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The Port City's 'Cine-scapes'

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Asma Mehan

Cinema acts as a significant mediator between urban reality and the imaginary sensory experience of the fictive world. Viewing the city through the lens of a camera enables us to build new narratives. Films have captured port cities within the flows of, goods, people, and ideas, making them ever-present in shared memories, historical narratives and urban nostalgia. Cultural production plays a role in the on-going construction of local port cultures, whether films, festivals, music, literature, theater, advertisements, or events. Telling the story of the port city – its past, present, and future; its buildings and its people – contributes strongly to the creation of port city cultures.^[i] The big screen can help viewers to perceive complex port city regions, learning from their history, understanding cultural values and developing shared urban narratives to tackle the upcoming challenges. In a broader sense, port city's 'Cine-scape'—to use a term coined by Richard Koeck,^[ii] puts the cinematic approach to port cities into the spotlight.

As a follow-up to [the blog by Hilde Sennema](#) (posted on April the 1st, 2020), about our favorite cultural expressions concerning port cities, the Port City Futures Team made another list of favorite films, movies, series and documentaries concerning ports and port cities.

The list includes a film that depicts the familiar maritime and touristic setting of Venice. **Vincent Baptist** (EUR) invites you to watch ['Don't Look Now' by Nicolas Roeg](#). He adds “the classic psychological thriller *Don't Look Now* (Nicolas Roeg, 1973) employs intricate editing techniques and occult plot elements to narrate the disintegration of a married couple's relationship, when they go on a trip to Venice in the aftermath of their daughter's accidental drowning. The film brilliantly flips the familiar maritime and touristic setting by depicting the surrounding waters as a continuous threat, rather than

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an open and welcoming environment. It also creates an eerie impression of what can happen when urban heritage is left to decay.”

We had another film suggestion related to maritime, surrealistic setting and sea-related myths by **Asma Mehan**. She invites you to watch [The Lighthouse by Robert Eggers](#) and declares “this is a black and white (35 mm film) psychological movie began as an attempt to adapt “The Lighthouse”, an unfinished short story by Edgar Allan Poe. I like the maritime and surrealistic sense of the movie that evokes 19th-century photography. It reminds you of the sailor myths and classical mythologies related to the sea.”

There are other film suggestions with the location setting of port city facilities (such as ships, visible surrounding water, decks, harbors, bridges) like [Sleepless in Seattle](#) by **Maurice Jansen** that features three port-cities: Seattle, Baltimore, and New York. Alternatively, San Francisco in [Vertigo by Alfred Hitchcock](#) suggested by **Asma Mehan**: “By seeing a great movie or listening to a great piece of music over and over, you can expect different results from a new perspective. Vertigo is a classical Alfred Hitchcock movie which has been shot in San Francisco, California. I still can remember Madeleine’s shot at Golden Gate Bridge, Fort Point, before she jumps to the bay.”

Focusing on documentaries, **Maurice Jansen** (EUR) urges us to watch [Wild Port of Europe](#) which is a documentary about wildlife in the port of, which is set in the ports of Rotterdam and Moerdijk and features the “abundant, resilient and dynamic forces of nature in Europe’s largest port and Dutch delta”. The film is yet to be released for distribution in 2021, but you can already watch the ‘Making of’ as it is being made. He added “what I like about this project is, of course, the focus on sustainability and the paradox of building a port yet sustaining nature. It can be done, however it requires a completely different engineering approach. You could say this documentary is a spin-off of the MV2 port expansion as Dutch dredging company Van Oord – one of the contractors of MV2 project - is co-financing the project.”

Francesca Savoldi presented the documentary [Many undulating things](#) which she recently watched. She states, “it is an attempt of poetic exploration of Hong Kong through its urban history and social change, in which maritime trade and the port play an important role. Its vision on how different temporal and spatial scales are interwoven with each other on its urban landscape is quite interesting. The documentary is not public yet. It was supposed to be screened in many galleries in Europe during this spring, but Covid19 canceled everything.”

Other PortCityFutures team members had very interesting series suggestions as well. **Yvonne Van Mil** (TU Delft) recommends the [Lumiére crime series TRAPPED by director](#)

[Baltasar Korkakúr](#). She tells us, “this series is about the port of the Icelandic village of *Seydisfjörður*. Shortly after a ferry enters the harbor, a mutilated body washes up. When a heavy snowstorm lands on the same day, no one can enter or leave the village, they are trapped. A classic crime, but the series also tells the story of a village council that wants to exploit the port as a tourist attraction, while at the same time showing the impact these tourists have on the Icelandic village.”

Hilde Sennema (EUR) recommends two series: “For me, the epitome of port city related film making is the second season of [The Wire](#). While the first season deals with drug networks in poor neighborhoods of Baltimore, the second season is about drug and human trafficking in the port. Some of the main characters deal drugs for the same reason they are actively involved in the trade union: because their dockworker salaries do not suffice. Meanwhile, we learn about the difficulties of jurisdiction and governance within the port city. (See if you can spot the cameo of the port of Rotterdam!)

The question of who governs the port city is also displayed in the [Netflix series Marseille](#). It deals with the mayoral race in the port city of Marseille and speaks to the difficulties of a city on the nation’s periphery to assert itself. Besides the political intrigue, we also get an insight into drug trafficking, funding of large projects on the waterfront, and a romance between the mayor’s daughter and a boy from the banlieues.”

Acknowledgement

This blog has been written in the context of discussions in the LDE PortCityFutures team. It reflects the evolving thoughts among group members on the socio-spatial and cultural questions surrounding port city relationships. special thanks for comments and reviews to Carola Hein and Paul van de Laar.

References:

[i] Hein, C. (2016). “Port cityscapes: conference and research contributions on port cities.” *Planning*

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