On the Waterfront

When I first watched the movie *On the Waterfront* I shared the view of many others that this was indeed a great movie. To some degree I did not go into it with an openness since I had heard about the political history and background behind the director Elsa Kazan and his testimony before the House Un-American Affairs Committee. Having more background in political science and history studies I tend to see films in their historical/political sense rather than their geographic sense. I was skeptical about what I would be able to find as I looked into the geography of a film. What I found with *On the Waterfront* was its geographic location was deliberately selected to give the film a true sense of place. It was not an accident, great acting or Hollywood magic that made the authenticity of this film; it had much to do with where it was filmed. The selection of Hoboken and the inclusion of its citizens helped create a feeling of place that comes through the silver screen to the audience who watches it.

The film opens panning across the harbor and off in the distance across the harbor is a very nice luxury liner resting quietly stately high above the water. Down in the water closer in is a run down little shack in the shadow of a freighter. The door opens and a group of men saunter up the gangplank. One of the men is wearing the clothes of a laborer and the others are the suits of businessmen. You can see their breath as they finish their conversation and part ways. This dichotomy of the rich and poor is an element of the environment in which they live. Richard Day, the artistic director, “carefully selected sites for locations shooting in Hoboken New Jersey, injected physical power into the dockside cityscape.” (Hey 683) Although the cold weather was not under his control they could certainly assume that shooting outside in the middle of winter there was a good chance for that.

The physical environment of the urban setting was carefully selected by Kazan. He was looking for an area that was urban and working class. Hoboken is a rectilinear city barely two miles long at the time of the filming. It was called the Mile Square City by its newspapers. Hoboken allowed a visual detachment from New York City that had a greatness to it. Hoboken lacked that greatness or even a close proximity to greatness. (Braudy 28)

Certainly it is possible to film in such a way to hide the city or create the illusion of a poor location. However, my use of the word “location” in this sense is in the same manner that it is used in the film industry, i.e. to shoot on location. For a geographer the proper term from the 5 themes of geography is “place.” I was struck by a passage from Leo Braudy when he used the word place when talking about Kazan’s discovery of its significance in filming. Braudy discusses Elsa Kazan’s realization while filming *Panic in the Streets* (1950). “The film itself is exciting to watch, but what Kazan got out of it, as he recounts, was that for the first time he really emphasized a place” (emphasis his) (28)
One other action that Kazan took to aide the authenticity was to use locals as extras in the movie. When place is discussed we tend to think in terms of the physical environment. There is also a great impact on place by the people who live there. As the scene closes dockside we see the main character, Terry Malloy played by Marlin Brando, walk up to the backside of a poor working class apartment building. He calls out to one of the tenets under the guise of returning a pigeon asks to meet him on the roof. This is our first introduction to the living conditions of the characters. This shot allows us to get a feel for just how tight and close the living conditions were for those residences.

Prior to writing the book Leo Braudy drove over the Hoboken out of a curiosity of finding the locations of the filming. He struggled to find them but was fortunate to ask at the right bar who led him to the next scene in the movie. After Terry gets the man to go to the roof Terry goes to hang out the union boss’s bar “Johnny Friendly’s Bar.” Leo gets a rather cool reception from those there that afternoon but eventually learns quite a bit in the process. “So not only was this the bar it turns out, but all the men here, including Pepe, (bar owner) had been extras. Gradually, as they reminisced, I started putting together the reality of the location with the sense of neighborhood the film had created for me.” (34) We as people give a uniqueness to a region, that difference is what makes it a place.

This human element is not just in those sending the message but also those receiving it. The man who Terry convinced to meet him on the roof actually is thrown off because he was “singing” to the police commission. When Terry realizes he played a part in the mans murder he is rather upset by it. His brother Charlie, who is in the inner circle, consoles him by pointing out the risk he posed to the union leaders, including him.

Jeffry Chown points out this portion the movie spoke to a number of groups in different ways.

“(Peter) Beskind is insightful here in reminding us how 1950’s audiences had more knowledge of European ethnicity than audiences today. Irish traditions about informing during the British colonial period or the Sicilian/Italian code of “omerta” would figure into the 1954 reception, yet seems baseless today. We live in a society where European ethnicity is progressively being erased, and students have difficulty identifying the traditions to which On the Waterfront alludes.” (117)

The other element of the human cultural element is introduced after the killing of the man, a priest is brought out to give him last rights. Roman Catholicism is a major part of the Italian and Irish culture. Including Roman Catholicism was necessary to truly add to the films environment as well as its historical basis. As the movie progresses we will see that the priest become a central figure in helping the workers take on their bosses.
Creating the “place” of a church was not done by the careful selection of a single location but rather a bit of Hollywood magic. It was actually created by piecing together the interior of one church with the exterior of another. After a secret meeting with the priest in the church, Our Lady of Grace, Terry and Edie Doyle, played by Eva Marie Saint, ran to a park just outside the church, Saint Peter and Saint Paul. Then they go for a walk in the park. And that park was actually pieced together from three different parks. (Braudy)

Another element of the environment is used later when Terry finally confesses his role in the killing of Doyle, whom he later finds out, is Edie’s brother. As he discusses what he should do about it with Father Barry he struggles about his choices and feelings for Edie. As Father Barry sees Edie down below walking along the pier he tells him he has to tell her. In the next scene he is talking to her but all you can hear is a boat whistle breaking occasionally to hear a word here and there. Through out the movie you can hear the distant blast of a ship’s horn. That subtle reminder helps you stay in that sense of place.

The faint sound of ship's whistle brings Terry back to reality and he hurries to the docks, where hundreds of men mill around on the pier. [The film effectively uses authentic sounds from its environment: foghorns, ship's whistles, etc. to heighten the realism.] Some of the longshoremen are muttering about the unfortunate Doyle death, because he "couldn't learn to keep his mouth shut." (www.filmsite.org)

As Terry and Edie spend more time together the Johnny Friendly gets more concerned about where his heart and head are. After a meeting with Charlie and the other union leaders he argues with them in defense of himself. The spiral down between Charlie and Terry is the famous scene in the back seat of the car. Terry cries out that he could have been something, he could have been a contender but he did what he was told and now he was a nobody.

The emotional climax continues to build as Charlie and Terry part company. Terry goes to see Edie as his world is closing in on him. This psychological environment is reinforced by the physical environment as it is filmed. The films Artistic Director, Richard Day uses the close, dark urban spaces. “These are the visuals which menacingly accompany Terry Malloy’s futile attempt to assess his situation.” (Hey 683)

The close space of the dwellings continues to the alleyway Terry and Edie run down to avoid being run over by a truck only to find his Charlie dead hanging by a longshoreman’s hook. Seeking revenge for his brothers killing he returns to Johnny Friendly’s Bar where he can find no one but rather is found by Father Barry. Father Barry convinces Terry to testify as the best way to get back at Friendly. In that scene Terry throws a gun at a picture and the dent from that is still in the wall according to Braudy. In the scene of the testimony everyone is again packed in close and tight.
It is only after he testifies that the space opens back up as Terry goes to the roof to see his pigeons. Here Day uses a long distant shot breaking with the close tight quarters of the last few scenes. He filmed these shots on clear sunny days to allow the areal perspective to soften the hard edges. (Hey 684)

As Terry looks over the remains of his pigeons he is shocked back to reality by the blast of a distant whistle calling him to work. Believing he has done the right thing he walks up to the dock to work. No one will talk to him and he is not selected for work. The coldness of his former friends is emphasized by the cold weather as you can see the breath of the actors. This was one additional choice by Kazan to get the actors to feel what it is to be at that place. As I alluded to above it was a rather cold winter and many of the lead actors were from California so not acclimated to the cold New England weather. Kazan did not allow heaters even though it was a rather cold winter. (Schickel and Young)

The shed shown at the start of the movie is where it all comes back to in the end. Terry goes to confront Johnny and gets beat up very badly. That is the turning point for the others to stand up with Terry against Johnny and the union bosses.

There are some great actors in many different films and with out a doubt they make a huge impact on the success of the movie. Great filming also has a major impact on the emotional connection by creating a seamless transition in the park even though it was filmed in three different places. However, when you pull those elements together with the local character you have the makings for a great film. Those elements together are the “place” where you can connect to the people.
Works Cited

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