

HOLLYWOOD ON THE POTOMAC

Getting It All Wrong and Yet Getting It Right

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(Notes on presentation for an Overbeck Lecture of April 10, 2007)

Greetings to all of you. I'm delighted to be able to present this lecture on a subject I love, the movies. Did anyone here see the movie *The Sentinel* last year (2006)? Well, this was a typical DC movie in how it treated locations. Let me just highlight one sequence: Secret Service Agent (Michael Douglas) is at Camp David with the president when he receives a call from an informant who orders him to meet him at "Allenwood Mall Food Court" in 20 minutes—and he makes the time!

Welcome to Washington, Hollywood-style. Why do our moviemakers so often get DC so wrong? No need to single out *The Sentinel*. Filmmakers have been tapping into Washington, DC, for years but they keep finding ways to violate its geography and essence.

Movies, of course, as entertainment vehicles, drive with a certain license. Commercial cinema needs dramatic or comedic effects to get people in the seats. So what if a few details are off, especially if you live in Portland or Peoria. The fact is: it takes time and money to get things right.

Yet, we live here, and I, at least, feel such license is no sanction. So many Washington movies get very basic things wrong, things that could be so easily checked by simply consulting the phone book or by simply asking the man on the street.

About Washington movies... By now enough films have been shot here, especially in recent years (38 to 40 in the decade of the 1990's alone), for it to be called a genre. But the first really Washington-based movie is the granddaddy of them all—*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*.

This is still a superior comedy-drama with the Boy Ranger Jefferson Smith (Jimmy Stewart) single-handedly beating the nasty grafters with an all-out filibuster. I want to emphasize, though, how this film was important in its 1939 context.

The Senate and House have never allowed commercial filmmakers to shoot in their chambers. Director Frank Capra wanted to shoot there, but his request was rejected, so he decided to create a duplicate Senate chamber in Hollywood. His design team made a near-to-scale replica, costing \$100,000 and taking 125 men six weeks to construct. This duplicate chamber was "complete to the last acanthus leaf and arabesque." When Mr. Smith wanders into it for the first time in awe, his impression was matched by millions of American filmgoers who had never before seen the Senate chamber in person.
(cue clip from *Mr. Smith*)

Mr. Smith is that rare film about politics that was a true box office success: it proved to be a great money-earner for Columbia Studios and garnered 11

Oscar nominations—though it won only one (for Best Original Story). It still may be the high point in DC movie history.

But think how many films get DC wrong. One of the ways is overusing the “establishing shot,” the iconic image in a film that immediately establishes whereabouts. The Capitol dome is the standard such shot or Washington.

Even Alfred Hitchcock couldn’t avoid the Capitol cliché. In *North by Northwest* (1959), the only Washington scene shows a reflection of the west front of the Capitol in a plaque for the “United States Intelligence Agency.” Watch as this sequence unfolds...

(cue clip from *North by Northwest*)

Yes, our super-secret intelligence agency smack on the Mall!

35 years later, this shot got a reprise in *Forrest Gump* (1994). Forrest’s girlfriend is showing him around the DC headquarters of the SDS and the Black Panthers. An open window reveals that same full frontal view of the Capitol’s West Front.

The geography of DC is often violated on the run. For example, a presidential motorcade in *In the Line of Fire* (1993): Secret Service agent Clint Eastwood jogs by the presidential limo as it passes the Willard Hotel going west, turns south on 15th Street past the Commerce Department, then is seen going north on 12th by the Old Post Office—an unlikely route for the prez.

(cue clip from *In the Line of Fire*)

Then there’s mangled motorcade in Goldie Hawn comedy *Protocol* (1984), showing a drive supposedly taking an Arab dignitary to the White House.

(cue clip from *Protocol*)

Whoa!...this motorcade circles the GW Memorial Parkway roundabout, then circles the Lincoln Memorial, goes by the Jefferson Memorial, doubles back past the Washington Monument, only to end up passing by the Treasury Building and the White House. Note here, too, how the star Goldie Hawn ends up at her Capitol Hill “house” on the unit block of 9th Street, NE.

Another intriguing drive is taken by crusading newsman Denzel Washington in *The Pelican Brief* (1993): from the Omni Shoreham Hotel, he asks a cab to get him to Georgetown law school but ends up behind the National Gallery, then—suddenly—he’s on Pennsylvania Avenue by the Old Executive Office Building, only to lose himself in silly demonstration parading pro-gun signs of all stripes.

(cue clip from *Pelican Brief*)

Perhaps the most egregious moving violation in DC movie history appears in *No Way Out* (1987). Kevin Costner, a naval officer fleeing two bad guys, crashes into them in his car on the Whitehurst Freeway, then jumps down into Georgetown and runs down K Street and then the C & O Canal...

(cue clip from *No Way Out*)

Note that he ducked into...of course, the prominent Georgetown Metro stop before leaping onto a Baltimore subway train and eventually running up steps into The Pavilion at the Old Post Office (which also doesn’t have a subway stop)!

Hollywood gets directions wrong, too, in dialogue. One recent example—which four people have pointed out to me, knowing I was doing this lecture—is a running joke in *The American President* (1995). Lovely lobbyist Annette Benning explains that she is late to the White House from Capitol Hill because of the heavy traffic at Dupont Circle—not exactly the way to get across town.

Though politics in the political thriller *The Contender* (2000) proves to be effective drama, sadly, the final scene is a joke. The president (Jeff Bridges) addresses a Joint Session of the Congress in a laughably cramped House chamber (filmed at the Virginia State House) and asks for a voice vote on a “live roll call” on his nominee.

(cue clip from *Contender*)

My personal favorite sequence in all of the Washington movies comes in *Being There* (1979). I want to show a somewhat disjointed montage which starts, with Peter Sellers, as the simpleton Chance the gardener, moving from the National Gallery to the White House, but what I love is the last part of this wandering sequence...

(cue clip from *Being There*)

That was Sellers strolling south up the slim median strip of an underpass on North Capitol Street towards the dome. That median strip is virtually impossible for a pedestrian to reach; it is a place where only the very mentally challenged (which Chance is) would venture. But for capturing and distilling a surreal aspect of our capital city, I think it is priceless...

But what about films that get the city right in some way?

As one exemplar, there is the science fiction classic, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), which treats the city's geography with intelligence. An early, important sequence has a flying saucer landing on the Ellipse in a nice series of monument shots. Important commentators of the day Elmer Davis and H.V. Kaltenborn also appear to herald the ship's coming.

(cue clip from *Day the Earth Stood Still*)

Broadcast News (1986) also gets much of Washington right. Director James L. Brooks knew what he was doing and told his story of ambitious journalists in a network-affiliated TV newsroom that avoided cliché. I'll show one example of his use of Capitol Hill, in a lovely night sequence that takes place at a residence on the 600 block of East Capitol Street.

(cue clip from *Broadcast News*)

Dave (1993) is sweet comedy about a regular guy doubling for President (both roles played by Kevin Kline), who takes over for the Chief Executive after the latter has a stroke. While there are faux pas's in the film (like a massive hidden bunker beneath the White House), it contains one fine element: a wonderful White House re-creation.

(cue clip from *Dave*)

Yes, that South Lawn shot—after the helicopter landed--was totally concocted, on a giant set constructed at the LA Arboretum.

Another film, *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* (1979), offers a smart view of how the Senate and Congress really work in a knowing script by Alan Alda, who

also played the title role. The movie also provided good renderings of congressional staff offices and the people who worked in them.

In the Line of Fire uses the city mostly accurately, especially in some striking chase sequences. I'll show an extended one featuring our hero Clint Eastwood chasing his nemesis, John Malkovich, over a number of Capitol Hill rooftops (first shot taken at Florida and LeDroit Park).
(cue clip from In the Line of Fire)

All the President's Men (1976) treats a great number of Washington locations with regard and gets both little things and big things right. One example: a sequence that ends in the Library of Congress's Main Reading Room, with a marvelous zoom shot moving out towards the ceiling of the Library's massive dome. How they got this shot I still haven't figured out.
(cue clip from President's Men)

I want to offer another example which features a wonderful set which recreates, in exemplary detail, the Washington Post newsroom.
(cue clip from President's Men)

I wish to point out here, too, that some film production designers have done a superb job of recreating the Oval Office, as they did for both The American President and Nixon (both of which used the same convincing set in same year--1995).

Advise and Consent (1962), from a popular novel of its day by journalist Allen Drury, was a drama revolving around a controversial Senate confirmation hearing, and it features that same magnificent reconstructed Senate chamber set we saw in Mr. Smith, if a bit refurbished. In this clip, you will see shots of the actual Senate upper gallery, which then switches—voila!--to the chamber set once inside the door.
(cue clip from Advise and Consent)

For many years—way before September 11—there have been restrictions on shooting in and around the Capitol. As I noted, the chambers have never been filmed. In older, quieter days, however, much more access was allowed.

For example, in the 1950 comedy, Born Yesterday, the congressional authorities still allowed shooting in the Rotunda, and we can see Judy Holliday (with co-star William Holden) admiring the Capitol dome and Brimidi's "Apotheosis of Washington" inside that dome. Access to the Library of Congress was also permitted. The following clip also shows a sequence where Judy shows Holden our founding documents when they were still on display at the Library on the second floor of the Great Hall (before move to Archives in 1952).
(cue double clip from Born Yesterday)

To wrap up this brief survey up, let's take another look at the Capitol from Washington Story (1952). This is a rare case of a Hollywood movie that makes Congress look good. Investigative journalist (Patricia Neal) tries to get the goods on a Massachusetts Congressman (Van Johnson), but he's really a decent guy trying to do the right thing, and they end up falling for each other. Again, the director, Robert Pirosh, got—really for the last time in DC movie history—very complete access to the Capitol (the House authorities liked the script). We see another scene in the Rotunda, and then finish with a clinch on the Capitol steps,

with East Capitol Street glimpsed in our view—and what I think is an appropriate end to “Hollywood on the Potomac.”

(Cue clip from Washington Story)

Many thanks, ladies and gentlemen.

(END LECTURE)