

Making Space for Film with Film Geographies

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Abstract

In this article I will argue that the online filmmaking and screening initiative Film Geographies is shaping (and has been shaped by) our understanding of what a geographical film is. It has achieved this by opening up a previously unavailable space for geographers to make and screen films allowing the creation and curation of a growing archive of work that is a significant contribution not just to filmic geographies as a sub field but to the discipline more widely. Film Geographies was established in 2016 as an online digital platform for the making and screening of films by geographers and/or about geography. In the last eight years it has amassed an archive of over 200 short films and over 1200 subscribers from around the world. Film Geographies also collaborates with other disciplines with joint calls highlighting the importance of building networks for film practitioners and researchers within and without the academy. The mostly short films are collected via two annual calls attached to major geography conferences. The online platform screens film online and in cinemas and organises filmmaking training workshops. I argue that the origins of the platform on the margins of the discipline, and diverse elements of the Film Geographies

platform, have created much needed accessible film space for geographers to make films, watch films and debate film and filmmaking, enabling participants to shape and influence a range of film-focused and practice-led contributions to the discipline.

Keywords: Filmic geographies, inclusivity, film as method, place-based filmmaking, filmspace

Introduction

Progress in academic filmmaking has been uneven across the disciplines. Unlike anthropology, with its long history of ethnographic and observational filmmaking (de Brigard 1975; MacDougall 1985; Pink 2001, 2012; Grimshaw 2001, 2005) or even sociology's use of audiovisual technology as a mode of (mass) observation (Casey et al. 2014; Hamilton 2006), the discipline of geography cannot draw on a long history of academic filmmaking. This has made a definition of geographical film harder to discern. It is only in the last decade or so that a sufficient number of films have been produced to allow scholars to more easily assess what a geographical film is, or might be, and what makes a film geographical.

In this article I will begin by giving a short history of filmmaking in geography, before going on to developments in the last decade, focusing on the impact of the establishment of filmgeographies.com as an online platform for debate and dissemination of geographical films. Looking back at the way the Film Geographies has developed, I will argue that it is creating a multi-layered film space that makes two significant spatiotemporal contributions to the field of film geography. Firstly, though the way it has provided an annualised and globalised mapping of geographical films, a dynamic and iterative space where films are produced, submitted and screened, allowing scholars and filmmakers to debate film and filmmaking in real time. Secondly, through its collection over the last eight years (and counting) of a significant archive of films, it is creating a historicised film space with content that it is now possible for scholars to map, track and analyse. I will also argue that Film Geographies has created a particular kind of radical film space, shaped by a previous resistance to the assimilation of filmmaking, that is defining a notion of what makes a geographical film for the discipline.

Geography and Filmmaking

Geography has always relied on visualization tools in its production of knowledge but has no clear heritage in the realm of filmmaking. Filmmaking could easily have been added to the toolbox as it was in other disciplines. *Climbing Mount Everest* (Noel 1922) is generally acknowledged to be the first geographical ‘expeditionary’ film. The film documented the first British ascent of the peak by Captain John Noel in the same year as *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty 1922), credited with being the first anthropological film and also one of the first films to define the documentary genre. Despite this early use of film to document explorer expeditions in the early 20th century, geography did not go on to develop a culture of filmmaking.

The establishment of a notion of a ‘filmic geography’ has been hampered by the belief that it is the core role of geographers to write about films and filmmaking in the context of space, place and visibility, but not to make them (Jacobs 2013, 2016a). The ‘cultural turn’ of the discipline in the 1980s created the first significant opportunity to examine the role of film and television production, heavily influenced by Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* (1972) and Mulvey’s work on the gaze (1975). In the following decades geographers went on to explore a gaze that was colonial/sovereign (Gregory 1994), touristic (Urry 2001), or academic (Crang 1997). But when geographers turned their attention to film, calling it a ‘new subfield’ (Lukinbeal and Zimmerman 2006), their approach was largely focused on writing about television and cinema in the context of landscape (Aitken and Zonn 1994; Kennedy and Lukinbeal 1997; Lukinbeal and Zimmerman 2006), thereby setting out limits to the rise of a filmic geography at the exact time they were proclaiming its arrival. When Aitken and Dixon (2006) stated that geography’s relationship with film had ‘come of age’, the idea of a ‘film geography’ was still largely one where film was analysed and written about, not practised.

It’s possible that one impediment to exploring filmmaking processes was related to an oft noted assumption that geography and visibility were indivisible (Driver 2003; Rose 2001, 2022). The discipline was referred to as the ‘eye’ of history (Cosgrove and Daniels 1988) — why add a camera when an eye was enough? Crang (1997, 359) for example, noted how geographers paid more critical attention to the ‘representations of landscape than the prac-

tices that create these representations.’ The absence of filmmaking for geography was a missed opportunity not only to add an important methodology to the discipline, but also to examine the spatiality of film, to reflexively explore our dependency on the visual (and aural), and to better understand how geographical research produces and creates knowledge about place and space.

Making Space for Film(ic) Geographies

While not a filmmaker herself, Doreen Massey was one of the few geographers who saw and was attracted to the spatial possibilities of film and filmmaking as a pathway to different kind of thinking space for geography (see Pratt and Jacobs 2018). Film connected theories of representation to politics and space, and Massey was excited by the transformative potential of film as a vehicle to effect meaningful change. It probably helped that she was based at the Open University (OU) for so much of her career (1982-2016), home to BBC TV studios that produced teaching material (Weinbren 2015), so that she was often in front of the camera even if not behind it. In an exchange with Lury published in *Screen* in 1999, Massey ruminated on the possibility of film ‘to criticise or reorder our geographical imaginations of the world’, suggesting one of the key reasons film could do this was the ability to render visible things that remain unseen in a global context (Lury and Massey 1999, 233). She identified the key spatial characteristics of film that made this possible: “Precisely because of its mobility, its ability to travel, to make new juxtapositions, new cartographies [...], film has the potential powerfully to present this other aspect of our spatial world as well” (Lury and Massey 1999). But without a material or conceptual location within the discipline for academic filmmaking to grow and develop, geographers interested in filmmaking had to look outside their discipline for inspiration and training, relying on handbooks and theoretical contributions from those working in film and cinema studies, anthropology and sociology (Dawkins and Wynd 2010; Dancyger 2011; De Jong et al. 2012; Hamilton 2006; Kydd 2011; Knoblauch 2012; Hampe 1996; McClane 2013).

The Film Geographies initiative was created on the edges of the formal academic establishment, not from choice but from necessity. In 1998, around the same time Massey was writing about the transformative potential of film and Gillian Rose was asking how geog-

raphy was visual, I (a prospective PhD student who would be supervised by Doreen Massey in the same OU geography department that Rose would later join) asked the then Head of Department if I could submit my thesis as a film. Or at least part of it. I was told this was possible in theory, but the actual process never materialized and my PhD remained solely a prose text. By 2004, now a post-doctoral fellow, I was able to obtain funding from research councils covering the humanities and social sciences to make films. Yet within my discipline, there was little interest shown and no opportunities to share or discuss films or the process of making a film. One of my films (*Sinai Sun*, 2006) was screened at the anthropological Margaret Mead Travelling Film Festival in 2007, but no such avenues existed in geography.

It wasn't really until the 2010s, when geography took a digital turn (Ash et al. 2018), that the potential of filmmaking gained traction. By then, more geographers were embracing filmmaking methodologies — see Garrett's use of 'videography' (2012), Gallagher on experimental sound (2011), Bliss on digital storytelling (2011), and Parr (2007) on the potential of collaborative filmmaking. With the rise of interest in non-representational theories, Lorimer wrote about the potential of the moving image to explore the 'more-than-human' (2010), while in 2011 Cutler established the film club Passenger Films (Cutler 2012) that until 2017 screened selected films with invited speakers at cinemas and other locations in London, providing a space for geographers to gather and debate key issues using filmic representations as a starting point. Perhaps most influential at that time in the discipline in relation to research methodologies for global development was the growing popularity of participatory video (Kendon et al. 2007; Milne et al. 2012). The first major geographical conference sessions on the rise of filmmaking in the discipline were held at the UK's Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG) and the American Association of Geographers (AAG) in 2011. The AAG session in particular garnered interest from feminist and queer filmmaking geographers and geographers from the global South, and several papers were developed into a special edition on the rise of filmmaking in the discipline for the journal *Area* (Baptiste 2015; Collard 2014; Kendon 2015; Jacobs 2016a, 2016b; Vasudevan et al. 2015).

Yet this growth of filmmaking in the discipline risked stalling without a space for both publishing and screening the films that would generate greater visibility and debate. At that time no high-rated journal would accept films unless distilled to a series of photographs as part of a 7000-word text (Jacobs 2013, 2016). With all that (albeit low resolution) audiovisual equipment available at the AAG, it seemed like an international conference would be a good place to start. I had already joined the Media and Communications Specialty Group in 2011 but it took me until 2016 (with my colleague Joseph Palis from the Specialty Group) to work up the courage to ask the conference organisers if they would add ‘films’ as an option to their paper presentations. They politely declined but said there was nothing to stop us from organising a film session as long as we didn’t mind holding it outside of the main conference timetable. From that moment on, nearly all our organising and networking took place outside of formal channels, and was largely unfunded. In the cartography of the discipline our position at the margins of the anglophone centre was made clear. After putting out a call for films on mailing lists, I set up a googledoc system for collating submissions and a website to host the films, registering the domain filmgeographies.com. Other interested geographers came forward and the website was developed with the help of web designer Matteo Bontempi and geographer Giovanna Ceno from Italy. Our first call received over forty-five submissions, many from women and many from beyond North America and Northern Europe.

Making Space for Film Space

Film space has been written about in many different contexts. In *L’espace au cinéma* Gardiès (1993) identifies four key spaces of cinema. Two are related to the audience — the physical location of the audience and the ‘viewer space’ of interpretation — while two are focused on the filmmaking process — ‘diegetic’ space and narrative space (Lévy 2013).

Referencing Lefevre’s *Production of Space* (1991), Massey has argued that space is ‘precisely the sphere of the possibility of coming across difference’ and ‘film is fantastic at portraying this aspect of intense and unexpected juxtaposition, which is a characteristic of space, and of cities in particular’ (Lury and Massey 1999, 232). Created on the margins and inspired by the idea of Massey’s thinking

about space, Film Geographies approaches its own film space as the product of spatial relations that can occur in a multiplicity of different spaces often at the same time. While we started as an informal initiative, we do now have a small pot of money and a partial formal structure has come through the establishment of a Film Specialty Group at the AAG, with its own constitution and bylaws. We also get funding from Queen Mary, University of London (QMUL), and other sources for screenings and workshops. Elsewhere the development of Film Geographies is still very much embedded in the idea of film space as a political space to affect change, and as an iterative process, relying on the unpaid labour of its supporters and shaped by its dialogical relationship with the filmmakers and films that are submitted. After that it is the format, genre, and method used by the filmmakers who submit their films each year that determines the content of the film space on offer.

Arguably the absence of any pre-established process for filmmaking in the discipline of geography has facilitated some freedom to develop a new set of feminist, decolonial practices and values, which informs our process from putting out calls for films, selecting the films and publishing the films online, and/or screening, as shown in the following outline of the film space of Film Geographies.

Film space is an Inclusive and Accessible Space

Putting out the Call – Establishing our calls through the AAG has helped ensure that Film Geographies has an international reach, though there is more work to be done. While still firmly in the anglophone academy, the AAG is the largest annual conference for geographers worldwide, so it attracts people from all over the world. Co-founder of AAG Shorts and co-chair of the AAG Film Specialty Group Joseph Palis is based in the University of Philippines Dili-man, and a significant proportion of our film submissions and subscribers come from the global South. To remove any financial barrier to participation, there is no charge to submit a film or watch a film and there is no requirement to register to attend a conference to have your film screened. Expensive equipment is not necessary, and films made with smartphones are welcome. While geography is an integral part of Film Geographies, the platform actively seeks out interdisciplinary and community collaborations: for example in 2021 we ran a joint call for films with researchers and textile practitioners at

the AHRC funded *Stitching Together* network to explore the relationship between making textiles and making films.

Faction and Fiction are welcome – Although attitudes are changing, a positivist approach that to produce knowledge as truth, academic films should be documentaries still lingers. Yet while the distinction between documentary and fiction might be a disciplinary or a categorical distinction, it is not ontological. By accepting any format or genre of film, we are encouraging filmmakers to think beyond the idea of film as a document and have amassed a diverse range of filmic styles over the years, including the excellent Nepalese ‘coming of age’ drama *Kabita* (2019) by Dikshya Karki and Alice Salimbeni’s collaborative parody *By Bike She Lives* (2020)

Films not Features- Keep it Brief – There are three main categories — completed shorts, work in progress and student shorts, with a fourth category of ‘community-led’ film coming in 2024. We ask that films are no more than twenty minutes with an ideal of about five minutes. This is partly for practical reasons – it means we can screen as many films as possible in one ninety-minute session and short films also work better in the classroom and online. By encouraging short films, we are better able to build capacity and work with scholars who might not have a lot of funding or filmmaking experience. The longer the film the harder it is ensure the narrative holds and elements connect, and the more time and money is needed, the more privilege required to make a film happen. The minority of academics who make feature-length films are able to do so because they have reached a level of tenure sufficient to access the funds to pay for production teams to achieve their aims. Making a short film is cheaper and easier, you can use your phone, you don’t need tenure or a large grant. The Student Short film by Mark Ball *Pick Up* (2019) tells a fascinating and complex story in under 3 minutes.

Building Capacity through Peer Review – This is a challenge. While traditional peer review takes place during the writing process, nobody wants to change a film once it’s gone through full production. We do offer a work in progress review, but it is more likely that our feedback will feed forward into the filmmaker’s next films. Our current review panel is largely self-selected and includes academics from geography, sociology and film studies based in the UK, USA, Germany, Italy and the Philippines, as well as people who work in the film industry from the UK and Portugal. The filmmaker answers

three questions: 1. What did you set out to make a film about?; 2. What methods did you choose?; 3. What challenges did you experience? After watching the film reviewers are tasked with assessing: 1. How closely did the filmmaker(s) get to achieving their aims?; 2. Does the style and approach to filmmaking match their objectives?; 3. Should the film be screened? Reviewers are not obliged to only choose films that are technically impressive but can accept a film if they consider it offers some insight into our relationship with the world.

Accessibility and Ownership – Filmmakers who have their films selected need to own the copyright as they are asked for permission to screen their films and host them on the Film Geographies website for a minimum of three years. Selected films are screened in a major US city for the AAG in March or April and in a UK city in late August for the RGS-IBG. At the moment there are no plans to single out films for special awards. Filmmakers are welcome to attend the screening, but it is not considered essential as funds for visas, travel and registration are only available to a minority. When the conference ends the selected films are made available to stream via the Film Geographies website.

Impact, Training and Engagement – Funding from QMUL's Centre for Public Engagement has allowed us to organise public screenings in the UK, US, Egypt and the Philippines. Other online screenings take place without funding, or at the invitation of members from around the world to give seminars or workshops. Different funding bodies including the AAG, the UK Office for Students, Queen Mary Westfield Fund, Centre for Public Engagement and the London Arts and Humanities Partnership have allowed us to offer free 3-5 day filmmaking training workshops (in collaboration with Vitor Hugo Costa at [Metafilms](#)) for staff, students and community organisations.

Conclusion

The establishment of Film Geographies was aimed at creating a space for geographical films. The years of positioning the filmmaking geographer, especially women and scholars of colour, as someone existing on the margins of the discipline has left its mark and constitutes a heritage of the geographical film which has shaped the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches of many films

that we receive. Film Geographies has made a start at mapping out the film spaces that already exist and at offering support to scholars who are looking to create new spaces. Each call for films issued by Film Geographies creates a new collection of films, highlighting how scholars are researching themes such as climate crisis, the housing crisis, migration, war and conflict, racism, feminism, trans justice, decolonisation and social justice. Over time, it is possible to map the changes in focus.

An initial overview of the 200+ films received by Film Geographies shows us how many geographical films have chosen to examine existing inequalities, marginality and outlier status in their choice of subject matter but also in their choice of methodology (Jacobs and Salimbeni 2024). Geographical films look at people's relationship to their environment in an excitingly diverse range of ways, experimenting with different filmic approaches, such as adopting a community-led placed-based filmmaking process (as in the series of award-winning short films exploring the relationship between urban and natural heritage made by made by young residents of Al-Khalifa in Cairo *Urban Dreams* (2021-3)), or reflexively examining the role of the researcher and the representational meanings of film space in their contributions. Notable examples include Neto's *Withering Refuge* (2021), an exploration of researching the experience of refugees living next to mines in Zambia, and Sango's *The Lower Main Street Rastaman* (2020), where she uses Glissant's concept of opacity to examine her discomfort in approaching research subjects in South Africa, or Duru's *A Walk Down the Shore* (2018), a narrative tour of different sites of male violence in Istanbul. By looking back at over eight years of film curation at Film Geographies, we can really start to see the multiplicity of stories coming together to produce 'a geography of film that emphasises the relationship of people to place, where landscape is given agency and becomes more than a passive background for human interaction' (Pratt and Jacobs 2018, 286/7).

Making an academic film today is far more likely to be accepted by mainstream geography, as shown by the growing number of articles on film in research practice, some of which have been written by Film Geographies reviewers and filmmakers (Ernwein 2020; Lukinbeal and Sommerlad 2022; Loi and Salimbeni 2022; Roberts 2020; Jacobs and Salimbeni (2024); Thieme et al. 2019). Now that

most journals are online, they are increasingly able and willing to accept films (for example, *Beyond the Text*) or film excerpts and some are even starting to support production costs. See for example the *Antipode Film Project* (2023). Situated on the margins of the discipline, Film Geographies remains imperfect, underfunded and reliant on unpaid labour. But perhaps the margins have become more central (hooks 1984) and, aided by the digital turn (Ash et al. 2016) as well as the increasing ubiquity of video driven material in higher education, the next years will see the boundaries of the discipline being redrawn to be even more inclusive of filmmaking in the academy

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