



## Whither urban social geography? Recent developments

### Key questions addressed in this chapter

- ▶ What is meant by the 'Los Angeles School' of urban geography?
- ▶ What are the advantages and limitations of the LA School's work?
- ▶ What are the relationships between cinema and the city?

As we have seen throughout this book, urban social geography is today a highly diverse set of studies. This diversity was memorably captured by one of the leading figures of the 'Quantitative Revolution' in geography, Peter Haggett, who likened urban geography itself to a city:

a city with districts of different ages and vitalities. There are some long-established districts dating back to a century ago and sometimes in need

of repair; and there are areas which were once formidable but are no longer so, while others are being rehabilitated. Other districts have expanded recently and rapidly; some are well built, others rather gimcrack.

(Haggett, 1994, p. 223)

In this final chapter we illustrate some of this diversity by considering two newly constructed 'districts' of the subdiscipline. First we look at the controversy surrounding the so-called 'Los Angeles' or 'California' School of urban geography. This debate may be envisaged as a reconstruction of an older 'district', namely, whether we can conceive of a **paradigmatic city**, i.e. one that can be used to generalize about future developments elsewhere. The second 'district' is related to the first, but may be regarded as essentially a new construction. Michael Dear, a key member of the 'LA' School has written that 'the urban grows increasingly to resemble televisual and cinematic fantasy' (Dear, 2000, p. 166). The second focus of this chapter is therefore

appropriately upon recent work on the links between cinema and the city.

## 14.1 Los Angeles and the 'California School'

The diverse and extensive writings of the Chicago School of urban sociology in the early part of the twentieth century meant that Chicago came to be regarded as the classic example of an industrial city. In a similar fashion, in recent years an extensive body of work by a group of scholars based in California has meant that Los Angeles has come to be seen as the archetypal 'postmodern' city (e.g. Scott, 1988; Soja, 1989, 1996; Dear and Flusty, 1998). Indeed, these scholars – largely based in the Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning at University College, Los Angeles – have self-consciously portrayed Los Angeles as a harbinger of future urban forms – encouraging others to portray them as the 'Los Angeles School' (or 'California School'). As in the case of the earlier Chicago School, there is a great deal of diversity in the writings of this school, but they do share a number of underlying themes.

Underpinning much of the work of the California School have been attempts to link the sprawling suburbs of Los Angeles with regulationist-inspired notions of a new regime of accumulation (see Chapter 2). A new regime of flexible accumulation is argued to be manifest in California in high-technology agglomerations (Scott, 1986), dynamic, fluid, creative industries such as those producing movies (Christopherson and Storper, 1986) and industrial clusters based around illegal or low-paid workers. However, critics have argued that these notions of industrial restructuring are too broad and economic in focus to provide a satisfactory explanation of the myriad small-scale processes involved in neighbourhood formation (Savage and Warde, 1993).

Another main theme to emerge from this work is the newness of Los Angeles. Although the origins of the current city can be traced back to the original settlement by Spanish missionaries in 1781, Los Angeles displays little of the industrial legacy of the classic industrial city. The new urban forms created on the

west coast of the United States were highlighted as early as 1945 by Harris and Ullman. They drew attention to reduced significance of a central business district and the presence of many competing decentralized centres in their **multiple nuclei model**. This dispersion was of course made possible by the widespread adoption of the automobile for transportation. As Reiff says of Los Angeles:

There are few experiences more disconcerting than walking along a wide LA street without the reassuring jangle of keys in your pocket. These streets are so unshaded, their sidewalks appearing wider because they are so empty.

(Reiff, 1993, p. 119)

This dispersion and lack of recognizable pattern has been a key theme developed by the Los Angeles School. What Soja (1989) has described variously as the **postmodern global metropolis**, **cosmopolis** and **post-metropolis** (1997) is seen as a physically and socially fragmented entity. Contrary to the popular stereotype, Los Angeles is not a city without a centre. Indeed, there is a recent strong element of recentralization in the form of the command centres linked into the new global economy but the city also consists of numerous subcentres and **edge cities** (Garreau, 1992). These are not the exclusively affluent suburbs of an earlier era but show enormous variations in character, some being industrial or commercial and others being relatively poor and/or with distinctive ethnic minorities. Soja (1992) developed this theme into the concept of **exopolis** – a city that has been turned inside out. In such an environment it is difficult for individuals to have a sense of belonging to a coherent single entity (see also Box 14.1). The fragmentation and diversity of postmodern culture is therefore manifest in the physical structure of the landscape. The term **galactic metropolis** has also been coined to describe such cities (Lewis, 1983). The reason for this label is that the commercial centres in such cities look more like stars spread about a wider galaxy rather than a single recognizable centre. Knox (2008) uses the term 'metroburbia' to describe the fragmented and multinodal mixtures of employment and residential settings in contemporary metropolitan regions, with their fusion of suburban, exurban and central-city characteristics.

## Box 14.1

### Key thinkers in urban social geography – Edward Soja

Latham has argued that Edward Soja is perhaps unique among contemporary urban social geographers in his capacity to both inspire and irritate (Latham, 2004)! The inspiration comes from the breadth and depth of his scholarship, the scale and sophistication of his erudition. The irritation comes from what some see as pre-emptive overgeneralization that signifies relatively little. What is in no doubt is that Soja has raised the profile of urban social geography, especially to researchers in other disciplines closely related to human geography.

Like David Harvey (Box 1.1), Soja has been greatly inspired by the work of French scholar Henri Lefebvre (see Box 9.4). Indeed, in Soja's case the influence would seem to have been even greater for, like Lefebvre, Soja has been concerned to put the production of space – what Soja terms 'spatiality' – at the centre of social theory. In *Postmodern Geographies* (1989) Soja argues that spatiality is a fundamental organizing principle of postmodern culture that serves to disguise the underlying power relations of a globalized capitalism.

In his second book *Thirdspace* (1996) Soja outlines six 'discourses' that encompass contemporary developments in Los Angeles:

- *The Post-Fordist Industrial Metropolis*: the city of new industrial spaces and sweatshops.
- *The Exopolis*: the city turned 'inside out' through fragmentation and decentralization.
- *The Cosmopolis*: the city shaped by globalization.
- *The Fractal City*: the city divided by multiple ethnicities and identities.
- *The Carceral Archipelago*: the city of privatized space and surveillance.
- *The SimCity*: the city of the digital knowledge economy.

In response to those who argue that this is 'top-down' theorizing which ignores the lively plurality of post-modern culture, Soja replaced his early sociospatial dialectic (that underpins this book, see Soja, 1980) with a 'trialectic'. As with Lefebvre, this concept integrates three conceptions of space: 'firstspace' (the material world); 'second space' (imagined representations of spatiality); and 'thirdspace', a conceptualization that integrates the previous two concepts. However, some claim this approach is vague and unspecified (see Barnett, 1997; Merrifield, 1999).

### Key concepts associated with Edward Soja (see Glossary)

Cosmopolis, exopolis, hyperreality, hyperspace, Los Angeles School, postmodern global metropolis, third space.

### Further reading

Barnett, C. (1997) Review of *Thirdspace: journeys to Los Angeles and other real and imagined places*, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* **22**, 529–30

Latham, A. (2004) Ed Soja, in P. Hubbard, R. Kitchin and G. Valentine (eds) *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* Sage, London

Merrifield, A. (1999) The extraordinary voyages of Edward Soja: inside the 'trialectics of spatiality', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* **89**, 345–8

Soja, E.W. (2000) *Postmetropolis: Critical studies of cities and regions* Blackwell, Oxford

### Links to other chapters

Chapter 9: Box 9.4 Henri Lefebvre

Another important theme running through the work of the California School has been the development of protective measures by the more affluent sections of society in an environment in which violence and crime is routine (Davis, 1990; Christopherson, 1994). This may be seen as a response to the increasing social polarization mentioned previously. One manifestation of these defensive measures is the growth of so-called bunker architecture (also termed 'citadel', 'fortified'

and 'paranoid' architecture): urban developments with gates, barriers and walls, security guards, infrared sensors, motion detectors, rapid response links with police departments and surveillance equipment such as CCTV. These form what Davis terms a 'scanscape', all designed to exclude those regarded as undesirable. These systems are often established in residential areas but exclusionary measures may also be undertaken in shopping malls and city centres. Thus, in some central



The paradigmatic postmodern city? An aerial view of Los Angeles. Photo Credit: Geoffrey DeVerteuil.

parts of Los Angeles park benches are curved in such a way as to inhibit people from sleeping on them over night. It is little wonder then that Davis (1990) talks of the 'militarization' of city life. However, it is not just the marginalized who are kept under surveillance in the contemporary city. New technologies centred around credit and loyalty cards, computers and pay-for-service facilities mean that corporations and governments can access vast amounts of information about people's travel and consumption habits.

### Critique of the LA School

Although the work of the Los Angeles School has undoubtedly been highly influential, the key question raised by their approach is: just how valid is Los Angeles as a general model of future urban developments? Although members of the California School hedge their comments with numerous caveats, acknowledging the unique history of Los Angeles, it is clear that they see

the city as representative of future urban forms. There are, however, many other cities throughout the Western world with stronger residual elements from previous periods as well as different political and administrative regimes. For example, McNeill (1999) notes that European cities have different urban morphology and stronger traditions of left-leaning social democratic governments from those of their North American counterparts. As Hall (1998) notes, it is not so much the urban forms as the *processes* involved in their creation that are the most important element in the work of the Los Angeles School and one should not assume that Los Angeles is the forerunner of future urban forms elsewhere. In addition, one should not exaggerate the newness of the city. For example, in the ring of barrios and ghettos that surround the newly fortified downtown of Los Angeles, Davis (1992) denotes a ring with similar attributes to the classic zone of transition of an earlier period in Chicago. These inner areas act as classic reception areas for immigrants to Los Angeles

and also manifest the classic teenage gangs of an earlier era (although the latter are now much more extensive, stretching out into suburban areas).

A second major criticism, not just of the California School but of all theories that emphasize the influence of postmodernism upon urban forms, is the silence over the issue of *race* (Jacobs, 1996). This is a criticism that emerges from postcolonial theory. Although postmodern perspectives claim to give expression to the diversity of identities in cities, it is argued that they remain a central vision in which immigrant groups are slotted in to perform a role in the new global economy. Yet postcolonial theory suggests that there is no one central vision but also many views from outside the centre. As Jane M. Jacobs notes:

Within social polarization arguments the complex politics of race is translated into a variant form of class differentiation produced by the now more thoroughly globalised and deceptively aestheticised unevenness of capitalism. A fractured, positional and often angry politics of difference is (mis)recognised as a static, structural outcome of advantage and disadvantage. Through this manoeuvre, the politics of race is cast off from the history of the constitution of difference and racialised subjects are denied the kind of agency captured by theorisations of a politics of identity. It is not simply that there is not enough race in these accounts of the postmodern city, it is that the cultural politics of racialisation is deactivated.

(Jacobs, 1996, p. 32)

A third major critique of the LA School argues that their dystopian vision of a fragmented metropolis fractured by the processes of globalization simply does not fit the facts. Indeed, Gordon and Richardson (1999) argue that the School has a cavalier attitude towards factual evidence in general. For example, they argue that Soja's assertion that planned peripheral communities such as in San Bernadino lack jobs and that consequently the inhabitants of these areas need to commute long distances does not seem to equate with commuting times of under 45 minutes. In addition, the often-quoted assertion that LA is stricken with social polarization is countered by the evidence of substantial

social mobility between social groups in the city. Thus Gordon and Richardson argue that many Latino immigrants in LA have moved into home ownership and form a new middle class. In addition, Jennifer Wolch's association of increasing homelessness with the forces of globalization is also criticized for ignoring many other contributory factors including deinstitutionalization, the destruction of poor-quality housing and the drugs problem. The assertion that LA has become the global command centre in the world economy is also seen as mistaken since all the major banks have left Los Angeles. Indeed, it is argued that the revival of the LA CBD can also be exaggerated, for the downtown area has very high rates of vacancies.

This vein of criticism is taken up by Curry and Kenney (1999). They argue that Los Angeles' emblematic status as a new global metropolis has been severely eroded by a series of setbacks. They claim that much of the city's manufacturing activity in the second half of the twentieth century was dependent upon defence expenditure on aerospace during the Cold War. When this ended growth faltered and the manufacturing activities were remarkably rigid (and decidedly non-post-Fordist) in adapting to new market opportunities.

### Los Angeles: a paradigmatic city?

There is insufficient space here to discuss the numerous other criticisms of the School's interpretation of Los Angeles made by Curry and Kenney or their rebuttal (see Scott, 1999; Storper, 1999, for details). However, a key wider question raised by the work of the LA School is how useful is the notion of a paradigmatic city (i.e. a city that displays more clearly than others the key urban patterns and processes of a particular period, see also Nijman, 2000). Curry and Kenney argue that the concept of a paradigmatic city seems to run counter to the LA School and other postmodernists' emphasis upon diversity, fragmentation and lack of structure. Furthermore, paradoxically, Dear and Flusty's notion of *keno capitalism* may be seen as perpetuating the detached modernist gaze upon cities of which they have been so critical (Beauregard, 1999). Thus it is argued that there is little of the cultural richness of the city in their extensive use of new terms to describe

various social groups in the postmodern city (e.g. the cybergeoisie and protosurps!) (Lake, 1999). Implicit in much of the work of the Los Angeles School is a critique of the work of the Chicago School which has dominated urban geography throughout much of the twentieth century. However, it has been argued that this critique (like many others before) concentrates upon

the spatial aspects of the Chicago School's approach, and in particular the Burgess concentric zone model (see Chapter 7), thereby ignoring the rich vein of case study material of local Chicago subcultures obtained through ethnographic research methods (qualitative methods such as participant observation and unstructured interviews) (Jackson, 1999).

## Box 14.2

### Key thinkers in urban social geography – Michael Dear

Michael Dear has made a significant contribution to the study of urban social geography in two distinctive and interrelated ways. First, he has undertaken a series of path-breaking surveys of the social and geographical consequences of deinstitutionalization – the closure of long-stay psychiatric institutions – and the associated phenomenon of homelessness. This work is best demonstrated in his early book *Not On Our Street: Community attitudes towards mental health care* (1982) (with Martin Taylor) and two later books (both with Jennifer Wolch), *Landscapes of Despair: From deinstitutionalization to homelessness* (1987) and *Malign Neglect: Homelessness in an American city* (1993). This work is in many respects a model of how to undertake policy-relevant, theoretically informed social research. It draws upon a wide range of perspectives and differing types of social survey to show the consequences of cutbacks in welfare spending. Furthermore, Dear has been highly active in drawing policy makers' attention to these issues.

Much of the above work is set in southern California where deinstitutionalization has been implemented in its most extreme form. This context provides the setting for Dear's second main contribution, as a key member of the so-called 'Los Angeles School' of urban geography. As with the work of fellow school member Ed Soja, this

aspect of Dear's work has aroused considerable controversy (see also Box 14.1). A number of complex issues underpin these debates.

First, there is the issue of just how representative is Los Angeles of future urban forms. Here the work of Dear and his colleagues seems to be contradictory. At times they play down the generality of their claims but at other times they seem unable to resist the temptation to proclaim Los Angeles as a paradigm for new global urban forms.

Second, there is the issue of just how relevant is postmodernism for an understanding of these changes. Dear thrives on using new textual forms and this has led to a wide range of new terms – some of which have proved irritating to his contemporaries.

Third, and related to the above two points, it is argued that for all the talk of 'postmodern urbanism' the LA School represents a Marxian overarching perspective in which various geographically and socially fragmented peoples are at the mercy of large corporations. In so doing it is argued that such work ignores issues of ethnicity and cultural difference.

Whether the LA School will assume the status of the Chicago School of urban ecology is therefore far from certain. Nevertheless, it is well worth reading Dear's work and the controversies it has generated.

### Key concepts associated with Michael Dear (see Glossary)

'Asylum-without-walls', deinstitutionalization, keno capitalism, Los Angeles School, postmodernism, reinstitutionalization.

### Further reading

- Dear, M. (2000) *The Postmodern Urban Condition* Blackwell, Oxford
- Dear, M. (ed.) (2001) *From Chicago to LA: Making sense of urban theory* Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA
- Dear, M. (2003) The Los Angeles School of Urbanism: an intellectual history, *Urban Geography* **24**, 493–509
- Dear, M. and Flusty, S. (1998) Postmodern urbanism, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* **88**, 50–72
- McNeill, D. and Tewdr-Jones, M. (2004) Michael Dear, in P. Hubbard, R. Kitchin and G. Valentine (eds) *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* Sage, London

### Links with other chapters

- Chapter 3: Postmodernism in the city
- Chapter 13: Service sector restructuring

Amin and Graham (1997) have argued that the tendency to take a limited range of urban contexts as paradigmatic of general change is not confined to adherents of the California School but also applies to those who proffer concepts of world cities (e.g. London, New York and Tokyo) or 'creative cities' (e.g. Barcelona). Echoing a growing chorus of other urban analysts, they argue that cities are increasingly inter-sections of multiple webs of economic and social life, many of which do not interconnect. This they call the *multiplex city* 'a juxtaposition of contradictions and diversities, the theatre of life itself' (Amin and Graham, 1997, p. 418). Boyer (1995) makes a similar distinction between the 'figured city' – the isolated planned city for affluent groups – and the 'disfigured city' – the neglected, unmanaged, spaces of the city inhabited by poorer groups. Increasingly, then, we cannot generalize about *the city*.

## 14.2 Cinema and the city

A relatively new, but rapidly growing, field of research within urban social geography concerns the inter-relationships between cinema and the city. This is an important sphere of enquiry for two main reasons. First, films are one of the most important forms of cultural expression in contemporary Western societies. Second, as we have seen previously in this book, cities play a crucial role in social life today. The result is a complex set of linkages between cities and cinema. These mutual interactions are reflected in the much-quoted observation by the French philosopher Baudrillard that, 'The American city seems to have stepped right out of the movies' (Baudrillard, 1989, p. 56). On the one hand, cities have greatly influenced the development of film. The earliest movies reflected urbanism at the beginning of the twentieth century. These films gave their audiences new perspectives on the cities in which they lived, with overhead views, tracking shots and close-ups. Indeed, some have drawn parallels between the cinemagoer and Benjamin's notion of the urban *flâneur*, the casual stroller observing the diversity of the city (see also Box 7.2). Thus, both the movie watcher and the city walker are often close physically, but distant socially. On the other hand, while city life continues to

dominate films, there is growing evidence that films and the film industry are having an increasingly important impact upon the evolution of new urban forms. Each of these interrelationships will be considered in turn in the chapter.

### Films as texts

There has been much complex debate within film theory over whether motion pictures have any special status as forms of cultural representation. For example, it is sometimes noted that, in comparison with many art forms, such as paintings, sculpture or opera, which are obviously artificial representations of the world, films can look as if what is happening on the screen is authentic and 'real'. This is sometimes referred to as the *haptical* quality of film (from haptic meaning 'to touch'). Indeed, what happens in motion pictures is in many cases all too real, especially when it has documentary overtones. For example, John Houston's film *The Misfits* contains harrowing scenes portraying the capture of wild horses. The terror and the panic on the part of the horses is real and shocking (as indeed, it also transpires, was the horrified reaction of star Marilyn Monroe). As the writer J.M. Coetzee describes:

Despite all the cleverness that has been exercised in film theory since the 1950s to bring film into line as just another system of signs, there is something irreducibly different about the photographic image, namely that it bears in or with itself an element of the real. That is why the horse capturing sequences of *The Misfits* are so disturbing: on the one side, out of the field of vision of the camera lens, an apparatus of horse wranglers and directors and writers and sound technicians united in trying to fit the horses into places that have been prescribed for them in a fictional construct called *The Misfits*; on the other side, in front of the lens, a handful of wild horses that make no distinction between actors and stuntmen and technicians, that don't know about and don't want to know about a screenplay by the famed Arthur Miller in which they are or are not, depending on one's point of view, the misfits, who have never heard of the

closing of the western frontier but are at this moment experiencing it in the flesh in the most traumatising way. The horses are real, the stuntmen are real, the actors are real; they are all at this moment, involved in a terrible fight in which the men want to subjugate the horses to their purpose and the horses want to get away; every now and then the blonde woman screams and shouts; it all really happened; and here it is, to be relived for the ten-thousandth time before our eyes. Who would dare to say that it is just a story?

(Coetzee, 2003, p. 67)

Nevertheless, in recent years this view of film has been much criticized and is referred to as the 'naturalistic fallacy'. What has become clear is that films are highly selective in what they represent. Films are therefore important cultural texts, full of socially constructed narratives and discourses – what in the context of motion pictures are often called tropes. A trope is thus a regular form of pattern that emerges in storytelling (such as the victory of the individual over 'the system' in Hollywood movies). Study of these tropes reveals much about films, the film industry and the society they represent (and especially the urban contexts in which they are shot).

## The influence of the city on film

Cities have had an enormous influence upon film. For example, some of the most popular and influential representations of city life in motion pictures are in a form known as *film noir*. This type of film, characteristic of the 1940s and 1950s, may be seen as a manifestation of an art form called expressionism, in which painters had sought to convey human emotions (as in Van Gogh's *Starry Night* or Munch's *The Scream*). German artists in particular, including Ernst Kirchner, Erich Heckel and Karl Schmidt-Rotluff, sought to portray a generation emotionally scarred after the First World War. This they did by representing cities and their inhabitants as dark and disturbing. After the Second World War, expressionism was carried to Hollywood by those escaping Nazi fascism and its aftermath. Émigré film directors in Hollywood continued to represent cities

as nightmarish centres of corruption, menace, vice and greed, although much of this reflected the Cold War paranoia of the era (Krutnik, 1997). Cities were represented as insecure places where things are seldom what they appear. City inhabitants were often portrayed as disturbed, dishonest and untrustworthy. Narratives were disrupted by people experiencing dreams, nightmares and hallucinations. Indeed, the mood of these films was often enhanced by dark interior scenes with basements and stairwells or exterior night-scenes in back alleys.

The private detective – as popularized in the novels of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler – is often a central character in such films. As Raymond Chandler famously wrote of the detective genre, 'Their characters live in world gone wrong . . . The streets were dark with something other than the night' (Chandler, 1973a, p. 7). However, in Chandler's hands the detective is a modern-day knight in shining armour for, 'Down these mean streets a man must go who is himself not mean' (Chandler, 1973b, p. 198). The private detective is an especially useful device in *film noir* because, during the course of performing his duties (and the private eye is usually male), he is able to move quickly between the many different strata of the city, the rich and poor, honest and corrupt. As we have seen previously in this book, these strata are associated with different residential areas of the city, and the detective in *film noir* is always on the move between these areas. However, paradoxically, with the extensive use of dark interior studio scenes in these films, we get a little sense of the city's geography. Key films of this type are *The Maltese Falcon* (John Houston, 1941) based on Hammett's novel of the same name and Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946).

## The influence of film on the city

As is widely known, Los Angeles contains the suburb of Hollywood, the centre that dominates the finance, production and distribution of the majority of the world's films. As such, no city has figured more in motion pictures. Despite the popularity of *film noir* in the past, the dominant image of Los Angeles in movies has been rather different. The mood is predominantly hedonistic



and characterized by sunshine, surfing, beaches, palm trees, conspicuous consumption and widespread personal mobility based on the automobile and freeways. Inevitably many films have attempted to puncture this hegemonic vision with insights into social inequality and the urban underclass, violence, traffic congestion, drug taking and alienation.

According to Walton (2001), Los Angeles illustrates the way in which film can influence local politics and urban development. He argues that popular understanding of the evolution of the city, together with the activities of green activists and environmental legislation in California, have all been influenced by *Chinatown* (1974). This film presented a view of the development of Los Angeles which, although arguably capturing certain underlying truths about the evolution of US cities, was in all main respects a work of fiction. To understand the influence of this film in more detail we first need to understand the reality of urban development in Los Angeles.

Los Angeles has developed into a sprawling metropolis of over 20 million inhabitants in what is essentially an arid landscape. As with all cities, central to this development has been an adequate supply of water. It was therefore necessary for the city to appropriate water from over 230 miles away to the east in the Owen's Valley of the Sierra Nevada mountains and transport this back to the city. This was accomplished via an elaborate system of aqueducts (as depicted in the LA-based films such as *Terminator 3*). This extraction of groundwater began in 1905 but the resulting drought and lowering of the water table brought about protests from local farmers, culminating in 1924 in the occupation and bombing of a local aqueduct (Walton, 2001). Although the protests were unsuccessful, the plight of the Owen's Valley farmers became something of a cause célèbre among social activists in the first half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the City of Los Angeles gradually purchased farms within the Valley to satisfy the seemingly insatiable need of the city for water.

The story then moves forward to 1974 and the release of *Chinatown* directed by the brilliant and controversial director Roman Polanski. This 'retro' detective movie is set in a mythical Los Angeles of 1937, and is complete with art deco backdrops and classic cars of the period. In the tradition of *film noir* the central figure

is an ex-cop turned private eye (Jack Nicholson) who gradually unravels a plot in an environment riven with corruption. City developers are bent on secretly acquiring, by criminal methods, land for urban development at reduced cost (in this case the adjacent San Fernando Valley rather than the distant Owen's Valley). Officials in the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) are bribed into secretly dumping water from city reservoirs at night in a time of drought with the aim of intensifying water shortages and thereby winning public support for dam construction, aqueducts and urban expansion. Local farmers who are deprived of water are made bankrupt and their land is subsequently acquired at artificially low cost by a dummy syndicate serving to disguise the interests of the developers. During the course of his investigations the Nicholson character also unearths a subplot of incest that Walton (2001) argues serves as a sexual metaphor for the literal rape of the land. The label 'Chinatown' serves as a trope for Nicholson's old police beat and signifies the hidden dark corruption of the city that is beyond police control or civil governance. The upshot of the narrative is that the public are relatively powerless and duped about the essentially exploitative and immoral character of urban development.

Quite apart from setting the centre of the conflict in the San Fernando Valley rather than Owen's Valley, the main fictional component of *Chinatown* is the corruption of the LADWP. However, understandably, many who have watched the film have tended to believe that the story bears some approximation to the truth. Also understandable, therefore, is the sensitivity of the LADWP to the maligning of their reputation, especially as the film seems to have prompted green activists in California to petition for limits on groundwater extraction. Such has been the controversy that the LADWP refused to allow a film company to use the Owen's Valley aqueduct to make a semi-documentary drama entitled *Ghost Dancing* about the bombing of the water supply (Walton, 2001). The extent to which *Chinatown* captures the spirit of urban development in US cities is a matter for debate, but what the film makes clear is the power of movies to capture the popular imagination and even influence local politics.

Another illustration of the power of cinema to influence the city is the Hollywood Redevelopment Project

## Box 14.3

Key debates in urban social geography – The significance of *The Wire*?

In this book we have suggested that you can enhance your understanding of urban social geography through forms of artistic representation such as films and novels. One might hardly expect television serials to figure in such a list, but one notable exception is the US-based series *The Wire* – often cited by its devotees as ‘The Greater TV Programme Ever’. *The Wire* was inspired by David Simon, who worked first as a newspaper reporter and then on an inner-city police squad investigating homicides.

*The Wire* is highly recommended for a number of reasons. First, it reveals both the breadth and depth of many of the urban issues discussed in this book. The series has run over five seasons, each season focusing on a particular aspect of the inner city: the drug gangs, dockyards, the city council, the schools and the media respectively. Second, with a cast of over 40 characters the programmes show the full complexity of urban problems and the numerous interrelationships between the elements that comprise them. There are some elements of cliché (a central character, Detective McNulty – while quite complex and brilliantly portrayed – is a dedicated cop who has become alienated from his wife). However, in general the characters are many faceted and complex. Drawing upon the authentic language of the inner city and the bitter talk of personnel in hard-pressed public bureaucracies (it

helps to have the subtitles displayed), the plots are labyrinthine and sometimes difficult to follow, but once you become initiated, they are intriguing and addictive. The episodes show much drug taking, brutal violence and morally reprehensible behaviour but the issues are not presented in simple one-sided terms. Third, the series is firmly rooted on location in a particular city – and one that has had a big influence upon urban geography through the writing of leading thinker David Harvey – namely Baltimore. Scenes are shot exclusively on location, often in the derelict two-storey ‘row houses’ that grew in the nineteenth century when Baltimore was a thriving port but which have since fallen into decline in the wake of massive deindustrialization. Other locations, such as social or ‘project’ housing, are seldom seen in Hollywood movies.

The scale of the drug wars coupled with the degree of urban dereliction in Baltimore is seldom matched anywhere else in the Western world and they are certainly on a scale beyond many cities in Europe. Nevertheless, the series serves as a warning of what can happen anywhere if – as in Baltimore – too much urban entrepreneurialism ignores the needs of the underclass. Final words should go to David Simon (2008b, pp. 22–28).

When I read reviews and commentary on *The Wire* in the

British press, I am usually moved to a peculiar and conflicted place. I’m gratified by the incredible amount of verbiage accorded to our little drama and I’m delighted to have the fundamental ideas and arguments of the pieces discussed seriously. But at the same time, I’m acutely aware that our dystopian depiction of Baltimore has more appeal the farther one travels from America . . .

There is something appalling in the suggestion that a television drama – a presumed entertainment – might be a focal point for a discussion of what has gone wrong in urban America, for why we have become a society that no longer even recognises the depth of our problems, much less works to solve any of them.

#### Key concepts related to *The Wire* (see Glossary)

Deindustrialization, ghetto, *revanchist* city, urban entrepreneurialism.

#### Further reading

Simon, D. (2008a) *Homicide: A year on the killing streets* Canongate, Edinburgh

Simon, D. (2008b) *The Wire*, *Guardian Weekend*, 6 September, pp. 22–8

#### Links with other chapters

Chapter 1: Box 1.1 David Harvey

(Stenger, 2001). This is a plan to redevelop over 1000 acres, based around Hollywood Boulevard, into a centre for tourism based around the film industry. The aim is to recapture the halcyon ‘Golden Age’ of Hollywood of the 1930s and 1940s through a new Entertainment

Museum, the renovation of existing movie theatres, and the construction of new multiplexes, hotels and retail outlets. Thus Hollywood will once again become a premier centre for moviegoing as well as moviemaking (Stenger, 2001).

## Film as business

When considering contemporary manifestations of cities in movies, it is important to remember that film-making is above all a business. Film production usually involves great expense, even without the huge fees commanded by international superstars. Mainstream commercial movies require large numbers of skilled personnel, expensive props, special effects or location shoots. Furthermore, even well-accepted formulas can easily flop at the box office. This means that film production is an inherently risky business, although if the right target is hit the commercial rewards can be enormous. Consequently, film producers often adopt various strategies to minimize the risk of commercial failure (the mixture depending on the target audience): audience testing of pre-production versions of films; making sure there is a happy ending; giving people a view of themselves of which they approve; avoiding any radical questioning of dominant societal viewpoints; and the use of humour to diffuse difficult situations.

### 'Curtisland'

The influence of commercial imperatives can clearly be seen in the representations of British city life in films scripted by Richard Curtis. These are the most commercially successful films ever produced in the United Kingdom and include *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Notting Hill* and *Love Actually* (see Table 14.1). In addition Curtis assisted with the script of the highly successful *Bridget Jones' Diary*.

City life in London as portrayed by Richard Curtis (in what might be termed 'Curtisland') has a number of distinctive characteristics. To begin with, his films tend to offer a rather sanitized 'picture postcard' view of the city. This is more than simply reinforcing the identity of London with some shots of central tourist images, a device used in many films located in cities. In addition, residential parts of London are typically represented as an 'urban village'. In the opening sequence of the film *Notting Hill*, for example, the key character William Thacker (played by Hugh Grant) walks to work through narrow traffic-free streets full of small shops and market traders. There are none of the homogeneous retail stores that characterize the average British high street (Mazierska and Rascaroli, 2003). Neither is there any hint of street crime, dirt, pollution or problems with public transport. Indeed, Notting Hill is portrayed as full of parks, squares and greenery. Although disabled and gay characters appear in the film, there is no reference to the ethnic diversity of Notting Hill or, indeed, the one feature that has made the area world famous (at least before the success of the film) – the annual Caribbean-style street carnival. The predominantly upper-middle-class central characters in 'Curtisland' are represented in a way that makes them easily identifiable as English to a wider international audience, yet at the same time in such a way that is acceptable or at least not offensive to the home audience. Hugh Grant is typically amicable and self-effacing but has difficulty in expressing his emotions (in sharp contrast to some of the US characters).

Table 14.1 Selected high grossing British-based films of recent years

Film	World gross up to Dec 2008 (\$ million)	Approx. cost of production (\$ million)
<i>Notting Hill</i>	374.0	42
<i>Bridget Jones' Diary</i>	281.6	25
<i>The Full Monty</i>	257.9	3.5
<i>Trainspotting</i>	24.1	3.1
<i>Bend It Like Beckham</i>	76.5	5
<i>Billy Elliot</i>	109.3	5
<i>Four Weddings and a Funeral</i>	257.7	4.5
<i>Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels</i>	25.3	1.4

Source: Data derived from [www.the-numbers.com/movies](http://www.the-numbers.com/movies)

## City branding

One final manifestation of the power of films is the intense competition that exists among cities to become the locations for films that require setting in a particular place. Many cities therefore have highly proactive film departments devoted to attracting movies. Various inducements can be provided: finance, tax breaks, the provision of discounted municipal services, help with finding suitable locations and arranging for streets to be closed during shooting. Some cities have attempted to

become a particular 'brand' displaying certain attributes; for example, Philadelphia markets itself as a paradigmatic late nineteenth-century US city. Thus it played the role of late nineteenth-century New York in the film *The Age of Innocence*. Philadelphia has also been successful in attracting other films in recent years; *Philadelphia* (of course!), *Sixth Sense* and *Twelve Monkeys*.

Some have disputed the economic benefits granted to cities by the encouragement of motion picture shoots. Critics point out that since many of the skilled staff are brought in from outside the employment gains for

### Box 14.4

#### Key debates in urban social geography – The impact on cities of 9/11

An extensive, disturbing, but crucially important, debate currently raging within urban studies is the impact of the terrorist destruction of the New York World Trade Center twin towers on 11 September 2001. This debate has widened to encompass the significance of other recent terrorist bombings and shootings throughout the world (e.g. in Delhi, Jakarta, Kabul, London, Karachi, Bali, Madrid, Moscow, Mumbai (Bombay) and Nairobi). The literature has also extended to consider the significance of other recent acts of urban violence and conflict throughout the world such as is manifest in the anti-globalization protests that have dogged recent international summit meetings of the 'International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Trade Organization (WTO) and the leading G8 economies.

The debates are complex but a few themes are apparent:

- ▶ Many have interpreted recent acts of terror and urban conflict as fundamentalist resistance to forces of globalization and modernization that have been intensified by the pluralistic mixing of cultures through processes of transnational urbanism (see Box 12.4).

- ▶ Many see the response of the United States and its allies to renewed terrorism (e.g. the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, increased surveillance of cities, armed compounds for elites and threatened groups) as a reassertion of global forces of capitalism. This may be seen as a radical extension of the 'militarization' of city life as described by Mike Davis in the context of Los Angeles (see Box 5.5).

- ▶ Some have argued that, for various political and commercial reasons, fears have been intensified by politicians and by the media. They assert that binary distinctions between 'them' and 'us' have been reasserted into diverse pluralistic societies, thus threatening civil liberties, social cohesion and democratic life. However, the greatest challenge to civil liberties lies with the actions of terrorists themselves, and the scale of the threat from future terrorist attacks should not be underestimated.

#### Key concepts related to the impact on cities of 9/11 (see Glossary)

Binaries, othering, Panopticon, 'scanscape', surveillance, transnational urbanism.

#### Further reading

- Coaffee, J. (2003) *Terrorism, Risk and the City* Ashgate, Burlington VT
- Graham, S. (2002) Special collection: reflections on cities, September 11 and the 'war on terrorism' – one year on, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* **26**, 589–90
- Graham, S. (ed.) (2004) *Cities, War and Terrorism: Towards an urban geopolitics* Blackwell, Oxford
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- Savitch, H. and Ardashev, G. (2001) Does terror have an urban future?, *Urban Studies* **38**, 2515–33

#### Links with other chapters

- Chapter 3: What is culture?
- Chapter 13: Urban social sustainability

the city concerned are often quite small and of short duration during shooting. In the case of *The Sixth Sense* filmed in Philadelphia, for example, only about 30 local people were employed for three months, about the same as for a large restaurant (Swann, 2001). To put things in perspective it should be noted that 35 000 jobs were lost with the closure of the nearby naval dockyard. Another problem is that once the novelty of figuring in a film wears off, local residents can begin to resent the inconvenience of frequent street closures and restrictions on movements in public spaces.

Nevertheless, the desire of cities to take an active role in filmmaking shows no sign of diminishing. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is a growing realization of the importance of skilled, talented people in fostering economic growth in spheres such as high-technology sectors and the creative industries (of which films are an integral part). Films that can raise the international profile of a city can play a key role in attracting such talent.

### 14.3 Conclusion: whither urban social geography?

It is appropriate to conclude this book by taking a step back and looking at the state of urban social geography in the early twenty-first century. This book has demonstrated that, to say the least, urban social geography is a highly diverse enterprise, both in terms of its subject matter and the diversity of methodological approaches used. Another metaphor to replace Haggett's 'city of districts' might be useful in this context – that of a river! Urban social geography can be thought of as a river growing in size and strength having been fed by many tributaries over the years. The original source was the work of the Chicago School of human ecology. Later this stream of thought was fed by regional science and urban sociology. More recently a major tributary has been cultural studies. Some of these influences, such as quantitative geography, have lessened in importance;

others, such as the study of urban ethnography, have become resurgent. As the subject matter has become more diverse, rather like an older river, it has subdivided and become reconstituted in new forms.

However, it is at this point that perhaps the hydrological metaphor breaks down. Whereas older rivers tend to slow down as they develop, urban social geography has shown increased dynamism in recent years. To be sure, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, urban social geography was also at the forefront of methodological developments in human geography, reflecting first quantitative approaches and later political economy. However, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, under the influence of the massive restructuring of Western economies at this time, the study of economic processes and industrial geography became dominant and at the cutting edge of methodological developments. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Western societies grew again in affluence, cultural studies grew in importance, and there was initially a shift of emphasis in human geography towards analysis of diverse issues such as consumption, identities and postcolonialism. However, in the last decade cities have once again taken centre stage in key debates in human geography. We suggest that the main reason for this development is that cities throw into sharp focus many contemporary issues, questions and dilemmas which bring together the two main sources in contemporary human geography: the so-called 'new economic geography' and 'cultural studies'.

- ▶ Although the issue is much disputed, many argue that cities have become key centres for innovation and economic growth as they try to foster a 'creative class' (Florida, 2002).
- ▶ Cities are crucial in the creation of new forms of identities in Western societies as diverse groups interact in a relatively close setting.
- ▶ Cities raise crucial questions about the social sustainability of changes in Western society. These questions have been raised at various times throughout this book and we hope that it will encourage you to study them in greater depth.

## Box 14.5

## Key films related to urban social geography – Chapter 14

*The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952) A classic melodrama about a Hollywood film mogul.

*Crash* (2005) Another multiplotted film in the tradition established by *Short Cuts* and *Magnolia*, although even more sombre and disturbing than these earlier films. *Crash* feels somewhat contrived and improbable at times, but this is a gripping portrayal of the consequences of ethnic fragmentation in Los Angeles. The city is shown with its citizens hermetically sealed by the highway culture and structure of ethnic residential segmentation.

*The Day of the Locust* (1975) Based on Nathaniel West's novel of the same name, this film presents the flip side of Hollywood's image of glamour and glitz. Set in the early days of Tinseltown, it portrays the somewhat pathetic attempts of a group of 'no-hopers' to make it into the big time in show business. Note: the book is better than the film.

*Hollywoodland* (2006) Superbly plotted detective-mystery story, partly fictionalized, and partly based around the true-life circumstances surrounding the death of the original superman, George Reeves. Shows the power of the studios in the old Hollywood system and the threat posed to them by television in the 1950s.

*L.A. Confidential* (1997) A thrilling film of contrasting police styles in Los Angeles in the 1950s. Tough and violent but even so, a sanitized version of the James Elroy novel.

#### Selected examples of film noir

Note: *film noir* brought together the expressionist artistic sensibilities of Eastern European directors (many of

them Jewish émigrés fleeing the Nazis in the 1930s) with Cold War paranoia, distrust of city life and fear of strong women. Common elements are: dark interior and night scenes; dreamlike or nightmarish imagery and flashbacks; voice-over narration; doomed romances; manipulative femme fatales; sexual obsession; base human emotions of jealousy, greed and betrayal; murder mysteries; individuals made rootless by the Depression or the effects of war; corrupt gangsters, cops and politicians – all based in a big city context. Scores of movies with elements of *film noir* were churned out by the Hollywood factory system in the 1940s and 1950s. The following list consists of just a few of the more notable examples.

*The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) All the *film noir* elements are incorporated into this classic of the genre directed by John Huston – alienation, betrayal and obsession.

*The Big Sleep* (1946) Probably the most famous *film noir* thriller of all time. Derived from the novel by Raymond Chandler (and incorporating its largely incomprehensible plot), the movie was directed by John Huston and stars the legendary Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall.

*The Blue Dahlia* (1946) A thriller in the *film noir* style written by Raymond Chandler and starring Alan Ladd.

*Build My Gallows High (aka Out of the Past)* (1947) A classic *film noir* in which Robert Mitchum is brought down by a femme fatale.

*Farewell My Lovely (aka Murder My Sweet)* (1944) Another classic detective *film noir* based on a Raymond Chandler novel illustrating the sleazy side of Los Angeles. Some consider star Dick Powell's performance in this

movie to be closer to Chandler's original vision of Marlowe than Humphrey Bogart in *The Big Sleep*. Note: it is also worth seeking out the 'retro' remake in 1975 starring the excellent Robert Mitchum.

*Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) A key film in the *noir* tradition, and based on a pulp novel by Mike Hammer. Director Robert Aldrich kept the original anti-hero but adapted the original story to incorporate Cold War paranoia. Although typically full of dark interiors, this film is fascinating for the brief scenes set in the older Bunker Hill district of Los Angeles, now demolished to make way for the city's reconstituted international financial centre.

*The Maltese Falcon* (1941) Another cult detective film based on the novel by Dashiell Hammett (whose detective Sam Spade was the forerunner of Chandler's Philip Marlowe). Again, this is a movie full of expressionist-inspired nightmarish images.

*The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) A recurrent theme in *film noir* is the desperate plight of individuals made homeless in the post-Depression years. In this film a 'drifter' falls for an attractive wife married to an older man. Inevitably, their love affair is doomed. The remake of this film in 1981 starred Jack Nicholson. There is an earlier Italian film based on this story called *Ossessione* (1942) by the famous director Luchino Visconti.

*They Live By Night* (1948) Doomed lovers on the run from the mob. The first film by the much-esteemed director Nicholas Ray.

*Touch of Evil* (1958) A thriller set in a small town on the US–Mexican border. Directed by the legendary Orson Welles (who also directed the famous *Citizen Kane*), it is full of dark

continued

urban nightscapes, police corruption, greed and betrayal. One of the last of the traditional films in the *noir* style.

**A few relatively recent updates of film noir**

*The American Friend* (1977) Cult director Wim Wenders pays homage

to the traditions of *film noir* in this thriller that also addresses one of his main themes, the cultural interactions between Europe and America.

*Blood Simple* (1983) An exciting thriller set in a small town in Texas. The first film by the innovative Cohen brothers.

*Body Heat* (1981) A comparatively recent update of the *film noir* style complete with femme fatale and steamy corrupt atmosphere.

*Chinatown* (1974) See the influence of film on the city in this chapter for a detailed discussion of this movie.

Box 14.6

**Key novels related to urban social geography – Chapter 14**

*The Day of the Locust* (1939) Nathaniel West. This novel presents the flip side of Hollywood's image of glamour and glitz. Set in the early days of Tinseltown, it portrays the somewhat pathetic attempts of a group of 'no-hopers' to make it into the big time in show business. The book is better than the film.

*Saturday* (2005) Ian McEwan. The dilemmas and challenges facing a middle-aged, middle-class person in a London overshadowed by terrorism.

*The Secret Agent* (1907) Joseph Conrad. A tragicomic novel concerning revolutionaries in late nineteenth-century London. A book that reminds us of the previous age of the anarchist-

terrorist but one which is also prescient of the current age of the fundamentalist suicide bomber.

**Classic detective novels**

*The Big Sleep* (1939) Raymond Chandler. Chandler's classic detective novel featuring Philip Marlowe exposing corruption in southern California. See also the memorable film starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall.

*The Long Goodbye* (1953) Another Philip Marlowe story (see also the film guide update on the website).

*The Maltese Falcon* (1930) Dashiell Hammett. One of the first of the 'hard-boiled' detective novels, also

made into a great film. Unlike earlier English detective fiction, in which the 'hero' was from the elite, Hammett's anonymous central character was from the 'street'.

*Red Harvest* (1929) Dashiell Hammett. This is actually the first of the 'hard-boiled' detective novels. Set in a town riddled with corruption, Hammett expressed his disillusionment with the greed of the capitalist system and what he saw as its corrupting influence upon unions and democracy.

*The Thin Man* (1932) Dashiell Hammett. Another classic detective novel portraying a black vision of corruption permeating all parts of urban society.

**Chapter summary**

14.1 The 'Los Angeles School' has portrayed the city as a harbinger of urban developments elsewhere, although this claim (and whether Los Angeles can be envisaged as a general model of urban development) is much disputed.

14.2 Cities have had a big influence on the evolution of motion pictures and have also been affected by motion pictures through the ways in which cities are represented.

## Key concepts and terms



bunker architecture  
 'California School'  
 cosmopolis  
 edge cities  
 exopolis  
*film noir*

galactic metropolis  
 keno capitalism  
 'Los Angeles School'  
 multiple nuclei model  
 multiplex city  
 paradigmatic city

postmetropolis  
 postmodern global metropolis  
 'scanscape'  
 trope

## Suggested reading

## The 'California School' of urban geography

- Dear, M. (2001) *From Chicago to LA; Making sense of urban theory* Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA
- Dear, M.J. (2003) The Los Angeles School of Urbanism: an intellectual history, *Urban Geography* 24, 493–509
- Scott, A.J. and Soja E.W. (eds) (1996) *The City: Los Angeles and urban theory at the end of the twentieth century* University of California Press, Berkeley, CA

## Cinema and the city

- Aitken, S. and Zonn, L. (eds) (1994) *Place, Power, Situation and Spectacle: A geography of film* Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD

- Barker, S. (2002) *Projected Cities* Reaktion Books, London
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- Shiel, M. and Fitzmaurice, T. (eds) (2001) *Cinema and the City* Blackwell, Oxford
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