapping Home: Literary and Filmic Representations of Multi-Scalar Dwelling."

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