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# Dis/embedded Geographies of Film: Virtual Panoramas and the Touristic Consumption of Liverpool Waterfront

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Les Roberts<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Drawing on archive film footage of Liverpool waterfront shot by tourists and other visitors to the city in the first half of the 20th century, this article examines the touristic construction and consumption of a panoramic space of representation that was materially embedded within the everyday flux of a thriving urban-industrial landscape. The deindustrialization of the waterfront and the closing up of the river as a well-integrated social landscape (epitomized by the closure of the dockside Overhead Railway in 1956) have precipitated a certain shift in the various “ways of seeing” that have hitherto structured the tourist gaze in Liverpool. Reflecting on the increasingly disembedded nature of the waterfront in the cultural geography of the city today, the article argues that virtual reconstructions of a panoramic “mobile gaze” orientated around the river and waterfront map a spatial absence and fragmentation characteristic of Liverpool’s emergent postindustrial landscapes of “culture capital.”

## Keywords

amateur film, tourism, panorama, mapping, Liverpool, waterfront, mobility

## Introduction: Cinematic Cartography

In October 2008, a film recreating the panoramic view of Liverpool’s docks, as seen by passengers traveling on the Liverpool Overhead Railway, was projected onto the side of the George’s Dock Building at Pier Head on the city’s waterfront. Made by the local artist Ben Parry, *Terminus* (2008) consists of a single, real-time tracking shot filmed at the height of elevation of the former railway. The location of the screening at Pier Head is a few yards away from where the elevated tracks of the railway used to run, carrying dockworkers, tourists, and commuters to destinations along the long stretch of docks that make up Liverpool’s historic waterfront.<sup>1</sup>

This hour-long virtual journey, although focused on the postindustrial landscapes of contemporary Liverpool, conjures the spirit of a long since vanished gaze. With the closure of the Overhead Railway in the late 1950s, the socially embedded spaces of representation that formerly defined

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<sup>1</sup>University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK

### Corresponding Author:

Les Roberts, University of Liverpool, Leverhulme Building, Abercromby Square, Liverpool L69 3BX, UK  
Email: [les.roberts@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:les.roberts@liverpool.ac.uk)

this area of the city have become navigable only through the “impossible geographies” (Brunsdon, 2007) of the moving image.

In this article, I chart a cultural history and geography of the “mobile gaze” in Liverpool and consider some of the ways in which this has informed the symbolic construction and consumption of the city’s waterfront landscape. Examining a selection of travelogue films shot by tourists and other visitors to the city in the first half of the 20th century, I argue that place-based studies of archive films can yield productive insights into the spatial anthropology of urban tourism mobilities as well as the underlying social, material, and spatial practices that have shaped the historical production of images and perceptions of given cityscapes: in this case, those of Liverpool.

In this regard, the article forms part of a wider study on the relationship between film, mobility, and urban space in which the representational spaces of film are embedded within their urban, historical, and geographic contexts, drawing in part on Geographic Information Systems technology to map a historical geography of film practice in Liverpool from the 1890s to the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> Exploring the scope for the development of “cinematic cartography” as a productive mode of geo-historical urban enquiry (see Roberts, 2008), this multidisciplinary and multilayered approach builds on work initiated by Dimendberg (2004), AlSayyad (2006), and others in foregrounding the study of spatiality in film “as a historical *content* as significant as its more commonly studied formal and narrative features” (Dimendberg, 2004, p. 9). As such, it seeks to contribute toward the shaping of a critical visual methodology that not only “[makes] the urban a fundamental part of cinematic discourse,” but also, and more important, “[raises] film to its proper status as an analytical tool of urban discourse” (AlSayyad, 2006, p. 4).

## Centripetal City

*Ferry Cross the Mersey* by the Merseybeat group Gerry and the Pacemakers has long had iconic status for the city of Liverpool. The song is played each time a Mersey Ferry arrives at or departs Pier Head, the historic hub and focal point of the maritime city: an experience the novelist Will Self (2007) has likened to “a busker singing ‘Streets of London’ in the streets of London, at once sweetly homely and infinitely claustrophobic” (p. 82).

At the height of the group’s fame in 1965, a film of the same name was released starring Gerry Marsden and his band mates in which the city itself—its river, its landmarks, its cultural hot spots—features prominently. In keeping with the music, the characterization of the city in *Ferry Cross the Mersey* directed by Jeremy Summers in 1965, is that of a confident, upbeat, and culturally vibrant destination; a city that, after a period of economic and industrial decline, had once again begun to draw strength from the inward flows of people and investment to its shores. In 2008, with Liverpool playing host to an unprecedented number of visitor arrivals in its capacity as European Capital of Culture, the structure of feeling evoked in the film is one that has a strikingly contemporary resonance.

Although an unremarkable film in almost every other respect, its iconic representation of Liverpool, and in particular its waterfront landscape, provides a valuable insight into the city’s cultural geography at a time when, like today, it had become a place (or space) of attraction.

Throughout a century or more of Liverpool in film, the fortunes and vicissitudes of the city and its inhabitants have long remained tied to those of the docks and waterfront. In these “city projections,” historical narratives are played out within a symbolic landscape in which the iconography of the waterfront becomes expressive of broader metonymic patterns of history and identity. Given its proud maritime heritage, Liverpool’s uneasy transition from an industrial to a postindustrial economy has ensured that the waterfront has retained a particularly strong visual presence in recent narratives of the city.<sup>3</sup> As I demonstrate, film provides us with a means by which we can access these shifting representational spaces to explore the ways in which different spatial

practices have historically shaped and reflected Liverpool's unique—and constantly changing—waterfront landscape.

The relationship between moving image and tourist practices, in particular the impact of so-called film-induced tourism on destinations, has recently (if belatedly) begun to achieve wider recognition in the tourism studies literature (see Beeton, 2005; Busby & Klug, 2001; Crouch, Jackson, & Thompson, 2006; Gibson, 2006; Kim & Richardson, 2003; Mazierska & Walton, 2006; Riley, Baker, & Doren, 1998; Schofield, 1996). Given the absence of reliable historical data, the influence of films such as *Ferry Cross the Mersey* on tourism mobilities in 1960s Liverpool can at best be only speculated. Where we do have access to Liverpool's cinematic geographies of tourism, however, is in archival collections of travelogues and amateur film footage shot in the city at different points in its history, a catalogue of which has been assembled as part of the University of Liverpool's *City in Film* research.<sup>4</sup> As with film more generally, the role of amateur and home movie footage is an area that has remained largely neglected in studies of travel and tourism to date, although this too is a trend that has begun to show signs of reverse (see Griffiths, 1999; Nicholson, 2002, 2006; Ruoff, 2006). In the case of Liverpool, archive film of the waterfront can inform ethnographic insights into the symbolic construction of an iconic cityscape: a representational space that, as I argue, can be traced to the emergence of a panoramic view of Liverpool and the construction of a "mobile virtual gaze" (Friedberg, 1993) that was materially embedded in the social, cultural, and economic fabric of the city.

Before moving on to discuss the cinematic geographies of Liverpool's waterfront in greater detail, it is first necessary to explore some of the theoretical issues pertaining to tourism, film, and the "panoramic perception" of the mobile gaze.

## Site-Seeing or Sight-Seeing?

Challenging Michel de Montaigne's view that the purpose of travel was to "rub up against others," Henri de Castela, writing in the early 17th century, argued that the success of a journey should be measured in terms of its resistance to the effects of others. Always traveling with the protection of guides and never interacting with the locals, Castela's ideal traveler or pilgrim would be in effect a "traveller without a body" (Williams, 1999, p. 108). This notion of the disembodied traveler, with its attendant ontology of *seeing* and *gazing*, is of course one that informs more contemporary debates in travel and tourism (Osborne, 2000; Urry, 2002). The situatedness of the gaze within discursive frameworks such as maps, guides, brochures, and such like is such as to mitigate against chance and contingency in the phenomenology of the tourist encounter.

In his classic study, *The Tourist*, Dean MacCannell (1976) argues that the "marker" attached to a specific tourist sight—that is, the representation and information relating to attractions—potentially becomes more important than the "sight" (or site) itself (the spelling is particularly significant here, as I discuss shortly). The marker functions as a means of sight recognition, displacing or obliterating the actual sight by processes of its own signification (pp. 109-133). Castela's insistence on traveling with the protection of guides provides an early example of this, highlighting the near-talismanic power of the "map" in displacing the contingent materiality of travel destinations.

Although he does not draw the distinction himself, in choosing the term *sight-seer* over *site-seer* in his description of the tourist, MacCannell (1976) indirectly pinpoints an inherent ambiguity in the semiotics of attraction; one that is rarely commented on in writings on tourism, where, typically, both spellings are used interchangeably. Highlighting the expressly visual consumption of place (or "site" of attraction) that marks out the tourist from other social actors, the "sight-seer" is, somewhat tautologically, one who sees what there is to be seen, that is, that which has been "marked" for touristic consumption. It is important to note here that *sight-seeing*, unlike

site-seeing, is fundamentally a visual hermeneutic that in its abstraction from place—from topic and topography—exists independently from the site. The “site-seer,” by comparison, like the map reader, represents an essentially discursive subjectivity that is the product of a topic space of travel (guide books, maps, tour itineraries, brochures, etc.). “Site” in this context denotes a symbolic and geographic marker that exists prior and subsequent to the act of seeing itself (i.e., the sight of the site). Although no less conditioned by the various “ways of seeing” (Berger, 1972) that shape the tourist encounter, *sight*-seeing, by drawing attention back to the act, or rather *moment* of seeing, reflects in part a prediscursive form of visual engagement that is temporally determined. This temporal dimension opens up the gaze to affects of chance, serendipity, and the singularity of the moment. By way of example, this may take the form of a sudden or surreal juxtaposition in which a view of an iconic landmark incites unexpected and, hence, hitherto “unmapped” psychogeographic connotations.<sup>5</sup> At the start of Patrick Keiller’s 1994 film *London*, for instance, a view of Tower Bridge, one of the most instantly recognizable or “legible” (Lynch, 1960) landmarks on tourist maps of the city, is no less instantly *defamiliarized* as a heritage icon by an excoriating voiceover narration that offers an alternative travelogue commentary of (Tory) Britain in the mid-1990s, one unlikely to have been found in the glossy publications of *Visit Britain*: “Dirty Old Blighty . . . under-educated, economically backward, bizarre, a catalogue of modern miseries, with its fake traditions . . . its sexual repression, its hypocrisy and racism” (see Brunsdon, 2004). This defamiliarization of the symbolic landscape of the city/nation brings into focus the contradictions and disjunctions of “site” (as an “official” or hegemonic space of semiotic inscription) and “sight” (as a mode of visual engagement underpinned by the lived and temporal dynamics of social space). Moreover, conditioned by the emotional disposition of the bearer of the gaze, *sight*-seeing also constitutes an embodied and affective space of representation (Bruno, 2002; Lefebvre, 1991) that might similarly cut across established readings of a given landscape or topography.<sup>6</sup>

For Crang (1994), the “Map”—the discursive domain of the site-seer—metaphorically denotes a certain way of seeing in which the “transcendent signifier” of heritage inscribes an essentially reactionary semiotics of place. In this analysis, the Map operates in dialectical tension with forms of spatiotemporal engagement denoted and enacted by what Crang refers to as the “Journey” (p. 344). Observing that heritage is not an object existing independently of how it is experienced, Crang’s metaphor of the Journey emphasizes the essentially performative attributes of *sight*-seeing, distinguishing the “event” from the site or place of heritage consumption (p. 342). Foregrounding the temporal and contingent, Journeys allow personal meanings, observations, and reflections to “reorganise and create associations” (p. 351), thereby disrupting the Map and displacing its organising principle (p. 353).

“Tours” as Morris points out, “postulate maps, while maps condition and presuppose tours” (1988, p. 38; see also De Certeau, 1984). By placing greater emphasis on the symbolic and affective mechanisms of the spatiotemporal Journey, the “vicious hermeneutic circle”<sup>7</sup> (Crang, 1996, p. 438) of much *sight*-/site-seeing practice is brought into critical alignment with the imbricated structures of the Everyday. Although the prosaic and quotidian are themselves not immune from the totalizing gaze of the site-seer’s Map, their incorporation within local discourses of heritage consumption does not of itself presage the inevitable reification of their constitutive histories (“heritage-as-object”). This notwithstanding, in a neoliberal climate of rapacious consumption and culture-led regeneration, the everyday histories that are inscribed in the industrial landscapes of cities such as Liverpool or, in Crang’s example, Bristol come to reflect a past that is increasingly displaced from the present by the very act of trying to (re)capture (or consume) it:

The marking of sight/sites as a sign of history is a process whereby what was formerly the everyday and quotidian is staged and marked out as distinct and extraordinary. Although this

vision may display parts of the everyday past, they are repositioned as separate, as excerpted, from present everyday life and thus rendered strange or exotic. (Crang, 1996, p. 437)

Practices of sight-seeing and site-seeing are, therefore, dialectically construed. They are embedded in a politics of space and visuality in which ideas of authenticity, place, and identity are being constantly negotiated. Moving within (or between) embodied and disembodied spaces of representation, the mobilized gaze of the tourist-spectator thus, charts a symbolic landscape that is itself a site/sight of contestation and (re)construction, structure and agency.

Why are these theoretical reflections important in the wider context of this discussion? First, as a temporal medium, film lends itself to a semiotics of attraction composed of both symbolic and affective structures of meaning: time creates a space in which narratives and emotions unfold (Deleuze, 1989). Second, as I demonstrate below, the touristic consumption of Liverpool's waterfront landscape has historically taken place within essentially mobile spaces of representation, such as unfolding panoramic (and indeed cinematic) views obtained from ships on the River Mersey, or from trains traveling along the dockside. As Anne Friedberg (1993, p. 3) observes in relation to cinema spectatorship, panoramic sight-seeing "offers a spatially mobilized visuality but also, importantly, a temporal mobility". Third, until comparatively recently, tourist mobilities in Liverpool, in particular those centered around the waterfront, were such that visitors were indeed required to "rub up against others," to use Montaigne's phrase. Travelers on the Overhead Railway, constructed in 1893 to serve the city's expanding system of docks, and those arriving or departing from the busy landing stage at Pier Head shared a vibrant social space alongside commuters, dockworkers, day-trippers, as well as other mobile subjects such as migrants and sailors. For much of Liverpool's modern history, therefore, sight-seeing practices were socially embedded within the everyday flux of a thriving urban-industrial and maritime landscape. The primacy of the mobile gaze in touristic "mappings" of these spaces informed the symbolic construction of a landscape in which the mobilities and geographies of everyday urban life were thus an integral element.

### Mobilizing the Gaze: Travel and Early Cinema

The first moving images of Liverpool, shot in 1897 by the Lumière Brothers' cameraman Alexandre Promio, were tracking shots taken from the Overhead Railway, the world's first elevated electric railway. Looking out over the docks and river, we glimpse a landscape that offers no significant architectural landmarks or picturesque views. Indeed, from an aesthetic standpoint, the view of the waterfront that would have greeted sight-/site-seers during this period provided little in the way of attraction, as this passage from a contemporary guidebook to the city illustrates,

It cannot be said, with any truth, that nature has been lavish in the bestowal of her gifts upon this particular corner of the earth. Compared, for instance, with the Clyde, the surroundings of the Mersey must be pronounced tame and spiritless; and nothing offers itself to the voyager as he enters its waters like the splendid panorama which unfolds itself before him on his passage from the sea to Greenock. (*Visitors Illustrated Guide to Liverpool*, 1886, p. 21)

This account was of course written before the construction of the (more recently dubbed) "Three Graces" at Pier Head. Built between 1907 and 1918, the Royal Liver, Cunard, and Port of Liverpool buildings are by far the most prominent iconographic symbols of Liverpool and its waterfront today (see De Figueiredo, 2003). At the time when Promio was riding the Overhead, the view from the river was thus less *marked* (to use MacCannell's, 1976, term), and this no doubt goes some way toward explaining why there are no shots directed toward the

landward side of the railway in the Lumierè footage. The other, and more compelling reason, is that the river itself was in many ways the iconic center of Liverpool. The spectacle of huge transatlantic liners berthed along the waterfront or of the bustling dockside activity, rivaled only by London, meant that the Overhead Railway, which offered visitors unprecedented access to these sights, played a crucial role in shaping early visual cultures of tourism in the city.

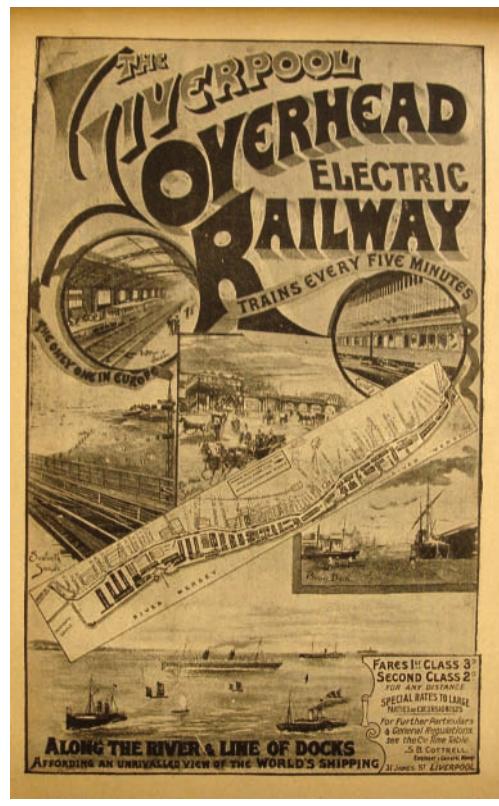
The coming together of these two nascent forms of urban mobility—one filmic and one architectural—informed a striking cinematic image of a modern city in which the dynamism and prosperity of the waterfront had become emblematic of the progressive rhythms of modernity itself (Roberts & Koeck, 2007, p. 86; see also Milne, 2006, p. 278). Indeed, the Lumierè film was itself emblematic of an emergent ontology of travel and early film that drew on prefilmic forms of the mobile gaze such as the panorama and diorama that had developed with the expansion of the railways in the 19th century. The symbolic resonance attached to the train as a driving force of modernity in many ways prefigured both the experiential disjunctions of time and space that early cinema audiences were soon to inherit and the modernist ambitions that cinema and the industrialization of travel inscribed in the collective imagination of industrial nations.

The “perceptual paradigm” (Kirby, 1997, p. 2) instilled by this new mode of travel—described by Schivelbusch (1986) as “panoramic perception”—was shared by audiences of the panorama and diorama and would later come to characterize the experience of the spectator in the cinema. The compression of time and space inaugurated by the railways also anticipated the radical discontinuities of space—time and the juxtaposition of disparate “mobile gazes” that were to find their cinematic counterpart in editing techniques such as montage. For Weiss (1998), the dynamics of speed and the collapsing of spatial distances “geographised” the landscape (p. 91). “Through this aestheticisation,” he argues, “foreground becomes abstract while background becomes panorama . . . Speed incites aesthetics towards greater modes of synthesis, whether organic (as in the landscape) or dissociative (as in modernist collage and cinematic montage)” (Weiss, 1998, p. 91).

## Waterfront Panoramas I: Liverpool Overhead Railway

Although the Overhead had been designed and built to ease the congestion of goods and passenger traffic along the busy Dock Road, the railway was soon to prove popular as a tourist attraction, offering visitors “unrivalled views” of the docks, ships, and river (see Figures 1 and 2). From as early as 1895, 2 years after its opening, tourist guides to the city had begun to include sight-/site-seeing information for those wishing to experience this unique architectural and panoramic phenomenon.<sup>8</sup> One of the first visual representations of the Overhead route, stretching from Herculaneum Dock in the south to Seaforth in the north, was published in 1904 in Bass, Ratcliffe and Gretton’s guide to the city (see Figure 3). This pullout pictorial map marked the sites that those riding the railway would expect to see, such as the Customs House, the Princes Landing Stage (at the time the longest in the world), as well as the Overhead Railway itself, which was something of an attraction in its own right. But perhaps more important, symbolic representations such as this also had the effect of “knitting together” the otherwise spatially fragmented landscapes clustered along the waterfront. As such, they informed a more unified and bounded idea of the city itself that was at the same time materially grounded in the port-city’s diverse social spaces.

Before 1893, views of the docks were restricted because of the perimeter walls that barred access to all but the dock workers themselves (Milne, 2006, p. 278). Although tours of some parts of the docks were appearing in guides as early as 1796, the industrial landscape of the waterfront did not have as strong a visual presence in tourist representations of Liverpool as it would after the construction of the Overhead. Touristic views, or “prospects,” looking out from the city had hitherto been those obtained from high vantage points looking out over the Mersey toward Cheshire and the mountains of North Wales.<sup>9</sup>

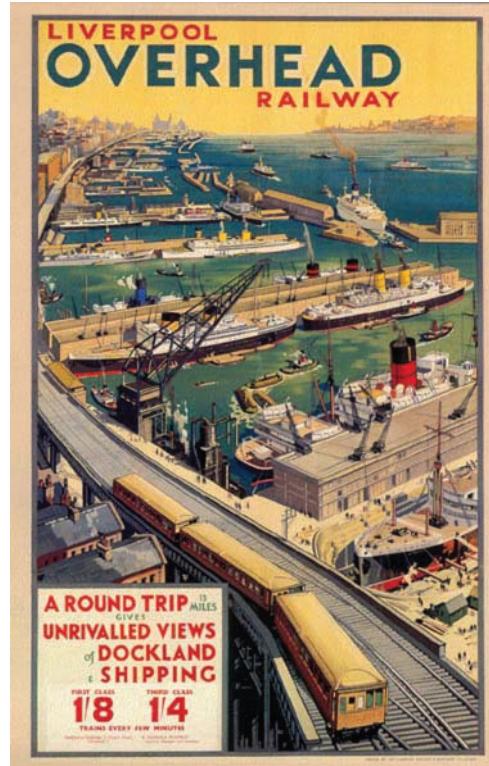


**Figure 1.** Liverpool Overhead Railway advertisement, 1896

Source: Liverpool Record Office.

Riding the Overhead, visitors could for the very first time enjoy the spectacle of the docks in all their splendor. The Lumière footage provides us with an early and magnificent glimpse of this urban landscape panorama, but later footage shot by tourists visiting or passing through the city also provides valuable insights into the role of the Overhead in shaping visual cultures of tourism in Liverpool in the first half of the 20th century.<sup>10</sup>

*Electrical Exhibition* is the title of footage shot during a visit to Liverpool and Southport in the 1930s by a family from Bolton.<sup>11</sup> The title refers to an industrial exhibition, probably held in Southport, that the family visits in the latter part of the film. What is notable about the Liverpool footage (and in this respect it is typical of much of the archival material shot by tourists in the city) is that the city center features hardly at all; it is activities on or around the waterfront that dominate the tourist gaze. The 13-minute film opens with some short street scenes featuring a woman and two children (presumably the filmmaker's family). A tram passes in the background. Following a brief shot of the Victoria Monument in Derby Square, the film cuts to a view of Victoria Tower in Salisbury Dock shot from the Overhead Railway. The remainder of the Liverpool footage is all centered on the waterfront. From his elevated vantage point the filmmaker observes some of the ships in dock and scans the façade of a warehouse overlooking the railway. A guard or ticket collector and passengers on board the train are observed at one point. The filmmaker seems particularly impressed by the sheer scale of the industrial infrastructure of the docks: we glimpse a vast complex of dockside buildings, a slow vertical pan of a crane operated by a group of



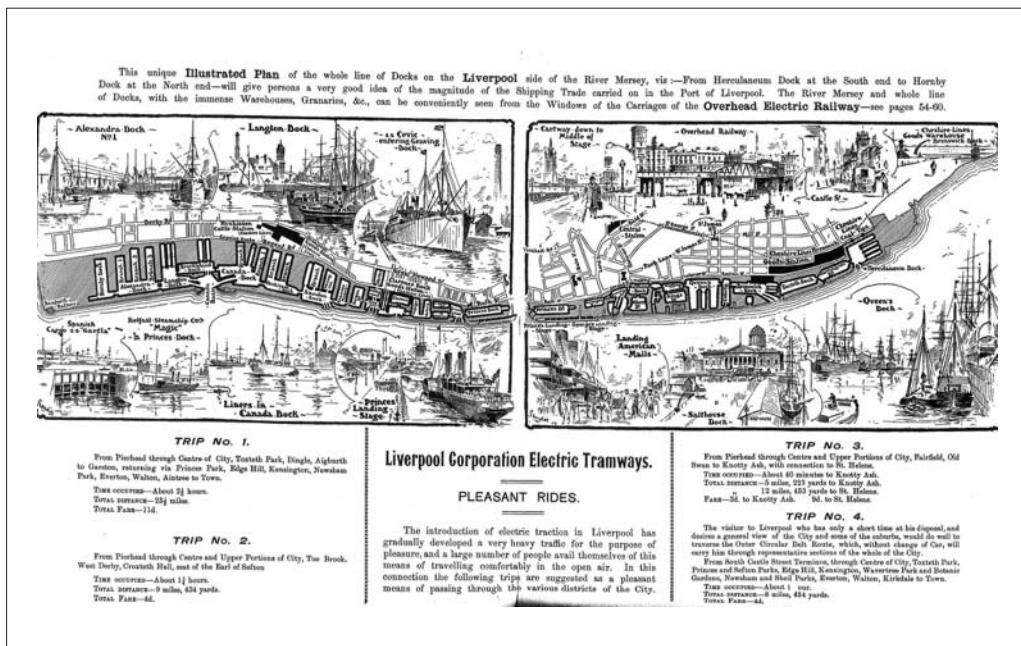
**Figure 2.** Liverpool Overhead Railway promotional poster, 1950s

Source: National Museums of Liverpool.

dockworkers is observed in close-up, the children, filmed on the dockside, are dwarfed by two steamships that tower over them. The sequence that follows the Overhead footage offers a reverse perspective of the waterfront, shot from a ferry bound for New Brighton (from where we are afforded views across the river of the north docks and Liverpool).

A later film, *Ships at Liverpool*, also features footage shot from the Overhead Railway, providing another valuable document of this unique dockside panorama. The film was shot in the 1950s by John Nolan, who made many films of his family holidays to various destinations including Liverpool and New Brighton.<sup>12</sup> The film opens with a short montage of mostly static shots taken around Pier Head: a view looking down James Street toward the Overhead Railway, Pier Head station, and St Nicholas Church. These last no more than 5 seconds, following which we are on board the Overhead, looking out at the ships, some in close-up, some in medium and long shot. The duration of each shot, typically no more than a couple of seconds, lends itself to a different form of mobile gaze from that captured by the Lumière's, which by contrast is more meditative and sustained. The haphazard and fragmented depiction of this mobile space is perhaps indicative of a “view aesthetic” (Tom Gunning in Griffiths, 1999, p. 283) more specifically touristic in its spectacular and mobile engagement with the visual landscape. The camera mediates an experience that is both embodied and visual. The shift from close-up to long shot in the framing of the ships, for example, reflects the perceptual modalities of an embodied gaze: a way of seeing determined by the mobile and fleeting nature of the viewer’s perspective.

What examples such as *Ships at Liverpool* attest to is the historic and geographic centrality of the waterfront in the touristic framing of Liverpool. Other parts of the city, if featured at all,



**Figure 3.** Tourist map of Liverpool Docks, 1904

Source: Liverpool Record Office.

are but minor players in comparison. The primary focus of sight-/site-seeing is the industrial and maritime activity taking place along the Mersey. Pier Head, the thriving hub of the port-city, is the symbolic and geographic axis point around which different forms of mobility in, through, and beyond the city are oriented. Crucially, the tourists move through this landscape not so much as disembodied voyeurs but as embedded participants in what the historian Graeme Milne (2006) describes as the “showy modernity of the Liverpool waterfront” (p. 278). After having traveled the Overhead, the tourists/filmmakers in both *Electrical Exhibition* and *Ships at Liverpool* take to the river from where their gaze is turned back toward Pier Head, the iconic backdrop of the Liver Building, and the unfolding industrial panorama of the docks and ships.

## Waterfront Panoramas II: Views From or Across the Mersey

No less instrumental in shaping the symbolic landscapes of Liverpool have been views of the city obtained from key points along the Wirral coastline, particularly Birkenhead and New Brighton. In geographic representations of Liverpool, one of the earliest panoramic depictions of the city, as seen from a perspectival location across the river (Birkenhead), may be found in a map published in 1851 (see Figure 4). This specific alignment of panoramic and cartographic representations displays a spatial construction of place and landscape in which the waterfront is the defining topographic feature in the symbolic representation of the city. In this respect, these early visual mappings anticipate the way Liverpool was later represented in postcards and in amateur films shot by tourists and day-trippers.

*Midlands and Mersey* (Graham West, 1949), for example, features a 33-second-long pan shot filmed from a vantage point somewhere along the Wirral coast (possibly Wallasey or Egremont). This is the only Liverpool footage on the reel, it but consists of a slow and careful scan along the docks and river, taking in ship traffic and the industrial skyline of the waterfront. The shot ends with a view of the Liver building and Anglican Cathedral to the right of frame, with smoke-belching



**Figure 4.** Waterfront panorama and map of Liverpool, 1851

Source: Liverpool Record Office.

chimneys to the left. Shot at dusk, the somewhat bleak and, for the most part, featureless landscape panorama can hardly be described as picturesque. The absence of any apparent aesthetic intent is perhaps suggestive of a more specifically geographic motivation on the filmmaker's part, as if ostensibly *mapping* this space.

As the *City in Film* research demonstrates, in quantitative terms the waterfront, and more specifically the area around Pier Head and Princes Dock, is by far the most filmed part of the city. This is particularly the case in relation to amateur film material shot both by locals and visitors.

Amateur film groups based in the Wirral, such as Swan Cine Club and Heswall Cine Club, have since the 1950s produced a number of films based on activities on or around the river, many of which are about ferry journeys across the Mersey (Roberts, 2010). Titles such as *Ferry—Birkenhead to Pier Head* (Angus Tilston/Swan Cine Club, 1960), *Boat for Businessmen* (Norman Couch/Heswall Cine Club, 1961), *Liverpool to New Brighton* (Harry Larkin/Swan Cine Club, 1960s), *Fair Play* (George Gregory/Swan Cine Club, 1960s), or *A Tribute to the Mersey* (Les Holloway/Curzon Productions, 1968)<sup>13</sup> all explore everyday scenes of life on the river, based largely around the operation of the various ferry services to and from Pier Head. In *Fair Play* a young boy crosses the river to spend the day at a funfair at New Brighton. The film sets out to present the subjective experience of the boy, and although partly dramatized, is clearly intended to draw on the experiences of the many Liverpudlians who visited the resort in its heyday. What is notable in the present context is that, on his arrival in New Brighton, the first thing the boy does is to look back toward Liverpool through a telescope on the promenade (Figure 5).

New Brighton appears in much of the archive footage shot by tourists. In the aforementioned *Electrical Exhibition*, for example, the Andrew family moves from the Overhead to a ferry en route to the resort. From the sands of New Brighton beach, the camera in one scene pans across from the grey, industrial skyline of the northern docks to children and families playing on the



**Figure 5.** Still from *Fair Play* (Swan Cine Club, 1960s)

Source: Angus Tilston/Pleasures Past.

beach in the foreground. Gazing toward the iconic buildings at Pier Head, this framing of the river and the northern docks is typical of much of the filmic material shot by tourists visiting New Brighton.

The association of panoramas within the leisure and tourism geographies of New Brighton can also be traced to earlier histories of the resort. As part of a new entertainment complex that was built around 1897, a 620-ft tower was constructed in a bid to rival the Blackpool Tower that had been built several years before. As well as offering views across Liverpool and the Mersey estuary, site-seers could also see parts of the Lake District, the Isle of Man, and the Welsh mountains. For a brief period, spectators could also enjoy virtual panoramas in the form of "Hales Tours of the World," which opened in the Tower Grounds in the summer season of 1907.<sup>14</sup> This cinematic voyage through exotic or picturesque landscapes thus provided a virtual alternative to the geographically embedded mobile gaze experienced across the river on the Overhead.

It is, however, the ferry journeys that provide the bulk of the waterfront views. The use of pan and travelling shots—well-established staples of the travel film—becomes more pronounced within these mobile landscapes. In *Rochdale Scenes; Liverpool Docks* (David A. Faulkner, c. 1960), the filmmaker shoots from the deck of a liner departing from Pier Head. In one sequence he films a 360° panoramic shot that moves clockwise from Pier Head, taking in the throngs of people lining the Landing Stage and activities taking place on and around the river. In another sequence, the camera pans the waterfront, starting from a view of the Anglican Cathedral, past the Three Graces, and onto the industrial skyline and smoke of the docks. Again, these are hardly untypical scenes, yet it is the very entrenched nature of their symbolic inscriptions within the landscape that the *idea* of the waterfront—as a dominant trope in the city's imagining, and as an unified and integrated space of organic social activity—is secured and reinforced. These embedded spatial practices of mobility were thus crucial in both the construction and maintenance of this symbolic landscape.

As we move toward the present, we witness a steady decline in the fortunes of both the ferries and of New Brighton as a popular leisure resort. Along with the closure of the Overhead Railway in 1956, the changes in mobility patterns that have in part caused, and in part resulted from, the

closing up of the river as a well-integrated social space, have precipitated a certain shift in the way the geography of the city has subsequently been imagined. What I wish to suggest is that this may in part be attributed to the gradual displacement of a socially and spatially embedded mobile gaze and that this, in turn, is a consequence of the postindustrial reconfiguration—and fragmentation—of the waterfront landscape. I shall examine these arguments more closely in the next section.

## **Virtual City Without a Center**

Estrangement (*dépaysement*) would appear to be a precondition for landscape. (Lyotard, 1989, p. 212)

[T]he essential aspect of the urban phenomenon is its centrality, but a *centrality* that is understood in conjunction with the dialectical movement that creates or destroys it. (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 116)

The opening shot of *Shooters* (Dan Reed, 2001), a violent gangster film set in Liverpool's criminal underworld, consists of a striking 2-minute panorama looking out across the Mersey estuary from a high vantage point somewhere in the city (probably Everton Brow). Panning slowly up river from Fort Perch Lighthouse at New Brighton, the camera eventually comes to rest on a view of the Liver Building. As a waterfront panorama, it is unusual inasmuch as it provides a reverse perspective to that which, as we have seen, is typically framed from the river or the Wirral. Moreover, given the length and panoramic breadth of this establishing shot, the inclusion in the next scene of a caption confirming the location as "Liverpool" appears somewhat superfluous. Yet, at the same time it is perhaps indicative of a certain estrangement and *dislocation* attached to the city's landscape in the 21st century. No longer able to readily sustain or convey an instant "imageability" (Lynch, 1960) of place and urban form, the horizontal, lateral expanse of the waterfront (in contrast to the totemic verticality of the Three Graces at Pier Head)<sup>15</sup> demands the holistic functionality of a synoptic perspective (Dimendberg, 2004, p. 69) predicated on movement and mobility. Although formerly constitutive of a geographically embedded space of representation, this mobile panoramic gaze can now be experienced only within the virtual geographies of cinematic space or else within the panoramic expanse of a waterfront image where movement is established relative to the (static) landscape in the form of the embodied mobility of the spectator. Read in this light, the virtual panorama may be looked upon as a form of psychogeographic mapping of a city whose very *illegibility* (see Highmore, 2005; Lynch, 1960; Roberts & Koeck, 2007) demands the suturing together—visually and symbolically—of its otherwise fragmented urban fabric.

A more recent illustration of this is provided by the aforementioned film *Terminus* (Ben Parry, 2008). An hour-long reconstruction of the panoramic view that would have been obtainable were the Overhead Railway still in operation today, the virtual geographies mapped in the film highlight the extent to which this once unique landscape played host to a unified and integrated field of spatiovisual engagement: one that has long since vanished. In the words of the artist Ben Parry, "Merging actuality with fiction *Terminus* re-ignites folklore, exposes the spaces of geographic dislocation and makes the invisible visible"<sup>16</sup> (see Figure 6). In addition, as part of the Liverpool 08 activities, National Museums of Liverpool commissioned the artist Ben Johnson to produce a vast panorama of the city and its waterfront skyline (8ft × 16ft), looking toward the Three Graces from a vantage point high above the river. The panorama was displayed in Liverpool's Walker Art Gallery during 2008 and proved an immensely popular exhibit.<sup>17</sup>

Enshrining a certain centrality of urban form, in the case of Liverpool waterfront the *consolidating* functionality (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 116) of the panoramic spectacle operates within a sociospatial context in which the river and waterfront can no longer be regarded as the hub of urban and industrial



**Figure 6.** Projection of the film *Terminus* (Ben Parry, 2008) on east wall of George's Dock Building, Pier Head, Liverpool, October 2008 (author's photo)

activity. As a consequence, and insofar as it is still possible to speak in terms of a designated "center" of the city, it is arguably the "place-less" vantage point of the virtual spectator that is increasingly called on to fix and sustain a spatially coherent and holistic space of representation in a city where material and experiential engagements with its urban form suggest anything but.

The waterfront panorama may thus be perceived as a way of "gathering up" a more unified space of representation that is felt to have been lost as a result of successive waves of urban transformations, which, with the gradual deindustrialization of the waterfront, coupled with a more general shift from "centripetal" to "centrifugal" urban spatial forms (Dimendberg, 1995, 2004; Roberts, 2010), have had such a profound effect on the way the city has been experienced and imagined since the late 1950s. The apparent function of the waterfront panorama in this context is to address a perceived lack, or absence, that permeates the social and cultural landscapes of the city today. As such, the virtuality of the panoramic gaze appears to reflect a certain "cartographic impulse" (see Castro, 2008): a desire to confirm and reinscribe Liverpool's symbolic and affective contours of place and identity. But also, in terms of its semiotic mutation within the city's postindustrial landscapes of consumer or "culture-capital" (Jones & Wilks-Heeg, 2004), the virtuality of the waterfront conveys a more totemic or talismanic function, as if seeking to tap into the suggestive power of its former industrial and maritime connotations.

Taking each of these observations in turn, we can begin to assess the "place" of the waterfront panorama in contemporary Liverpool and, by extension, that of the "mobile gaze" in the city more generally.

First, it is worth noting that one of the planned exhibits for the new Museum of Liverpool, scheduled to open in 2010, is a virtual reconstruction of the Overhead Railway. Visitors will

be able to board one of the original carriages and watch archive footage shot from the Overhead at different points in the railway's history. The subject of a number of historical studies (Bolger, 1992; Gahan, 1982; Jarvis, 1996), as well as frequent nostalgic reflections in the local media, the Overhead Railway (or "Dockers Umbrella" as it was known to locals) is remembered with much affection by many Liverpudlians. There is little doubt that a virtual journey through the cinematic landscapes of the waterfront would be a popular exhibit, particularly among some of the city's older generations, but it is worth exploring more closely some of the reasons why this may be so. There has of late been a growing interest in archive film of the city. Recent screenings of Liverpool films by the North West Film Archive have proved hugely popular, reflecting at the same time more regional and national trends.<sup>18</sup> The celebrated return of the filmmaker Terence Davies to his native Liverpool, and the release of his autobiographical film *Of Time and the City* (2008), has provoked further engagement with the cinematic geographies of Liverpool's past. The film consists almost entirely of archive footage of the city, much of it shot by amateur filmmakers, and features many shots of the Overhead Railway, including, among the contemporary footage, a sequence from Ben Parry's *Terminus*.

In the context of the present discussion, I am suggesting that the apparent nostalgia boom surrounding the virtual reconstruction the city's past can in part be attributed to the increasingly disembedded nature of the mobile gaze within the contemporary landscapes of the city.

An almost literal illustration of this may be found in the case of the BBC's Big Screen, the imposing image-spaces of which dominate the geographic space in which it is situated (Clayton Square in the city center).<sup>19</sup> The Big Screen, as its name suggests, is in essence a huge television broadcasting BBC news and sports, dramas and soaps, as well as local arts and community-based productions. In November 2006, as part of the publicity surrounding the *City in Film* project, a short compilation of archive film of Liverpool was broadcast at regular intervals over a 2-week period (see Figure 7). For a few minutes, shoppers and pedestrians could access a virtual world comprising archival fragments of different parts of the city (including views of the waterfront) that have been salvaged from each of the decades of the past century.<sup>20</sup> Situated in the main shopping area of the city center, it is perhaps fitting that representations of the waterfront—a landscape that has for so long functioned as the symbolic and geographic center of the city—should find their "place," so to speak, within virtual environments of leisure and consumption.

The spatial disembeddedness of the waterfront is also evidenced in the way the image has been commodified and co-opted as a corporate signifier in the marketing of Liverpool as a global brand.<sup>21</sup> At a site earmarked for redevelopment in front of Lime Street Station, a billboard promoting the station's status as "Gateway to a World-Class City" features a striking virtual panorama of the waterfront (see Figure 8). The image is photographed at dusk, with some of the city's most prominent landmarks all "theatrically" illuminated and neatly clustered together in perfect configuration. Geographically, such a view is only possible from a singular vantage point across the river (to the right of Seacombe Ferry Terminal), yet, at the same time, as Roberts and Koeck (2007) have noted,

[I]t represents an image of the city in which maximum legibility—i.e. the ability to "read" the cityscape as "Liverpool"—has been invested. This economy of legibility (branding the city for global consumption) constructs a vision that is at once totalising and particular: a virtual city whose center is everywhere and nowhere. (p. 54)

Abstracted from (geographic) space and place, this virtual relocation draws on a certain performative and symbolic register (the size and location of the image at pavement level, for



**Figure 7.** “Society of the Spectacle”: BBC Big Screen, Clayton Square, Liverpool, November 2006 (author’s photo)

example, provides an iconic backdrop or narrative space within or against which the urban *flâneur* can play his or her fleeting role) that renders present that which it simultaneously disavows. Laying claim to a legible and historically resonant sense of place, the image at the same time invokes a curiously absent spatiality: one that conjures an acute sense of urban dislocation. Reduced to a façade, backdrop, or panoramic screen, the image of the city (Lynch, 1960) becomes little more than a touristic spectacle (Augé, 1996; Roberts, 2008), emptied of its spatially embedded social fabric. Existing only through the words and images that evokes it (Augé, 1995), the “non-place,” as Marc Augé has opined, “is not only a space: it is virtually present in the gaze” (1996, p. 179). Refracting the gaze of the site-seer, the virtual panorama thus serves both to mark and to mask the dis/embedded geographies of the postmodern city, substituting the urban lacunae of the present for the “projected”—and displaced—urban spaces of an imagined past or the synthetic cityscapes of a future vision. These urban projections, as with much current development in Liverpool, are sustained by a rhetoric of “culture-capital” that has underpinned the transformation of much of the city’s urban fabric into branded spaces of leisure and consumption: the city consuming itself in the commodified pursuit of its own simulacrum.

## Conclusion

A BBC article on Liverpool’s waterfront from 2003 carries two quotes that reinforce the central contention of this article: namely, that the shifting cinematic geographies of the waterfront reveal



**Figure 8.** Waterfront panorama: Lime Street, Liverpool, July 2006 (author's photo)

an iconography of landscape that is being reframed by the abstract and increasingly disembodied spaces of the virtual spectator. One is from an actress who had recently bought a waterfront apartment in Birkenhead (a conversion from a former warehouse building): “The view’s amazing. We get to look at the most fantastic waterfront in the world.” Indeed, one of the principle marketable attributes of these waterside properties is the panoramic views of Liverpool that potential purchasers can enjoy or “own,” highlighting the extent to which the decline of the river and waterfront as a vibrant social space has led to the privatization of this landscape as a symbolic marker of place and identity.

The other quote from the article is from a captain who has worked on the Mersey Ferries for 33 years: “We used to carry people going to work or shopping, now people come to enjoy the trip we’re no longer just a glorified bus service.” Yet, as I have shown, it is the very everydayness of activities on or around the river and the diverse range of social actors—commuters, shoppers, dockworkers, tourists—traditionally inhabiting these spaces that have played such an important role in shaping the material and symbolic landscapes of Liverpool’s waterfront. The more prosaic fate of being little more than a “glorified bus service,” un-self-referential and otherwise “unmarked” in the everyday folklore of the Mersey, is one expressive of a certain sociality of place, the mythopoesis of which has become the subject of the tourism, culture, and heritage industries’ increasingly irradiating gaze (Augé, 1996, p. 179). The ferry captain’s remarks, echoing the rhetoric of the regeneration industry, embraces the primacy of the tourist gaze—and site-seer—in the cultural revisioning of Liverpool’s urban landscape. This uncritical acceptance of the benign efficacy of the tourism economy raises the question as to what remaining provision, if any, there is for spatiocultural forms of public engagement that are not ultimately driven by an overarching logic of leisure, consumption, and culture-capital. If the waterfront is to be anything other than just a banal spectacle for touristic consumption (a construction of place in which the

inescapable strains of *Ferry Cross the Mersey* are in perpetual playback), its sustainability as a diverse and culturally vibrant urban landscape, one reflective of a broader range of mobilities and spatial practices, needs to be assured. Whether the initiatives surrounding “Liverpool 08” are sufficiently equipped to sustain the renewed production and cultivation of these more embedded (and embodied) spaces of representation remains, at this juncture at least, open to question.

Mapping the cinematic geographies of Liverpool—in this case those coalescent around the river and waterfront—this article contributes toward the development of a critical visual methodology (Rose, 2006) that has remained largely untapped in extant research on space, visuality, and culture. As I have demonstrated, archive film can provide us with valuable insights into the ways tourists and others visually engage with historical urban landscapes. Opening up new historiographical perspectives on film, place, and space, “cinematic cartography” informs a mode of critical spatial analysis in which the representational spaces of film are brought into dialogue with the lived and material spaces of the “archive city” (Roberts & Koeck, 2007). As documents of everyday urban spaces and practices, it is instructive therefore to look at the examples discussed in this article as “topographic films,” a distinction they share with early actuality films of cities, such as those explored in artist and filmmaker Patrick Keiller’s recent installation *City of the Future* (Keiller, 2003, 2008).<sup>22</sup>

The cultural theorist Ben Highmore (2005) has argued that by treating cultural texts such as films or novels as “navigations of actual urban space, they offer experiential maps of urban environments from very particular viewpoints . . . [providing] material that registers social, spatial and historical differences in particularly vivid and dense ways” (p. 24). The topographic films of Liverpool waterfront shot by tourists and other visitors to the city capture ethnographic fragments and glimpses of historically specific forms of sociospatial practice. Liverpool’s difficult transition from an industrial to postindustrial economy has precipitated a certain shift in the various “ways of seeing” that have hitherto structured the tourist gaze in the city. Oriented around the river and waterfront, the “site” of visual engagement has, for much of its modern history, been informed by the different and overlapping social mobilities attached to this landscape. Moreover, the embodied mobility of the gaze has played a crucial role in shaping a coherent and bounded space of representation: a space “knitted together” by what Weiss (1998) describes as the “organic synthesis” of panoramic perception. The increasingly disembedded nature of the mobile gaze has contributed to the reification of “site”—as a discursive marker of place and identity—over “sight”: that is, practices of visual engagement that reflect the more embodied dynamics of social space (Lefebvre, 1991). The closing off, or reduction, of these dialectical frameworks of embedded spatial engagement has, as Lefebvre has so cogently argued, brought about the further fragmentation of urban space and, with it, the further incursion of corporate capital into the social structures of everyday life.

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## Notes

1. See [www.jumpshiprat.org/pages/terminus/](http://www.jumpshiprat.org/pages/terminus/)
2. See [www.liv.ac.uk/lسا/cityinfilm](http://www.liv.ac.uk/lسا/cityinfilm).
3. Controversies surrounding Will Alsop's "Cloud" design (the proposed and subsequently abandoned "Fourth Grace" building) and the new Museum of Liverpool building (which prompted UNESCO to threaten to revoke Liverpool's World Heritage status) attest to the prominent role of the waterfront in current discourses of the city.
4. [www.liv.ac.uk/lسا/cityinfilm](http://www.liv.ac.uk/lسا/cityinfilm)
5. Brunsdon's (2004) discussion of "blocking" and "inciting" in relation to city landmarks in film has some currency here. In this analysis, the touristic and somewhat clichéd use of "typical" city views in films, such as Big Ben or the Tower of London, can have the effect of *blocking* viewers engagement with these landscapes rather than *inciting* responses designed to draw out the particularities and embedded narratives, histories, and memories attached to a specific place or location (p. 64).
6. See also Laura Ruggeri's (n.d.) discussion of "abstract tours" that are designed to prompt antitouristic engagements with urban space, fostering embodied knowledge and experience of space over purely visual consumption.
7. MacCannell (2007) makes a similar observation in his reference to the "hermetic circularity" of much tourist image production and consumption, which, he asserts, is "designed to prevent the eruption of anything new."
8. Bass, Ratcliffe and Gretton's 1895 guide to Liverpool featured a four-page section, with photos, providing information about the Overhead. This largely comprised a statement from one of the engineers who worked on the construction, but acknowledgement is also briefly made to its touristic potential: "The Overhead Electric Railway is now quite considered one of the sights of Liverpool, and it affords (what was previously almost impossible to obtain) a magnificent view of the line of the Docks" (Bass, Ratcliffe, & Gretton, 1895, p. 31). Heywood's guide to Liverpool, published a year later in 1896, also makes brief mention of the "magnificent view" available from the Overhead (Heywood, 1896, p. 30) and features an early advert marking the railway as a major Liverpool attraction (see Figure 1).
9. See W. Moss's *The Liverpool Guide* (1796/1974, pp. 20-22) for a detailed description of "prospects" that could be obtained from parts of the city such as Upper Duke Street.
10. For extensive archive footage of the Overhead railway in operation, see *The Liverpool Overhead Railway* (DVD—Online Video).
11. The footage was donated to the North West Film Archive by the filmmaker's son. See [www.nwfa.mmu.ac.uk](http://www.nwfa.mmu.ac.uk).
12. As with *Electrical Exhibition*, this footage is part of the North West Film Archive's collection of Liverpool on film.
13. All the films cited here are part of the Angus Tilsto Collection. Tilsto is a long-standing Wirral-based filmmaker, collector, and producer who has built up a collection of some 800 films, many of which are made by local amateur filmmakers and cine clubs (see Hallam, 2007). All other films cited in this section are from the North West Film Archive. For extensive footage of the Mersey Ferries in operation, see *Ferries Across the Mersey* (Merseyside Memories DVD—Online Video, 1996).
14. See Picture House: Magazine of the Cinema Theatre Association No. 7 (Autumn 1985, pp. 6-7). Hale's Tours were a simulated railroad experience, first established in 1903 by George C. Hale, a cinema proprietor from Kansas City, in which the auditorium was designed to resemble a railway carriage, complete with a vibrating floor and sounds of a steam engine to make the trip more convincing. Many

- of the industry's leading luminaries, such as Sam Warner, began their careers with Hale's Tours (Fielding, 1983, pp. 122-127).
15. It is worth mentioning here that in the research conducted for this article at the Liverpool Record Office, it emerged that the category of "the waterfront" has only relatively recently begun to be used as a subject keyword in catalogue listings. This would indicate a certain discursive (re)construction of the "waterfront" that can arguably be attributed to a change in definitions that began in the 1970s, when the industrial, functional and horizontal/linear associations of the river and docks shifted toward a landscape defined in more visual, aesthetic, and vertical terms. Around this time, discourses of regeneration and "waterfront renewal" became commonplace, and it is this shift in emphasis toward the visual consumption of the landscape, its architecture, and skyline that arguably accounts for the increasing emphasis on "the waterfront" in cultural and economic discourses of the city. I am very much indebted to Graeme Milne for his thoughts and insights on this subject.
  16. Ben Parry, quoted in [www.08businessconnect.com/detail/RAILWAY\\_FILM\\_TRACKS\\_BACK\\_TO\\_THE\\_FUTURE\\_/548/64.aspx](http://www.08businessconnect.com/detail/RAILWAY_FILM_TRACKS_BACK_TO_THE_FUTURE_/548/64.aspx) (retrieved November 11, 2008). See also [www.jumpshiprat.org/pages/terminus/](http://www.jumpshiprat.org/pages/terminus/).
  17. See <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/walker/exhibitions/liverpoolcityscape/>
  18. The growing interest in regional and national archive footage is in part evidenced by the success of the popular BBC TV programmes *The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon* and *The Lost World of Friesse-Greene* as well as the Granada series *The Way We Were*.
  19. See [www.bbc.co.uk/liverpool/big\\_screen/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/liverpool/big_screen/).
  20. The footage was taken, with permission, from Angus Tilston's Pleasures Past series of Liverpool films.
  21. Although it is the case that Liverpool's iconic buildings, such as the Three Graces and St George's Hall, have long been used to promote the city by municipal authorities (see *City of Liverpool Official Handbook*, 1906), the rarefied and virtual "site" of the waterfront iconography in city branding discourses is such that it is increasingly detached from its material analogue in real time and space: that is, that which is experienced as part of everyday mobilities within the city.
  22. Arranged on a series of screens and historical maps, Keiller's exhibit comprises actuality footage of urban landscapes, filmed between 1896 and 1909, showing street scenes and "phantom ride" views shot from moving vehicles such as trams and trains. The exhibition was held at the BFI Southbank in London between November 23, 2007 and February 3, 2008.

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## Bio

**Les Roberts** is a research associate in the School of Architecture at the University of Liverpool, United Kingdom. His research explores the broad intersection between ideas and practices of space, place, and mobility, particularly in relation to film. He is co-editor of "The City and the Moving Image: Urban Projections" (Palgrave, 2010), and is currently working on a monograph on film, mobility and urban space.