

Miljena Vučković

stand in, cover, shoot

“Nothing can happen, unless it happens somewhere” / “Ništa se ne može dogoditi, a da se ne dogodi negde”¹

Meta Hočevar writes about the stage as a space of a play. Movies, same as theatre, and everything else after all, demand a place for any story to unfold. This text explores the phenomenon of the city and state as a movie / shooting location and the influence the filming industry has on (real) space, with focus on Hungaria, Romania and Serbia.

Inspired by an ever growing and more present phenomenon in the last years in eastern European countries - with a spreading tendency in Mediterranean and Baltics, but also Emirates and far away tropical islands - to compete in offering better conditions for foreign - Hollywood / UK / Bollywood production companies, this text will reflect on typical processes in usage of space as shooting location and consequences it has.

Global context and short review of circumstances within industry serve as a frame for analysis of current situations in three observed countries. Mutual for all of them - except Banat - is the relatively recent turbulent past that still influences economic and social circumstances, as well as growing ambition to rebrand oneself and through some - even though unclear - cultural politics gain or enlarge their influence and better their position and image within Europe.

Existence of the Internet significantly changed how business is done, now that the world is visible and easily reachable on any screen. As in other professions, so in the movie making - it is always about growth and improvement, and with the rapidly changing culture of content producing and consuming, the filming industry has to reinvent itself every now and then.

¹ M. Hočevar. *Prostor igre*. (Jugoslovensko Dramsko Pozorište, 2003), 10.

So, same as in other fields, professional gatherings are nothing new, and Film Festivals have Industry sections for some time already, but since recently, except for making and selling movies, it is a hot topic to discuss where best to shoot them. And it is not important just for professionals but ever more so for national GDP.

Newbies are big on investing - National film centres, studios, various platforms organise “familiarisation trips” to lure in foreign location scouts. Even regions together present themselves at the industry gatherings, as small countries are easily reachable from one another, and also can complement each other when it comes to studios and other facilities. Lighter equipment, faster and smoother logistics, among other, pushed countries globally to compete in this new Olympics. Business knows no national borders.

On one side, there are locations - and their local/national industry workers, tourism boards and offices, hospitality unions, etc., that want to attract movie makers, and on the other are magazines, websites, guilds competing to grab attention of national / regional / local promoters, with the aim to sell more ads. Improvement in technology led to the existence of many platforms that besides presenting and offering various shooting locations also offer services like comparison of locations by several parameters, including rebat, equipment, easy access, etc.

This all results in great slogans, placed on even greater images of “amazing / unbelievable / unique, phantastic / perfect / etc.” locations. *Locations galore* (Tucson, USA), *The ultimate location* (Montana, USA), *The kingdom of cinematic treasures* (Saudi Arabia), *Nature in the spotlight* (Costa Rica), *Epic* (Norway), *The French experience* (France), *Timeless charm* (Italy), *Land of filming* (Morocco), etc. Space is turned to images to be better sold, with small or big letters and numbers that indicate the high rebat percentage - return of tax and other incentives. While location shots promise uniqueness and pure magic - and movie is a business of magic, numbers are there to convince.

Exciting locations for exciting stories

Hungary - whose selling slogan is above - is one of the most popular European filming hubs for good reason. It was among the firsts to offer tax return and other stimulating shooting conditions, there are plenty of skilled professionals with wages smaller than in UK and USA, and, conveniently, historical events formed various architectural styles, to offer cover for various epochs, (European) cities, and thus, stories to be turned into movie magic. Also, plenty of European film authors and workers - skilled technicians and artists - particularly from Hungary emigrated to the USA in the first half of XX century and significantly influenced Hollywood, creating a legacy that is fondly mentioned and called upon now.

Major projects - like *Dune Part 2* and *Poor Things* were shot in Hungary, leaving behind thousands of working hours (and gossip - loyal and integral part of industry), hundreds of people engaged, and dozens of built structures. To be used

and reused, torn down, rebuilt .. to cover for something else.

30% cash rebate, period architecture and growing studio base are three main pillars of Hungarian movie business lure. Particularly studios with water facilities, greenboxes and backlot sets are desirable, and Budapest has few of the new backlot complex sceneries on offer - New York, renaissance and mediaeval, WWII barracks. Combined with greenscreen turned greenbox stage, literally, anything and everything can be shot anywhere. That makes this cover-spaces paradox even stranger. Is it really important which city crew is in, when they can - with the help of the Art Department - make any place work? Starting from always sunny places - in order to use up the day in the beginning of the movie industry - over some truly exceptional spaces that responded to particular stories in its hay days, productions are now chasing cheaper locations (and crews) where everything can be done (without significant consequences) for less money.

Still, from outside (and also from inside, let's be honest), the industry is exciting and movies are magic! It's just not equally magic for everybody involved, and least for citizens. Some of them become professional extras, and are riding the wave, since they can not walk or drive through too often blocked streets, due to sets and shootings. One studio in Budapest has a slogan *The film capital*, and one can not help but wonder if this is a statement, promise or a threat? And it goes beyond cities - nature, heritage, people. All resources onboard!

Not being landlocked as Hungary and Serbia, Romania has more natural diversity and impressive locations to offer, besides experienced crew, modern equipment and attractive production costs, that all three countries boast about. Truly great natural beauty and a rich cultural heritage help to build a base of locations that can double or cover for much of (other parts of) Europe. But a generous incentive of 35 - 45% did its homework, too, in positioning Romania on the production map.

BBC crime series *Killing Eve* - all three seasons - took advantage of Bucharest covering for both Paris and Moscow, while Netflix production of teenage hit series *Wednesday* located their sets within gothic architectural heritage. The buildings already have a just right look and atmosphere to support the story. However, *Dracula Untold* by Gary Shore was not filmed in Romania.

Not being Budapest or Prague (that already has a map of the iconic shooting locations), Bucharest, together with other Romanian cities, fortresses, castles, natural and built wonders has to find its niche to appeal to high-profile productions. As Lithuanian movie workers significantly gained skills and improved offer during the last decade and pretty much grabbed the opportunity to host series shootings and cover for the former Soviet bloc, this cover is already blown. But, to use one of the most popular phrases in presenting this corner of the world - maybe being on the crossroad where East meets West is the answer - if one can be Paris and Moscow at the same time, one can be pretty much anything - city or something completely different.

Not to repeat all the same commercial and ornate phrases intended to distinct one country from another, Serbia or “Eastwood” can boast that it succeeded in doing impossible, namely, *SFC (Serbia Film Commission / Film in Serbia)* persuaded local governments and public institutions to become more film friendly environments, particularly to international productions.

Already in 2014, *Film in Serbia* also, together with British Council Serbia organised training for future and emerging professionals, developing local “network” simultaneously with working on law for incentives and creating a network of locations on offer. This strategy paid off, as SFC is the place to go when in search of places, and is now directing some of the activities (led and provided) by Serbia Creates - a platform established by the Prime Minister’s office, and committed to supporting creative industries. Educating and nurturing of current and future CGA, VFX and other “digital professionals” is useful not just for the movie industry, but provides a workforce for a huge and growing gaming industry.

Somewhere between glorious past - as former Yugoslavia was second largest European production destination outside of the UK, and hopeful future - with games, foreign productions and shiny commercials, is now. Now, brutalist architecture of Novi Beograd is very much loved by production designers (many of whom are trained architects) and directors, and is used in many commercials and music videos. This poses questions, among others, is it ethical to turn architecture into this kind of commodity and is it possible to use this (foreign) love as an asset in promotion and protection of endangered built heritage? If architecture partially forms the identity of a certain place, what does it do as a backdrop, separated from its purpose and meaning? Does a city need a blockbuster to have a say and influence regarding its space? Like Dubrovnik in Croatia, which was drowning in fans of *Game of Thrones*, can a film set turn the shooting location into a tourist spot that does a favour, rather than damages the city / location? Similarly to tourism, the filming industry is both hazardous and beneficial to spaces.

Both Dubrovnik and Novi Beograd, and plenty of other cities are in various Catalogues of places - very convenient. Real places, with their stories and atmospheres, everyday life and citizens are put on market and turned into “easy to use, easy to choose from” booklets. They present places recorded from a certain (best) angle, cutting off everything that could spoil the impression and “damage” the image of location. Film shooting is a giant trick, and it frames what it wants to be seen, while leaving unwanted out (of frame). And, it treats shooting locations in the same manner. Like 3D images cut out from reality and surroundings, places go through the first round of becoming non-places - turning into just a potential to cover for someplace else. Chosen for their particular characteristics and look, sometimes they play themselves, and sometimes they are tweaked, covered with layers of production design, like actors in costumes.

Space is important for film in many ways. Cities are endless inspiration for movies - from stories to atmosphere, they determine what is possible to happen there, and

what is expected in some other places - from christmas movies to horrors, the audience know exactly how something should look and feel. The language is familiar and expectations are formed. Production design is thus crucial in movie narrative, be it a castle in a historical drama, wild forest, endless landscape in a road movie, or any place else. Even combinations and free interpretations like "inaccurate" historical styles still help to tell the story, whether they are deliberate choices or out of necessity.

Looking at film history, one can explore what certain cinematography implicitly says: Yugoslav movies, and even more film journals - (short) forms played before the movie itself - were showing to the audience how one should live, behave, what is happening in other parts of the country and world, and so much more. Values were communicated through these forms, and spaces and places shown played a crucial role in this message delivery.

Great and "accurate" locations demand less intervention, which saves lots of production money. So, besides "experienced and friendly crew members, competitive incentives, great tax return and newly built studios with hi-tech equipment", good locations are important for "cost friendly production". On the other hand, controlled shooting conditions - like studio (backlot) saves money in different ways, so sets are still often built - either in studios or on locations. Not the same as a City, more like a Potemkin village, but still, built. Sometimes they are torn down immediately after the shooting, sometimes recycled, repurposed .. and sometimes video format precedes the real space, like in *Ghibli park*, in Japan. Initially imagined, written and drawn, after years of living in books, cartoons and imagination, becoming iconic (and even praised for its urban quality, like town of Koriko in *Kiki's Delivery Service*), places from Ghibli cartoons are now built in an amusement park, so fans can enter this unreal space. Same and different from Disneyland.

One of the positive aspects of the film industry influencing nature, cities and other built spaces and temporarily disturbing the life of inhabitants, is presenting and seeing the known place in the new light. Those interested in movies - various professionals - film workers, interior designers, historians, etc., curiosity hunters, fans and travellers, anybody basically, could research and find various photos of locations, interventions, shooting sets, etc. in the now growing bases on the internet. Previously confined to what the newspapers share, curated images provided by the production, now they can finally find their tribe online, to discuss, share, and grow their knowledge base.

Another positive aspect of this location's market is returning these countries to the industry mainstream, again being part of the world, after several decades of falling behind. Although this adjustment to industry standards sometimes impairs creativity and ability to find wittier and faster solutions in favour of protocols, rules and regulations, known procedures .. Still, procedures, rules and even foreign syndicates are capable of protecting local crews, which is more than welcome in

this precarious industry. Movie industry professionals were proudly reciting the notorious narrative of being “married to the job”, and having no other, more real life than one on set - which is one of the most intense and real unreal worlds one can inhabit.

List of positive impacts include improvement of technical equipment, modernisation of studios, development of scenographic rentals (which is also beneficial for entertainment and corporate industry), which all again shape urban surroundings, by clustering at one residential/industry area at the outskirts of Belgrade. Cheaper land for large warehouses, traffic infrastructure and possible cooperations led to this spatial formation, which later influence preferred location choice - one that is on the same road and direction as rentals. In this way, created spaces heavily determine urban space and its future.

Another big development that followed fast growth in the filming industry is catering. This is a bitter-sweet occurrence, as it simultaneously raises the bar in the hospitality industry but at the same time, is followed by lots of garbage - as any other take away beverages, just multiplied by all meals during the day, hundreds of crew members and dozens of weeks. It remains in the city / state, after the film is done and the crew is gone.

Now, there are some greener tendencies in the filming industry globally, as well as in other industries, which was previously definitively not the case in this fast-paced, goal oriented, expensive but high earning game.

It remains to stay curious and closely follow further trends in filming locations battle, as it influences daily lives in the Central-Eastern Europe region, while covering for so many other places.

Even if it rains on set, it is always sunny on the screen.

Sources:

Books

M. Hočevar. *Prostor igre*. (Jugoslovensko Dramsko Pozorište, 2003), 10.

I. Šentevska. *KONSTRUKCIJA IDENTITETA I MEDIJSKI TEKST: REPREZENTACIJA URBANIH TRANSFORMACIJA BEOGRADA U MUZIČKOM VIDEU* (University of Art in Belgrade, 2014), PhD dissertation;

Magazines

FW. Brought to life. *Monocle*. Volume: n175 (2024): 048.

World of Studios. Cannes edition. (2023)

The Hollywood Reporter. Volume No 14 (may 2023)

Screen International. *Screen at Cannes Film Festival.* (may 2023)

Websites

Alien Films Entertainment. *Filming in Romania*
<https://www.alienfilmsentertainment.com/> (Accessed 2024-09-27)

<https://www.budapestreporter.com/> (Accessed 2024-09-27)

Tom Abraham, Butterfield & Robinson. “Wednesday” *Filming Locations You Can Visit in Romania.* (2024).
<https://www.butterfield.com/get-inspired/travel-journal/wednesday-filming-locations-romania> (Accessed 2024-09-27)

Diana Lodderhose, Deadline. *Hot Spots: How Serbia Has Quietly Become A Competitive European Destination For Foreign Film Shoots.* (2024).
<https://deadline.com/2023/11/hot-spots-how-serbia-has-become-competitive-european-destination-for-foreign-film-shoots-1235638053/> (Accessed 2024-09-27)

European Film Commissions Network. *Spotlight on Serbia Film Commission* (2018). <https://eufcn.com/spotlight-on-film-in-serbia/> (Accessed 2024-09-27)

House of Lapland. *Filming in Finnish Lapland.* (2024).
<https://www.lapland.fi/film/filming-in-lapland/> (Accessed 2024-09-27)

Czech Film Commission. *Lights! Camera! Prague! — Prague Film Locations Map.* (2015). <https://issuu.com/prague.eu/docs/lightscameraprague> (Accessed 2024-09-27)

<https://m.imdb.com/search/title/?locations=romania> (Accessed 2024-09-27)

Romania Tourism, Romania Natural and Cultural. *7 Renowned Movies that were Filmed in Romania.* (2024)
<https://romaniatourism.com/movies-filmed-in-romania.html> (Accessed 2024-09-27)

<https://www.thelocationguide.com/locate/> (Accessed 2024-09-27)