PLAYING THE BIG EASY: A HISTORY OF NEW ORLEANS IN FILM AND TELEVISION

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Existing cultural studies scholarship on New Orleans explores the city’s exceptional popular identity, often focusing on the origins of that exceptionality in literature and the city’s twentieth century tourism campaigns. This perceived exceptionality, though originating from literary sources, was perpetuated and popularized in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by film and television representations. As Hollywood’s production standards evolved throughout the twentieth century, New Orleans’ representation evolved with it. In each filmmaking era, representations of New Orleans reflected not only the production realities of that era, but also the political and cultural debates surrounding the city. In the past two decades, as the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the passage of film tax credits by the Louisiana Legislature increased New Orleans’ profile, these debates have been more present and driven by New Orleans’ filmed representations.

Using the theoretical framework of Guy Debord’s spectacle and the methodology of New Film History and close “to the background” textual analysis, this study undertakes an historical overview of New Orleans’ representation in film and television. This history starts in the era of Classical Hollywood (1928-1947) and continues through Transitional Hollywood (1948-1966), New Hollywood (1967-1975), and the current Age of the Blockbuster (1975-). Particular attention is given to developments in the twenty-first century, especially how the devastation of Hurricane Katrina and the recent tax credit laws affected popular understandings of the city. Hollywood’s representations have largely reinforced New Orleans’ exceptional, “Big Easy” identity by presenting the city’s unique cultural practices as every occurrences and realities for
New Orleanians. While Hurricane Katrina exposed this popular identity as a façade, the lack of interest by Hollywood in meaningfully exploring Katrina, returning instead to the city’s pre-Katrina identity, demonstrates the persistence of this identity in the popular imaginary. Overall, this study demonstrates the role of standards of production in shaping the popular identities of “mythic cities,” and the continued importance of film and television as texts through which American culture can be better understood.
To Megan
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The idea from this project emerged during a stroll through the French Quarter in 2014, and a revelation that there was something off about how that section of the city is presented in *Now You See Me*. While I was initially drawn to the image of New Orleans, I increasingly understand that everything worthwhile about the city comes from the people who live and work within it. Though I am only starting to get to know you, I thank you.
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INTRODUCTION

Ideas of New Orleans exist in the popular imaginary. Some are visual: the wrought-iron balconies of the French Quarter, Mardi Gras parade floats, and above-ground cemeteries, all vestiges of the French and Spanish heritage that distinguish the region from the rest of the United States. Some are aural: the sounds of the blues, jazz, rock n’ roll, or bounce music, a legacy of the city’s black music history. Less isolatable senses—a crowded street, feeling drunk, and, in a more recent development, the horror of watching citywide devastation on the news, or experiencing it firsthand—can also be associated with New Orleans. These ideas exist in people’s imaginary for different reasons: literature, musical reference, and first-hand experience of the city are all factors. However, what is likely the greatest contributor to these ideas is New Orleans’ persistent presence in American film and television. From the yellow fever-stricken French Quarter in William Wyler’s Jezebel (1938) to the hyperreal “Big Easy” of NCIS: New Orleans (CBS, 2015-), New Orleans has remained in the popular imaginary for as long as film and television have been the dominant mediums of popular culture. As the Hollywood backlot iteration in Jezebel and the Disneyfied “real” streets of NCIS demonstrate, these representations had a precarious relationship with reality from the start.

It is remarkable that a city so small in population can maintain such a large imprint in the popular imaginary. As of 2015, New Orleans’ population was around 390,000, the 49th most-populous city, situated between Wichita, Kansas and Arlington, Texas. Even accounting for the larger metropolitan area, New Orleans’ popular image far surpasses cities many times larger, such as Houston (4th most populous, at 2.3 million) or Phoenix (6th most populous, at 1.5
million). The disparity between population and cultural impact can be partly attributed to the city’s historical significance: in every U.S. census, from the 1820s until the 1960s when it was overtaken by Dallas, New Orleans was the most populous city in the American South. Additional credit may be given to the city’s aforementioned French and Spanish colonial heritage, and the written accounts of that heritage that helped establish its perceived uniqueness within American culture. However, the role of film and television has been crucial in creating, establishing, perpetuating, and even subtly altering the identity of New Orleans through on-screen representations.

This study explores the history of New Orleans’ representation in film and television, and the relationship between these representations and the popular identity of the city. While originating from nineteenth century literature and twentieth century tourist campaigns, New Orleans’ popular identity was, from the 1930s onward, defined and perpetuated by filmed representation. As much as it has been defined by its many boosters in literature and at the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Commission, it has changed with the evolving conventions of film and television production in each new era. Just as popular discourse on the city evolved from literary nostalgia surrounding the “decadent Creoles” to more modern frivolities on Bourbon Street, so did filmed representations of New Orleans evolve from a backlot recreation in Southern California to the present-day government-subsidized depictions of New Orleans as “itself.”

In his manifesto on the importance of media literacy, Stephen Apkon observes that “we are awash in a world of screens and moving images,” noting that “whether you are in a yurt in

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1 Houston’s lack of clear popular identity is explored in Claudia Calhoun’s “When Houston Met Hollywood: Giant, Glenn McCarthy, and the Construction of a Modern City,” *Journal of Urban History* 41, no. 3 (2015): 404-419
the Mongolian desert or a penthouse apartment in New York City, you are likely exposed regularly to visual communication.”² With the moving image never more omnipresent in day-to-day life, the role of these images in defining the space around us has never been more central. David B. Clarke notes that popular perceptions of cities are indelibly tied to filmed representation, arguing that the “sensorial immediacy…of the cinema” matches the psychological experience of being in a city.³ Filmed representations have also been crucial to the development of national identity, and are particularly relevant to the conceptualization of the United States, a country with one of the most active film cultures that has long been defined by its urban centers, and how their perceived value systems contrast with the rural.⁴

This importance endures despite the increased tenuousness of fixed national identities. Johan Andersson and Lawrence Webb note that traditional concepts of individual cities and culture are eroding as larger percentages of people flock to cities, and digital technology continues to interconnect the global population. However, Andersson and Webb also note that despite this rapid, global urbanization, “the notion of ‘the city’ and the image of individual cities nevertheless retain demonstrable currency and imaginative power for their inhabitants, visitors, governments, policymakers and planners.”⁵ The continued value of individual cities can also be found in film and television, where conventional narratives continue to demand clearly defined

⁴ Barbara Mennel, Cities and Cinema (New York: Routledge, 2008), 10-12; Thomas Bender, Towards an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth Century America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).
and recognizable locations to serve as backdrops. In other words, though the lived experiences in any given American city are increasingly homogenized, filmed representation continue to present the lives of New Yorkers as reflecting the frenetic energy associated with the “Big Apple,” and Los Angelenos as chasers of movie star dreams in Hollywood.

In this context of film and television representation, New Orleans remains a remarkable case study. New Orleans has an established visual and conceptual character; New Orleanians are perceived as living exceptional lives, with architecture, cuisine, and cultural practices found nowhere else in the country. This identity has emerged despite being far less populated than New York, Los Angeles, or most other cities with a clear cinematic identity. The origins of this cinematic identity, and how it has been disseminated within film and television narratives throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, demonstrate how exceptional cinematic identities are forged through the continued favoring of exceptional over the mundane.

This study builds off previous deconstructions of New Orleans’ identity in history and cultural studies, analyzing filmed representations of the city within the context of New Orleans’ political and cultural history. This focus will be enhanced by giving attention to the evolving conventions of film production through different eras of American film history, how those changes affected New Orleans on-screen, and how the differences in those representations affect popular understandings of the city. This approach operates from the understanding, informed by cultural studies, that film and television representations of cities “produce discourses about those real places,” and that those discourses are inextricably affected by “the context of production.”

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By situating close textual analyses of film and television texts within the history of both Hollywood and New Orleans, this study merges a film history methodology with a theoretical framework derived from cultural studies, bridging an existing gap within New Orleans scholarship.

**New Orleans, the Mythic City**

New Orleans was founded by French settlers in 1718 on a landing of the Mississippi River surrounded by swamp. The city started as nothing more than a humble village, comprising at first of only “a few hovels, a church, a warehouse and a public square situated on a relatively high ground fronting the river.”

The settlement gradually expanded outward from that public square, which came to be known as the Place D’Armes, later renamed Jackson Square after Andrew Jackson’s 1815 military victory against the British at the Battle of New Orleans. This square, with St. Louis Cathedral at its center, would become the most iconic image associated with the city. By 1769, the city had a population of just under 3,200; by 1810, seven years after the purchase of the Louisiana Territory by the United States, that number was over 17,000, making it the ninth-largest city in the U.S.

This boom was due, in part, to New Orleans’ emergence as a center of the slave trade in the Americas.

New Orleans was a city founded in a swamp, and from its beginnings it relied on forced labor to drain and build over that swampland; first convict labor from France, then African slaves. New Orleans centered its economy around slavery in its early years: as a center of commerce in the city’s many slave pens and auction houses, and in the sugar cane plantations.

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of the surrounding countryside. Though tourist campaigns would later emphasize elements of New Orleans’ relative racial tolerance compared to other Southern cities, by the 1850s the French Quarter was flanked by two slave pens on each side—a fact, historian Walter Johnson notes, that later New Orleans historians are not eager to point out.\(^9\) Paradoxically, New Orleans’ tourism would gradually be built around the artistic accomplishments of its black population, in particular their musical accomplishments.

The intermingling of racial, ethnic, and national identities would be crucial elements of New Orleans’ narrative of exceptionalism. In 1763, the French territory of Louisiana was ceded to the Spanish through the Treaty of Paris, leading to four decades of Spanish rule and influence.\(^10\) The descendants of these French and Spanish colonialists, along with other Latin foreigners who gravitated to New Orleans, demographically merged to be known as white Creoles, an identity that became tied to the oldest sections of the city that grew out of the Place D’Armes.\(^11\) Concurrently, the clandestine institution of *plaçage*, by which white Creole men would keep a second common-law family by a mistress of color, contributed toward the creation of a second caste of free New Orleanians of color that came to be known as black Creoles. Even though historians have long argued that the practice of *plaçage* was distorted and romanticized by travelers’ accounts, the concept would cast a long shadow on the city’s popular identity.\(^12\)


\(^10\) The popular image of the French Quarter’s wrought-iron balconies was a Spanish influence, resulting from the Quarter’s rebuilding after a fire in 1788.


\(^12\) A concise review of this debate can be found in Carol Wilson’s “*Plaçage* and the Performance of Whiteness: The Trial of Eulalie Mandeville, Free Colored Woman, of Antebellum New Orleans,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 15, no. 2 (2014): 187-209.
Furthermore, the heritage of black Creoles, and the debate surrounding their Creole “status,” would become a significant point of contention in New Orleans history.

In 1803, the Louisiana Territory was returned to France, only to be sold that same year to the United States. The effect of this purchase, compounded by the outlawing of the external slave trade by the U.S. in 1807, was a major population shift, with large numbers of Irish, Germans, and Italians immigrating to the city to fill the city’s gap in manual labor. This immigration of laborers, along with the gradual Americanization of the city resulting from annexation, further distinguished the cultural and spatial identity of white Creoles. The oldest neighborhood of New Orleans, centered around the old square, or literally “Vieux Carré” as the neighborhood came to be known, became associated with the white Creoles, while Anglo-Americans became associated with the other parts of the city, with main thoroughfare of Canal Street the de facto dividing line. This dividing line was not as absolute as was commonly thought in early histories of the city; many Creoles married into rich American families, and vice versa, and overlap between these two groups within the city was fairly common. Nonetheless, this white colonial heritage came to define the Quarter’s identity.

At the same time, New Orleans was growing outward, both through increased immigration to the city and the annexation of surrounding cities. In 1852, the state legislature undid the unwieldy city government of municipalities that allowed the francophone population to self-govern their side of New Orleans. On the same day, the city government annexed the neighboring City of Lafayette into New Orleans, “bringing along with it all of its Anglo-

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American, German, and Irish voters.”14 These two measures marked the beginning of the end of New Orleans as a Creole city, with Anglophone politics gradually consolidating power. The continued immigration of white ethnics into New Orleans, the Union occupation of the city during the Civil War and Reconstruction, the abolition of slavery, and the dwindling white Creole population would all continue this process of Americanization. The tripartite racial castes, a legacy of the French and Spanish, were undone and replaced by the white/black binary by the emerging Jim Crow government in the 1870s.15 It was during this era, which also saw the infamous riots against the city’s then-integrated police force by white supremacists at Liberty Place, that Creoles of color began facing the same legal discrimination as the city’s non-Creole black population, subject to Louisiana’s new segregation laws. Homer Plessy, the plaintiff of Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), the case which unsuccessfully challenged the constitutionality of segregation, was a New Orleans Creole of color who sought to undo the segregation of Louisiana’s rail cars, and whose legal defeat only further entrenched segregation in the American South.

Ironically, it was during the period that New Orleans lost stature as one of America’s most populous cities, more resembling other American cities in appearance and demographics, which accounts of the city’s exceptionality began to spread. These accounts first emerged from the city’s Creole literary traditions, were later picked up by outsiders’ accounts of the city in literature and newspapers, and then embraced in bohemian circles and by preservationists in their partly-successful campaign to preserve the French Quarter. As the city government gradually

14 Campanella, Cityscapes of New Orleans, 17.
saw that this reputation contributed to tourism, they took up the helm of self-promotion. Despite the façade-shattering devastation of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans maintains this exceptional identity to this day. Architect James Sanders mentions New Orleans in the same sentence as London, Paris, Rome, Florence, and Jerusalem as “a mythic city,” which he defines as a city which “may be rendered in images, in words in music…a vital, living counterpart to the city that spawned it.”\textsuperscript{16} In his history of New York in film, Sanders argues that New York’s mythic identity emerged \textit{from} its filmed representations, owing to their popularity.\textsuperscript{17} By contrast, this study argues that while New Orleans’ mythic identity was formed from a variety of media, from the era of Classical Hollywood onward these identities were reflected and reinforced by filmed representation.

Previous scholarly analyses of New Orleans grappled with questions of exceptionality, the belief expressed by its local boosters that New Orleans has an ineffable appeal owing to its architecture, music, food, and “a spirit that is summoned, like a hologram, in the midst of all these element, and that comes, ultimately, from the people who live there.”\textsuperscript{18} While early studies by the city’s native historians often took this exceptionality for granted, most scholars from the 1960s onward explored and critiqued its origins, seeking to dispel what Robert C. Reinders labels “the romantic approach” to New Orleans’ history.\textsuperscript{19} Though the city’s unique cultural practices remain the subject of fascination, the consensus regarding the city’s perceived


\textsuperscript{17} Sanders, 20.


\textsuperscript{19} Fossier; Lyle Saxon, \textit{Fabulous New Orleans} (New York: The Century Co., 1928); Reinders, 9.
exceptionality is closer to Shannon Lee Dawdy’s conclusion that “New Orleans may be extreme, but not exceptional.”

Regardless of these scholars’ conclusions, the role of filmed representation in these scholarly accounts has been peripheral at best. New Orleans studies sometimes pay lip-service to a handful of crucial representations like *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), *The Big Easy* (Jim McBride, 1987), and *Treme* (HBO, 2010-2013), and their interplay with and influence on the city’s identity. However, most studies have focused on more tangible cultural phenomena, like the city’s sex trade history, literary traditions, and tourism self-promotion. Compared to more populous and readily identifiable cinematic cities like New York and Los Angeles, the role of New Orleans’ filmed representation is marginalized. While studies about New Orleans and Louisiana’s representation in film and TV emerged from regional scholars, the body of work covering the city’s representation is surprisingly limited.

Analysis of New Orleans in film and TV did increase after 2005 following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. The heightened scholarly interest in New Orleans that

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followed the hurricane led to more studies of the city overall, but also specifically to filmed representation. Bernie Cook’s study and Diane Negra’s edited collection on Katrina’s representation in the media, along with countless articles and chapters focusing on individual case studies, emerged after the storm. These works inform the focus of this project, and in some cases, served as inspiration for this study’s conception. While the importance of Katrina to the city and its identity cannot be overstated, my study will build upon the work of these studies by connecting the timelines of post-Katrina representations and the film and TV representations that preceded the storm. This framing will reveal the ways in which Katrina specifically changed New Orleans’ popular representation, and how it did not.

**Theory: Spectacular New Orleans**

The central concept behind this study’s theoretical framework is authenticity: what is the relationship between an on-screen representation of New Orleans and the off-screen “reality”? This concept has been present in film studies from the beginnings of the discipline. Siegfried Kracauer, for instance, considers the divide between two tendencies of filmmakers at the inception of cinema: the “realistic,” exemplified by the capturing of everyday life by the Lumière brothers, and the “formative,” exemplified by the fantastical creations of Georges Méliès. Similarly, Bela Balázs argues in the 1940s that the ability to film on location is the new

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medium’s greatest advantage.\textsuperscript{26} However, just as the debate over New Orleans’s identity extends beyond the screen into tourism studies, so does the question of authenticity extend outside of film and TV into cultural studies.

Since World War I, scholars have been probing the effect of mediated images on world perceptions. Walter Benjamin considers modern industrial art’s effect on perceptions of originality with his concept of the aura, viewing narrative and documentary film as both having a diminishing effect on the specialness of the subjects they capture.\textsuperscript{27} Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer similarly point out the pernicious effect of Hollywood on the consciousness of the masses, arguing that mass-produced, homogenous narratives reinforced the prevailing ideology of the capitalist corporations that produce the films.\textsuperscript{28} Though these perspectives have continued relevance in understanding the relationship between cityscape and cinema, scholarly engagements with postmodern problematizations of the “real” are the best-equipped theoretical lenses to apply to New Orleans, given its longstanding focus on the notions of authenticity in a society increasingly built upon replications of the past.

One significant early example of a postmodern analysis of New Orleans in cultural studies is Umberto Eco’s \textit{Travels in Hyper Reality}, the semiotician’s exploration of “instances where the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the


absolute fake.”29 In this collection of essays, Eco recounts visiting the French Quarter in order to compare it to its recreation in Disneyland, a juxtaposition that reveals the precariousness of comparing simulation with and the “real thing.” His assessment of the Quarter is positive, concluding that the site’s “realness” is tied to its original location as the foundation of the city and its unique architecture, making the Quarter “one of the few places that American civilization hasn’t remade, flattened, replaced.”30 However, the history of the French Quarter (and of New Orleans at large), in which many buildings were demolished and replaced by buildings replicating the eighteenth-century architecture of the original, reveal that Eco’s real/hyperreal binary is too simple a paradigm to apply to the city and its on-screen representations. Likewise, with Simulacra and Simulation, Jean Baudrillard is too absolute in his argument that the very presentation of the simulacrum negates traditional concepts of reality. While Eco sees the hyperreal Disneyland as a counterpoint to the “real thing,” Baudrillard instead sees Disneyland as existing “in order to hide that it is the ‘real’ country, [that] all of ‘real’ America that is Disneyland.”31 Baudrillard’s absolutism, in which the simulation reveals the inherent artificiality of all society, provides no room to distinguish between on-screen representation and the off-screen architectural developments of the city.

Rather than focusing on hyperreality or the simulacrum, this study’s theoretical framework is informed by Guy Debord’s writings about the spectacle. Debord originally formulated his theory in 1967 as a way of processing the rapid change in the media, architectural,

30 Eco, 29.
and urban landscape during that period. What distinguishes Debord from Eco and Baudrillard is his understanding of the spectacle as a takeover of urban spaces by capitalist autocracy, “the opposite of dialogue,” in which modern cityscapes are subjected to “real unreality” both on-screen and off.32 In Debord’s spectacle, there is an alternative path in which the city might be democratically reclaimed from the forces of capital that distort and physically alter cities like New Orleans. This contrasts with Baudrillard rejecting any reclamation or alteration of what he sees as a more absolute state of affairs in the simulacrum, along with Eco’s false dichotomy of “real” and “hyperreal.” In short, Debord’s spectacle allows for the analysis of media texts on equal terms with the political discourse and physical transformation of a cityscape, as all three encompass “a world view transformed into an objective force.”33

The spectacle is an all-encompassing worldview, including not only the homogenization of urban spaces like New Orleans, which Debord links to tourism, but also overall trends of media production, and the “social relationship between people that is mediated by images.”34 Analyzing New Orleans media texts within the context of the spectacle allows for the analysis of those texts in connection to larger trends of the city’s urban development, connected both to its tourism industry and to its new identity as Hollywood South.

In addition to the work being done in film and cultural studies, explorations of cityscapes’ relationships with identity can be found in the fields of memory studies and geography. Drawing largely from the pioneering scholarship of Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora, the field of memory studies operates on the premise that cultural memory is “not the Other

33 Debord, #5.
34 Debord, #4, #165, #168.
of history. Nor is it the opposite of individual remembering. Rather it is the totality of the context within which such varied cultural phenomena originate,” and is worthy of study alongside traditional historical frameworks.\(^5\) Within this field, Nora’s concept of *lieux de mémoire*, or “sites of memory,” has been applied to how physical locations, temporal constructs, and ephemeral media towards constructing national and regional memories.\(^6\) The field of memory studies has also sought connections between reality and its medial construction, notably through the work of Sybille Krämer.\(^7\) Though not dealing directly with memory studies, this study acknowledges the thematic overlap with that field of study, particularly regarding New Orleans as a site of both culturally exceptional and emblematically American.

While memory studies scholars focus on the relationships between individuals, cultures, and sites of memory, geography scholars focus on cultural differences, the power dynamics therein, and how those differences are mediated by spaces and places.\(^8\) A disciplinary offshoot from cultural studies, geography studies have explored the role of media in space from a variety of perspectives.\(^9\) In explorations of cityscapes, these studies have taken on particular interest in the role of race, socioeconomics, and power when viewing the cycles of urban decay,


\(^7\) Erll, 114-115.


gentrification, and construction/destruction.\textsuperscript{40} This framework has been applied to New Orleans in the work of the late Clyde Woods, who explored what he called the city’s “Blues Geography,” and how that geography “illustrates the dialectic relationship between the regional, national, and global political economies.”\textsuperscript{41} This study will contribute to that body of scholarship, but through a methodology more grounded in film studies than in memory studies or geography.

**Method: New Film History, “To the Background” Formalism**

This project analyzes film and television texts’ treatment of New Orleans as a cinematic location, analyzing multiple texts over a nearly century-long timeline. This requires a methodology that combines formalism and film history, in which the primary sources are both the film and television texts themselves and the archival records, legal documents, and first-hand accounts relevant to the production of those texts. A methodological framework that allows for this analysis is New Film History, articulated by James Chapman, Mark Glancy and Sue Harper in their introduction of their anthology of the same name. Chapman, Glancy and Harper position their methodology in contrast to traditional film history, in which film is either analyzed as an historical artifact or a reflection of the culture from which it emerged. While often insightful, these studies often favor the cultural context over the realities of production, not accounting for the role that actual filmmaking decisions that contribute to a film’s portrayal of reality.


In contrast to these paradigms, Chapman, Glancy and Harper offer a more rigorous framework that analyzes film (and television) as the collective output of multiple agents, emphasizing primary sources and allowing for filmic analysis beyond just narrative. Most importantly, New Film History emphasizes “a greater attention to the cultural dynamics of film production and an awareness of the extent to which the style and content of films are determined by the context of production.”42 This allows for a history that neither favors certain media texts based on subjective ideas of quality, nor attempts untenable psychological connections between representation and society’s collective mindset. Rather, representations of New Orleans will be connected back to specific conditions of production and historical developments within the city itself.

The textual analysis of the films and TV shows themselves will replicate Celestino Deleyto’s framework of analyzing cities on-screen. In his study of film representations of Los Angeles, Deleyto argues that attempting to define “realness” on-screen is illogical. Drawing from Henri Lefebvre’s theoretical premise that space is socially-produced, and Doreen Massey’s argument that space is always political, Deleyto argues that films “do not reproduce real places,” but rather, through formalist choices, “produce discourses about those places and therefore have an important impact on our perception of those places and their history.”43 This framework connects the political context of a physical location to its mediated representation, echoing Guy Debord’s elaboration of the spectacle as “a social relationship between people that is mediated

42 Chapman, Glancy and Harper, 6.
by images.”⁴⁴ Accordingly, Deleyto modifies the typical perspective of formalist analysis, reorienting the focus from the action in the foreground “to the background, where alternative and often more significant stories and spatial configurations can be found.”⁴⁵ This “to the background” formalism pays particular attention to the actual locations filmed by productions, and how they are contextualized within the film or TV narrative. Framed within New Film History, this project’s formalist analysis of the film and television texts will focus on how New Orleans is represented within the context of the film, and how both the city’s historical/political context and the conventions of film production contributed to that representation.

**Chapter Preview**

The first chapter, “From the Streetcar to the Streets: The New Orleans of Classical and Transitional Hollywood” covers representations within those two historical periods: 1929-1946 and 1947-1966, respectively. It was in the Classical Hollywood era that the cinematic identity of New Orleans was first established. This identity drew from preexisting and concurrent literature set in New Orleans, which defined the city as a combination of Old-World romanticism and Latin decadence. Originating from literary perceptions of the city’s French and Spanish Creole descendants, these characteristics were appropriated by preservationists in the first half of the twentieth century in an attempt to preserve the French Quarter, which became both the cinematic metonym for New Orleans and the catalyst for New Orleans’ modern tourism industry. In addition to the political context of the era regarding New Orleans, these representations were defined by the film production conventions of the era. These conventions included limitations by the production code in how explicit themes and situations could be portrayed, the widespread

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⁴⁴ Debord, #4.
⁴⁵ Deleyto, 4-5.
popularity of costumed dramas and literary adaptations, and most importantly, the recreation of locations on studio soundstages and backlots in Southern California.

These conventions gradually fell out of vogue during the so-called Transitional Era of Hollywood, giving way to increased filming on-location and contemporaneous settings. It was also in this era that cities like New Orleans saw the rise of boosterism by governmental entities for more location filmmaking, including New Orleans Mayor “Chep” Morrison’s courting of film productions to the city in exchange for positive portrayals of his city. It was during this era that old-world representations of New Orleans gave way to a new-world New Orleans, with films that emphasized the city’s industry, port, and burgeoning Central Business District. To demonstrate the thematic tensions between the New Orleans of Old and Transitional Hollywood, director Elia Kazan’s two New Orleans-set films, *Panic in the Streets* (1950) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), are analyzed and compared. Though *Streetcar* emerged from the Transitional era, its formal and thematic content reflects representations of New Orleans from the Classical era. Analyzing both films within the context of Hollywood history and Kazan’s own account of the two productions demonstrates how New Orleans’ cinematic identity changed when filming shifted from the backlot to on-location.

The second chapter, “Becoming The Big Easy: The New Orleans of New Hollywood and the Age of the Blockbuster,” focuses on New Orleans represented in those two historical eras, 1967-1975 and 1975-2002, respectively. These eras are collectively defined by increased on-location filming and the dissolution of the Production Code in favor of the MPAA ratings system. These eras saw the escalation of city and state government sponsorship of location production.

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46 Though the Age of the Blockbuster is an ongoing historical era of Hollywood, this analysis concludes this era in 2002, the year in which Louisiana passed film production tax credits that would fundamentally alter the city’s relationship with the industry.
filmmaking, demonstrable in New Orleans by the establishment of the Louisiana Film Commission. They also saw the decline of New Orleans industrial economy, with the city increasingly relying on tourism for its livelihood. The effect of these trends is the on-screen presentation of New Orleans’ identity in more explicit terms, with an increased exposure of those areas of the city most favored by both film productions and tourism commissions (the French Quarter, the Garden District) and a decreased emphasis by the city government in portraying the city positively. Though less films were made during these respective eras, there were more representations of New Orleans on-screen, resulting in a greater net exposure of the city in film.

It was during this period when New Orleans’ popular identity found more dimensions through film, particularly in the supernatural, criminal, and racial dynamics that came to be associated with the city. However, the most prominent representation is its “Big Easy” identity, by which New Orleans came to be known best as a party city with old-world trappings, populated by exceptional, colorful locals. Though this identity has its origins in the city’s Latin heritage and history of sexual tourism, it was given its name in the 1970s as a part of a Mardi Gras tourism campaign. That name was in turn immortalized by The Big Easy (1987), Jim McBride’s crime thriller of the same name. The Big Easy is notorious among New Orleanians for the artistic and geographic liberties it takes, particularly in its incorporation of Cajun people into the New Orleans landscape. Despite these liberties, the film was largely praised by national film critics upon release for its authenticity. Analyzing The Big Easy within the context of this divide, its heightened representation of the city, and the altering landscape of film production in the New Hollywood and Blockbuster eras demonstrates the extent to which the city’s tourism campaigns succeeded.
The third and fourth chapters focus on Hurricane Katrina, and the effect this disaster had on filmed representations of New Orleans. While filmed representations of New Orleans before 2005 reinforced the city’s Big Easy identity that was embraced by non-locals, Katrina exposed that image as a façade. The third chapter, “Elvis Presley Sat Here: Treme as Neutral Ground between Katrina Verité and Katrina Hollywood,” focuses on those films and TV shows which actively deconstruct the city’s preexisting cinematic identity by focusing on the people and locations most affected by the storm and marginalized by the city’s tourist-based service economy. This trend, labeled in this study as “Katrina Verité,” includes both fictional and documentary film and television works emerging from independent cinema and pay-cable channels, two outlets that accommodate less commercially-oriented narratives and subject matters. The emergence of a counter-narrative to New Orleans’ tourist-centered identity demonstrates that identity’s artificiality. However, as this chapter’s analysis of Treme demonstrates, separating the “Big Easy” identity from the city in post-Katrina representations remains a difficult proposition.

The fourth chapter, “Katrina Hollywood: A Hurricane Marginalized, Exploited, and Overcome,” focuses on those representations of Hurricane Katrina that conform to pre-storm representations of New Orleans. Labeled in this study as “Katrina Hollywood,” these representations consist of film and television works made predominantly by major studios and broadcast television networks. This analysis is framed within the context not only of Hurricane Katrina, but of the passage of the Louisiana Motion Picture Tax Incentive Act by the state legislature in 2002. Part of a larger trend of productions filming beyond Hollywood to avoid the tax and union expenses that come with filming in an industry town like Los Angeles, this law contributed to New Orleans earning the moniker “Hollywood South.” This trend of
representation has led to an increase of productions using New Orleans as stand-ins for other
cities, along with the relocation of film settings to New Orleans. In this production environment,
the few significant Hollywood representations of Katrina have largely avoided the critical
scrutiny found in independent film, instead using the storm as an empty plot device. This
disinterest in exploring Katrina in favor of more traditional “Big Easy” representations of the city
demonstrate a return to pre-Katrina modes of representing New Orleans.

In addition to summarizing my findings, this project will conclude with a reflection on
the future of New Orleans as a center of production and the existential future of the city itself. As
the effects of global warming and offshore drilling lead to more and more erosion and flooding,
increasing the possibility of another hurricane and the threat of rising sea levels, it is worth
considering whether film and television representations might become the only way in which
New Orleans, and other threatened coastal cities, might be experienced in the future.
CHAPTER I. FROM A STREETCAR TO THE STREETS: THE NEW ORLEANS OF CLASSICAL AND TRANSITIONAL HOLLYWOOD

_Saratoga Trunk_ (Sam Wood, 1945) opens in 1875, with Clio Dulaine (Ingrid Bergman) returning to her birthplace of New Orleans after a prolonged residence in Paris. Dulaine, the offspring of an affair between a white Creole aristocrat and a light-skinned Creole of color, has been exiled from her home city for over a decade, and is set on righting wrongs perpetrated against her mother. As she pulls up to her home, an abandoned, moss-strewn mansion on Rampart Street, a handful of black onlookers in the street seem puzzled. As she unlocks the door, Dulaine is flanked by Angelique (Flora Robson), her Haitian maid; and Cubidon (Jerry Austin), her French dwarf manservant. “Ghosts in there,” Cubidon warns her. “If there is, it’s my father’s,” Clio replies, “and I’d like to see him.” Gothic and atmospheric, this scene embodies New Orleans’ place in the popular imaginary at the time of the film.

In addition to the mise-en-scene and sound design (the wrought-iron gates, the singing street vendor, the Spanish moss), the off-screen context of _Saratoga Trunk_ defines many trends of New Orleans’ on-screen representation. Perhaps the most conspicuous of these realities is race: the history of New Orleans is defined by racial turmoil both unique (the _plaçage_ arrangement of a white Creole patriarch and a dark-skinned woman that brought Clio into the world) and typical of the greater Southern United States (the _de jure_ Jim Crow segregation that would go into effect in Louisiana not long after the time period of _Saratoga Trunk_). Starting in the 1870s and continuing well into the twentieth century, representations of the Louisiana Creoles have long been a subject of fascination in literature. This fascination, in turn, bled into Hollywood productions through literary adaptations and period pieces: _Saratoga Trunk_ was an adaptation of Edna Ferber’s 1941 novel of the same name.
The representation of New Orleans’ racial dynamics in the original novel is complicated by the film’s politics of representation: Bergman, a white Swede, wears a dark brown wig to play a biracial Creole, while Robson, a white English actress, dons blackface and dark-hair prosthetics to play a black Haitian woman. Having Robson don blackface is troublingly anachronistic; even by 1945, blackface was increasingly uncommon in Hollywood productions.\(^{47}\) However, Bergman’s casting as a biracial woman was typical of Hollywood representations of Creoles during the period, and remains a frequent choice of Hollywood representation of biracial people to this day.\(^{48}\)

In addition to the period piece, subject matter, and politics of representation, another reflection of the era from which Saratoga Trunk emerged is the film’s representation of New Orleans. Saratoga Trunk was filmed entirely in Hollywood, the city recreated through a combination of backlot, matte paintings, and stock footage. While location filming in New Orleans was relatively frequent before the 1930s, the gradual consolidation of filmmaking by the studio system to Southern California made backlot replications of faraway cities like New Orleans increasingly cost-efficient; location filming would only gradually become commonplace again in the late 1940s and the 1950s.\(^{49}\)

What is even more curious about Saratoga Trunk is the spatial discontinuity in its depiction of New Orleans. Dulaine’s house on Rampart is located in the Marigny, a

\(^{47}\) This anachronism did not prevent Robson for being nominated for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress.

\(^{48}\) An example of contemporary biracial casting can be found in Aloha (Cameron Crowe, 2015), in which Emma Stone, a white actor, plays a quarter-Chinese, quarter-Native Hawaiian woman.

\(^{49}\) Ed and Susan Poole, Louisiana Film History: A Comprehensive Overview Beginning 1896 (Donaldsville, LA: Margaret Media, 2012), 11-33.
neighborhood where white Creole patriarchs would historically house their *placées*. However, the action of the film is otherwise almost entirely in the French Quarter, the more recognizable historic neighborhood of the white Creoles, and the landmarks therein (St. Louis Cathedral, the French Market, and the French Opera House all make appearances). Even when action takes place in the Marigny, it is preceded by an establishing shot of St. Louis Cathedral, the centerpiece of the French Quarter. This choice can only be explained by the centrality that the Quarter holds in New Orleans’ location identity. This centrality is the result of generations-spanning publicity bestowed upon the Quarter by writers, painters, and preservationists.

Any consideration of New Orleans’ on-screen identity begins with the French Quarter. The oldest neighborhood in the city, the image of the Quarter, or *Vieux Carré*, is likely what most Americans would create in their minds if asked to picture New Orleans. Most other cinematic cities boast a variety of oft-filmed locations—a film set in Los Angeles might feature anywhere from the Hollywood Hills to Venice Beach, while Manhattan-set films could be set anywhere from Harlem to Chinatown. While the Central Business District (CBD) and the Garden District later find their way onto the screen when studios resume the practice of location filmmaking in the 1950s, the city’s cinematic identity continues to be defined by the French Quarter. Its wrought-iron balconies, narrow streets, and recognizable landmarks (St. Louis Cathedral, Jackson Square, the Pontalba Apartments) have been the center of New Orleans’ tourist industry since the mid-twentieth century. The Quarter is also the most represented area of the city in film, comparable to the place of prominence held by the Strip in popular perceptions of Las Vegas. It is no coincidence that both the Quarter and the Strip are the visual metonyms of these two tourist-reliant cities: both areas have been endlessly promoted by the governments of their respective regions, and feature prominently in cinematic representations of their respective
cities. However, while the Strip is perceived as a thoroughly modern center of vice, the French Quarter’s excesses have a more old-world character. This is because while the Vegas Strip was conceived from the ground-up in the twentieth century, the French Quarter evolved into that identity from its centuries-old origins as the ethnic neighborhood of the white Creoles. This legacy also has complicated ties to the representations of the city during the classical and transitional eras of Hollywood, typically considered by film scholars to consist of the 1920s to 1946 and 1946 to the mid-1960s, respectively.

The film representations from these eras run concurrent with the debates that citizens of New Orleans were having over the future of their city, and the significance of the French Quarter in that future. In one camp were prominent political and business figures seeking to remedy what they saw as a lag between New Orleans and bustling industrial centers of the era, including New York and Chicago. An important step in the plan to make this city friendlier to business and industry was to demolish the Quarter in order to expand the adjacent CBD. In the other camp were preservationists who considered the French Quarter worthy of saving and preserving, and who saw a path to financial solvency in making the French Quarter a tourist destination. While the preservationists ultimately prevailed in their fight against the demolition of the neighborhood, the eventual monetization of the Quarter gradually resulted in what Guy Debord labels the “freezing of life,” in which the Quarter gradually ceased to be a living neighborhood and instead became a space in which tourists could visit and play.  

expected, as the neighborhood became more famous for the sleazy neon bars of Bourbon Street than for the elegant antiquing found on Royal Street.

The film representations of the classical and transitional eras not only reflected this debate, but evolved with it; as Hollywood productions started shooting on location in the Quarter, the neighborhood was captured less as a historic neighborhood and period piece setting (Royal Street) and more as a modern center of vice (Bourbon Street). This trend would result by the 1950s in a divide in representation between studio-created period pieces and on-location representations of modern vice. This divide, similar to Alecia P. Long’s dual perceptions of New Orleans’ as a place of both cultural exceptionalism and vice, can be seen in the representations of the French Quarter in two films directed by Elia Kazan: *Panic in the Streets* (1950) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951).51 While both films utilized location filming to varying degrees, Kazan’s films embody these two conflicting images of the New Orleans. *Streetcar* embodies the city’s Creole mythology, enhanced by Hollywood’s hyperreal recreations of a French Quarter on backlots and in soundstages, *Panic*’s sprawling on-location snapshot of the city as it was in 1949 denotes a more modern New Orleans, portraying the city’s vices devoid of their historic origins. This divide in representation, and its lingering significance on the city’s identity, is the subject of this chapter.

This chapter begins with the establishment of the primary debates in New Orleans over Creole identity, along with how the French Quarter became a battleground for the city’s image. This is followed by a history of Hollywood’s representation of New Orleans in film from the Classical to the Transitional period. This will establish the context of a close reading of Kazan’s

films, and how the two films respectively reflect the dual images of New Orleans during these periods. Considering these representations within the traditions of tourism and location identity highlights the theoretical significance of these on and off-screen developments, especially the effects of the film industry’s shift from studio to location filmmaking.

**The French Quarter and White Creole Exceptionalism**

As any horse-drawn tour guide would be sure to point out, the French Quarter is the oldest neighborhood in New Orleans, the ancestral home of the city’s white Creole population, and a center of architectural wonder. However, the French Quarter of only a century earlier would have been an entirely different sight: in the 1900s, the neighborhood, known to the locals as “Frenchtown,” was a diverse, run-down working class neighborhood populated with Italians, African-Americans, Cajuns, Greeks, Latin-Americans, and many other ethnicities. Few white Creoles remained in the neighborhood, most having moved to nicer areas of the city, and in any case, white Creoles’ cultural affinity with the Quarter was irreparably damaged by the destruction of the French Opera House by fire in 1919. When Storyville, New Orleans notorious red-light district, was shut down by city authorities in 1919, and the city’s prostitutes gravitated into the Quarter, most of the remaining Creoles moved out of the neighborhood. It was this French Quarter—a crumbling, crowded 78 square-block neighborhood, devoid of the ethnic population that initially defined it—that became the battleground for preservation and New Orleans’ civic identity.

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54 Ellis, 21.
“Local color” travelers’ accounts from the city describing New Orleans in exceptional terms date back to the city’s colonial era.\(^{55}\) One such account emerged from New York traveler Christian Schultz, who visited the city in 1808 not long after American annexation. In his letters, Schultz remarks in detail about the local practices of Quadroon Balls, the racial caste system, and how the gentlemen of the city “are generally too much attached to the bottle after dinner.”\(^{56}\) Schultz attributes these customs to the still predominantly-French white population, noting that the newly-arrived Americans “feel not a little foolish upon their first arrival in this city, where the manners and amusements are so very different from their own.”\(^{57}\) Despite the clear groundwork laid in these accounts for New Orleans’ exceptionalism, some historians argue that these more colorful accounts are favored by writers to reinforce preconceived notions regarding the city. As Sandra Frink points out, these early travel accounts of the city were just as likely to compare New Orleans to other American cities than to describe the city in exceptional terms.\(^{58}\) Rather than originating directly from these travelogues, the contemporary narrative of New Orleans white Creole exceptionalism has its roots in mid-to-late nineteenth century literary culture.

This literary fascination with Creoles first emerged from within white Creole culture itself. Starting in the 1830s, a community of white Creole scholars and writers, led by historian

\(^{55}\) Campanella, *Cityscapes of New Orleans*, 306; Long, 1.


\(^{57}\) Schultz, 192, 196.

\(^{58}\) Sandra Frink, “‘Strangers are Flocking Here’: Identity and Anonymity in New Orleans, 1810-1860,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 11, no. 2 (June 2010), 160.
and politician Charles Gayarré, propagated the myth of white Creole exceptionalism, positioning white Creoles as both American and elevated in stature by their cultural roots to Mother France.\textsuperscript{59} By the 1870s, as the civic presence of white Creoles in New Orleans declined, fascination with white Creoles expanded into non-Creole New Orleanians and transplants to the city. George Washington Cable, a New Orleans native of English heritage, wrote several novels and essays on Creole culture, the most prominent being \textit{The Grandissimes: A Story of Creole Life} (1880). Cable provided a more critical perspective on Creoles, using \textit{The Grandissimes} to explore the racial hierarchies and comment on the systemic violence of Louisiana culture, and arguing that miscegenation was a definite characteristic of white Creole culture. This open acknowledgement of white and black Creoles’ shared heritage drew the ire of white Creoles, represented by Gayarré in a public denunciation of Cable’s assertions.\textsuperscript{60} After Gayarré’s death in 1895, his disciple, Grace King, and her acolytes Albert Fossier and Lyle Saxon, would continue asserting that white Creoles shared no lineage with black Creoles. Similarly, Lafcadio Hearn, an Anglo-Greek reporter who immigrated to New Orleans in 1878, romanticized Creole life with fewer reservations, writing newspaper columns characterizing Creole life as an exceptional and endangered lifestyle in an increasingly cold and modern American landscape.\textsuperscript{61}

Such accounts of Creoles differed in perspective and scope, sometimes coming into conflict with each other. However, they are unified in their rehabilitation of the French Quarter’s

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\textsuperscript{60} Charles Gayarré, \textit{The Creoles of History and the Creoles of Romance: A Lecture Delivered in the Hall of Tulane University, New Orleans, by Hon. Charles Gayarré on the 25\textsuperscript{th} of April, 1885} (New Orleans: C.E. Hopkins, 1885).

\textsuperscript{61} S. Frederick Starr, Introduction to \textit{Inventing New Orleans: Writings of Lafcadio Hearn}, ed. S. Frederick Starr (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), xix-xx.
reputation. Though increasingly abandoned by the Creoles and replaced by ethnic populations less exoticized by Anglo-American writers, the decline and decay of the Vieux Carré only enhanced the neighborhood’s literary appeal. Writing for the *Cincinnati Commercial* in 1877, Lafcadio Hearn equates the city’s appeal to its old-world trappings.

There are memories of Havre and Marseille to be obtained from the Old French Quarter; there are buildings in Jackson Square which remind one of Spanish-American travel. I fancy that the power of fascination which New Orleans exercises upon foreigners is due no less to this peculiar characteristic than to the tropical beauty of the city itself.62

Cable, though more critical of white Creole culture, writes of the same area of the Quarter at sunset in 1880: “The sun is once more setting upon the Place d’Armes. Once more the shadows of cathedral and town-hall lie athwart the pleasant grounds where again the city’s fashion and beauty sit about in the sedate Spanish way.”63 These florid portraits of the neighborhood would gradually drive the first wave of tourists to the Quarter, with northern enthusiasts seeking the paths described in the writings of boosters like Hearn and Cable.64

This perception of the Quarter solidified as time passed, the buildings crumbled, and Creole presence in the neighborhood continued to decline. As late as 1928, Lyle Saxon describes the Quarter’s buildings as “still charming in their decay, but they are sad too. Ironwork hangs rusting against mouldering [sic] plaster; window sashes sag; old courtyards—once the center of Creole life, once gardens filled with palms, cape jasmine, crepe myrtle—are used now as stables


for horses or as a parking place for automobiles.”65 These accounts of the Quarter contributed to
the literary reputation of the French Quarter as a space emblematic of New Orleans’ old-world
mystery and beauty. While the decay of these buildings seemingly shut off from the modern
world only enhanced the old-world exoticism to observers like Saxon, this would be the image of
the Quarter that would be used to rally for its preservation.

**Business and Preservation**

The old-world decay so admired by New Orleans writers also made it the target for
criticism by the city’s civic and business leaders in the 1920s. These leaders, which included
members of the New Orleans Association of Commerce, saw the city’s future in the expansion of
its industry, port, and downtown area, with the aim of making New Orleans a commercial city
on-par with New York and Chicago.66 The modernization process involved the demolition of the
Quarter in order to expand the adjacent CBD. With this attitude in mind, businessmen and
developers demolished several of the Quarter’s structures to make way for industry, apartments,
and storefronts.

On the other side of the debate were preservationist groups believing that the French
Quarter held cultural significance worthy of preservation.67 Consisting of an unlikely coalition of

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67 John Shelton Reed, *Dixie Bohemia: A French Quarter Circle in the 1920s* (Baton
Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 79-80. In his recount of the French Quarter’s
Bohemian scene in the 1920s, Reed notes that this divide between business and preservation is
not quite as neat as has it has been made out. For one, he notes that the Association of Commerce
went on the record in 1917 arguing for preservation efforts of the Quarter, and that in 1919 the
Association’s president argued for the renovation of the Pontalba Buildings. Nevertheless, it is
still clear that the preservations played a crucial role in staying the ongoing deterioration and
initiating the renovation of the Quarter, often because of the needs of the city’s business
interests.
prominent society ladies, businesswomen, and artists of the Quarter’s bohemian scene, including Lyle Saxon, Grace King, and Sherwood Anderson, these groups advocated the City Commission to preserve the buildings within the Quarter. Many members, including Saxon and artist Alberta Kinsey, preemptively bought up properties in the neighborhood to restore and protect them. In 1925, preservationists scored a victory with the establishment of the Vieux Carré Commission, which initially served as an advisory body to the city government. The Commission’s powers were limited at first, and there remained several battles to be fought against development throughout the first half of the century, including the willful neglect of buildings, construction of modern buildings that imitated the Spanish colonial style, and the near-construction of an adjacent highway that threatened to damage the Quarter with its traffic reverberation. Nonetheless, their early efforts laid the groundwork not only for the Quarter’s preservation, but also the neighborhood’s gentrification, as both the city government and the Association of Commerce took steps to build up the neighborhood as the city’s eminent tourist attraction. This trend all but guaranteed the French Quarter’s status as the face of New Orleans tourism, and as a cinematic metonym for the city at large.

However, the dimensions of the preservation effort would be complicated by a conflicting effort to develop the Quarter in the 1940s. As J. Mark Souther describes it, “the wartime influx encouraged some property owners to exploit the city’s ribald, risqué image by opening adult-oriented nightclubs that threatened the French Quarter’s old-world ambience.”

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68 Reed, 81.


These clubs, located primarily on Bourbon Street, flew in the face of the ambitions of preservationists to turn the Quarter into a pristine historical district.

In 1946, deLesseps Story “Chep” Morrison was elected mayor of New Orleans. A supporter of the preservationist movement and an opponent of the Bourbon Street nightclubs, Morrison undertook an effort to clean up the Quarter of immoral dealings, while understanding that removing vice from the neighborhood entirely would prevent many tourists from seeking the Quarter out. This conflicted undertaking resulted in a few superficial crackdowns of corruption and gambling that nonetheless maintained the split-image of the Quarter between posh historical district and a modern den of sin. Paradoxically, these two images have their origins in the descriptions from historic and literary accounts of Louisiana Creoles as a decadent people. A brief overview of New Orleans’ early representations reveals that promotion of the city and its exceptionalism would be difficult to separate from its cinematic representation.

**New Orleans In-Studio: The Classical Hollywood Era**

In the formative decades of film production in the United States, filming in New Orleans was relatively common, encompassing studio recreations, location shoots in the city, and “actualities,” early precursors to the modern documentary.71 However, the consolidation of American film production within Southern California, and the gradual transformation of the studio system into a streamlined production line, made location filming a luxury that studio moguls were unwilling to accommodate. In his account of representations of New York City, James Sanders summarizes the predicament:

71 The first films shot in New Orleans were these actualities shot by the American Mutoscope company in 1898, all of which are now considered lost films. The first fictional film shot in the city, a Faust adaptation titled *Mephisto and the Maiden* (Francis Boggs, 1909), is also considered a lost film.
To studio heads, shooting on location was an anathema, destroying the efficiency and control that made the whole system work. How could a star filming at a distant location do a costume test for her next picture, thus assuring that it got under way quickly? How could moguls review the daily footage...of a picture made in New York...when any film stock shot on the East Coast would take over three days to arrive in Hollywood? Add to this the logistical fears about the disruption of shooting by huge crowds anxious to see and touch their favorite stars, and the old technical problem of recording sound on noisy streets, and it was clear that the real city was not going to make a sustained appearance on screen anytime soon.72

This reality played out in the actual productions of films set in New Orleans. From 1928 to 1947, an era that encompasses the Classical Hollywood period, sixty-five fictional films were produced that were set in New Orleans.73 Of these sixty-five, only fourteen, roughly twenty-two percent, were filmed in any part of Louisiana, with most of these exceptions, including Jezebel (William Wyler, 1938) and The Buccaneer (Cecil B. DeMille, 1938), only using the Louisiana region selectively through second-unit filming.74 While New Orleans itself would be filmed by documentary travelogues and a handful of Hollywood productions, the vast majority of initial representations in New Orleans were filmed in Hollywood. The effect of this divide between

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74 Ed and Susan Poole, “Louisiana Film History,” Hollywood on the Bayou, http://www.learnaboutmovieposters.com/newsite/Louisiana/titles/year.asp. Since I am limiting my analysis to representations of New Orleans, representations of greater Louisiana were excluded from my scope. This includes several prominent box office successes of the era, including Steamboat Round the Bend (John Ford, 1935) and Louisiana Purchase (Irving Cummings, 1941).
New Orleans and early representation is that for many filmgoers, their first exposure to New Orleans was a Hollywood imitation.

The most prolific of any American filmmaking era, the production output of Classical Hollywood was diverse, with the first cycle of nearly every genre associated with Hollywood beginning in this era. One particularly popular Hollywood filmmaking form during the Classical era was the costumed period piece. Most associated with the high production value and prestige of MGM, the most successful studio of the era, costumed dramas of classical Hollywood were often adaptations of popular literature and stage adaptations, allowing studios to show off opulent production design and costuming.  

It was this New Orleans that movie audiences were exposed to the most: of those sixty-five films set in New Orleans from this period, nineteen were period pieces. Though not constituting a majority, this genre of filmmaking included the most prominent and successful depictions of New Orleans from that era, including *Jezebel*, *The Buccaneer*, and *Saratoga Trunk*. It also includes less successful period films that nonetheless perpetuate these trends of representation, including *Flame of New Orleans* (René Clair, 1941), *Lady from Louisiana* (Bernard Vorhaus, 1941), and *The Foxes of Harrow* (John M. Stahl, 1947). Not all filmic representations of New Orleans were successful during this era: many, such as *Swamp Woman*

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76 These films were identified from the list provided by Ed and Susan Poole in *Louisiana Film History*. Among the films listed as taking place in New Orleans, the plot descriptions of the films were looked up to see if they took place in the 1800s. Other than the films mentioned, they include *Hardboiled Rose* (F. Harmon Weight, 1929), *Cameo Kirby* (Irving Cummings, 1930), *Dixiana* (Luther Reed, 1930), *Belle of the Nineties* (Leo McCarey, 1934), *Naughty Marietta* (W.S. Van Dyke, 1935), *Madame X* (Sam Wood, 1937), *The Toy Wife* (Richard Thorpe, 1938), *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming 1939) *Old Hickory* (Lewis Seiler, 1939), and *New Moon* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1940).
(Elmer Clifton, 1941), were marginal B-pictures, and some, including *Flame of New Orleans*, were box office failures. Additionally, the subject matter of the New Orleans-set films of this era of Hollywood is not uniform. *Blonde Venus* (Josef Von Sternberg, 1932) only featured New Orleans briefly, and not long enough to paint a thematic picture of the city. *Dixie* (A. Edward Sutherland, 1943) frames New Orleans within popular perceptions of the American South, while both *Birth of the Blues* (Victor Schertzinger, 1941) and *New Orleans* (Arthur Lubin, 1947) explore (and white-wash) the city’s jazz heritage. However, the majority of period pieces were set in Creole New Orleans, perpetuating the myth of the city’s exceptionalism. These period pieces were the most popular cinematic images of New Orleans of the era: both *Jezebel* and *The Buccaneer* were among the most successful films at the box office in 1938, as was *Saratoga Trunk* in 1946.\(^77\) The significant number of these period pieces, their relative box office success, and their perpetuation of the myth of New Orleans exceptionalism make them most noteworthy representations of the city of the Classical Hollywood era.

When analyzing the thematic content of the New Orleans-set period-pieces, clear trends emerge. Eleven of the eighteen period films center around white Creoles: in *Jezebel*, *Lady from Louisiana*, and *The Foxes of Harrow*, white Creole aristocrats are framed as representative of New Orleans’ backwardness and lack of social progress, while in *Saratoga Trunk* the Dulaines are depicted as secretive and old-world, refusing to acknowledge Ingrid Bergman’s Clio Dulaine as an illegitimate child of their late patriarch.\(^78\) Additionally, all films highlight the city’s racial


\(^78\) With the exception of *Saratoga Trunk*, the Creoles of these films are not overtly identified as such. I discerned Creole presence in films by their French surnames, a strategy also utilized by Richard Campanella in his mapping of Creoles in historical New Orleans census data. I also recognized Creoles by their French-tinged accents, though the latter is not always reliable
dynamics to varying degrees. *Saratoga Trunk* directly confronts the city’s plaçage legacy. *Jezebel* poses questions regarding the inhumanity of slavery. *The Foxes of Harrow* points a disturbingly uncritical lens at antebellum slavery, portraying the slaves as mostly content in bondage. *The Foxes of Harrow*’s troubling representation of slavery aside, none of these films are progressive in their identity politics: *Saratoga Trunk* features a white actor in blackface, while *The Buccaneer, Jezebel, Flame of New Orleans* and *Lady from Louisiana* keep their black characters on the periphery of the story, often as stereotypical comic relief. When compared to the later representations of the city in the 1950s, it is worth noting that at the very least, these films did not erase black bodies from the city’s landscape.

Finally, with the exception of *The Buccaneer*, these films’ New Orleans scenes take place primarily in the French Quarter, including *Jezebel, Flame of New Orleans, Lady from Louisiana, Saratoga Trunk*, and *The Foxes of Harrow*. The centrality of the French Quarter can be tied partly to historical reality: in the era of New Orleans during which these films are set, the French Quarter was still the neighborhood of the Creoles, the location of the city’s government, and its center of commerce. However, as previously demonstrated with *Saratoga Trunk*, the prominence of the Quarter gradually superseded geographical accuracy and instead became visual shorthand for the city at large. This geographical disorientation reaches its zenith in *Lady from Louisiana*: set in 1880s New Orleans, the film establishes two locations within the city, the “Vieux Carré,” where high society celebrates Mardi Gras, and “Frenchtown,” the seedy part of town where the gentlemen of the town seek extramarital rendezvous. Overlooked by the film’s narrative is the fact that these two areas are in the same neighborhood. Vieux Carré and

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for this era of Hollywood, since many Creole characters are played by American actors who do not attempt a Creole accent. Campanella, *Geographies of New Orleans*, 209.
Frenchtown are both historic names for the French Quarter, while the buildings in both neighborhoods respectively resemble the wrought-iron mansions of the Quarter. Inadvertently, *Lady from Louisiana*’s two faces of the French Quarter foreshadow the perceptual divide that would develop between the Quarter as both a historic legacy and a place to have a good time.

The French Quarter would remain the primary location for New Orleans representations into the late forties and fifties. However, as location filmmaking grew in popularity, a divide between how this neighborhood and city was represented developed between studio and location filmmaking.

**New Orleans On-Location: The Transitional Hollywood Era**

The gradual decline of in-studio, factory-style production happened for a variety of reasons. The most prominent of these was the Paramount Decree, a landmark court ruling that declared that Hollywood studios’ vertical integration of production and distribution constituted an illegal monopoly. This ruling, which outlawed the profitable practice of block-booking, and forced the studios to sell off their theater chains, is the typical book-end of the Classical Hollywood era by film historians. Other factors compounded the change: the post-war price of materials; a successful strike in 1946 which increased salaries for craftsmen; the improvement of camera and sound technology that made shooting outside of a controlled environment more feasible; the impact of war documentaries on audiences previously unacquainted with those films’ on-screen realism; and the effect of the location filmmaking in Italian neorealist films on American audiences and filmmakers looking to replicate their style.79 These factors pushed Hollywood studios towards more realistic depictions of locations on-screen: budgets of

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79 David A. Cook, 373.
expensive costume dramas and musicals were reduced, while “semi-documentary” films shot on location and often featuring amateur actors came into vogue.\textsuperscript{80}

The effects of these trends were measurable, but gradual: costumed dramas and musicals did not disappear overnight, but became more limited, high-budget fare. As Thomas Schatz notes, these costumed dramas and musicals became more prestigious and expensive; as studios scaled down their production, they became more reliant on big-budget event pictures to shore up their bottom-lines.\textsuperscript{81} However, with the exception of their big-budget gambles, studio outputs were on a much smaller scale than pre-World War II. Because economic realities made shooting on location more feasible and because they aligned with post-war American audiences’ tastes, there were more and more films shot on real city streets.

The impact of this change on production dynamics was considerable: from 1948 to 1966, fifty-one fictional films were produced that were set in some part in New Orleans. Of these fifty-one films, twenty-five, or forty-nine percent, were filmed in some part on location in New Orleans, a marked increase from the twenty-one percent of the previous era.\textsuperscript{82} The shift in how New Orleans was represented was more gradual. Literary adaptations and period pieces set in the city continued well into the 1950s, including \textit{My Forbidden Past} (Robert Stevenson, 1951), \textit{The Mississippi Gambler} (Rudolph Maté, 1953), \textit{Band of Angels} (Raoul Walsh, 1957), and a remake of \textit{The Buccaneer} (Anthony Quinn, 1958). Many of these films had the same focus as the New Orleans films of classical Hollywood; all of the aforementioned films feature white Creoles, while both \textit{My Forbidden Past} and \textit{Band of Angels} explicitly delve into the legacy of plaçage in

\textsuperscript{80} David A. Cook, 374-376.


\textsuperscript{82} Poole and Poole, “Louisiana Film History.”
their storylines. Additionally, with the exception of some second-unit filming of the surrounding countryside in *Band of Angels* and *The Buccaneer*, these period pieces continued the tradition of a New Orleans recreated in-studio.

However, alongside the continued interest in white Creoles emerged a new trend of representation, in which the New Orleans of the modern era actually portrayed itself on-screen. This trend includes films such as *Panic in the Streets*, *New Orleans Uncensored* (William Castle, 1954), *New Orleans After Dark* (John Sledge, 1958), and *King Creole* (Michael Curtiz, 1958). These films vary in production quality and subject matter. *Panic* is a prestige crime drama by one of Hollywood’s top directors. *After Dark* and *Uncensored* are both a part of the trend of low-budget “urban confidential” films from the era, the latter shot by a director known for his penchant for cheap gimmicks. Meanwhile, *King Creole* is the most well-regarded of Elvis Presley’s musicals, helmed by the legendary director of *Casablanca* (1942). However, all three films are united in the diversity of areas of New Orleans that are represented: while the French Quarter is the center of action for all four, other areas of the city, including the riverfront docks (*Panic; After Dark*), the Central Business District (*Panic; After Dark; Uncensored*), Gentilly (*After Dark*) and the shores of Lake Pontchartrain (*King Creole*) make prominent appearances. Additionally, while all three films’ plots deal with crime and corruption, the character of this corruption is both modern and white-washed, with no Creoles or major black characters in sight. The opening disclaimer of *New Orleans After Dark* makes this mode of depiction explicit, stating, “This story could be about dedicated police officers anywhere. It happens to be about a

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detective of the New Orleans Police Department and his family.” Even the title *King Creole*
refers not to any Creole character or storyline, but to the name of a club in the Quarter owned by
an Anglo-American gangster, a plot point that effectively encompasses how the Quarter’s Creole
identity was monetized during that time period.

**Tourism, New Orleans, and Film**

The transformation of New Orleans on-screen reflects the two contrasting tourist images
of the French Quarter increasingly associated with the city at large. The first image, drawn from
popular literature set in the city, is concerned with New Orleans’ exceptionalism, tied to the
legacy of white Creoles and their perceived foreignness and decadence. The location and subject
matter of the films perpetuating this image reflect the historical debates within that literature.
Centered almost entirely within either the French Quarter or the plantations that surrounded the
city in the nineteenth century, the films focus on the secrecy and insularity of white Creoles, the
sexual indiscretions of white Creole patriarchs, and the racial boundaries transgressed by those
indiscretions. This New Orleans, reflected in films from the 1930s through the 1950s, featured a
New Orleans mostly recreated in-studio.

The second image is tied to New Orleans as a modern city. While the city is still
portrayed as sordid, the Latin origins of this reputation are diluted in favor of a more Anglicized
representation of the city. Though still centered in the French Quarter, these films focus on the
modern neon signs and nightclubs of Bourbon Street, rather than lingering on the Quarter’s
distinctive Creole architecture. Furthermore, these more modern depictions of New Orleans
expand beyond the border of that neighborhood, presenting more of the city than its visual
metonym. It is no coincidence that these films emerged during the first cycle of film noir, a genre
cycle directly interested in weaving “urban discourses around real locations.” Rather than reflecting on the past, these films focus on the New Orleans of the present, with stories of crime and corruption in the nightclubs and on the waterfront. Most importantly, the characters of these modern stories, rather than reflecting the racial ambiguities of old New Orleans, offer only one dimension of the city’s racial makeup: almost all of the characters are white. This post-war representation of the city was shot on-location, using New Orleans to represent itself.

The history of New Orleans’ film and television representation is intertwined with the city’s long history as a tourist destination. As Vicki Mayer notes, the Association of Commerce during the Mayor Martin Behrman’s administration (1904-1920) courted early film pioneers not to establish an industry, but as a vehicle by which the city itself could be promoted. This strategic flaw would contribute to the effort’s failure, just as Los Angeles’ comparative willingness to embrace film as an industry in itself contributed to the industry’s consolidation in Southern California. Though New Orleans failed to become a major center of film production, cinematic vehicles for civic promotion nonetheless emerged in the early period pieces set in the city. Many of these films were direct adaptations of works of literature and history that laid the groundwork for New Orleans’ romantic image that tourists would seek out. Some were written by prominent residents of New Orleans and Louisiana, drawing a direct line from the literary to the cinematic promotion of New Orleans. Both versions of The Buccaneer were adapted from Lyle Saxon’s Lafitte the Pirate (1930); Band of Angels was based on a novel by Robert Penn Warren (1955), then a professor at Louisiana State University.

84 Celestino Deleyto, From Tinseltown to Bordertown: Los Angeles in Film (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017), 67.

in Baton Rouge. By the time he wrote *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), Tennessee Williams was also a longtime resident of the French Quarter and a central figure of the neighborhood’s bohemian circles. Furthermore, as production conventions grew to favor location filmmaking, New Orleans’ city government was an active participant: *Panic in the Streets, New Orleans After Dark*, and *New Orleans Uncensored* were made with the direct participation of Mayor Morrison’s office and the NOPD. This early intertwining of filmmaking and self-promotion makes media and tourism studies a natural pairing.

Key to the debate over tourism and film is how a film’s representation of a city reflects that city’s identity. In “Metonymy and the Metropolis,” William J. Sadler and Ekaterina V. Haskins define the “postcard effect,” by which a city is packaged in a film or television text by the highlighting of a handful of recognizable city landmarks as establishing shots. By Sadler and Haskins’ definition, the postcard effect “both reflects and legitimizes a fragmented experience of visiting a location without immersing oneself in the intricacies of its politics and geography.” Sadler and Haskins’ approach is insightful, and relevant to how New Orleans is used in many film representations (St. Louis Cathedral, probably the most common New Orleans postcard image, is used as a metonym in *Saratoga Trunk* and *The Belle of New Orleans*). While film representations of the city condense that city’s politics and geography to the average viewer,

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86 Gary Boulard, *The Big Lie: Hale Boggs, Lucille May Grace, and Leander Perez in 1951* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 2001), 32; Straw, 112. The cooperation of the city government with *New Orleans Uncensored* is actually announced on a title at the beginning of the film, with many city officials also playing themselves on-screen, including the police superintendent and a judge. *New Orleans After Dark* ends with the disclaimer “Filmed by MPA Productions with the cooperation of the City of New Orleans and the New Orleans Police Department, and also features NOPD officers playing cops on-screen.

Sadler and Haskins downplay the importance of the political mechanizations in how an icon from a city emerges as metonymic of a city at large. Given the long and complicated political developments that led to St. Louis Cathedral’s prominence on both the postcard and the silver screen, it is inevitable that some element of the political sparring between developers and preservationists is reflected in the ongoing persona of the city.

By contrast, Lynnell L. Thomas’ framework of televisual tourism considers the representation of a city in terms of its connection to the city’s contemporary politics. Discussing the post-Katrina racial politics of HBO series *Treme* (2010-2013), Thomas notes that the show creates a tourist gaze in its viewers, providing local views of the city otherwise considered off-limits to tourists visiting the city. Thomas writes about an era of New Orleans defined by both political crisis and cultural saturation: the location identity of New Orleans, still developing in the early twentieth century, was by the 2000s established to the point of stereotype. However, it is worth considering televisual tourism as it applies to an earlier era, during which these now-commonplace perceptions of New Orleans were first being established. Two films of the classical and transitional eras will be analyzed along these lines, considering how both contribute to the location identity of New Orleans. Just as the tragedy and displacement wrought by Hurricane Katrina informed the mediation of New Orleans in *Treme*, so did the literary mythologization of the Creoles, the subsequent preservation of the French Quarter, and the city’s overall attempts at modernization inform these earlier cinematic renderings of New Orleans.

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The Two New Orleans of Kazan

Two films provide a rare opportunity for comparison: on-screen iterations of New Orleans, one on-location and one in-studio, both produced by the same filmmaker. One of the most celebrated Hollywood filmmakers of his era, Elia Kazan directed back-to-back films set in New Orleans: *Panic in the Streets*, a film noir shot on location and released in 1950, and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, his 1951 adaptation of Tennessee Williams’ 1947 play of the same name. *Panic in the Streets* emblemsizes several of the trends that defined Hollywood filmmaking and representations of New Orleans from the period. Set in the present-day and utilizing multiple areas of the city, *Panic* represents the city as seedy and corrupt, while jettisoning the Creole origins that contributed to that persona. *Streetcar* is, at first glance, an odd choice to represent the mode of Old Hollywood New Orleans costume dramas: it was released in 1951, well after the Paramount Decree, and is set in the present-day rather than the nineteenth century of Creole New Orleans. Furthermore, as Catharine Savage Brosman argues, despite Blanche DuBois’ patrician background and French family name implies, “the play has no further connection to the Creole past or present.”

While Brosman’s conclusions regarding Williams’ original play may be correct, when framed within the history of New Orleans’ film representations, Kazan’s on-screen realization of the city in *Streetcar* places the film directly within an old Hollywood tradition of adaptations of literary and theatrical texts about decadent Creoles. Additionally, both *Panic* and *Streetcar* provide ample opportunity to analyze each film’s realization of New Orleans. Kazan, who started as a theater director, wanted to capture the city in its reality with *Panic in the Streets*, distancing

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himself from his previously “theatrical” works like *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1945) and *Gentleman’s Agreement* (1947). Whatever the reason, Kazan’s visual style—characterized by long takes in deep focus, and complex blocking that allows actors to explore the space within the frame—makes his 1950s films particularly suited for analysis of how they use both interior and exterior location.

Kazan’s rendering of Williams’ New Orleans in *Streetcar*, studio-bound and centered in the French Quarter, evokes a specific decadence that is tied more directly to the traditional perceptions of the city’s old-world decay. Analyzing and comparing both films in regard “to the background,” while taking the production context into account, makes it possible to demonstrate the evolution of New Orleans’ popular identity. Released a year after *Panic*, *Streetcar* artificially-enhances many modern characteristics of New Orleans while repeating the trends of Hollywood’s New Orleans-set costume dramas. The result of these choices is a film representation of New Orleans embodying the literary image of New Orleans, evoking the city’s Creole heritage. While both films feature themes of corruption and racial and ethnic diversity, the corruption and diversity of *Panic in the Streets* reflect the city’s modern political realities, with a much more Anglicized and racially-segregated portrayal of the city. By contrast, *Streetcar’s* themes are steeped in the literary and filmic traditions of Old New Orleans, set in the modern day but evoking New Orleans’ complicated Creole mythology. The New Orleans of these two films, and the circumstances of each film’s production, demonstrate that while studio replications of the city verge into the hyperreal, location filmmaking can be just as subjective and selective, and does not necessarily constitute a more accurate portrayal of an urban landscape.

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“As Multiethnic as Possible”: The New Orleans of Panic in the Streets

The opening shot of New Orleans in Panic in the Streets is a long track of Bourbon Street at night. As Elmer Bernstein’s jazzy score plays over the opening credits, the viewer is greeted with the flashing neon signs of clubs that dotted the French Quarter street in 1950, including Leroy Gale’s Sugar Bowl, Moulin Rouge, and Gunga Den. Far from the old-world of Saratoga Trunk or Jezebel, the Quarter of Panic in the Streets is a modern neighborhood of Greek cafés, laundromats, and back-alley apartment buildings with ramshackle breezeways. Rather than harkening back to its past as a Francophone neighborhood, or foreshadowing its future as a gentrified tourist zone, the Quarter of Panic reflects the paradoxes of its identity in 1950: a growing number of nightclubs, but with clear vestiges of its then-diminishing identity as a diverse ethnic neighborhood.

While this modern Quarter is front-and-center from the start, the film does not limit the action of the film to that neighborhood. The story of the film follows Clint Reed (Richard Widmark), a Navy doctor who, upon discovering that a murder victim carries pneumonic plague, leads a manhunt to find the killers and prevent an epidemic from breaking out. The film simultaneously follows the gangster Blackie (Jack Palance) who, along with his goons (Zero Mostel, Guy Thomajan), murdered patient zero and are unwittingly infected. Along the way, the film shows off several locations within the city: every scene of Panic was filmed on location. The scenes that reveal Reed’s family life and regular arguments with his wife (Barbara Bel Geddes) over finances take place in a quiet neighborhood, either a white middle-class area of the city or a metropolitan suburb. His investigation pushes him across several areas of the city, including a freighter anchored off of the coast, a Greek diner in the Quarter, and several parts of the Central Business District, including the coroner’s office, City Hall, and Lafayette Square.
The investigation closes in on an apartment complex in the Quarter, where Blackie’s associate Poldi (Thomajan) is bed-ridden and dying of plague. When Reed confronts Blackie as he is attempting to carry Poldi down rickety stairs in a stretcher, Blackie throws Poldi over the railing and runs away. The chase continues onto the Bienville Street Wharf, then adjacent to the Quarter on the riverbank, in a coffee warehouse.

Within this mapping of locations, a pattern emerges. Three neighborhoods—the French Quarter (which then included the port), the CBD, and an unnamed suburban or residential neighborhood—appear on-screen. This grouping consists of a gentrifying white ethnic working-class enclave, a non-residential downtown, and a white residential neighborhood. While more inclusive than the French Quarter-only-New Orleans’ of the previous era, this collection of areas nonetheless paints a predominantly-white picture of the city. These demographics are also reflected in the people that populate the New Orleans of Panic. Kazan took pains to make his film “as multiethnic as possible,” drawing from both his own Greek background and New Orleans’ diverse white ethnic population.91 This multiethnic picture includes American characters of Greek and Italian descent, Chinese cooks and sailors, and African-American dockworkers. Kazan’s dedication to a multicultural depiction of New Orleans is admirable, especially given the lack of such diversity in other films of the era. However, the lack of any black speaking roles, or interest in exploring New Orleans’ black neighborhoods or complicated racial dynamics, represents a step backward from even the conservative period films of the 1930s.

91 Alain Silver and James Ursini, audio commentary for Panic in the Streets. The choice of making a Greek café a key plot point to the story likely emerged from Kazan’s own Greek background, rather than an attempt to reflect the demographics of New Orleans.
In addition to making *Panic* as multiethnic as possible, Kazan made an effort to make his film as “New Orleans” as possible. In an interview later in life, Kazan notes that he wanted to “exploit the environment. It’s so terrific and colorful. I wanted boats, steam engines, warehouses, jazz joints—all of New Orleans—in that picture.” To this end, Kazan cast several local actors and nonprofessionals in minor speaking roles, including several actors from Le Petit Théâtre du Vieux Carré, a community theatre troupe dating back to the 1910s bohemian scene in the Quarter. Kazan also incorporated jazz conspicuously into the diegetic sound of the film, employing many of the musicians he met during filming. Many shot selections, such as opening the first scene outdoors at night, were chosen to emphasize New Orleans’ unique environment. To this end, Kazan received the full cooperation from Mayor Morrison’s government, who was eager to have the production in the city, either for the exposure, the economic stimulation, or both. This eager cooperation from the civic government both harkens back to New Orleans’ early efforts to court film studios in the early twentieth century, and foreshadows Louisiana’s eventual more overt efforts to court production in the twenty-first.

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92 Jeff Young, *Kazan: The Master Director Discusses His Films* (New York: Newmarket Press, 1999), 64.


94 Young, 66.

95 Young, 66.

96 Elia Kazan, *A Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989), 379; Silver and Ulsini. While both Kazan and Silver & Ulsini highlight Morrison’s eagerness to accommodate the film production—Silver and Ulsini note that “they cleaned out an entire bordello so that they could stay there”—neither go into the specific motives for the city government to accommodate Kazan’s shoot. For his part, Kazan recalls embracing the spirit of the city during production. In an explicit and candid passage of his memoir, he recalls “a ‘carny’ atmosphere,” and that after his family returned to New York, he “bunked with a gentle, generous young woman who’d recently given birth; when we made love, her milk was all over my chest. Living irregularly, I was in heaven.”
Despite his efforts, Kazan’s success in capturing New Orleans’ environment is mixed. While the occasional trumpet riff nods to the city’s jazz culture, Elmer Bernstein’s otherwise traditional orchestral score clashes with Kazan’s diegetic incorporation of jazz musicians. Similarly, the locals cast in the film, while providing texture to the film’s presentation of the city, only draw further attention to the incongruity of the professional actors, none of whom attempt a local accent. Incongruity can also be found in the film’s portrayal of the city’s corruption. While the city is portrayed as a dock town with no shortage of nightlife, the extent of the city’s corruption stops (almost literally) at the water’s edge, as the city’s government and law enforcement are portrayed in a fairly positive light. This choice has been seen as representative of 1950s film noir’s turn towards respect for government institutions, and of Kazan’s “good government” liberalism: Widmark’s Reed, a navy doctor, is the ultimate righteous government official, seeking to reconcile federal and municipal government for the greater good.97 This portrayal can also be viewed as quid pro quo for civic cooperation Kazan received: as historians Alain Silver and James Ulsini note on their audio commentary, in exchange for cooperating with the production, Mayor Morrison’s city was portrayed “in a relatively positive light.”98 While the location filming of this period allowed for unprecedented access to real-life locations, it also resulted in limitations that were not a concern in previous studio representations of New Orleans.

Kazan later expressed disappointment in his perceived shortcomings in representing New Orleans. In his memoir, Kazan notes that despite his attempts to incorporate jazz into the film, he regrets how little of the city he was able to incorporate into the film’s sound design, noting that

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98 Silver and Ulsini.
he vowed after that production to “never again leave my sound track to a producer and his musical director.” 99 This would not be the only element of *Panic in the Streets*’ production that Kazan would later recall with regret. In a 1971 interview, Stuart Byron and Martin L. Rubin frame a question to Kazan by noting that “Although both this film and *A Streetcar Named Desire* take place in New Orleans, in *Panic in the Streets* it’s anonymous, it could be any city, whereas *Streetcar* has a New Orleans feel.” 100 The framing of this question is not entirely fair, perhaps reflecting Byron and Rubin’s preference for the more atmospheric New Orleans of *Streetcar*. Nonetheless, Kazan’s response to this question is telling: bemoaning that the New Orleans of *Panic* did not fully capture what he saw in the locations in-person. Kazan recalls that there was “so much wet corrosion in New Orleans…but when you look at it on film, you wouldn’t know.” He then pivots to discussing *Streetcar*, noting that for his follow-up film, he had “a terrific art director [Richard Day], and I said to him ‘I want these walls to perspire!’…When I photographed it actually in life, it didn’t come over.” 101 Thus, Kazan’s lesson from shooting on-location in *Panic*: even with real locations, you may not get the desired atmosphere.

“I Don’t Want Realism. I Want Magic”: The New Orleans of *A Streetcar Named Desire*

The image behind the opening credits of *A Streetcar Named Desire* provides a clear picture of the New Orleans Kazan is intent on portraying in this film. While *Panic in the Streets* presents a living, breathing French Quarter in its opening track of Bourbon Street, *Streetcar* presents a single image of a French Quarter building: time literally standing still in New Orleans. The wrought-iron balconies and half-visible courtyard signify a Creole mansion of the Quarter,

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101 Byron and Rubin, 133.
while the cracked plaster and exposed brick of the exterior wall reveal the dilapidated state of the building. While the New Orleans of Panic appeared run-down in parts, the character of Streetcar’s decrepitude strongly evokes an old-world flavor: this is the French Quarter that the Creoles abandoned, more evocative of the decaying mansion of Saratoga Trunk than Panic’s Bourbon Street nightclubs.

This version of Streetcar, a mostly faithful adaptation of the play, follows Blanche DuBois (Vivien Leigh), a schoolteacher from an old Southern family, as she arrives in New Orleans to live with her sister, Stella (Kim Hunter), after losing their family’s ancestral home, Belle Reve, to creditors. When she realizes that Stella is living in much lower standards than she believes her family is worthy of, and married to a crude Polish-American mechanic, Stanley Kowalski (Marlon Brando), she lashes out, calling Stanley a “Pollack” and telling Stella that he’s “low.” When Stanley finds out Blanche’s lies—she was thrown out of her school for having sex with a student, and was run out of her hometown—her remaining grasp on reality begins to slip, and is shattered entirely when Stanley rapes her while Stella is at the hospital delivering their baby. After her subsequent mental breakdown, Blanche is committed to an institution, and Stella, in the one major departure from the original play, takes her baby and leaves Stanley, seemingly never to return.

Kazan aimed to make the New Orleans within the film an extension of the characters’ psyches, particularly Blanche’s. Calling his approach to Streetcar “the opposite of Panic in the Streets,” Kazan notes that “In Streetcar all the externals come from the internals.”102 To paraphrase a character in Chinatown (Roman Polanski, 1974), if Kazan sought with Panic to bring his characters to New Orleans, with Streetcar he sought to bring New Orleans to his

102 Young, 84.
characters. This approach resulted in few location changes from the original play: with the exception of three scenes, all of the action of the film takes place in and around Elysian Fields, the Creole mansion-turned-decaying apartment complex.

This was not Kazan’s original plan for his adaptation: after he caved to Williams’ request that he adapt *Streetcar* for the screen, Kazan envisioned “opening up” the play. This process would involve extending the narrative to include Blanche’s time at Belle Reve before she arrives in New Orleans, filming on location both in the city and in the Mississippi Delta, and making “the old city’s presence a force.”103 After collaborating on a draft of this screenplay, Kazan balked at the idea, realizing that the play’s effectiveness stemmed “precisely from its compression, from the fact that Blanche was trapped in those two small rooms, where she’d be constantly aware that she was dangerously irritating Stanley and couldn’t escape if she needed to.”104 From this realization, Kazan doubled down on a more theatrical adaptation of *Streetcar*, not only recreating New Orleans on a soundstage at Warners but making stylistic choices that enhanced the psychological violence of the story. This included designing the apartment set so that the walls could be moved to make the set smaller as Blanche’s reality began to collapse, along with achieving his much-desired wall sweat.105

The result of this stylistic direction of *Streetcar* is a very limited geography of New Orleans. While *Panic in the Streets* utilized dozens of interior and exterior locations scattered across three different neighborhoods, *Streetcar* only features four different locations in the entire

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105 Kazan, *A Life*, 384; Byron and Rubin, 133.
The first scene after the opening credits, when Blanche arrives in New Orleans by train and asks a helpful sailor where she can find the titular streetcar, takes place at the old Louisville and Nashville Train Station, at the foot of Canal Street in the CBD. Two of the locations—the bowling alley where Stanley plays, and Elysian Fields—are located in the French Quarter. The final location is an unnamed waterfront pavilion where Blanche goes on a date with Mitch (Karl Malden), one of Stanley’s friends. Of these locations, only the train station was shot on location, though as Scott Jordan Harris notes, even this choice of location—an aging, congested, and smoke-filled train platform—contributes to the claustrophobia found in the rest of the film.\textsuperscript{107}

The effect of this selection of locations is a mix of old-world and new-world imagery, almost all of which is centered within the French Quarter, as the vast majority of the film’s action still takes place in and around Elysian Fields. Blanche’s first venture in the French Quarter highlights this dichotomy: fading in from the previous moment when she gets on the streetcar, Blanche is shown in wide shot walking into a cacophonous street scene with neon signs, nuns escorting children across the street, and a man walking past her holding a dead chicken. Jazz piano and trumpet can be heard, along with the crash of a rowdy saloon, the honking of car horns, and crowds laughing. Once Blanche turns into the courtyard of Elysian Fields, however, the volume of the city is turned down as the screen fixates on the old brick, cracked plaster, and grand staircase of the old building. Two women sit on a couch in the middle of the courtyard: Eunice (Peg Hillias), a white woman, and upstairs neighbor to Stanley and Stella, and an

\textsuperscript{106} In the original play, the action never leaves Elysian Fields.

unnamed black woman (Marietta Canty). Blanche is lost, and the building is so beneath her expectations that she does not even realize that she is standing in Elysian Fields.

The scene evokes many of the perceived paradoxes of the French Quarter in the twentieth century: a mixture of the modern and old-world, the sacred and the profane (nuns and bar fights, St. Louis Cathedral and Bourbon Street). This is the “cousin of Montmartre” that Umberto Eco evokes in *Travels in Hyper Reality*, with old Creole structures, strip joints, and restaurants “still…inhabited by *Gone with the Wind* characters.” Though Eco was speaking of his real-life experiences in the city, there is nonetheless a heightened reality to his description, one that is embodied in Kazan’s studio replication of this unnamed French Quarter intersection. In an era that saw several prominent replications of New Orleans streets on-screen, Kazan nonetheless had to return to the studio to find the New Orleans of his (and others’) imagination.

Unsurprisingly, Kazan’s heightened-reality New Orleans draws from preexisting iconography of the city found in Classical Hollywood period dramas of the past. Like most of these earlier representations, action takes place almost exclusively in the French Quarter. Like the New Orleans scenes of *Saratoga Trunk*, the center of action is a Creole mansion that time forgot. As in *Jezebel*, the streets are continually inhabited with black street vendors selling “red hots” and “fresh fish.” Though *Streetcar* centers entirely around white characters, showing no interest in the transgressed color lines of *Saratoga Trunk* or *My Forbidden Past*, the French Quarter of *Streetcar* is not only multiethnic but multiracial, with black extras populating the spatial and aural dimensions of this film in servile roles, similar to the black characters in *Jezebel*. Though there is no overt mention of slavery in *Streetcar*, the ancestral home of the

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DuBois’, Belle Reve, is described as a columned country mansion, an image that calls to mind an antebellum plantation that once used slaves.

Like Eco’s New Orleans, the New Orleans of Streetcar is inhabited by a Gone with the Wind character. Though Vivien Leigh played Blanche on the London stage, Kazan cast her over Jessica Tandy, the originator of Blanche, because of Leigh’s star power, indebted to the enduring popularity of the 1939 film adaptation of Gone with the Wind, and Leigh’s turn as Scarlett O’Hara. Mark Royden Winchell is not the only scholar to make the association of Blanche as a fading, failed Scarlett, and Belle Reve as a latter-day Tara that could not be saved.\(^{109}\) While both Williams’ original play and Kazan’s adaptation of Streetcar comment on the hypocrisy and decline of the Southern aristocracy, with the exception of a mention of Blanche and Stella dining at the Creole restaurant Galatoire’s, the play makes no direct references to Creole culture. However, there are several elements that invite comparisons between Blanche’s story with the cinematic tradition of white Louisiana Creoles. In a vivid memory that Blanche recollects to Stanley regarding how she lost Belle Reve, she recalls the generations of vice and indolence by the family patriarchs. “Piece-by-piece our improvident grandfathers exchanged the land for their epic debauches, to put it mildly. Finally, all that was left…was the house itself, and about twenty acres of ground, including a graveyard, to which now all, but Stella and I, have retreated.”\(^ {110}\) While debauchery and financial failure are not characteristics exclusive to white Creole aristocrats, this cultural connection is reinforced by the film’s setting, the French names of


\(^{110}\) This reflection of indiscretion and failure upon the men of Belle Rive is echoed later in the film, when Blanche recalls that “I lived in a house where dying old women remembered their dead men.”
DuBois and Belle Reve, and the location of the mansion in a fictional town in Mississippi Delta, an area where Creoles also settled. These characteristics add up to the conclusion that Blanche and Stella as scions of a Creole dynasty, which, like many such families, had declined to the point of irrelevance by the mid-twentieth century. The wrought-iron balconies, crumbling exterior, and broken chandeliers of the film’s French Quarter mansion only confirm this evocation within the film’s universe.

These old-world evocations of Blanche and Elysian Fields come into conflict with the very modern New Orleans beyond the mansion’s courtyard. With *Streetcar*, Kazan built upon his self-perceived shortcomings in evoking New Orleans in *Panic* with his sound design of *Streetcar*. In *Kazan on Directing*, he lists his intended aural evocations in a stream-of-consciousness passage: “Cathedral bells, chickens, 4-Deuces, distant fights. Bowling pins. Drunks going home at night. Auto horns. Babies crying. Factory whistles. Trains, all kinds. Bells.” Within a collection of mostly modern sounds, Kazan begins and ends by mentioning the sound of bells, highlighting the contrast of the old and new within the French Quarter. This also reflects *Streetcar*’s set design: though Kazan transplants the neon signs of the real Quarter in *Panic* onto the Warner’s soundstage, there is an intentional contrast of this era with the old-world decay of Elysian Fields. Even the modern streets feel more old-world by comparison to the “real thing”: the streets are narrow to the point of buildings closing in on each other, making the already-cramped French Quarter feel even more confined and European. Near the end of the film, as Blanche is shuttled away to an institution, she reacts to the sound of the bells from St. Louis Cathedral. “Cathedral chimes. They’re the only clean thing in the Quarter.” Taking into

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111 Fertel, *Imagining a Creole City*, 4-5.
account Kazan’s intention of making the externals come from the internals, these choices all reflect Blanche’s mindset: her white Creole aristocratic sensibilities clashing with the modern sounds of the 1950s French Quarter.

**Conclusion: This Story Could Be Anywhere. It Happens to Be in New Orleans.**

The New Orleans’ of *Panic in the Streets* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* reflect two conflicting images of the city: one modern, Anglicized, and “real,” the other old-world, Latin, and hyperreal. However, to say that either of Elia Kazan’s representations of New Orleans is more accurate or truthful than the other would be to engage in fruitless subjective debates over authenticity. As Celestino Deleyto notes in his analysis of Los Angeles in film, “the views of the city that films convey are all equally ‘real,’ equally incomplete and inescapably ideological.”

The audience sees more of New Orleans in *Panic in the Streets*, but the process by which that New Orleans is mediated—not just through screenplay and shot selection, but through civic cooperation, and the limitations in what Kazan could distill from his first-hand experiences—frames that New Orleans within a political agenda that negates the city’s racial dynamics and history. The New Orleans of *A Streetcar Named Desire* draws directly from the city’s literary Creole legacy, a legacy which was distorted and romanticized over a half-century of literary and film depictions of the ethnic group. A more tenable approach for understanding these films can be seen as a part of cultural studies, and the relationship between tourism and filmed representation. Just as tourists flocked to the French Quarter to find Creoles after reading about them in the novels of George Washington Cable, and to walk the grounds of the Battle of New Orleans after seeing *The Buccaneer* (1938), so did tourists flock to the city to ride the Desire

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113 Deleyto, 4.
114 Stanonis, 1-27.
The mythology of the Creoles in the writings of Cable, Hearn, Saxon and others contributed both to the Quarter’s preservation and to the prominence of white Creoles in the popular imaginary of the early twentieth century, two factors that fed into Hollywood’s studio recreations of the city and the Creoles. As the old-world charm of this image ceded in favor of a more modern iteration of corruption, the two images gradually merged in the popular identity of the city, as demonstrated by the dueling old world/new world personas of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Far from emerging from a vacuum, the respective New Orleans’ of *Streetcar* and *Panic in the Streets* result from decades-long political machinations regarding the French Quarter and its preservation. That *Streetcar* evokes more of a “New Orleans feel” than *Panic* was as much a result of the political and production realities of each film, with the French Quarter of *Streetcar* created in a studio in Burbank, 2000 miles away from any municipal authority willing to object.

The presentation of New Orleans in *Panic in the Streets* as a modern American city was a rare instance in which the city’s representation was not defined by an exceptionalist narrative. The New Orleans of *Panic* could have easily been swapped out for New York, which was entirely Mayor Morrison’s point: the industrial might of mid-twentieth century New York was the aspirational model for New Orleans’ economic growth. Though the docudrama era of Transitional Hollywood would be followed by even more location filming of New Orleans, future representations of the Quarter would, ironically, more closely resemble the artificiality of *Streetcar* than the gritty realism of *Panic*. As the city continued to preserve and package the

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115 Stanonis, 97.
Quarter for tourist consumption, New Orleans would more closely resemble a studio recreation than the rickety ethnic enclave of the early twentieth century. This process of “museumization,” by which both the Quarter and New Orleans at large would become its own backlot, would lead to even more New Orleans iconography appearing on-screen in Hollywood productions, and the emergence of a more clearly-defined identity, and accompanying nickname, for the city.116

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Five minutes into the James Bond adventure *Live and Let Die* (Guy Hamilton, 1973), the film cuts to the corner of Dumaine and Chartres Street in the French Quarter, where a white MI6 agent in a suit and fedora (Robert Dix) smokes a cigarette and looks across the street at a restaurant called “Fillet of Soul.” After “New Orleans, Louisiana” fades on and off-screen, a brass band rounds the corner. It is a jazz funeral second line, a New Orleans tradition with German and African musical roots. The leader of the procession, the Olympia Brass Brand, was a common sight in New Orleans film from the 1950s. Composed entirely of African-American attendees, the parade is solemn, with band and second line slowly marching to “Just a Closer Walk to Thee.” As the agent looks on, he is approached on his side by a black man in a suit (Alvin Alcorn, a New Orleans-native jazz trumpeter). “So, whose funeral is it?” the agent asks the man. “Yours,” the man replies, who then stabs the agent in the gut, causing him to immediately fall dead to the ground. As the procession reaches the man’s body in the street, the pallbearers lower the coffin over the body, clicking it shut and lifting the coffin back up. Instantly, the procession turns celebratory: the trumpet blares the opening notes to the upbeat “Joe Avery’s Piece,” the second-line members open up garishly-colored umbrellas, and the pace of the march accelerates, with even the grieving “widow” smiling and dancing along.

A far cry from the gothic overtones of the studio artifice of *Saratoga Trunk* (Sam Wood, 1945), *Live and Let Die* features New Orleans “in the flesh,” its iconic streets and distinctive

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118 The band does have one white trombonist.
jazz rendering the title card nearly redundant. Far from being any more or less “authentic,” this representation of the city reflects the political realities of its era. While the New Orleans’ Creole influence remains visible in the Quarter’s distinctive architecture, the city’s racial dynamics are now flattened into a black/white binary. The French Quarter’s heritage as the historic neighborhood of the white Creoles is either forgotten or ignored (the French Quarter was never a predominantly black neighborhood, as it is presented in the Bond film). Similarly, while the blackface of Flora Robson in Saratoga Trunk is a bygone relic, the racial dynamics nonetheless remain troubling. Live and Let Die trembles at the threat of black male sexuality as embodied by the black antagonist Dr. Kananga (Yaphet Kotto), prime minister of a fictional Caribbean nation, who moonlights as a drug dealer and keeps a young white woman as a ward. Most significantly in relation to this study, New Orleanians are portrayed as eccentric (in this case, homicidal) characters obsessed with local traditions (in this case, jazz funerals). This attitude reflects New Orleans emerging “Big Easy” identity, which would come to dominate representations of New Orleans during this period.

Live and Let Die was released at the transitional point between two eras of American filmmaking. The first of these eras, commonly called “New Hollywood” (1967-1974), is often recognized as an era of unprecedented artistic daring, during which American auteurs exerted a level of creative control unseen before or since.119 The era that followed, the “Age of the Blockbuster” (1975-present), saw the reconsolidation of studio power by their corporate owners, defined by big-budget spectacles based on known intellectual properties.120 While the exact

start and end points of these respective eras are debatable, their collective effect on representations of cityscapes like New Orleans is less so, as both eras saw an increase in both location filmmaking and explicit thematic content that continued to flesh out cinematic cityscapes. Furthermore, the formal innovations that defined New Hollywood carried into the Age of the Blockbuster: though the acid-trip in St. Louis Cemetery at the end of New Hollywood pioneer Easy Rider (Dennis Hopper, 1969) was a product of the era’s countercultural leanings, the influence of that era’s formal innovation can be seen in the similarly-edited nightmare sequences of Angel Heart (Alan Parker, 1987).

Prior to the 1960s, Hollywood’s representation of New Orleans was defined by the growing divide between studio-created period pieces, which centered on the white Creoles and their perceived decadence, and more modern representations of the city, which were filmed on-location and presented a more Americanized, white-washed depiction of the city’s corruption. The New Hollywood and Blockbuster eras would witness cinematic New Orleans regress back to an exceptionalist identity. Some period pieces and Creole literary adaptations would continue to appear, such as Pretty Baby (Louis Malle, 1978) and Interview with the Vampire: The Vampire Chronicles (Neil Jordan, 1994). However, most New Orleans films of these eras are set in the present day, while evoking a debased attitude that hearkens back to the city’s Latin heritage and highlights its iconic local traditions. This “Big Easy” identity combined depictions of New Orleans’ colonial architecture with characters that echo literary stereotypes of New Orleans’s decadent Creoles. In these films, locals listen to local jazz, Cajun, and brass band music, and talk in exaggerated, often indecipherable accents. Though other areas of the city become visually associated with New Orleans at large, the location of the Big Easy remains firmly in the French Quarter. Films embracing this “Big Easy” identity often underline New
Orleans’ exceptionality by presenting the city as francophone, a distortion of a city in which English has long been the predominant tongue of locals.

The “Big Easy” identity has direct roots in New Orleans’ increased tourism campaigns; the name originated from a suggested play on New York’s “Big Apple,” with the intent of improving the marketing of the city’s Mardi Gras season.¹²¹ This increased marketing was itself a result of the city’s mid-century economic downturn, as the city’s decades-long efforts to make New Orleans a “modern” city of industry was coming to an unsuccessful close. By the 1960s, the effects of deindustrialization led to New Orleans’ factories gradually closing and moving to other cities, while lack of development and discord within the city’s maritime community contributed to the city’s shipping companies and tenants moving to adjacent cities in Louisiana and Texas.¹²² By the 1970s, with no recourse, Mayor Maurice “Moon” Landrieu directed the city’s resources into developing New Orleans as a tourist attraction. The ultimate effect of these efforts was the transformation of the French Quarter into what J. Mark Souther calls “Creole Disneyland,” in which the Quarter became cleaner, safer, and more family-friendly, closely resembling New Orleans Square, its simulacrum counterpart in Anaheim. More broadly, the jobs filled by this tourist overhaul paid far less than the industrial jobs they replaced, contributing to the development of an underclass of predominantly African-American service industry workers.¹²³

These developments directly affected how New Orleans was presented on-screen. The on-location representations of the city in the 1950s showed a living, modern city. Far from the sprawling grime of Panic in the Streets (Elia Kazan, 1950), the New Orleans of Live and Let Die

¹²¹ Souther, 153.
¹²² Souther, 34-37.
scarcely leaves the French Quarter. That Quarter appears bright and immaculate, with clean streets and freshly-painted facades (the only thing close to resembling litter on the ground is the dead MI6 agent, and even he is quickly picked up). Though a city’s appearance in a location shoot is altered by the set decorator as dictated by the film story needs, the fact remains that Landrieu and the city government attempted to turn New Orleans of the 1970s into a cleaner, brighter, and more welcoming place, a reality that inevitably affected the city’s on-screen appearances. With the establishment of the Louisiana Film Industry Commission in 1973, the state government took its first major step in promoting in-state production. This measure only enhanced New Orleans’ status as a popular film location, as the state courted productions looking to instill atmosphere into their films, even if the film was originally set elsewhere.¹²⁴

No media text did more to popularize this “Big Easy” identity than the film of the same name.¹²⁵ Though praised by national critics upon its release for its realistic depiction of New Orleans, The Big Easy (Jim McBride, 1987) is notorious among locals for its exaggerated representation of New Orleans’ residents and culture. As the standard-bearer of this new tradition of New Orleans representation, The Big Easy geographically compresses the city into a handful of identifiable neighborhoods, while portraying local residents as cartoonish and quirky. The film also incorporates Cajuns into the cityscape, contributing to misconceptions about Cajun people

¹²⁴ Though Live and Let Die’s production predated the Louisiana Film Commission, it represents an early example of this trend of relocation. Ian Fleming’s original novel was set in Jamaica, Harlem, and St. Petersburg, Florida, screenwriter Tom Mankiewicz relocated the Florida scenes to New Orleans for no other reason than the Bond franchise had yet to travel there, and because he thought its jazz culture would add atmosphere to the film. The choice of New Orleans iconography was equally arbitrary: Broccoli settled on the jazz funeral only because a Mardi Gras parade would look too similar to the Junkanoo celebration that already appeared in the Bahamas-set Thunderball (Terence Young, 1965). Paul Duncan, ed., The James Bond Archives (Cologne, Germany: Taschen, 2015), 221.

¹²⁵ Souther, 261-262.
and their relationship to New Orleans. Though the film presents a New Orleans rife with
corruption, its breezy presentation of the city as the fun, exciting “Big Easy” contribute to the
city’s tourist image. Far from being just an empty romp, The Big Easy subtly reflects the political
dynamics related to New Orleans and tourism from that era.

**New Orleans, the Tourist Town**

The journey of New Orleans from a city hoping to court tourists to a city that needs them
to survive economically was gradual. From the railroad company-driven advertisements of the
1880s, to the heritage tourism tied to the Vieux Carré in the 1920s, to the post-war vice town
shaped by the veterans who were stationed in the city as sailors, each era saw an increase of
interest in the city’s sites and cultural events.126 Despite this gradual increase in tourism, political
and economic figures of New Orleans long considered tourism a secondary industry, giving more
attention to developing the port, industry, and infrastructure.127 In no era was this more
pronounced than in the mayoral reign of deLesseps “Chep” Morrison. In his four terms in office,
from 1946 to 1961, Morrison attempted to fill the void of industrial production left by the end of
World War II, while emphasizing trade connections with Mexico and Latin American countries
to increase cargo through the city’s port. Morrison also promoted the city’s tourist attractions,
including Mardi Gras and the Sugar Bowl college football game, but he never viewed tourism as
a foundation for the future of New Orleans.128 Though he understood the importance of the

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126 Carolyn Bender, “All Board to Mardi Gras! Railroad Travel Advertising, Press
Coverage, and Tourism in New Orleans After Reconstruction,” *The Atlanta Review of
Orleans and the Emergence of Modern Tourism, 1918-1945* (Athens: University of Georgia
Press, 2006), 141-169; Souther, 43-44.

127 Souther, 22-24.

128 Souther, 22.
Bourbon Street dives to New Orleans’ popular identity, he openly stated that he would trade all of the French Quarter “for a few blocks of really modern apartments housing a thriving middle class.”129 The modernity desired by city officials versus the heritage and vice sought by tourists proved irreconcilable as long as city leaders prioritized development and industry as the future of New Orleans.

The city’s emphasis on modernization shifted in the 1960s, as a series of civic and economic realities altered the landscape of New Orleans. As shipping technology progressed to containerization, adjacent port cities like Mobile and Gulfport began to siphon off the shrinking number of stevedore jobs, a problem exacerbated by New Orleans’ lethargy in modernizing its port facilities.130 Factory jobs continued to leave the city for cities in the surrounding south, while those that remained, like NASA’s Michoud Assembly Facility, employed far fewer workers than initially anticipated, with many of those jobs requiring more education than could be found among New Orleans’ undereducated workforce.131 Additionally, as the city gradually integrated its municipal facilities and schools, and as the interstate and adjacent suburbs continued to expand, the city’s population decreased, becoming increasingly black and impoverished with fewer job opportunities than in previous eras. By the time “Moon” Landrieu was elected as mayor in 1970, the city’s population had declined from its 1960 peak of 627,000 to 593,000. As the trends of urban sprawl and declining job prospects continued, that number would only further decline through the rest of the twentieth century.

131 Souther, 191; Ellis, 108.
Landrieu, a white mayor elected on the promise of increasing black civic influence, saw no recourse but to dedicate the city’s resources towards developing the city as a tourist attraction. While Landrieu oversaw the construction of the Louisiana Superdome and advocated for an increase in civic promotion of the city to tourists and conventioneers, his influence is particularly conspicuous in his alterations of the French Quarter. Developments promoted and implemented in the Quarter during Landrieu’s administration include turning Jackson Square into a pedestrian mall, opening up a promenade on the Square’s previously-industrial riverfront, and renovating the French Market into a more tourist-friendly bazaar. These changes, all implemented with the hope of drawing more tourists, continued the area’s ongoing decline as a living neighborhood, as rents continued to rise and residential conveniences dwindled. The French Market renovation is a particularly acute demonstration of this decline: once a thriving fish and produce market, Landrieu’s renovations pushed out the remaining market vendors in favor of merchandise booths and food and beverage shops.\textsuperscript{132} The French Quarter that emerged from these renovations, combined with the efforts by developers of previous decades in creating modern hotels imitating Creole architecture, is labeled by J. Mark Souther as “Creole Disneyland,” a family-friendly theme park that more closely resembles the Quarter’s Disneyland replica, New Orleans Square, than a living, breathing neighborhood.\textsuperscript{133}

New Orleans would continue to rely on tourism for its economic viability in the ensuing years. From the 1973 into the 1980s, fueled by the OPEC oil embargo and federal deregulation of oil prices, New Orleans experienced a brief oil boom which produced jobs and fueled high-

\textsuperscript{132} Souther, 168-169.

\textsuperscript{133} Souther, 182.
rise construction. In the mid-1980s, during the mayoral term of Ernest “Dutch” Morial, a black Creole civil rights activist and the city’s first black mayor, the local oil industry crashed, leading to a civic financial crisis. With little success courting industry, Morial continued his predecessor’s legacy of relying on tourism, helping to build the convention center that would later be renamed in his honor, and spearheading the city’s ill-fated hosting of the 1984 World Exposition. Morial’s successor, Sidney Bartholemy, would further prioritize tourism development by expanding the convention center, drastically increasing the number of high-rise hotels in the Central Business District (CBD), and opening an aquarium adjacent to the French Quarter on the old Bienville Street wharfs: the same wharfs where stevedores were shown unloading coffee and bananas at the climax of Panic in the Streets.

The effect of these developments is the aggressive alteration of the city’s landscape towards accommodating tourism, often at the expense of the needs and desires of the city’s residents. The French Quarter would continue to decline as a residential neighborhood, dominated more than ever by bars, restaurants, souvenir shops, and other businesses catering to pedestrian tourists. Similarly, the CBD, once the center of resident-targeting businesses like department stores and banks, is now overwhelmed by high-rise hotels owned by national chains, leading to a new nickname by residents of the “Central Tourist District.” While the Quarter and the CBD remain the center of tourist traffic in the city, the modern needs of New Orleans to become an attraction in itself led to the promotion of other areas of the city to tourists.

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135 Souther, 205.
136 Ibid., 206.
areas include the Garden District, an exclusive Uptown neighborhood defined by its columned Victorian mansions and the picturesque St. Charles Streetcar Line. The Garden District soon became a popular site for walking tours pointing out the house where Jefferson Davis died, John Goodman’s home, the yard that Peyton and Eli Manning played catch in as children, and the “haunted” mansions featured in the novels of Anne Rice. The Faubourg-Marigny in Bywater has also become a tourist hub; as the nightclubs of the French Quarter shifted to more mainstream rock and country music, the city’s jazz would increasingly be found in the clubs of Frenchmen Street. Though the French Quarter would remain the center of New Orleans tourism and representation, this wider promotion of the city would gradually translate to these other areas of the city represented in film and television.

Beyond the altered physical landscape of the city, the increased emphasis on tourism in New Orleans directly impacted the city’s residents, in particular its large working-class black population. While African-American residents of the city have long been relegated to working-class jobs, the city’s population boom in the 1940s was fueled by black families seeking the many factory and port jobs available in the city during World War II. These well-paying jobs provided a foundation for the city’s black middle class. In the decades following the war’s end, these jobs would dwindle, replaced by lower-paying jobs in the growing service industries required by businesses catering to tourists. The workers in these jobs, who often do not own cars, were priced out of the neighborhoods that they have to work in, and would take long commutes to low-wage jobs in the Quarter and the CBD from neighborhoods never visited by

137 These were all locations pointed out to me on a walking tour of the Garden District in my first visit to New Orleans in 2011.
138 Souther, 74-75.
139 Thomas, 4-13.
white tourists. These include the working-class areas of the Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans East, and Gentilly. Lynnell L. Thomas correlates the investment of civic resources into the tourist areas with the withholding of resources from these residential areas. As she explains, “the resources that the city poured into the tourist districts for continuous police protection, debris removal, beautification, and infrastructure maintenance reduced the services available for other areas of the city.” In addition to suffering from neglect and decay, these neighborhoods would also experience higher crime rates, contributing to one the highest murder rates of any city in the United States.

The conspicuousness of black labor and inconspicuousness of day-to-day black life in a now-predominantly black New Orleans would become a paradox for the city’s evolving location identity. New Orleans was first marketed in the early twentieth century as the home of the decadent white Creoles, an identity that played out in early Hollywood representations of the city. While not synonymous with the South at large, white Creoles are remembered as aristocrats who relied on slavery for the accumulation of their wealth. Following a pattern of tourism marketing in the early twentieth century, this identity was coopted into romantic perceptions of the Antebellum South. As cultural memory of antebellum plantations become less romantic, so did the city distance itself from perceptions of antebellum grace and Southern charm, by the 1970s the city’s official tourist campaigns marketed itself instead as a “European” city within

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141 Thomas, 20.

North America. While this campaign does not erase the city’s slavery legacy, it positions New Orleans as exceptional within the Old South, framing French and Spanish treatment of slaves as more benign. As Thomas notes, this pre-Katrina tourism narrative privileged the French colonial heritage over black identity, positioning New Orleans as a rare example of multiculturalism and tolerance in the Old South while continuing to marginalize African-American contribution to the city’s culture.

The earliest representations of New Orleans as a Creole city and a modern city were respective products of the city’s nineteenth century literary identity and the city fathers’ attempts in the 1950s to modernize. Likewise, both the marginalization of African-Americans and continued emphasis on maintaining areas of the city visited by tourists had a direct impact on how the city is represented in film and television. However, as with the previous periods, the film and television representations of this more recent era were as much a product of the changing conditions of production as they were a production of the city’s evolving economy and politics. In the case of the period from the mid-1960s until 2002, these representations were affected by conventions two eras of Hollywood production.

**New Hollywood and the Age of the Blockbuster**

Respectively encompassing the late 1960s to 1975 and 1975 to the present, New Hollywood (1967-1975) and the Age of the Blockbuster (1975-) are two eras commonly interwoven, with time-lines and names differing depending on the film historian. However,

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143 Thomas, 35; Souther, 170.
144 Thomas, 35-36.
145 David A. Cook sees the New Hollywood era as fading out by 1970, as the studios rediscovered their confidence in more traditional mainstream films. Both David Bordwell/Kristin Thompson and Peter Biskind see New Hollywood as gradually winding down into the 1980s. Jon Lewis presents a similar timeline, though he designates 1968-1980 as the “Auteur Period,” using
the primary differentiator between the two is the perception of the former’s artistic daring; it was during New Hollywood that a handful of innovative filmmakers found unexpected critical and commercial success by infusing time-worn Hollywood genres with the formal verve of the French New Wave. The Age of the Blockbuster, as its name implies, is defined by the preeminence of big-budget spectacle, often genre films based on preexisting intellectual property. Despite some significant differences of these two eras, their effect on representations of New Orleans is collective: both eras built upon the 1950s film production trends of increased location filming and even more explicit portrayals of violence and sexuality, as the old Production Code ceded in 1968 in favor of the Motion Picture Association of America’s ratings system.

As with the shift from Classical (1928-1947) to Transitional (1948-1966) Hollywood, the respective transitions to New Hollywood and the Age of the Blockbuster emerged from changes in business practices, conventions of film production, and audience taste. Shifts in business practices of the New Hollywood era were brought about by a changing of the guard: as the last studio moguls sold off their studios to corporate parents, a creative vacuum emerged that was filled by a diverse (in background, not in gender or ethnicity) coalition of filmmakers, many of

whom were among the first generation of film school graduates. According to the most romanticized narrative, these filmmakers were equipped to respond to evolving tastes of coming-of-age Baby Boomers who craved more thematic and stylistically daring entertainment than the big-budget musicals and Biblical epics typical of transitional Hollywood. This narrative is a simplification of the historical realities: studios continued to churn out big-budget epics like *The Towering Inferno* (John Guillermin, 1974) and family-friendly musicals like *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (Robert Stevenson, 1971) alongside gritty dramas like *Mean Streets* (Martin Scorsese, 1973), and only a handful of the auteur-driven films found large-scale commercial success. Nonetheless, the New Hollywood movement is credited as the Hollywood Renaissance and one of the most creatively-fruitful eras of American Cinema. Though many were not financial successes upon initial release, the films of New Hollywood took advantage of the final dissolution of the Production Code in 1966 to push the thematic and formal limits of American film.

The New Hollywood era is typically defined by the explicit representation of sexuality, unflinching violence, and anti-establishment themes, exemplified by *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967), commonly considered the era’s starting point. The endpoint of the era, and the beginning of the Blockbuster Age, is Universal’s release of *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975). *Jaws* defined the impending Age of the Blockbuster through its big-budget spectacle, broad thematic

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149 Cook, 848. Coincidentally, *Bonnie and Clyde* was filmed entirely on location in Louisiana, though the film was neither filmed nor set in New Orleans.
appeal, innovative marketing strategies (media saturation with advertisements, front-loaded release, heavy merchandising), and tremendous financial success.\textsuperscript{150} Though concurrent and contrasting film movements, like American independent cinema, also emerged during this era, Hollywood’s economics continue to be centered around big-budget tentpoles, justifying the moniker.\textsuperscript{151}

The differences between New Hollywood and the Age of the Blockbuster, their respective start and end points, and the ultimate significance of New Hollywood as a separate era, remains a subject of debate in film studies. Less debated is the effect of these eras on representation of cities on-screen, including New Orleans. The effect of these two eras on representations of cityscapes is defined by audience expectation and economic reality. Regarding audience expectation, the influence of Italian Neorealism and early Hollywood docu-dramas cemented audience expectations that characters interact within real locations. As James Sanders notes, “Long accustomed to seeing actors in front of shallow, projected backgrounds, audiences now reveled at the placement of characters within the fullness of real urban settings.”\textsuperscript{152} On the economic end, the ongoing decentralization of Hollywood’s business model gradually shifted from the model of studios as producers of films to that of studios as packagers and deal-makers with stars, filmmakers, and agents.\textsuperscript{153} This shifted the center of production even further away

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{153} Justin Wyatt, \textit{High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).
\end{footnotes}
from the backlot and towards location filmmaking in both American and foreign locales. Vicki Mayer describes this dynamic: “The disintegration of big studio monopolies over all aspects of the industry left a competitive market in production, the aspect of filmmaking in which investors take the most economic risk, and producers thus [had to] scramble to do more with less.”

Productions would continue to shoot interiors in-studio when necessary, and would return to studio recreations of exteriors for intentionally stylized metropolises—as in the blatantly artificial Las Vegas of One from the Heart (Francis Ford Coppola, 1982), or the cramped, expressionist Gotham City of Batman (Tim Burton, 1989). However, by the late 1960s, filming exteriors on-location was the industry standard. Though the Age of the Blockbuster is ongoing, its relevance on representations of New Orleans becomes secondary in 2002. In that year, film tax credits were passed by the Louisiana Legislature, which became the primary influencer of how the city is filmed.

“Anything in the United States, Except Mountains”: New Orleans On-location

The filmmaking conventions of New Hollywood and the Age of the Blockbuster translated into more location shoots in New Orleans, and Louisiana at large. Over the combined classical (1928-1947) and transitional (1948-1966) periods of Hollywood, a 38-year period, 116 feature-length narrative films were set in New Orleans, an average of 3.05 films per year. During the combined eras of New Hollywood (1967-1974) and the Age of the Blockbuster (1975-2002),


155 Another radical shift in how cities would be represented on-screen would not come until the emergence of the “digital backlot” in the late 2000s, a trend that coincided with New Orleans’ tax credit law, and never affected representation of the city on-screen. J.P. Tello, “The Space of Today and the World of Tomorrow: Hybrid Film and Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow,” Film Criticism 35, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 24-36.
a 35-year period, 129 films were set in New Orleans, slightly increasing that average to 3.68 per year. Given the continued fall-off in feature film production in America following the 1948 Paramount Decree, it is remarkable that representations of New Orleans not only became more common, but actually saw a net increase during the New Hollywood and Blockbuster eras.

In addition to an increase in representations of New Orleans, this era also saw an increase in location shoots in New Orleans. While 39 of the classical/transitional films (about 34%) were shot on location somewhere in Louisiana, 114 of the New Orleans-set films of the New Hollywood and Blockbuster eras (about 88%) were shot on location in New Orleans itself.\(^{156}\) While including a large number of made-for-TV movies and a handful of non-theatrical shorts, this increase is nonetheless remarkable. These numbers reveal that after 1967, more portrayals of New Orleans were spread among fewer films released every year. Film productions would continue to mix New Orleans production shoots with more cost-effective stand-ins, often continuing to shoot interiors on soundstages, as *Live and Let Die* does, or mixing New Orleans locations with locations in surrounding Louisiana cities, as is done in *The Beyond* (Lucio Fulci, 1981) and *Hard Target* (John Woo, 1993).\(^{157}\) The most budget-limited productions would also continue recreating New Orleans in other cities: the made-for-TV biography *Ruby Bridges* (Euzhan Palcy, 1998) was shot entirely in Wilmington, North Carolina.\(^{158}\)

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\(^{156}\) As with the previous chapter, this number was tabulated from the list of films shot and set in New Orleans in Ed and Susan Poole’s “Louisiana Film History.” Given the scarcity of location filmmaking in the classical period, for that previous tally I took into account any New Orleans-set films that were filmed in any part of Louisiana. For this tally, given the tremendous increase in location filmmaking, I counted feature-length films that were shot in New Orleans. Films that were shot in New Orleans but not set there, or films in which the location could not be discerned, were not included in this tally.

\(^{157}\) Duncan, 229; Poole and Poole, *Louisiana Film History*, 134; 159.

Orleans-set films of this era shot entirely on location in the city, the era of New Orleans recreated entirely on a Southern California backlot was over.

By virtue of the increased number of location shoots in the city, far more of New Orleans itself appeared on screen during these eras. The French Quarter would continue to dominate on-screen representations, including the corner of Dumaine and Chartres in *Live and Let Die*, the Cornstalk Hotel in *Hard Times* (Walter Hill, 1975), the Napoleon House in *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991), Madame John’s Legacy in *Interview with the Vampire*, and the still-ubiquitous St. Louis Cathedral in *Angel Heart, The Pelican Brief* (Alan J. Pakula, 1993), and *Dracula 2000* (Patrick Lussier, 2000). The CBD would also continue to be popular, with the Piazza d’Italia showing up in *Tightrope* (Richard Tuggle, 1984) and *The Big Easy*, and the Sazerac Bar in the Roosevelt Hotel featured in *JFK*. However, other neighborhoods of the city began appearing as well. Not surprisingly, film crews often favored the same areas popular with tourists. The Garden District was chosen for its Victorian architecture in the period piece *Pretty Baby*, and for its haunting atmosphere in the Italian horror film *The Beyond*, while bars on Frenchmen Street in the Marigny would appear in *Hard Target*. The plantations of the surrounding countryside and outskirts of the city, many of which have been converted into heritage resorts, would feature prominently in period pieces like *Mandingo* (Richard Fleischer, 1975) and *Interview with the Vampire*.159 Specific tourist locations would also appear prominently on-screen: the Audubon Zoo would be the center of the supernatural story of *Cat People* (Paul Schrader, 1982), the Riverwalk mall would appear in *Tightrope* and *The Pelican Brief*, while the Jax Brewery, a French Quarter landmark recently renovated into a shopping mall, would appear in *Dracula 2000*.

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Far from coincidental, the ubiquity of tourist-popular locations was the result of city and state-wide promotion of film production, and the proximity of those efforts with the advancement of tourism. As noted earlier, in 1973, Louisiana Governor Edwin Edwards signed Executive Order No. 49 establishing the Louisiana Film Industry Commission. The commission was entrusted to the Executive Director of the Department of Commerce and Industry, with the following mission:

[The Executive Director] shall administer a program designed to develop, create, and execute plans, programs and events in connection with promoting Louisiana as a film-making location; to provide free location scouting, to provide information on available facilities, to offer assistance in obtaining permission to film, to provide complete background information on all cultural and historical aspects of Louisiana, and to maintain a cooperative working relationship with film makers coming into Louisiana.”\(^{160}\)

The rhetoric of the executive order, combining a business initiative with self-promotion of the state, reveals the growing importance of industries like tourism and film production, and the difficulty in separating the two. This inseparability is underscored by the makeup of the Commission’s board, which included the executive directors and chairmen of both the Department of Commerce and Industry and of the Louisiana Tourist Development Commission.\(^{161}\) In the subsequent three decades, the Commission would fulfill its mission,


\(^{161}\) This board membership would later be privatized. By 2000, the membership would consist of “representatives of the Louisiana Restaurant Association, the New Orleans Hotel-Motel Association, two film industry labor unions, the chancellor of the University of New Orleans and others.” Louisiana Division of Administration, “January,”; Brett Clanton, “State’s Film Commission Lacks Stable Leadership,” New Orleans CityBusiness, June 26, 2000,
receiving special thanks on the credits of Louisiana-set films such as The Savage Bees (Bruce Geller, 1976), Southern Comfort (Walter Hill, 1981), Cat People, Angel Heart, and The Big Easy.

As a right-to-work state with lower union rates than California or New York, a commission willing to assist in scouting locations, and a diverse topography—one commissioner noted that “within 50 miles of New Orleans, you can duplicate anything to be found anywhere in the United States, except mountains”—Louisiana has several incentives for productions looking for a cost-efficient location.162 Perhaps most importantly, the state has New Orleans: Vicki Mayer notes that the Crescent City would continue to dominate location filming in the state, and the city would use its tourism infrastructure to lure film productions.163 The mayoral administrations of Martin Behrman (1904-1920) and Chep Morrison (1946-1961) supported film productions in New Orleans with the understanding that city would be portrayed in a positive light. However, as the racist cops of Angel Heart and the corrupt detectives of The Big Easy reveal, subsequent administrations were increasingly unconcerned with whether the city’s civic administrations are portrayed in a positive light.164 At the same time, the Commission would


163 Mayer, 44, 48.

164 Though the city government does not censor the content of productions, usage of the NOPD’s departmental logos, vehicles and uniforms are still contingent upon approval of how the department is portrayed by their public integrity bureau. Despite the extremely negative portrayal
have its difficulties, struggling with budget cuts and coming under criticism in the 1990s for wasting resources trying to court Hollywood productions rather than supporting local filmmakers.\textsuperscript{165} Additionally, though studio facilities would gradually be built in-state, Louisiana initially lacked the filmmaking infrastructure necessary to accommodate anything but short-term location shoots, with most of the interior studio work still going to facilities in Southern California and Canada.\textsuperscript{166}

Despite these struggles, a handful of Blockbuster-Era film productions changed script locations from other U.S. cities to New Orleans. \textit{Tightrope} moved from San Francisco, \textit{Angel Heart} moved the second half of the film from New York, and \textit{The Big Easy}, originally titled \textit{Windy City}, was renamed when the film’s location was changed from Chicago. The impact of the Commission on these changes is unclear: \textit{Tightrope} relocated to avoid associating Clint Eastwood’s character with his iconic San Francisco-set \textit{Dirty Harry} series, while Alan Parker shifted action to New Orleans in \textit{Angel Heart} because he was wary of shooting another film entirely in New York, believing New Orleans’ voodoo heritage would match the supernatural elements of William Hjortsberg’s original novel.\textsuperscript{167} Similarly, Daniel Petrie Jr. relocated his story from the Windy City to \textit{The Big Easy} because of the recent release of several Chicago-

\textsuperscript{165} Clanton, “State’s Film Commission Lacks Stable Leadership,” 8.
based crime films, and on the belief that New Orleans would provide “greater ambiguity to the corruption theme.” It seems likely, given the rationales for relocation, that the producers had a predetermined desire to relocate their stories to New Orleans. As will be demonstrated in later chapters, once the Louisiana Legislature began giving film productions financial incentives to shoot in their state, the dynamic of relocating productions would become more common, and more complicated.

Given the plurality of representations of the city during the New Hollywood and Blockbuster eras, it is difficult to make broad generalizations regarding trends of how New Orleans is depicted. There are certainly remnants of the old Hollywood fascination with the Creoles in period pieces like *Pretty Baby* and literary adaptations like *Interview with the Vampire*, and depictions of the city as a den of modern vice continued in films like *Tightrope* and *Down by Law* (Jim Jarmusch, 1986). On the whole, however, the film and television representations of New Orleans from 1967 to 2002 featured a recurring handful of “stereotypes” as identified by H. Wayne Schuth in his overview of New Orleans in film, namely, stereotypes that are largely fueled by the civic campaigns to promote tourism. As Schuth explains:

> Such images and stereotypes as jazz, the French Quarter, and the waterfront docks are found in most films that use New Orleans as a setting. Other stereotypical images that appear now and then, each contributing to a composite image, are sternwheelers, ferries, freighters, iron grillework [sic], courtyard apartments, the Pontalba apartments, balconies, St. Louis Cathedral, strip joints, jazz funerals, horse and carriages, redneck policemen,

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crabs, shrimp, crawfish, Dixie beer, questionable politicians, Victorian mansions, 
vooodoo, spanish moss, sex, violence, Bourbon Street, Creoles, Cajuns, the St. Charles 
streetcar, cemeteries, the Superdome, the Royal Sonesta Hotel, the Royal Orleans Hotel, 
Cafe Du Monde, Mardi Gras, swamps, fans, French accents, Southern accents, 
prostitutes, fountains, magnolias, black children dancing, and Lake Pontchartrain.\textsuperscript{169}

While overreaching (sex and violence are “stereotypes” attributable to most American cities), 
Schuth’s list effectively reviews the dimensions of New Orleans’ identity that developed after 
1966. Rather than attempt to explore each of each stereotype in detail, it can be useful to focus 
on those that appear in \textit{The Big Easy}, particularly the incorporation of Cajuns into New Orleans’ 
identity.

While there is no absolute differentiation between the New Hollywood and Blockbuster 
representations of New Orleans, there are gradual transitions over time. From the 1960s to 2002, 
on-screen sexuality and violence became more explicit, while mainstream Hollywood 
productions adapted the broad accessibility of the blockbuster as the new norm. The effect of 
these trends on New Orleans is a more licentious on-screen city, with the character of that 
licentiousness often becoming less subtle. In other words, New Orleans on-screen became more 
of a city of excess, but in ways that reflected New Orleans with less nuance. Reflecting the 
gradual acceptance of on-screen violence and sexuality by American audiences, and the 
commercialization of New Orleans throughout the late-twentieth century, New Orleans on-
screen became more immoral and less culturally distinct. In the New Orleans of \textit{The Cincinnati 
Kid} (Norman Jewison, 1965), a film produced during the transitional period just as the 
Production Code was losing its relevance, two instances of infidelity take place off-screen. One 

\textsuperscript{169} Schuth, 241.
of these instances is a married white aristocrat (Rip Torn) lying in bed with his black girlfriend (Mimi Dillard). This implication, during a period when interracial relationships (to say nothing of extramarital affairs) were still not widely approved by American audiences, portrays New Orleans as an area of lax sexual mores, albeit without exploring the specific historical context of that reputation (set in the 1930s, *The Cincinnati Kid* features no characters identified as Creoles).\(^{170}\)

By 1969, a year after the Production Code was replaced by the ratings system, the Mardi Gras New Orleans that the bikers reach in *Easy Rider* is a city of unbridled excess, with the lead characters tripping on acid with naked women in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1. *Easy Rider* was a runaway box office success, and was likely the first glimpse of Mardi Gras for many Baby Boomers.\(^{171}\) Though the drugs and nudity in *Easy Rider* represent a clear shift in convention from *The Cincinnati Kid*, the manner in which Dennis Hopper utilizes Mardi Gras and the

\(^{170}\) This narrative convention of interracial sexual relationships in films set in New Orleans, usually of white men with black women, would continue through the 1980s. Such relationships would also appear in *The Cincinnati Kid*, *Tightrope*, *Down by Law*, *Angel Heart*, *Interview with the Vampire*, and *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh* (Bill Condon, 1995). With the exception of *Vampire*, *Candyman*, and a few vague intimations in *Angel Heart*, none of these films explore the historical implications of interracial relationships in New Orleans, revealing an interesting distillation of a culturally-specific civic history and a more generalized (and problematic) equivocation of interracial romance-as-libertine-as-New Orleans. Interestingly, *The Pelican Brief* would be attacked by critics for shying away from an on-screen romance between Darby Shaw (Julia Roberts) and Gray Grantham (Denzel Washington), even though John Grisham’s novel featured the characters becoming romantically involved. Thus, though filmmakers did not shy away from portraying white male/black female relationships in a non-normative context, they stopped short of portraying a black male/white female relationship as normative.

\(^{171}\) The film’s representation of what began as traditional French Carnival and was, at that point, still dominated by the old-money Krewes of the city, helped contribute to a national reputation of Mardi Gras as a countercultural debauch. This, in turn, drove more outsiders to gravitate towards the city, helping to increase the scale of the city’s yearly Mardi Gras celebrations, pushing towards what many locals see as a more commercial and national iteration of Carnival. Souther, 150-156.
ambiance of St. Louis Cemetery was poetic, meant to represent the spiritual malaise of the characters and Peter Fonda’s channeling the real-life death of his mother. Subsequent depictions of Mardi Gras, following in the footsteps of this iconic representation, would be less symbolic, with plastic beads and parades instead used by filmmakers to inject mood and texture into their films.

By the 1980s and 1990s, Blockbuster-Era films such as the thriller *Tightrope* and the John Woo action film *Hard Target* would portray New Orleans in even more thematically explicit terms, while finding a way to streamline the iconography of Mardi Gras. *Tightrope* follows a New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) detective (Clint Eastwood) as he investigates a serial killer and delves deeper into the city’s underworld of sexual perversions, while *Hard Target* follows a Cajun drifter (Jean-Claude Van Damme) as he becomes entangled in a secret cabal of rich men who hunt the city’s poor for sport. Beyond the obvious shift in how violence and sexuality is presented, both films feature scenes set in warehouses that hold Mardi Gras floats. By setting scenes in a warehouse full of New Orleans iconography, filmmakers are able to extract Mardi Gras atmosphere without having to incorporate the festivities into the narrative in any meaningful way, or even have their films set during Mardi Gras season. Putting Mardi Gras floats in a warehouse is an effective metaphor for how Hollywood captured New Orleans by the 1980s: iconography of New Orleans removed from its cultural context and presented on-screen as an empty signifier.

This enhancement of New Orleans on-screen also carried into how actors played locals on-screen, particularly in dialogue. In 1950, actors Richard Widmark and Paul Douglas could get away with using their non-Southern accents in *Panic in the Streets*. By the 1980s, with screen

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172 Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, 64.
acting convention demanding a greater emphasis on local authenticity, audiences would be less likely to accept such a discrepancy between performance and setting. Actors were therefore increasingly required to at least attempt a local accent, typically either Old Southern, local New Orleans ("Yat"), or even Cajun English. While the difficulty of mastering these accents for roles has benefitted some local actors, particularly longtime New Orleans resident John Goodman, for the many non-native actors, as Dennis Quaid’s performance in The Big Easy demonstrates, mastering a local accent is a struggle for many other actors.¹⁷³ Like the rise in New Orleans iconography, both the increase in accent work and the often-exaggerated nature of the performances—Tommy Lee Jones' Clay Shaw drawling on about going home to make etoufée in JFK—fuels the idea of New Orleans as an exceptional place, where every day is Mardi Gras and the locals are always down to party. This mode of representation of New Orleans as an exceptional city of revelry reached its zenith (or nadir) with The Big Easy.

**The Big Easy: Reception and Controversy**

Written by Daniel Petrie Jr. and directed by Jim McBride, The Big Easy is one of the most hyperreal portrayals of New Orleans to appear on-screen. The film follows Remy McSwain (Dennis Quaid), a corrupt Irish-Cajun homicide detective for the NOPD, and Anne Osborne (Ellen Barkin), a newly-arrived assistant district attorney, as they fall in love and team up to uncover a racketeering conspiracy inside of the police department. Upon release, the film was a modest commercial success, grossing about $17 million in five weeks in the theaters.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ New Orleans-set film and television works that Goodman has appeared in include The Big Easy, Kingfish: A Story of Huey P. Long (Thomas Schlamme, 1995), A Streetcar Named Desire (Glenn Jordan, 1995), The Princess and the Frog (Ron Clements and John Musker, 2009), and Treme (HBO, 2010-2013).

On the national level, the film was critically acclaimed. Roger Ebert, in his four-star review of the film for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, called it “one of the richest American films of the year” and “the most convincing portrait of New Orleans I’ve ever seen,” specifically praising the Cajun soundtrack, the performances, and Quaid and Barkin’s on-screen chemistry. Ebert would later rank the film #2 on his top ten list for 1987. Similarly, Sheila Benson of the *Los Angeles Times* praises the film’s atmosphere, noting that because of the authentic local soundtrack and effective camerawork and atmosphere, “there’s something authoritative…to the feeling of the city that goes beyond familiar iron filigree and a lilt in the voice.” The New Yorker’s David Denby would go further, not only prasing Quaid’s performance as “smashing,” but also positioning *The Big Easy* as a standout among lesser New Orleans films: “Many have merely exploited New Orleans for its cayenne-pepper exotic surface; director Jim McBride tries to capture its soul.” While some national critics were less effusive—Richard Schickel of *Time* did not find the film’s central romance convincing, and Vincent Canby of *The New York Times* thought the script was murky—the film’s reception was largely positive, with few comments in even the negative reviews on the believability of the film’s setting. For example, although critical of the story, Schickel still praised the film as “atmospherically rich.”

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The Big Easy’s local reception was less enthusiastic. In his two-and-a-half-star review for The Times-Picayune, critic David Baron opens by noting that The Big Easy “isn’t what one would call a well-made film.”¹⁸⁰ Unlike his peers in national publications, Baron criticizes the film’s attempt at capturing New Orleans atmosphere, noting that “if you live in New Orleans you’re sure to find the film’s depiction of ‘local custom’ more than a mite exaggerated—and if you don’t (and have nothing more to go on than this picture), you’re apt to conclude that the Crescent City and its inhabitants are all decidedly weird.” Baron also pokes fun at the attempt at accents, particularly Dennis Quaid’s “one part 9th Ward ‘Yat,’ two parts thick Bayou Cajun,” and the film’s “notion that citizens of this city speak either a barely recognizable Cajun patois or else with a deep Mississippi drawl [that] should make for gales of knowing laughter in the area theaters.” Baron’s final assessment is not sanctimonious: he calls The Big Easy “a heck of a lot of fun,” and says local audiences should find it “refreshing…to hear plenty of inimitably local expression and not once to see Jackson Square.” Still, his review underscores the chasm between national and local perceptions of The Big Easy. Local skepticism about The Big Easy has not gone away with time: in an online poll put out by The Times-Picayune in 2014, Dennis Quaid’s McSwain was voted the worst big-screen Cajun accent with nearly 48% of the vote.¹⁸¹ Quaid’s

¹⁸⁰ David Baron, “‘Big Easy’ is Fun for N.O. Audiences,” The Times-Picayune (August 21, 1987), LaGriappe-7.

¹⁸¹ Mike Scott, “And the Worst Big-Screen Cajun Accent Belongs to…” The Times-Picayune, April 21, 2014, http://www.nola.com/movies/index.ssf/2014/04/and_the_worst_big-screen_cajun.html. Runners-up in the poll include Adam Sandler as Bobby Boucher (21.92%) in The Waterboy (Frank Coraci, 1998), Jean-Claude Van Damme as Chance Boudreaux (10.96%) in Hard Target, Van Damme again as Luc Deveraux (8.22%) in Universal Soldier (Roland Emmerich, 1992), and Wilford Brimley as Uncle Douvee (6.85%) in Hard Target.
performance, which the actor now admits was affected by his cocaine addiction at the time, remains what Picayune columnist Mike Scott describes as “the accent locals love to hate.”

**Cajun New Orleans**

Quaid’s accent is tied to the element of the *The Big Easy* that has received the most scholarly attention: its representation of Cajuns. An ethnic group separate from the French and Spanish colonial-descended white Creoles, Cajuns descend from Acadians who were displaced from Canada by the British for their loyalty to France in the French and Indian War. Migrating to Louisiana, Cajuns lived in relative isolation for the next two hundred years, absorbing some Native Americans and escaped slaves in developing their distinct culture. Unlike white and black Creoles, Cajun culture is not centered in New Orleans, but instead around bayous of Southwestern Louisiana, a region that would gradually be known as Acadiana. Nonetheless, there are several points of overlap: in demographics (some poor white Creoles assimilated into Cajun culture), cuisine (there are Cajun and Creole variations of several Louisiana dishes), and culture (towns and cities in Cajun country have their own Mardi Gras celebrations). These similarities contributed to the consolidation of Cajun and Louisiana Creole culture into a perceived Franco-American regional “other.” The combination of Cajun and New Orleans identities is spearheaded by a tourism industry eager to cater to visitors’ expectations of finding Cajun people, music, and food on their visit, despite less than one percent of New Orleanians self-identifying as Cajun.\(^{183}\) This merging of New Orleans and Cajun cultures translates on-

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\(^{182}\) Dennis Quaid, “Dennis Quaid’s Favorite Mistake: Cocaine Addiction,” *Newsweek* (April 10, 2011); Scott, “And the Worst.”

\(^{183}\) Bernard, 120. One section of the documentary *Ella Brennan: Commanding the Table* (Leslie Iwerks, 2016) reviews the impact of Paul Prudhomme, a Cajun chef whose elevation to executive chef at the prestigious restaurant Commander’s Palace paved the way
screen to a collapsing of the space between New Orleans and Acadiana, making the two areas seem like they are adjoining. In multiple productions, characters leave New Orleans city limits, only to be found in the heart of the Cajun Bayou within seconds of screen time.\(^{184}\) This compression of screen space, like the marketing of Cajun music and cuisine in New Orleans, allows filmmakers to treat viewers to a perceived cultural dimension of Louisiana without “leaving” New Orleans.

The earliest representations of Acadians were in the many film adaptations of Evangeline, the Longfellow epic poem, including one shot in Louisiana in 1929.\(^{185}\) Beyond that, Cajuns show up in American films since at least 1944, first appearing in the Lon Cheney Jr. horror vehicle The Mummy’s Curse (Leslie Goodwins, 1944) and the film noir Dark Waters (Andre DeToth, 1944). In most of American films since, Cajun representation has been largely negative, ranging from the child-like people at one with nature in Louisiana Story (Robert J. Flaherty, 1948) and Thunder Bay (Anthony Mann, 1953), to the dumb hicks in The Waterboy, to the murderous swamp people of Southern Comfort and No Mercy.\(^{186}\) Actual Cajuns are only occasionally cast in supporting roles, including musician Dewey Balfa, who appears briefly in both Southern Comfort and The Big Easy. More often, Cajun characters are played by non-Louisiana actors who attempt an accent, like Quaid in The Big Easy or Adam Sandler in The

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\(^{184}\) This happens to the escaped inmates of Orleans Parish Prison in Down by Law, who also magically are able to cross the entire western part of the state by foot and reach the Texas border. Similarly, in No Mercy (Richard Pearce, 1986), Eddie (Richard Gere) and Michel (Kim Basinger) escape their assailants in Algiers by floating on a raft that, by morning, takes them to Cajun country.

\(^{185}\) Evangeline (Edwin Carewe, 1929).

Waterboy. In some cases, rather than casting American actors attempting accents, productions fall back on the old Hollywood strategy of casting foreign actors with the hope that American audiences will not know the difference. Examples of this strategy include the Mexican Gilbert Roland and Spanish Antonio Moreno in Thunder Bay, the Belgian Jean-Claude Van Damme in Hard Target, and the Dutch Jeroen Krabbé in No Mercy, all of whom pass off their natural accents as Cajun English to unknowing (or uncaring) American audiences.

Riding a wave of Cajun-centered in the 1980s and 1990s, The Big Easy is described by Louisiana scholar Shane K. Bernard as the most harmful representation of Cajuns. “No film did more to misrepresent Cajun culture” he argues, “than The Big Easy, which the nation embraced as an accurate glimpse into the ethnic group’s mysterious folkways.”\(^{187}\) Charles J. Stivale echoes this sentiment, criticizing the appropriation of Cajun culture as allowing the filmmakers “to express the film’s simplistic moral message but to also bring law and civilization finally to the lawless and the uncivilized.”\(^{188}\) Cajuns are portrayed in The Big Easy as a colorful ethnic minority of New Orleans that are not above looking the other way at moral corruption. This portrayal is similar to how the Irish are portrayed in The Untouchables (Brian De Palma, 1987), a Chicago-based police thriller released that year with similar themes. The choice to make Remy half-Irish is likely a concession to the reality that a family of Cajun NOPD officers does not make sense (in the original Windy City script, the main character’s family is Italian).\(^{189}\) The same likely goes for the appearance of the mafia in The Big Easy, given the common cultural thread of organized crime in Chicago. Both Irish heritage and mafia presence are valid historical legacies.

\(^{187}\) Bernard, 120-121.


\(^{189}\) Rowlands.
of New Orleans: Irish immigration to New Orleans was significant throughout the nineteenth century, and the New Orleans mafia that plagued the city’s Sicilian community was the first to emerge in the United States.\textsuperscript{190} However, both were relics of the city’s past: most of the city’s Irish population had left the city’s Irish Channel neighborhood by the 1960s, and by the 1980s, the influence of city’s mafia family was a shell of its former self.\textsuperscript{191}

The film’s representation of a bygone era as modern-day reality is not an anomaly, but rather the paradox at the heart of \textit{The Big Easy} and other New Orleans films like it. While filmmakers like McBride attempt to capture the cinematic side of New Orleans by highlighting the picturesque areas sought by tourists (the French Quarter, the CBD), it would detract from the story to capture these films as they would appear on a given day: full of tourists. The result is a paradox by which these areas, which have been either gentrified and/or converted for tourist needs, are captured as living, breathing neighborhoods, while actual residential areas are left out. This division between those New Orleans areas that are lived-in and those that are marketed and sold by the city, what Guy Debord calls “spectacular separation,” is at the heart of the divide in local and national perceptions of New Orleans by the 1980s, by which the exceptional is presented on-screen to the audience as the everyday. This strategy, seen in \textit{The Big Easy} and countless other New Orleans films, contributed to the perception of New Orleans as “the Big Easy,” a truly exceptional city that often resembles the French Quarter and is filled with quirky, outlandish locals.


The Big Easy of *The Big Easy*

*The Big Easy* opens with a tracking shot of the bayou, with “Zydeco Gris Gris” by the Cajun band BeauSoleil playing over the imagery. This track over the bayou is intercut with the image of a mobster lying dead in the Piazza D’Italia. While the juxtaposition of the bayou and New Orleans over a Cajun soundtrack establishes the imagined spatial proximity between Acadiana and Louisiana, the choice of the Piazza D’Italia has further significance. An eclectic Renaissance Revival square on Poydras St. in the CBD that contrasts whimsically with the city’s Creole architecture, the Piazza was commissioned by the city government in the 1970s to honor the city’s Italian heritage. As the area around it failed to develop as planned, the Piazza fell into disrepair, and by 1987 was considered a “postindustrial ruin.”\(^{192}\) The use of the Piazza is telling: as Remy explains to another detective, the public placement of the body was likely meant to “send a message” to a rival gang, but at that time the Piazza was not considered a popular public square. This use of New Orleans, in which largely “unlived” spaces are used as public places, pervades the rest of the film. A similar presentation of a visually-stimulating location occurs four minutes later, when Remy and the rest of the homicide division are shown headquartered in the NOPD’s French Quarter Precinct. This real-life precinct, originally built in 1826 as the Old Bank of Louisiana, was converted into a tourist information center in 1971 by the Tourist and

\(^{192}\) The Piazza was also used in a similar fashion as a crime scene in *Tightrope*, and was only recently renovated by the city in 2013. The Piazza’s state of decrepitude at that time is intimated in Richard Dodds’ *Times-Picayune* article discussing locals who appeared in *The Big Easy*. In reference to the local who was forced to play the corpse lying face-down in the fountain, Dodds muses, “Maybe they changed the water first.” Elisabeth Rappe, “Tightrope (1984),” in *World Film Locations: New Orleans*, ed. Scott Jordan Harris (Bristol, UK: Intellect Books, 2012), 56; Richard A. Webster, “Piazza d’Italia to Undergo $250,000-plus Renovation,” *The Times-Picayune*, May 23, 2013, http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2013/05/piazza_ditalia_to_undergo_reno.html; Dodds.
Convention Commission.\textsuperscript{193} That building was then converted into a police precinct in the 1980s by Mayor Dutch Morial, with the primary aim of curbing violent crime in the tourist-heavy Quarter.\textsuperscript{194} Thus, a beautiful, columned building in the Quarter, converted from a tourism bureau into a precinct designed to protect tourists, is passed off as just another neighborhood precinct. This choice of location filming, over the actual location of NOPD’s homicide unit in the department’s headquarters in Mid-City, is a stylistic choice to use a picturesque area of the city to represent how the city looks overall, again reinforcing the exceptional as the everyday.

*The Big Easy*’s representation of the French Quarter as an active neighborhood extends throughout the film. After a night of eating and dancing at the Uptown music venue Tipitina’s—a studio recreation, as the real Tipitina’s was under renovation at the time of filming, and in any case, does not serve food—Remy drives Anne back to her apartment in the Quarter.\textsuperscript{195} Anne, annoyed by Remy’s blasé stance on the city’s culture of corruption, gets out of the car over Remy’s objections before they arrive at her apartment so she can stop at the corner grocery. The store, the French Market Grocery on the corner of Decatur and Barracks, was owned by an Italian family for generations, a vestige of the once-vibrant Sicilian presence in the lower French Quarter, before urban sprawl led to their gradual migration.\textsuperscript{196} Though no longer open, a handful of other similar groceries remain in the Quarter, including the Central Grocery on Decatur St.


\textsuperscript{194} Souther. 227.


and Matassa’s on the corner of Dauphine and St. Philip, along with other Sicilian family-owned businesses like the Hotel Monteleone. Though these groceries still cater to the handful of residents that remain in the Quarter, they supplement their businesses as restaurants and delis, with the Italian-New Orleans classic muffuletta remaining their most famous menu item. A sign advertising the French Quarter Market’s muffuletta is even prominent in a shot in this sequence. Though the lower French Quarter (“downriver,” between Jackson Square and Esplanade) is more residential than the upper French Quarter (“upriver,” between Canal St. and Jackson Square), by the 1980s this area was heavily gentrified, making Anne’s residency there, and the scene that follows, all the more unlikely.

As Anne is walking out of the market with her groceries, she notices an older woman trying to chase down two men who stole her purse. As one of the (African-American) men runs by Anne, she hits him in the legs with her grocery bag, and a scuffle ensues. Suddenly, Remy pulls up in his convertible, hitting one of the men with his car and tackling the second to the ground. Remy handcuffs them to his convertible, whispers a threat to “beat the ever-living shit” out of the men if they even get their fingerprints on his car. Noticing that Anne is watching him closely, he then makes a show of reading the men their Miranda rights, to which they respond “yes sir!”

Beyond the troubling racial dynamics of the scene—these are the first African-American characters the audience is introduced to, and not the last black criminals to appear—the presentation of this criminal act within the French Quarter has broader implications. City-wide,

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197 The French Market Grocery closed sometime after 1994, the latest it was mentioned in *The Times-Picayune*.
New Orleans has struggled with crime since the 1960s, with non-tourist residential areas having the most problems. The French Quarter is not immune to these trends; after all, the aforementioned police precinct was added with the intent of keeping crime in the Quarter down, and crime in the adjacent St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 has become frequent enough that tourists are now discouraged from visiting it. However, the presentation of this street scene in the most affluent, picturesque, and tourist-friendly neighborhood of the city reveals the filmmakers’ desire to present the tourist image of the city as the day-to-day reality of the city’s residents.

Enhancing these everyday scenes in the French Quarter are sights that align with what a tourist might expect to find in New Orleans that are interwoven into the plot. At the Club Sho-Room, a Bourbon Street strip club, Remy is busted by internal affairs while trying to acquire protection money from the owner. It is at Antoine’s, the iconic French Quarter Creole restaurant, where Anne gets a phone call from Remy saying that he has been arrested. In addition to the Piazza D’Italia, another dead body is found at Mardi Gras World, a warehouse/museum where tourists (and filmmakers) can find Mardi Gras floats on display year-round. A marching band can be found practicing in the neutral ground of a road as Anne is on her way to meet with a local gang leader. The film treats the viewer as a tourist to the city, one who might expect a marching band playing and dancing in the middle of the road on any given day.

As the opening music and Remy’s heritage suggests, most of this televisual tourism centers around Cajuns, to the point that The Big Easy’s geography and landscape is altered to accommodate Cajun culture. The real-life Tipitina’s is a popular venue for both local and national music acts. The studio recreation in the film reimagines the venue as a Cajun restaurant-music hall where where Remy teases the Cajun chef about how much sassafras filé he uses in his

199 Souther, 227.
gumbo, and where Remy and Anne dance to Cajun music. As Remy exclaims to Anne, “This is New Orleans, the Big Easy. Down here, dancing is a way of life!” Cajun culture is revisited later in the film: after Remy beats his corruption charge in court, his friends and family throw a bal de maison, an informal Cajun dance party, to celebrate his win. This scene takes place on a Waterfront house in West End, an affluent New Orleans neighborhood adjacent to Lake Pontchartrain and the 17th Street Canal. Known primarily for its seafood restaurants and the Southern Yacht Club, West End is not a tourist destination. Given the action of the scene, the area was likely chosen for its nautical setting, with the lake in the background meant to evoke the bayou without relocating the production. This geographical liberty underscores the compression of symbolic space between Cajun country and New Orleans in the state’s popular identity. Though hundreds of miles separate Acadiana and New Orleans, the needs of the plot and the expectations of tourist-audiences conveniently realign Cajun country to within a short drive from metropolitan New Orleans.

While tourist locales are prominent in The Big Easy, the film does take diversions into residential areas that highlight the points of overlap in the city’s competing identities. Altogether, the film’s action is centered around the French Quarter, the CBD, Uptown, and possibly the Lower Garden District, with a brief stop in West End. Of these five areas, two (the Quarter, the CBD) are popular tourist areas, one features a popular tourist location (Tipitina’s), while another is used as a façade to reinforce the city’s tourist identity (West End passing as Cajun country). In addition to these areas, all of which are presented as predominantly white

200 Dodds; Stivale, 81, 171.

201 Though the neighborhood of Remy’s apartment is never identified, its implied proximity to Charity Hospital possibly places it in the Lower Garden District.
neighborhoods or nonresidential areas, the film has two scenes set in predominantly-black neighborhoods. However, even the content of these scenes overtly reinforces the city’s revelry.

The first of these scenes features Remy responding to a triple murder in Storyville. The famed red-light district of the same name depicted in *Pretty Baby* was shut down in 1917, and by 1987 the area was dominated by the Iberville housing project. The Storyville name still carries with it the mythology of the city’s licentious past, and while tourists now avoid this area, as Alicia P. Long acknowledges, “the soft-focus myth that has grown up around Storyville is alive and well.”202 It is likely for this reason that the filmmakers chose to set the murder in this area of the city, rather than a neighborhood with a less iconic name. Initially, the murder scene is surrounded by a crowd of angry locals, as a rumor was circulating (later turning out to be true) that the killers were cops driving an unmarked police car. Given the film’s themes of police corruption and murder, this scene might have provided an opportunity to criticize the city’s economic and social injustice. However, this opportunity is lost in the film’s dedication to instilling as much devil-may-care atmosphere into the story as possible. Within minutes of arriving, Remy asks if the crowd outside is being controlled. His captain replies, “Oh yeah, the riot’s kind of turned into a party.” Black New Orleanians are apparently so carefree that even a neighborhood murder by police is an opportunity to *laissez les bons temps rouler*.

The second scene that takes place in a black neighborhood is not readily identified. Anne and Lamar Parmentel (Charles Ludlam), the colorful local attorney who helped Remy beat his corruption charge, are on their way to visit Daddy Mention (Solomon Burke), the local black gang leader and client of Lamar’s who dabbles in voodoo or, as Lamar puts it, “He’s a doctor of

roots, fruits, and snoots.” The filmmakers’ emphasis on injecting as much local iconography and good-time attitude into even a transitional scene such as this likely contributed to the absurd reputation the film has with locals. Even Daddy Mention, framed initially as a sympathetic character and a loving father, is murdered by corrupt policemen within minutes of his introduction to the audience, reducing a potentially interesting character to another signpost of black New Orleans stereotypes.

On the most obvious level of analysis, *The Big Easy* features several New Orleans stereotypes identified by Schuth: these include a shot of Remy and Anne sitting at a table in Tipitina’s that includes a bottle of Tabasco sauce so prominent in the foreground it appears almost as tall as Remy in the frame. Such applications of local culture, combined with the “decidedly weird” representation of its inhabitants, helped define for mainstream audiences the kind of experience they might have in their own visit to the Big Easy. Though the Louisiana Film Commission was directly involved in production, the evolving economics of film production make it clear that the *quid pro quo* arrangements of location filming in the 1950s no longer apply. Rather than receiving municipal support in exchange for a positive image of the city, as with *New Orleans Uncensored* (William Castle, 1954) and *Panic in the Streets*, *The Big Easy* took advantage of support from the state film commission to present a story of deep-rooted civic corruption. The film’s lasting impact in popularizing the Big Easy moniker speaks both to the shift in civic policy regarding how New Orleans is portrayed in film, and to the degree to which crime, corruption, and “good times” are intertwined into New Orleans’ identity. Though *The Big Easy* is unusual in its excursions into areas of the city that are both predominantly black and not tourist areas, any potential political statement of these scenes is undercut by the presentation of these neighborhoods as defined by criminality, and the people who occupy them by insulting
regional stereotypes. This picture of New Orleans as full of good-time cops and criminals alike was nonetheless seductive to national audiences, contributing to a chasm in how New Orleans perceives itself and how the national audiences perceive the Big Easy.

**Conclusion: The Construction of the Façade**

The New Orleans-set films of Classical Hollywood were homes of the highest echelon of New Orleans society recreated on soundstages and backlots. The docu-dramas of the 1950s, while favoring areas more often frequented by tourists, still portrayed locations where New Orleanians lived and worked in their day-to-day lives. By the 1980s and 1990s, New Orleans-set films were portraying non-residential zones of the city as “lived-in,” packaging the “exceptional” New Orleans sought by tourists as the same New Orleans lived in by the city’s residents when the cameras are turned off. This “spectacular separation” between residential and on-screen New Orleans is a direct effect of the alterations of the cityscape undertaken by the municipal government to accommodate tourism, and the related measures taken by city and state governments took in courting film and television crews to capture the neighborhoods tourists travel to New Orleans to see. If tourism is, as Guy Debord argues, “the chance to go and see what has been made trite,” by the 1980s cinema was where New Orleans was made trite, the place where tourist expectations became cultural stereotypes.  

The discourse on disparities between a “real” and “reel” city is not exclusive to New Orleans: it is a pastime of every New Yorker, Chicagoan, and Angeleno to point out the inaccuracies in media representations of their cities. What separates New Orleans from these major metropolises is that while the city holds a significant place in the popular imaginary, less

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is actually known about the Big Easy. You do not need to be from Manhattan or Downtown Los Angeles to understand that the main characters of *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004) and *New Girl* (FOX, 2011-) could not afford the real-life apartments they inhabit in the shows, nor to realize that the many stops in Chicago made by the gang in *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* (John Hughes, 1986) would be impossible to fit into a one-day trip. It is less likely for national audiences to realize that Anne Osborne in *The Big Easy* probably could not afford her French Quarter apartment on a government salary, or that the victim in the opening of *Hard Target* runs from the French Quarter to across the river in Algiers in a matter of seconds. Roger Ebert’s review demonstrates this fundamental illiteracy to the region’s intricacies, identifying Charles Ludlam’s lawyer as a Cajun, despite no indication in either the dialogue, his appearance, or his accent that he is one.\(^{204}\) If the spell of New Orleans in these films, combined with the non-native’s relative ignorance about the city’s geography and politics, made an exaggerated caricature in a film like *The Big Easy* convincing to urbane film critics like Ebert and David Denby, then it was doubtless convincing to average filmgoers across the nation and the world.

It is impossible for critics or audiences to understand neighborhoods when they are not even aware they exist. Gentilly, New Orleans East, and the Ninth Ward were invisible to tourists and film crews alike. As these areas of the city—poorer, blacker, but no less New Orleans than the French Quarter—were ignored by both the city government and the camera, those who lived in these areas continued to struggle with the crime, unemployment, and blight. Without accurate firsthand knowledge, audiences are left to fall back on how the city is packaged and sold to tourists, and how the city has appeared in other film and television works:

\(^{204}\) Says Ebert, “My favorite supporting performance in the movie is by Charles Ludlam, as a defense attorney, impeccable in his Panama hat and summer suit, taking a mile a minute in a shrill Cajun shriek.”
a self-perpetuating cycle that always leads back to the French Quarter. This gap in perception of New Orleans between locals and non-locals is underscored by Souther in his epilogue to *New Orleans on Parade*:

New Orleans wears a mask, flaunting its beautiful architecture, delicious food, frenetic revelry, and fascinating folkways while hiding its face—decadent slums, deprivation and crime, apathy and despair. Those fortunate enough to spend a vacation or purchase a home sequestered amid iron-lace balconies, flickering gas lamps, horse-drawn carriages, and oak-canopied streets enjoy the New Orleans portrayed in film, television, literature, popular music, travel guides, and magazines. Those unfortunate ones who live amid dilapidated shotgun houses, broken windows, graffiti, and treeless, pot-holed streets suffer a New Orleans untouched by the colorful paint, bright lights, festive umbrellas, and bronze plaques that connote tourism.205

As it turns out, this “Big Easy” mask could only be ripped off by a moment of national disillusionment, just as the Rodney King riots broke open the perception of racial harmony in Los Angeles.206 Souther wrote his epilogue in 2005: as it turns out, just before such an event would come to the nation in the form of images of those previously-invisible areas of the city underwater on CNN.

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205 Souther, 228-229.
206 Deleyto, 15-18.
CHAPTER III. ELVIS PRESLEY SAT HERE: TREME AS NEUTRAL GROUND BETWEEN KATRINA VERITE AND KATRINA HOLLYWOOD

Of all of the documentaries to emerge from the wake of Hurricane Katrina, few matched the immediacy and visceral impact of Trouble the Water (Carl Deal and Tia Lessin, 2008). The documentary is anchored by Kimberly Rivers Roberts and her husband Scott, a New Orleans couple who used Kimberly’s camcorder to document their experience riding out the storm in their Ninth Ward attic. The Roberts’ firsthand account is interwoven with their post-Katrina experiences in a Red Cross shelter and returning to New Orleans after the storm, along with footage of local and national politicians and newscasters reacting to the Hurricane and its impact. Similar to Josh Neufeld’s A.D.: New Orleans after the Deluge (2009) and Dan Baum’s Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans (2009), Trouble the Water personalizes the storm’s impact through direct recounting from first-hand survivors of the storm. In a particularly memorable sequence, the audio of a 9-11 dispatch officer tells an elderly woman trapped in her attic that no help is coming, as footage shows floodwaters reaching the street signs of the Lower Ninth.

Even with the human devastation of the film’s flooding scenes, one of the most chilling scenes in Trouble the Water takes place Uptown at the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation (NOTMC), a year (and a world) removed from the worst of Katrina’s destruction. In this brief diversion from the Roberts’ post-Katrina experiences, the audience is introduced to an unidentified female representative for the agency who discusses the post-Katrina effort to bring tourists back to the city. She notes that the NOTMC’s research “has showed us that people want to come here for a vacation. They want to come and relax. They don’t want to constantly be reminded about, you know, devastation when you’re trying to have a good time on a vacation.” She runs through the positives of the city’s recovery status: the mall is in good shape, the French
Quarter has been cleaned up, and the aquarium and Harrah’s Casino have reopened. She goes on to say that “people have the perception that we’re closed, and while eighty percent of the city was devastated, that twenty percent, where the tourists are, was not.” She closes by showing a promotional DVD of the city that features a montage of every possible tourist image associated with the city’s “Big Easy” identity, from St. Louis Cathedral to the aquarium to the Garden District, set to a trad jazz jingle titled “Do They Play Jazz in Heaven?” The NOTMC representative’s introduction to the clip is telling: “this is a DVD that we produced right before the storm, but everything in the DVD is perfect, so we still use it.” Trouble the Water then contrasts the smiling, heartless capitalism of this scene by cutting from the promotional footage to a track of the Ninth Ward a year after the storm, with wrecked houses, boats, and cars still dotting the overgrown landscape, as the cheery jazz song fades out.

Trouble the Water’s documentary status does not necessarily qualify the film as a more accurate representation of New Orleans than fictional narrative films. As the New Orleans-native media scholar Bernie Cook notes in his review of Katrina representation, documentary “manipulates time and space for emphasis and argument,” often staging scenes to convey narrative.207 Subjective documentaries like Trouble the Water tell stories by choosing what footage to include and exclude, and it is possible that the NOTMC representative has more dimension than the clueless shill who appears on-screen. However, the NOTMC scene conveys several truths of post-Katrina New Orleans. The first is that in addition to the tremendous human and economic devastation wrought by the storm, Hurricane Katrina exposed the divide between national and local perception of New Orleans, established by the city’s tourism

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The continuation of the divide in how locals and non-locals perceive New Orleans is evident in the two post-Katrina trends of representation. On the one end, there are media texts that, like Trouble the Water, attempt a good-faith appraisal of the storm and its effects. This trend of both documentary and fiction films, labeled in this study “Katrina Verité,” includes film and television works that attempt to meaningfully explore the human, economic, and identity crises that befell New Orleans in the wake of Katrina. On the other end, there are media texts, including Hollywood films and television shows like Déjà Vu (Tony Scott, 2006) and K-Ville (FOX, 2007-2008), which downplay or co-opt the Hurricane’s destruction to tell a story that does not substantially explore the hurricane’s impact, often perpetuating the image of New Orleans as the city where les bon temps rouler. This camp, labeled in this study “Katrina Hollywood,” also demonstrates the continued intertwining of the city’s economic interests and its feature film productions, as the film tax credit law passed by the Louisiana Legislature continues to draw more film and television productions to the state. The next two chapters will explore each of these trends in turn, starting with the Verité approach, and the complications that come with adapting a documentary lens to a fictional work.

A tremendous body of documentary filmmaking detailing the storm and its aftermath followed in the wake of Katrina. These documentaries were not the medium by which the
majority of people witnessed Katrina; that banner would be carried by the network and cable television news of the era. However, as Bernie Cook notes, “If television news formed the broadest, most-watched set of representations of Katrina, documentary films were able to explore stories, witness events, and feature voices overlooked, neglected, or suppressed by television news.”

While each documentary has its own focus and message, many themes recur, including the failure of national media outlets to immediately reckon with Katrina’s impact, the personal cost of the storm on individual citizens of the city, the failure of government institutions on civic, state, and national levels to properly prepare for and respond to the storm, economic injustice along racial and socioeconomic lines, and the challenges faced by many New Orleanians wanting to return home and rebuild their homes and lives.

Included in Cook’s grouping of Katrina texts connecting to the lived experience are a select number of fictional films set in New Orleans. Though the most prominent Hollywood representations of Katrina deal with the storm’s aftermath superficially and as a tertiary plot point, some media texts embraced what Thom Andersen has labeled the “city as subject” in their approach to representing New Orleans and Katrina. Produced largely independent from the studio system, fictional works such as Low and Behold (Zack Godshall, 2007), New Orleans, Mon Amour (Michael Almereyda, 2008), Beasts of the Southern Wild (Benh Zeitlin, 2012), and the HBO drama Treme (2010-2013), attempt (with varying degrees of success) to reckon with the human impact of Katrina on the city’s population. Though most of these texts were watched even less than the documentaries on Katrina—neither Low and Behold nor Mon Amour received

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208 Bernie Cook, xvii-xviii.

209 Los Angeles Plays Itself (Thom Andersen, 2003).
a wide theatrical release, and *Treme* had middling ratings through all four of its seasons—they reveal the difficulty in reckoning with post-Katrina New Orleans in a fictional form.

Of these fictional renderings of Katrina, *Treme*, David Simon and Eric Overmyer’s drama about the citizens of New Orleans and their day-to-day struggles in the immediate aftermath of the storm has received the most critical and academic attention. While the other films listed adapt a documentary aesthetic, *Treme* goes a step further, casting professional actors alongside real-life New Orleans figures and interweaving fictional narrative and ripped-from-the-headlines political controversies. However, in addition to its presentation of civic issues previously highlighted by documentaries, *Treme* spends half of its episodes focusing on those cultural institutions that tourists flock to the city to find every year, including music, food, and Carnival. This set of representations, in turn, are framed within the context of Hollywood’s popular representations of New Orleans. So confident are the showrunners in their grasp of New Orleans culture that they use *Treme* to explicitly parody other New Orleans films and television shows within the show’s narrative. By framing *Treme* within the “neutral ground” between Katrina Verité and Katrina Hollywood approaches to representing New Orleans, Simon and Overmyer position their show as a paradox of cultural authority. *Treme*’s attention to detail in its representation of entire the city progresses the show beyond the geographic inaccuracy defined by Hollywood’s representations. However, the show's continued insistence on revisiting and exploring New Orleans culture and its argument for the city’s exceptionality ultimately replicates the same “Big Easy” identity typically found in Hollywood films.

The position that *Treme* holds between the Verité and Hollywood approaches can be illustrated by a close reading of “All on a Mardi Gras Day,” the first of the show’s four annual Mardi Gras episodes. To understand *Treme*’s approach, it is useful first to recall the timeline of
Hurricane Katrina, and to review both the characteristics of Katrina Verité and the existing scholarship on *Treme*.

**Hurricane Katrina**

By Saturday, August 27, 2005, meteorological projections made it clear that Hurricane Katrina would make landfall in Louisiana. For a region and a city that deals annually with the threat of hurricanes, the governmental response was slow. Though Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco declared a state of emergency that day, it was not until Sunday morning, as the storm strengthened to a Category 5, that New Orleans Mayor C. Ray Nagin ordered a mandatory evacuation of the city. Even then, the city government provided no clear guidance for evacuation, and no transportation for those who could not drive themselves. For those who remained, some chose to ride it out in their homes, as many had done in past hurricanes, while about 20,000 took shelter in the Louisiana Superdome. Though residents of New Orleans feared the worst, the eye of the hurricane actually missed New Orleans, landing northeast of the city in St. Tammany Parish. The waters of Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi surged to nine and sixteen feet above their normal levels, respectively. 210 Though the wind and flying debris caused a great deal of damage, including cracking open the roof of the Superdome, for those still in the city, by morning it was assumed that the worst of the storm was over.

However, at around 9:00 am of Monday, August 29th, the Industrial Canal levee breached, and water surged into the basin of the city. Subsequent breaches in the 17th Street and London Avenue Canal levees would be reported throughout the day. The total of six breaches along the three canal levees, combined with the failure of pumping stations in Jefferson and

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Orleans parishes, resulted in the flooding of eighty percent of the city. Those residents stuck in the Superdome would eventually be evacuated to Morial Convention Center, where residents faced extreme heat and lack of water and sanitation. Many stuck in their houses drowned or died of exposure in their attics. Those stuck on their roofs had no choice but to wait for a helicopter or a boat rescue that often did not come. By the end of the crisis, an estimated 1,440 people died in Louisiana from the storm and its aftermath, though this number is disputed.211

Governmental response to the crisis ranged in levels of callousness and incompetence. On a local level, rule of law deteriorated as an overworked NOPD failed to control the crisis, quickly abandoning search-and-rescue in favor of crime control. Police in neighboring Gretna turned back survivors at the Crescent City Bridge by firing on them.212 From his command post at the Hyatt Hotel, Mayor Nagin resorted to criticizing the slow federal response in a widely-circulated outburst during a radio interview.213 On a state level, Governor Blanco allegedly failed to request direct military assistance from President George W. Bush, while the Louisiana National Guard denied Red Cross and other NGO aid groups entry into New Orleans.214 On the Federal level, FEMA director Michael Brown did not even acknowledge that there was a levee


213 Evans Thomas.

breach until 6:00 a.m. on Tuesday morning. Though it soon became clear that FEMA lacked the resources to adequately respond to the crisis unfolding throughout the region, President Bush did not immediately mobilize a military response. Military personnel would not arrive to the city until September 5, a full week after Katrina made landfall. President Bush did not cancel his vacation to his ranch, and his choice to have Air Force One fly over parts of the flooded areas on the way back to the White House on August 31 conveyed an optic of an out-of-touch and uninterested president. During a visit to Mobile, Alabama on September 3, he praised Brown’s handling of the storm, famously stating “Brownie, you’re doing a heck of a job.” Brown would resign as head of FEMA on September 12 over his handling of Katrina. Bush would not visit New Orleans until September 13, over two weeks after the storm made landfall.

The storm irrevocably altered the geography of New Orleans. Though the neighborhoods most damaged by the flooding were not exclusively working class—the middle-class Lakewood was among the most devastated—as Lynnell Thomas notes, during the city’s post-civil rights era of white flight, “the city’s African American population grew and spread primarily into more affordable, lower lying, and less environmentally sustainable areas of the city, such as the Lower Ninth Ward, parts of Gentilly, and New Orleans East,” all of which were devastated by Katrina’s...

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216 Evan Thomas.


floodwaters.\textsuperscript{219} Those areas of the city least affected by the flooding, including the Central Business District, the Garden District (part of Uptown, labeled the “Isle of Denial” by locals for its geographic remove from the worst of Katrina’s wrath), and the French Quarter, are all popular areas of the city for tourists and film scouts alike. Writing in 2006, New Orleans geographer Richard Campanella speculated as to whether expensive, long-term flood prevention solutions would be implemented to prevent another future catastrophe, or if only the historic districts would be saved, turning New Orleans “into a ‘boutique city’ of visitors, gentry, and staff,” an American Venice.\textsuperscript{220}

Though neither extreme option has yet come to fruition, civic measures made after the storm have made it more difficult for many working-class residents to resettle in New Orleans. Neglect of those most affected by the storm can be seen in the 100,000 black New Orleanians who have yet to return home, and the struggle of those who did return in their dealing with insurance companies lowballing policies, FEMA trailers lined with formaldehyde, and the controversial “Way Home” federal program that was censured by a federal judge for discriminating against black homeowners.\textsuperscript{221} For many politicians and developers, Katrina was

\textsuperscript{219} Lynnell L. Thomas, \textit{Desire & Disaster in New Orleans: Tourism, Race, and Historical Memory} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 17,

\textsuperscript{220} Campanella, \textit{Geographies of New Orleans}, 396-397.

an opportunity to rid New Orleans of its low-income housing and to properly monetize the city, embodying Naomi Klein’s concept of “disaster capitalism.”

This camp includes Mayor Nagin, who called for the construction of a casino district before civic outrage forced him to backtrack. More explicitly, Congressman Richard Baker of Louisiana’s Sixth District privately told lobbyists “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.” Despite Baker’s declaration, most of the city’s low-income housing projects were largely undamaged by the flooding, but the city council voted to demolish them anyway, replacing them with mixed-income units that house a fraction of the population of the high-rises.

Exacerbating this loss of affordable housing is the gentrification of working-class areas like Gentilly and Tremé, a gradual, ongoing process by which locals are priced out of the neighborhoods they grew up in. Today, New Orleans’ entrenched economic and racial inequalities have never been more conspicuous, while the city has never been more inhospitable to its predominantly-black working class. Meanwhile, the city’s tourism industry has fully rebounded, and as will be explored in a later chapter, filmmaking in the city has flourished.


Thomas, *Desire & Disaster in New Orleans*, 16.
Katrina Verité: Post-Katrina Documentaries

In an interview with PBS’ Jim Lehrer on September 1, 2005, FEMA Director Michael Brown stated, in a response to Lehrer pushing him about FEMA’s failure to properly respond to the storm, that “we’re seeing people that we didn’t know exist that suddenly are showing up on bridges or parts of the interstate that aren’t inundated.” Brown’s callous response, like Rep. Baker’s comment on the city’s public housing, is revealing of the federal response to the storm and the people most affected by it. The FEMA director’s statement is also an accurate reflection of how national perceptions of New Orleans were altered by the storm. For non-locals who visited New Orleans pre-Katrina, mentions of areas named the Lower Ninth Ward and Gentilly would likely be met with blank stares. However, while these areas remain mostly unvisited by tourists—with the exception of the Katrina “disaster buses” that tour the most affected areas of the city—their existence, and the struggles of their residents, were no longer “out of sight, out of mind” after being featured on the evening news, and in the documentaries and fictional film and television that chronicled the storm and its aftermath.

Since the earliest years of motion pictures, New Orleans has been a popular subject for documentaries: the first filmed representations of the city were now-lost documentary shorts by American Mutoscope, exhibited through the eponymous peepshow-style device invented by the company. The city’s status as a documentary subject would continue through the silent and

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227 Eric Ishiwata used this quote as a launchpad for his article on the erasure of black people from the neoliberal landscape. “‘We Are Seeing People We Didn’t Know Exist’: Katrina and the Neoliberal Erasure of Race,” in The Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans, ed. Cedric Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 32-59.

228 Ed and Susan Poole, Louisiana Film History: A Comprehensive Overview Beginning 1896 (Donaldsville, LA: Margaret Media, 2012), 11-15.
sound eras of American cinema, including travelogues shot by the Ford Motion Picture Laboratories, MGM’s Traveltalks series, and Columbia Pictures. Both owing and contributing to the city’s perceived exceptionalism and historical significance, New Orleans’ popularity as a documentary subject and setting continued through the second half of the twentieth century.

Though not widely seen at the time of their release, Les Blank’s Louisiana-set documentaries, including the celebration of the city’s Mardi Gras and St. Patrick’s Day celebrations in *Always for Pleasure* (1978), are perhaps the most well-regarded examples today, owing to a late-career critical reassessment and the release of Blank’s work by the Criterion Collection. Though a steady stream of travelogue and historical documentaries emerged on New Orleans, they paled in comparison to the outpouring of documentary work after Katrina.

From 2006 to 2015, hundreds of documentaries were made about Hurricane Katrina’s effect on New Orleans. This number includes feature-length films, like *Trouble the Water* and *Faubourg Tremé: The Untold Story of Black New Orleans* (Dawn Logsdon, 2008), and short films like *An Eye in the Storm* (Neil Alexander, 2006) and *Still Standing* (Paola Mendoza, 2006) that were released theatrically on the festival circuit. Some feature-length and short films, such as *A Village Called Versailles* (S. Leo Chiang, 2009), *I’m Carolyn Parker* (Jonathan Demme, 2011), and *Big Easy to Big Empty: The Untold Story of the Drowning of New Orleans* (Greg Palast, 2007), were produced for and broadcast on TV. Others were aired as feature-length episodes of anthology series, including *Law & Disorder* (Thomas Jennings, 2010) and *Witness: Cities of the United States: New Orleans* (Ford Motion Picture Laboratories, 1923); *Modern New Orleans* (James A. Fitzpatrick, 1940); *Old and Modern New Orleans* (Andre de la Verre, 1942).

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231 Poole and Poole, “Louisiana Film History.”
Katrina (Jon Siskel and Greg Jacobs, 2011). Two television miniseries, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006) and *If God is Willing and da Creek Don’t Rise* (2010), were both produced by Spike Lee for HBO, while *Hurricane on the Bayou* (Greg MacGillivray, 2006) started as a nature documentary for IMAX theaters. While *Hurricane on the Bayou* and *Faubourg Tremé* started production before the storm and incorporated Katrina last-minute, the rest were produced in direct response to the storm.

Compared to Hollywood’s filmed representations of New Orleans and to the initial television news broadcasts of Hurricane Katrina, Katrina documentaries have far smaller audiences. The vast majority of the documentaries were produced independently, most not garnering a theatrical release outside of festivals and first-run markets. While some, such as *Faubourg Tremé* and Jonathan Demme’s *I’m Carolyn Parker*, eventually found a home on public television, many did not, and those not already produced for TV were mostly relegated to straight-to-DVD and streaming releases by independent distributors, if released at all. It is reasonable to conclude that these documentaries did not have as direct an impact on popular perceptions of New Orleans as Hollywood productions like *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Elia Kazan, 1951) or *The Big Easy*. However, as Bernie Cook notes, these documentaries built upon the collective memory of Katrina and its impact. “While television news formed the foundation for the memory and understanding of Katrina,” Cook argues, “documentary film and video both built upon that foundation and attempted to destabilize it by offering contrasting information and interpretation.”

Hurricane Katrina, like September 11, was an event experienced by the vast majority of Americans through television. Just as documentary and feature film mediations of 9/11 keep alive the memory of that event for those who were not alive to witness it, so do

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232 Bernie Cook, 125.
documentaries perpetuate the memory of Katrina for those who did not see the storm on CNN in 2005.

Almost all of the aforementioned documentaries engage with the city beyond the typical tourist locales, highlighting those residents whom Michael Brown did not know existed. The most prominent Katrina documentary is still Spike Lee’s HBO miniseries *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, owing to its creator’s and network’s respective cultural clout and its release only a year after the Hurricane. *When the Levees Broke* rebukes the city government for its longtime neglect of those residents living outside of the tourist areas. “They not [going to let anything] happen to this French Quarter,” claims one of Lee’s local interviewees while discussing the commonly-held belief that the levees were dynamited in 1965 during Hurricane Betsy. “If the French Quarter go, everything go.” Throughout Lee’s four-hour indictment of the municipal, state, and (especially) federal failure to properly maintain the levees and respond to their failure, those neighborhoods and individuals outside of the Quarter are put front-and-center in his “talking head” structure. Whenever a New Orleans resident appears on-screen, the caption lists not only their name and occupation, but the neighborhood they live in, from the Garden District to the Lower Ninth Ward. Most of the film’s footage comes from the many residential areas that were devastated by flooding. Perceptions of the Central Business District as the bustling downtown area of shopping, hotels, and the Superdome are fundamentally altered by the images of evacuees suffering and dying in the Superdome and outside of the Morial Convention Center. The only time the French Quarter is prominently featured is during President Bush’s televised address in Jackson Square on September 15, an event that is framed as bitterly ironic; as Lee’s interviewees note, most New Orleanians were still incapable of watching the address, and the President’s visit required a temporary return of
electricity in the city that was promptly shut off once he left. Though the French Quarter and the Superdome continue to function as metonyms for New Orleans, When the Levees Broke marked the first time a New Orleans film or television text framed the city’s tourist and cinematic icons as façades, rather than as recognizable areas of the city. As the opening example from Trouble the Water demonstrates, it would not be the last instance of subverting New Orleans’ tourist identity.

Since the most affected neighborhoods of New Orleans were those outside of the tourist areas, an effective documentary on Hurricane Katrina must, by necessity, reject previous stereotypical framings of these areas as “the” New Orleans. Along with the implicit rejection of past tourist/filmic narratives is the explicit criticism of past and present economic injustices ingrained in the city’s geography. In Big Easy to Big Empty, during journalist/filmmaker Greg Palast’s interview of Alik Raheem of the Common Ground Collective, Raheem rails against the “two cities…the city for the white and the rich and…another city for the poor and black.” Similarly, A Village Called Versailles centers around the previously-invisible Vietnamese-American community of New Orleans East, and how it mobilized politically to halt the toxic trash dump being zoned adjacent to their neighborhood. Tootie’s Last Suit (Lisa Katzman, 2009), about prominent Mardi Gras Indian Chief Tootie Montana, closes with the chief’s son expressing dismay that the city does not want its black citizens to return home. Though not widely viewed by audiences, these documentaries collectively develop a counter-narrative to the centrality of the French Quarter, Garden District, and CBD found in standard filmed representations of New Orleans.

\[233\text{ While residents of the Garden District are interviewed, the mostly-unflooded Garden District does not appear in Lee’s documentary.}\]
Katrina Verité: Post-Katrina Fictional Representation

Despite Katrina’s undeniable cultural reverberations, Hollywood studios remain reluctant to produce a film that directly reckons with Hurricane Katrina, opting instead for films that deal with the storm tangentially or exploit the storm as a backdrop (see Chapter 4). The fictional moving image texts that demonstrate an active interest in dissecting the storm have emerged from American independent cinema and prestige television, two modes of media production that have been the primary source of complex, mature visual storytelling during the family and teen-oriented mass entertainment that defines the Age of the Blockbuster. These works include Low and Behold; New Orleans, Mon Amour; Treme; and Beasts of the Southern Wild. They all share Katrina documentaries’ interest in peeling back the façade of New Orleans to reveal previously unseen people and areas of the city. Low and Behold, Mon Amour, Beasts, and Treme are all are shot in a documentary style, utilizing the wreckage of certain neighborhoods of the city (or, in Beasts’ case, a Louisiana barrier island) as a backdrop for the action, and casting a combination of professional actors and local amateurs. Most importantly, all of these films and TV shows attempt to capture the plight of Katrina survivors through a sympathetic incorporation of its residents and a story centered around their plight, as opposed to exploiting the ruined city for empty atmosphere or a peripheral storyline.

Low and Behold follows Turner (Barlow Jacobs), a young man who comes to New Orleans to make money as an insurance adjuster for residents attempting to rebuild their homes. Having difficulty navigating the city, Turner enlists the help of Nixon (Eddie Rouse), a troubled

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local factory worker. Director Zack Godshall entered the project with the intention of blurring fact and fiction, intentionally seeking out New Orleanians’ real-life stories for his own narrative. Cowriting the film with Godshall, Jacobs is a first-time actor and a Katrina evacuee, and bases the story on his own experiences in evacuating and working in the city as a temporary insurance adjuster after the storm.

Through the narrative device of Turner interviewing the owners of the homes he is adjusting, the film intersperses real-life New Orleanians recounting their experiences of surviving and evacuating from the storm. Though Turner is initially indifferent in his interactions with survivors, he gains empathy through his conversations with Nixon, and starts helping Nixon search the city for his missing dog. When Turner eventually learns that Nixon is unemployed, squatting in his wrecked house, and is missing his wife and daughter, he belatedly comes to terms with the human scale of what he has been witnessing every day. Though rarely seen, *Low and Behold* is remarkable in its complete reorientation of the cinematic geography of New Orleans outside of the established norm. It is perhaps the first feature film in decades set and shot entirely in New Orleans and without featuring a single wrought-iron balcony or Mardi Gras float.

While *Low and Behold* implicitly subverts audience expectations of New Orleans, *New Orleans, Mon Amour* explicitly subverts them. *Mon Amour* follows Henry (Christopher Eccleston), an affluent, married doctor who rekindles his affair with Hyde (Elisabeth Moss), a younger woman with whom he used to be involved, who returned to help rebuild the Lower Ninth Ward. While more focused on the relationship between these two characters than the

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235 Zack Godshall, “Let the Breeze Spell the Stream, or Learning How to Make a Film in Post-Katrina New Orleans,” *Southern Review* 51, no. 3 (Summer 2015), 510-511.

pleit of New Orleanians, director Michael Almeryda contributes a clear understanding of the city’s geographic, classist boundaries. The story’s action alternates between Henry’s opulent house in the Garden District, and the Lower Ninth, where Hyde and her fellow volunteers live in tents. The French Quarter, where Henry attends a costumed gala, is filmed like a hallucination, its ongoing party atmosphere seemingly unreal when framed within the aftermath of the storm. Like Low and Behold, Mon Amour is populated with a mix of professional actors and local amateurs, (including Low and Behold’s Barlow Jacobs, who has a small role as one of the volunteers) a move that Almeryda viewed as a necessary step towards creating authenticity.\(^{237}\)

Though Mon Amour is not without problems—the film is very white, and never considers the perspective of anyone actually born into poverty—the choices he makes in depicting New Orleans differentiate his film from Katrina Hollywood.

Both Low and Behold and Mon Amour are low-budget films, shot in 2006 in a still-devastated New Orleans, and released on the festival circuit (Low and Behold at Sundance; Mon Amour at South by Southwest).\(^{238}\) However, both films failed to secure theatrical distribution, eventually released into the dense content forest of video-on-demand and streaming services. The fate of these films reflects that of other Katrina Verité films like Below Dreams (Garrett Bradley, 2014), The King of New Orleans (Coodie Simmons and Chike Ozah, 2015), and other little-seen New Orleans-shot independents languishing on streaming platforms.


\(^{238}\) Though released in 2008, New Orleans, Mon Amour was quickly shot in the summer of 2006. “‘New Orleans Mon Amour’ Director:”
By comparison, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is an outlier in terms of its visual style, its storytelling, and its critical and audience reception. Director Benh Zeitlin cast many local actors in his roles, including Houma-native Quvenzhané Wallis and New Orleans-native Dwight Henry in the lead roles. It explores the plight of residents of Louisiana’s barrier islands whose homes are sinking before their eyes. Though shot with a documentarian’s eye in 16mm handheld, *Beasts*’ narrative is a magical realist fairytale that incorporates magical creatures and dream sequences to tell its story. While still set in Louisiana, *Beast* was shot in the bayous of Montegut in Terrebonne Parish, a far cry from the docudramas filmed on the streets of New Orleans. *Beasts* was also a rousing success at Cannes and Sundance, where it respectively won the Caméra d’Or and the Grand Jury Prize. The film was sold to Fox Searchlight for $2 million, grossed nearly $22 million nationwide, and earned Academy Award nominations for Best Picture, Director, Screenplay, and Actress (Wallis). As the most critically successful fictional Katrina Verité film, *Beasts* is perhaps revealing about the perception of post-Katrina New Orleans as unmarketable even for independent cinema. *Beasts* takes place primarily outside of New Orleans, and its representation of New Orleans explores nothing about the storm’s impact on the city itself. This arm’s distance from Katrina and the city makes *Beasts* an interesting exception that falls just outside of New Orleans’ city limits.

**Treme and its Critical and Academic Reception**

As noted earlier, none of the post-Katrina texts, either fictional or documentary, received the level of critical and scholarly attention given to *Treme*.\(^{239}\) Like *When the Levees Broke*, *Treme* benefits from the deep pockets and cultural pedigree of its network, HBO. Spike Lee was

\(^{239}\) Though named after the New Orleans neighborhood, *Treme* (pronounced “Trem-ay”) dispenses with the accent aigu commonly found on the last e in the name.
able to utilize the resources of the network to release *When the Levees Broke* within a year of the storm, while most other documentaries were forced to rely on a less consistent stream of funding and access to its subjects.\(^{240}\) Similarly, while the makers of fellow Katrina Verité texts *Low and Behold, Mon Amour*, and *Beasts* were forced to scrape together funding from multiple sources and submit to festivals to obtain distribution, David Simon and Eric Overmyer’s backing was secure from the moment their series was green-lit. *Treme* was released and stayed on-air because of the working relationship Simon developed while producing three previous projects with HBO over the previous decade. However, its cultural impact can be attributed in part to the relative stability afforded by television for independent-minded projects, a trend that has been noted of today’s media landscape.\(^{241}\)

Like other Katrina Verité works, *Treme* attempts to capture the struggles of real-life New Orleanians in the aftermath of the storm, grounding the story through a focus on residents of both the titular neighborhood and New Orleans at-large. The first season focuses on Creighton (John Goodman), a Tulane professor struggling with depression and writer’s block, his wife Toni (Melissa Leo), a civil rights attorney who is helping LaDonna (Khandi Alexander), a Tremé bar owner searching for a brother lost during Katrina while in police custody, and LaDonna’s ex-husband Antoine (Wendell Pierce), a hustling trombonist. Janette (Kim Dickens) is a struggling local chef, while her boyfriend Davis (Steve Zahn) is a DJ and wannabe musician. Albert “Big Chief” Lambreaux (Clarke Peters) is a Mardi Gras Indian Chief trying to rebuild his home, while his son Delmond (Rob Brown) is a successful jazz trumpeter living in New York. Sonny and Annie (Michiel Huisman and Lucia Micarelli) are two French Quarter street musicians on

\(^{240}\) Bernie Cook, 132.

\(^{241}\) Sepinwall, *The Revolution Was Televised*. 
diverging creative and personal paths. In subsequent seasons, the show would grow to accommodate Nelson (Jon Seda), a disaster capitalist-developer from Texas; Terry (David Morse), a disillusioned NOPD shift lieutenant; and L.P. (Christ Coy), an out-of-town reporter from ProPublica investigating unsolved crimes perpetrated by police during Katrina. Finally, *Treme* would also feature countless musicians, politicians, chefs, and other cultural figures appearing as themselves. Many TV critics praised *Treme* for its attention to detail and its refusal to conform to audience expectations, while others criticized the show for its over-emphasis on authenticity at the cost of narrative drive, and its tendency to have its characters pontificate about New Orleans culture and music.\(^{242}\) However, the most sustained source of discourse surrounding the show has come from academia.

In reference to the influential rock group The Velvet Underground, music producer Brian Eno famously said that while the band’s first album sold only 30,000 copies, “I think everyone who bought one of those 30,000 copies started a band.” Similarly, while few people watched *Treme* while it was on the air, everyone who did seems to have written an academic article on the show. Though 1.1 million watched the pilot on April 11, 2010, subsequent episodes never came

close to this peak, and by the series finale, viewership had dropped to 397,000 viewers. Nonetheless, academic interest has continued unabated well after the show went off the air. Scholarship on *Treme* includes several academic articles, special issues of *Television & New Media* and the *European Journal of American Culture*, a book anthology, chapters in two more anthologies, and chapters in three monographs, to say nothing of the countless panels and presentations on the show at academic conferences. Topics of research on the show vary from the show’s engagement with New Orleans residents, to its relationship to and representation of blackness, to its representation of jazz and New Orleans’ music culture, to how the show constructs a post-Katrina narrative. However, perhaps the most prolific and fruitful thread of scholarship revolves around the show’s relationship to reality.

Both Simon and Overmyer expressed criticism of past on-screen representations of New Orleans in films such as *No Mercy* (Richard Pearce, 1986) and *Angel Heart* (Alan Parker, 1987),

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and they sought to learn from the mistakes of these films. Overmyer, a longtime resident of New Orleans’ Marigny neighborhood, experienced these difficulties firsthand when he helped produce *The Big Easy* (USA Network, 1996-1997), a TV adaptation of the 1980s crime drama. Simon outlined *Treme’s* complex relationship to reality in an editorial written for *The Times-Picayune* in anticipation the show’s premiere. Simon notes that in the first episode, Jannette, who has run out of her menu’s dessert, resorts to serving “dressed-up” Hubig’s Pies, a local brand of pastries found in New Orleans-area groceries that had yet to restart production after Katrina in November 2006, when the episode takes place. These “Magic Hubig’s,” as Simon calls them, establishes the show’s relationship to reality: striving for authenticity, but allowing for just enough fudging of the facts as can be tolerated from a storyteller. However, the metaphor of a locally-produced supermarket pastry, plated, dressed up, and served to customers in a New Orleans restaurant also represents the show’s negotiation with mainstream visions of New Orleans. The image of New Orleans in *Treme*, like the Magic Hubig’s, is unavailable to the average tourist, but nonetheless accommodates a tourist’s preconceived idea of New Orleans.

This is the conclusion reached by Lynnell L. Thomas in her analysis of *Treme*. While Thomas praises *Treme’s* rejection of many stereotypes regarding the city’s residents, she also notes that the show “attempts to reconceptualize the typical New Orleans tourist experience by cultivating a particular type of tourist and tourist gaze among its viewers,” establishing several of the show’s main characters as privileged insiders who contrast with the interloping tourists that

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245 Bernie Cook, 309.
246 Bernie Cook, 297-298.
appear on-screen. The tension inherent in Thomas’ “televisual tourist” gaze is exemplified by
the moment in an episode when a busload of disaster tourists interrupt a funeral ceremony for a
Mardi Gras Indian. The interaction between the bus driver and the Mardi Gras Indians frames
them as interlopers breaching the sanctity of a very private ceremony, yet without Treme, this
ceremony would be out-of-sight for the show’s audience as well. This positionality provides
viewers the privileged point-of-view of the locals, when they are really the tourists snapping
photos from the bus. Though Thomas rightly connects the paradox to the parallels between the
show and the city’s tourism industry, the irreconcilability of the insider-as-outsider dynamic of
watching Treme also stems from the show’s straddling of the dividing line between Katrina
Verité and of the established tradition of New Orleans representation in Hollywood films.

**Treme as Neutral Ground**

The neutral ground is one of the many shibboleths of New Orleans. Ostensibly the grassy
space between two sides of the road, in any other city the neutral ground would just be called the
median. The origin of the term comes from the original system of municipalities that were
divided along ethnic and linguistic lines. Richard Campanella notes that the term originated
during the nineteenth century, when Canal Street was the dividing line, or “neutral ground,”
between the French-Creole and Anglo-American sides of the city. While once a cultural
dividing line and a place where politicians from either sides could parlay, today the neutral
ground is best known as the place to watch a parade, and as a way to identify outsiders not

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247 Lynnell L. Thomas, ““People Want to See What Happened’: Treme, Televisual
Tourism, and the Racial Remapping of Post-Katrina New Orleans,” *Television & New Media* 13,

248 Richard Campanella, “The Turbulent History Behind the Seven New Orleans
Municipal Districts,” *The Times-Picayune*, March 7, 2016),
sufficiently assimilated into the local culture, as in the proper pronunciation of “Tchoupitoulas.”

In recent decades, proper identification of the neutral ground became a right-of-passage for many New Orleans film and television representations. In *The Big Easy*, two characters walk by a local marching band parading on the neutral ground. In *K-Ville*, a post-Katrina police procedural otherwise mocked for its misrepresentation of New Orleans culture, Anthony Anderson’s Detective Marlin Boulet first suspects his new partner is lying about his background when he tells Boulet to drive on the neutral ground when pursuing a suspect. In her article on authenticity and *Treme*, Joy V. Fuqua notes her own experience of assimilating into New Orleans as a transplanted resident, and her recognition of *Treme* as the television equivalent of a local who knows that “neutral ground is the place to park when it rains.”

Given the sensitivity with which many New Orleanians approach representations of their city, properly identifying the neutral ground is entry-level: a low bar that media producers must clear on the way to a more meaningful, “authentic” representation.

Given its origin as a cultural barrier between the entrenched, francophone origins that remain associated with the city’s exceptionalist identity and the encroaching, eventually overwhelming anglophone American presence, the neutral ground works as an effective metaphor for the space within which David Simon and Eric Overmyer position *Treme*. After Hurricane Katrina, two “municipalities” of representation emerged. On one side of the neutral

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250 Joy V. Fuqua, “‘In New Orleans, We Might Say It Like This…’: Authenticity, Place and HBO’s *Treme,*” *Television & New Media* 13, no. 3 (2012): 235.
ground is Katrina Verité, documentary and fictional films that emphasize the people and neighborhoods rarely seen by tourists or Hollywood. These films have a clear political agenda to bridge the gap between perceptions of New Orleans and the harsh realities that the city’s residents continue to face after the storm. On the other side of the neutral ground is Katrina Hollywood, with films that continue to focus on the same exceptionalist narratives and iconography that Hollywood found so fascinating it before the storm. In this municipality, Katrina certainly exists, but only as a means to a separate narrative end, not as a subject to be explored in itself.

Straddling these two extremes is *Treme*, a show that tries to have its King Cake and eat it, too. Simon and Overmyer seem genuinely dedicated to creating an authentic picture of New Orleans that New Orleanians can identify and connect with. To that end, *Treme*’s meandering narrative includes the real-life struggles that New Orleans faces in its recovery, but also the real-life individuals who experienced these struggles firsthand. However, *Treme* also acknowledges the Hollywood side of the street, both referencing specific New Orleans/Hollywood texts while also incorporating the spirit, the iconography, and even a handful of actors that are associated with the city’s popular identity. The effort that the show puts into acknowledging the Hollywood side—with the live music, the celebrity appearances, and the yearly Mardi Gras episodes—is also what prevents it from aligning with more grounded texts like *Trouble the Water* and *Low and Behold*, Verité texts that eschew these idealized elements of New Orleans entirely. This contrast between *Treme*’s narrative of cultural exceptionalism and the Katrina Verité negation of that narrative puts into consideration what exactly an “authentic” New Orleans is, bringing into question the entire project trying to portray authenticity on-screen.
Treme’s documentary-like lens is acknowledged by several scholars. Bernie Cook notes that other than being scripted, Treme fits filmmaker Jill Godmillow’s definition of a documentary, as the show makes “some kind of claim to represent the real world, contains performances by social actors (rather than professional actors), and claims to edify, to persuade, or to raise awareness.”251 This line between fact and fiction is noted by film scholar J.M. Tyree as well, who acknowledges that when real-life celebrities like Elvis Costello and David Chang play themselves, and fictional characters like Davis and Janette are based on real-life New Orleans figures, “the circular confusion of reality, authenticity, and celebrity is complete.”252 The show goes beyond imitating the documentary form, even replicating Katrina documentary subject matter. Treme can be viewed as a series-long exploration of the ongoing aftermath of the failures by the federal government before and after the storm, which is also an effective descriptor for When the Levees Broke and If God is Willing and da Creek Don’t Rise. Additionally, a narrative thread of season one follows Albert drawing attention to the boarding up and demolition of the city’s undamaged housing projects, a topic explored in If God is Willing and From Big Easy to Big Empty. Albert’s crusade eventually lands him in Orleans Parish Prison and into conflict with the police, evoking the history of conflict between the Mardi Gras Indians and the NOPD also looked at in Tootie’s Last Suit. In season three, as Sonny kicks his drug habit, he falls in love with the daughter of a Vietnamese fisherman, incorporating the Old World/New World cultural dynamics of the city’s Vietnamese community also explored in A Village Called Versailles. Finally, the last two seasons of the show include an investigation by

251 Bernie Cook, 295.
L.P. and Teri into the murder of New Orleans residents by NOPD officers, a story based on a real-life investigation documented in *Law & Disorder*.

In addition to shared subject matter with Katrina documentaries, *Treme* makes direct connections to those documentaries in its cast and crew. The most prominent examples of these are Wendell Pierce, a professional actor whose family home in Pontchartrain Park was wrecked by Katrina, and Phyllis Montana LeBlanc, a New Orleans East resident making her acting debut on the show, both standout interviewees of *When the Levees Broke*. Kimberly Rivers Roberts, whose footage of herself and her husband in their Lower Ninth attic appears in *Trouble the Water*, shows up briefly in season three as herself and, in a moment of art imitating life imitating art, gives a fictional character a CD copy of *Trouble the Water*. These connections extend to behind the camera as well. Lolis Eric Elie, the New Orleans journalist and writer of *Faubourg Treme: The Untold Story of Black New Orleans*, was the story editor for all four seasons of *Treme*. The implicit references to the documentaries and the explicit connections between *Treme* and post-Katrina nonfiction filmmaking underscores Simon and Overmyer’s dedication to presenting a New Orleans that was invisible to viewers before the hurricane.

A look at one specific episode demonstrates how *Treme* blurs fact and fiction. Written by Overmyer and directed by Anthony Hemingway, “All in a Mardi Gras Day” is the first of *Treme*’s annual episodes centered around New Orleans’ Fat Tuesday celebrations. Like each subsequent Mardi Gras episode, “All on a Mardi Gras Day” has an episodic, elliptical structure. While certain narrative threads are strung through—Tulane Professor Creighton Burnette’s growing depression, Sonny and Annie’s deteriorating relationship, LaDonna’s struggle with

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keeping the secret of discovering her brother’s death, and Albert’s feud with the NOPD—the episode is mostly a collection of moments of revelry, a conscious attempt by Simon and Overmyer to capture what it feels like for New Orleanians to celebrate Mardi Gras. In this regard, the episode strongly resembles *Always for Pleasure*, Les Blank’s documentary celebration of New Orleans’ Mardi Gras and St. Patrick’s Day, which Simon and Overmyer cite as a key influence on *Treme*.

In addition to echoing this prominent pre-Katrina text, the episode continues the tradition of cherry-picking New Orleans documentaries in their casting, not only through the continued presence of Pierce and Leblanc but also jazz musician/composer and fellow *When the Levees Broke* alum Terence Blanchard and *Faubourg Treme* narrator Lolis Eric Elie, appearing as fictionalized versions of themselves. The episode even opens with an interaction involving Bob Edes, an actor and Lakeview native who plays a “Middle Aged White Guy,” a character who also lost his Lakeview house. These connections to New Orleans’ documentary history, a part of the show’s broader attempt to capture a particular truth about New Orleans, have been noted in scholarship on the show by Cook, Tyree, and others.

Less acknowledged is the degree to which *Treme* engages with New Orleans history as a filmed location in fictional film and television. “All in a Mardi Gras Day” can thus be analyzed for its engagement with these past New Orleans film and television texts. Specifically, this episode engages in ideological parody, which Linda Hutcheon categorizes as “a repetition that includes difference…imitation with critical ironic difference, whose irony can cut both ways.” Hutcheon argues that nature of this mode of parody can range “from the reverential to

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254 Bernie Cook, 313.

the playful to the scornful.” Hutcheon’s theorization, previously utilized for film analysis by Marsha Kinder, is useful in understanding Treme’s engagement with previous New Orleans media texts. This engagement, in turn, demonstrates the middle-ground that Treme holds between Katrina Verité and Katrina Hollywood, and the difficulty of avoiding New Orleans iconography in filmed representations of the city.

“Elvis Presley Sat Here!”: King Creole and Reverential Parody

Forty minutes into “All in a Mardi Gras Day,” Jannette arrives at a party hosted by Anthony (Hemingway, the episode’s director), a friend living in the French Quarter. In one of the few instances of the show depicting the Quarter in a residential context, Jannette is led by Anthony to his balcony. When he shows Jannette the plaque at the window sill, she exclaims, “Oh my God! Elvis Presley sat here for the opening scene in the movie King Creole!” This overt homage is an echo to an earlier, less noticeable homage to King Creole (Michael Curtiz, 1958) in the episode. Twenty-four minutes in, as Delmond looks down from that same balcony to the revelers on Royal Street, director Hemingway actually recreates the original shot of Elvis emerging from his apartment in the opening scene, using the same blocking, camerawork, and apartment as the original. Mere throwaway references on their own, collectively these moments constitute a clear homage to the Elvis musical, putting the show in direct conversation with New Orleans’ film history.

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256 Ibid., 26.
On one level, these moments acknowledge the French Quarter’s history as the city’s primary film location, aligning with *Treme*’s representation of the Quarter as a developed tourist locale. However, a closer comparison of the two scenes reveals a subtle ideological critique of how New Orleans has changed in the fifty years between these two productions. The scene from *King Creole* features Elvis’ character, Danny Fisher, singing a call-and-response with a black woman (Kitty White) selling crawfish from a cart: in the early-morning scene, the streets are empty but for the woman and other food vendors peddling their wares. Food peddlers were once a ubiquitous characteristic of New Orleans life: Lafcadio Hearn describes them in one of his early reports on the city in 1881, while *The Times-Picayune* and the Louisiana WPA both included them in their accounts of the city in 1913 and the 1930s, respectively. Street peddlers were also a frequent sight in New Orleans film representations up to that point: *Jezebel* (William Wyler, 1938) opens with a street market scene, while *A Streetcar Named Desire* features flower and “red hot” vendors in its fictionalized French Quarter. Such vendors were still a common sight in New Orleans through at least the 1940s, making their appearance in *King Creole* plausible.

Though the scene takes place in the French Quarter—specifically, 1018 Royal Street—even the ubiquitous neighborhood’s appearance was credible. The Fishers’ apartment fell within what Richard Campanella labels the “Lower French Quarter,” an area that was relatively


residential and still a far cry from the already-ubiquitous night clubs of the upper Bourbon St.\textsuperscript{261} Though the neighborhood was already on its way toward gentrification in the 1950s, Scott S. Ellis notes that “there were plenty of working poor” still in this area.\textsuperscript{262} Within the context of the late 1950s, though the scene was idyllic (a woman street vendor, picturesque Royal Street, Elvis breaking out into song), its cultural context was still true to 1950s New Orleans.

The \textit{Treme} parody of the scene provides an ironic contrast to this idyllic French Quarter scene. In the episode’s recreation, Delmond emerges from his balcony window in the morning to survey not morning street vendors, but a crowded street of Mardi Gras revelers, including topless women shouting at Delmond to throw them beads. Far from requiring any suspension of disbelief, this scene is still a common sight in the Quarter on Mardi Gras Day. Within the context of Katrina Verité, the show’s commentary on the changing face of the Quarter can be parsed: if there was any accuracy to \textit{King Creole}’s quiet street awoken by vendors, it has long been replaced by throngs of bead-starved tourists.

Hutcheon notes in her study of literary parodies that “many parodies today do not ridicule the backgrounded text but use them as standards by which to place the contemporary under scrutiny.”\textsuperscript{263} \textit{Treme}’s parody of \textit{King Creole} is one such application of what Hutcheon calls “reverential parody.” The Elvis musical is a New Orleans film that maintains unironic popularity to this day. \textit{Times-Picayune} columnist Mike Scott notes that because Curtiz shoots New Orleans lovingly, and because of Elvis’ enduring popularity, “it would be hard to find [a film shot in New

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{261} Richard Campanella, \textit{Cityscapes of New Orleans} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017), 71.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{262} Scott S. Ellis, \textit{Madame Vieux Carré: The French Quarter in the Twentieth Century} (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 72.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{263} Hutcheon, \textit{A Theory of Parody}, 57.}
Orleans] that is so universally appreciated, both in New Orleans and outside of it.”\(^{264}\) Though tongue-in-cheek, *Treme*’s parody of the *King Creole* scene acknowledges this reverence: the closest the film comes to a joke at the film’s expense is Jannette’s impersonation of the Elvis line “thank you very much.” What the parody does accomplish is drawing attention to the evolution of New Orleans’ image, as signified by the commercialization of the French Quarter and Mardi Gras. Though the apartment Delmond is staying in is still portrayed as residential, the area is no longer portrayed as a living neighborhood, but as one that caters to tourists who flock to the area both year-round and during Mardi Gras. This irony is cemented by the recreation’s placement within the episode’s montage: before and after the recreation, the audience is shown residents of Uptown, the Tremé, and the Garden District beginning their Carnival celebrations, contrasting with tourist stereotypes (bare-breasted women demanding beads in the Quarter) with how locals celebrate Mardi Gras (neighborhood-centered celebrations distant from the Quarter). Though not derisive of the film, *Treme*’s treatment of *King Creole* does call attention to the complete commercialization of the French Quarter in the ensuing fifty years, and how that transformation parallels the evolution of New Orleans’ popular identity. The other parodies of New Orleans media texts within this episode have a less generous tone, engaging with other New Orleans texts’ respective exaggerations and inaccuracies.

“Hey, *chere*”: *The Big Easy* and Playful Parody

Another telling instance of *Treme*’s self-positioning in relation to mainstream film representation of New Orleans occurs eleven minutes into “All on a Mardi Gras Day.” Creighton Burnette, a New Orleans-loving English professor at Tulane, takes his daughter Sofia (India

Ennenga) to see a hard-hit area of the West End. As Creighton surveys the wreckage—“like seeing an ancient ruin”—he points out where several restaurants used to be, including the Bruning’s restaurant and the Bruning family home, “You know, the one that was used in The Big Easy?” Sofia knowingly nods, replying with an impersonation of Dennis Quaid’s accent from Big Easy character, Remy McSwain: “Hey chere.” Not missing a beat, Creighton returns with his own McSwain impersonation: “Fais do-do, baby.”

The choice of referencing The Big Easy is telling. As noted in the previous chapter, the film is notorious among New Orleanians for its exaggerated portrayal of New Orleans culture, its demographic and cultural inaccuracies regarding Cajuns, and (especially) for Quaid’s attempted Cajun/9th Ward patois that Creighton and Sofia impersonate. While Treme’s parody of King Creole used the respected film as a launchpad for a parody of the French Quarter, the episode’s engagement with The Big Easy better aligns with Hutcheon’s concept of “neutral or playful” parody, in which there is “close to a zero degree of aggressivity toward either backgrounded or foregrounded text.” While Creighton and Sofia’s exchange, a verbal parody in comparison to the “situational” parody of King Creole, confirms and reinforces the film’s status as a popular inside joke for New Orleanians, but the tone of their exchange never goes beyond a playful ribbing at the 1987 film’s eccentricities. Though Overmyer’s parody only confirms Treme’s

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265 For New Orleanians, this would be an especially poignant scene: though the scene is set in 2006, production filmed on-location in 2010, with the area still looking just as devastated.

266 David Baron, “‘Big Easy’ is Fun for N.O. Audiences,” The Times-Picayune, August 21, 1987, LaGriappe-7; Shane K. Bernard, The Cajuns: Americanization of a People (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 120-121.

267 Hutcheon, 60.

268 Hutcheon, 58.
self-positioning as a more authentic portrait of New Orleans culture, the tone of the episode’s engagement with *The Big Easy* never goes beyond a wink and a nod.

This playful, ironic tone is reinforced by the show’s deliberate positioning of *Big Easy* supporting actor John Goodman as the knowing ridiculer of the 1987 film. Casting Goodman for *Treme* was good fortune for Simon and Overmyer. Goodman has long lived in New Orleans, is passionate about the city and the civic challenges it faces, and is thus appropriate casting as a Tulane professor who channels his depression and frustration into video tirades he posts on YouTube. Even before Katrina and the tax credit boon that drew production, Goodman was a longstanding fixture of New Orleans film and television culture. In addition to *The Big Easy* and *Treme*, Goodman appeared in the made-for-TV movies *Kingfish: A Story of Huey P. Long* (Thomas Schlamme, 1995) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Glenn Jordan, 1995). Goodman also lent his voice to Disney’s New Orleans-set animated feature *The Princess and the Frog* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 2009), and his Garden District mansion has long been a regular stop for walking and driving tours in the city.

Though Goodman is not from New Orleans, his presence in *Treme* is a noteworthy appearance from one of the city’s most recognizable and beloved residents. His local celebrity would even become the subject of an in-joke in the episode: Later that night, as Creighton debates his wife Toni about the relative merits of the former night parades of the all-male, all-

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269 Goodman’s casting also reflects a trend within the show to incorporate actors previously known for their appearances in New Orleans film and television texts. These casting choices range from homages, such as casting Tim Reid, star of the short-lived but well-received New Orleans-set sitcom *Frank’s Place* (CBS, 1987-1988), as a sympathetic judge, to casting Anthony Anderson, star of the short-lived police procedural *K-Ville*, as a waiter and sometimes actor.269 These casting choices, combined with the incorporation of individuals involved with Katrina documentaries, further demonstrates the space that *Treme* attempts to create for itself between the New Orleans’ of fiction and reality.
white krewe of the Knights of Momus, Sofia interjects her preference for the night parade staged by Endymion, a so-called “super krewe” with open membership and that traditionally crowns celebrities as grand marshal. Creighton mocks Sofia’s choice. He makes a fake choking sound, ridiculing super krewes as “B-list celebrities! Tons of plastic beads! Like everything else in American culture, cheap, mass-produced, made in China.” The irony of this scene was not lost on Times-Picayune columnist Dave Walker, who notes that John Goodman was grand marshal of Endymion in 1990.270

Other than being joke at Goodman’s expense, or yet another demonstration of the show’s insider status, the episode’s playful parody of Goodman and The Big Easy positions Treme as a cultural authority on New Orleans.271 Though the makers of documentaries like When the Levees Broke and fictional Katrina Verité films like Low and Behold implicitly reproached Hollywood representations through their highlighting of neighborhoods previously not captured on film, Treme moves beyond this by poking fun at a film for its silly inaccuracies. In The Big Easy, the Bruning’s waterfront home was used as a stand-in for an undefined Cajun bayou setting in the New Orleans area, a part of the show’s blurring of the geographic space between New Orleans and Acadiana. Treme’s use of the area not only conveys the destruction wrought by Katrina in erasing a city landmark from the map, but also reorients that space to its actual location in the


271 On the episode’s DVD commentary, Overmyer claims to have forgotten that Goodman was in The Big Easy, and to not know that he was once grand marshal of Endymion, though it seems unlikely that Overmyer, a longtime resident who also adapted The Big Easy for television in the ‘90s, would forget this information.
West End of New Orleans: In a single moment, *Treme* both corrects *The Big Easy*’s geographical discontinuity and offers a verbal dig at the film’s expense. In a fleeting moment of the episode, Creighton and Sofia’s exchange demonstrates the extent to which *Treme* considers itself an authority on New Orleans culture, presented as a TV show so authentic it has the authority to joke about other TV shows. As the final example from “All in a Mardi Gras Day” demonstrates, the show also does not hesitate to directly correct the inaccuracies of other film texts.

**Gumbo Parties: *K-Ville* and Scornful Parody**

Later in the episode, there is a moment of parody so low-key that it was likely overlooked by most who watched the episode. Before the forty-two-minute mark, Davis and Annie, who meet and bond at a party over their pirate costumes, are walking to a party being thrown by Davis’ neighbor Lolis. After the New Orleans-born Davis mentions that Lolis “usually does gumbo,” Annie, a transplant to the city, innocuously asks “he’s having a gumbo party?” Davis pauses, smiles, and gently corrects Annie, “Yeah, we don’t really call it that here, but…” The thought is not even completed before the show cuts away to the Burnette household eating gumbo around their kitchen table.

In this moment, *Treme*’s creators flaunt their knowledge of New Orleans ritual: it is common for Mardi Gras revelers to return home in the afternoon to eat gumbo, and Davis, an insider-outsider constantly feeling the need to prove his cultural bona fides, is the natural choice to explain the nuance to a transplant like Annie. However, as Mike Scott of the *Picayune* noted, and as Ovemyer himself acknowledged on the DVD commentary, this moment was a subtle dig at *K-Ville*, FOX’s short lived police procedural shot and set in post-Katrina New Orleans. Three minutes into that show’s premiere, the protagonist, NOPD officer Henry Boulet, looking outside of his Upper-Ninth Ward home, catches a neighborhood boy trying to dig up his cypress tree.
After chastising the boy, he asks how his mother is, and says “tell her I’ll be around Saturday for the gumbo party.” This ironic twist would not have been lost on New Orleans viewers: K-Ville’s “gumbo party” faux-pas was so notorious that it spawned an ironic, short-lived tradition of New Orleanians hosting gumbo viewing parties of K-Ville while the show aired on Monday nights.272

Unlike Treme, K-Ville was not as well-received by New Orleanians or critics, though the show averaged far more viewers in its ten-episode run than Treme did.273 In his somewhat sympathetic review for The Times-Picayune, Dave Walker notes that while the show means well, “locals will immediately despise elements of ‘K-Ville’ because they always do. Nobody gets us right. Actually, some of the local reaction to ‘K-Ville’ will be rooted in past attempts to capture New Orleans in movies (‘The Big Easy’) and on TV (‘Orleans,’ ‘The Big Easy’). It just can’t be done.” As with Goodman’s scripted teasing of the film version of The Big Easy, Overmyer takes an opportunity to point out another filmed representation of the city’s inaccuracies, but goes a step further in to actually correcting K-Ville’s mistake. Though the jibe is delivered by Davis to the unassuming Annie with gentle condescension, the act of directly ridiculing and correcting another contemporary New Orleans text reflects a parodic step beyond playfulness and into what Hutcheon describes as “the point which irony overlaps with satire… that contemptuous laugh that will merge with the scornful satiric ethos (which always implies corrective intent).”274 This active correction of another post-Katrina show demonstrates that

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274 Hutcheon, 61.
inaccuracies continued in New Orleans-set texts even after the storm, and the showrunners’
willingness to call out other shows for their fallacies. This gesture further reinforces *Treme’s*
self-positioning as a cultural arbiter of New Orleans representations.

This self-positioning would become even more explicit in season 4. In a late-series
storyline, Antoine gets a job consulting an actor (Wilson Bethel) portraying jazz pioneer Kid
Ory on fake-playing the trombone. The fictional film is set to inaccurately portray Ory’s life and
his Creole background: while Ory was a black Creole, the actor playing him is white.
Furthermore, the actor is dismissive of Antoine’s concerns about the film’s misrepresentation,
even though Antoine is part-Creole. Wendell Pierce, the actor playing Antoine, is not a
trombonist, and is therefore forced to fake his slide movement in a similar manner as Bethel
playing the actor playing Kid Ory. One of the show’s many signature emulsions of fiction and
reality, labeled by *The Times-Picayune*’s Alison Fensterstock as “*Treme*-ja vu,” this moment
also reveals an example of what the showrunners consider to be acceptable deviations from
reality.\(^\text{275}\) From *Treme*’s perspective, the sin of this fictional film production is not casting an
actor that cannot play trombone, but that both the actor and the filmmakers responsible are
willfully ignorant of New Orleans culture. Like the callout to *King Creole* and the jab at *The Big
Easy*, the call-back to *K-Ville* demonstrates the *Treme* showrunners’ mastery of the minutiae of
New Orleans life; the how-to-get-where/what-to-call-this locals obsess over when watching
representations of their hometown. However, when compared to other Katrina Verité texts like
*Low and Behold* and *When the Levees Broke*, *Treme*’s overall focus on the city’s tourism
industries comes into sharp contrast.

\(^{275}\) Bernie Cook, 368.
“You better go see the Mardi Gras”: *Treme* between Katrina Verité and Katrina Hollywood

The previous chapter focused on the era of Hollywood representation from which many popular perceptions surrounding New Orleans came into existence. In considering the representations of New Orleans that emerged from this previous era, one of the striking trends were the many ways in which filmmakers were able to incorporate Mardi Gras iconography into their films. If a film was not set during Carnival season, like *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), then it would somehow find a way to include Mardi Gras references and imagery. A common device for filmmakers to accomplish this were characters coming across a warehouse full of Mardi Gras floats being stored for Carnival, like in *The Big Easy,* *Tightrope* (Richard Tuggle, 1985), and *Hard Target* (John Woo, 1993). Moving from these films to the post-Katrina representations, one of the most striking takeaways is how little of Mardi Gras shows up. In the documentaries, when Carnival is mentioned, it is meaningful. For example, *When the Levees Broke* concludes with displaced locals converging on New Orleans for the first Mardi Gras after the storm. Carnival-centered films like *Tootie’s Last Suit* consider the storm’s effect on the city’s Mardi Gras traditions. However, the vast majority of the post-Katrina documentaries do not feature Mardi Gras in any capacity. The same goes for the fictional Katrina Verité films. There are no Mardi Gras parades in *Low and Behold or New Orleans,* *Mon Amour,* and the pre-title celebrations of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* lack any specific iconography associated with Louisiana Carnival.

The reason for this is obvious: most of these films were not about Mardi Gras, so why would they include it? It is easy to overlook the radicalism of this stance within a tradition of representation that goes out of the way to include a parade float. This comparison is not meant to criticize *Treme,* for it would only be natural for a seasons-spanning show about New Orleans
to feature Mardi Gras heavily. The show should also be credited for its expansive vision of what Mardi Gras means to New Orleanians, exploring the nuances of local traditions, such as the Mardi Gras Indian tribes and the Zulu Parade. The show’s exploration of Mardi Gras balances local and national perceptions of Mardi Gras, making room for both the neighborhood second-line parades and the topless women and beads in the Quarter. For Simon and Overmyer, New Orleans is an exceptional place, and that exceptionality is tied to the city’s people, music, food, and traditions. Though the “Big Easy” film and TV texts are guilty of a multitude of cultural inaccuracies and of white-washing, Treme ultimately centers its New Orleans’ identity around the same Mardi Gras iconography and its cultural exceptionality.

This contrast between the greater geographic and demographic accuracy and perpetuation of cultural exceptionalism can be found in the first episode of season two, “Accentuate the Positive.” In one particular scene, Antoine is playing at Tipitina’s, the popular music venue portrayed in The Big Easy, along with the real-life brass band Bonerama, while Annie and Davis watch from the crowd. The actual Tipitina’s is used, with the venue’s layout and musical acts a more accurate depiction than the Cajun restaurant/dance hall recreation used in The Big Easy. However, when Annie asks Davis how the rap/jazz fusion group Galactic manages to make their mix of musical styles work, he responds “It’s New Orleans. We put it all together!” This statement strongly resembles Remy’s line when coaxing Anna onto the dance floor at Tipitina’s in The Big Easy in both spirit and structure: “It’s New Orleans! Down here, dancing is a way of life!” Though Treme’s version has more verisimilitude—all of the music locales are real, and the music is always played live—the spirit of both scenes, and their significance in the

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portrayal of New Orleans, are the same. The showrunners dedication to exploring every nook and cranny of New Orleans effectively rebukes the geographic and demographic sins of the many “Big Easy” representations that preceded it, including those that the show itself mocked in “All in a Mardi Gras Day.” However, the show’s continued revisiting of Mardi Gras every season, and its unending focus on New Orleans culture for its own sake, demonstrates that for all of its demographic and geographic accuracy, *Treme* offers the same thesis on New Orleans as the film and television it parodies.

*The Big Easy* is a studio film, made in the service of its genre, stars, runtime, and marketability. As a premium-cable show made and produced by a creative talent with a great deal of influence with the network, *Treme* is less susceptible to the pressures that influenced *The Big Easy*, and had far more time to explore its setting. They are also, frankly, different media texts made by different artists. *Treme*’s journalistic attention to detail emerges from Simon and the team of journalists and crime writers that have surrounded him since *The Wire* (Overmyer, David Mills, George Pelecanos) and the Louisiana-based writers and journalists he invited into *Treme*’s writers’ room (Elie, Tom Piazza, Mari Kornhauser). This creative team made a New Orleans television show remarkably diverse in its representation and broad in its scope. Perhaps the most beloved New Orleans media representation ever made, *Treme* ultimately gravitates towards the same iconography as the film and TV the show itself ridicules. This reality reveals the extent to which New Orleans’ exceptionalism has taken root in the popular imaginary, and how it may be unavoidable in fictional representations of New Orleans, even ones such as *Treme* that are less dependent on a robust commercial performance for its existence.

In 1984, H. Wayne Schuth was fatigued with the endless barrage of New Orleans representations favoring wrought-iron balconies and gumbo. Schuth explains that “Tiny French
Quarter shops and apartments are much more atmospheric and exciting than the huge, sprawling modern shopping centers and apartment complexes” as easy to find in the New Orleans area as in any American metropolis.\textsuperscript{277} While Schuth acknowledged that audiences would prefer French Quarter imagery, he expressed his hope that “image makers in the future will move beyond some of the familiar patterns and enable viewers to see the city and its people in richer and more varied ways.”\textsuperscript{278} It took a devastating disaster like Hurricane Katrina for Schuth’s wish to come true, and even then only on the margins of the film and television industry. with documentaries like \textit{Trouble the Water} and little-seen independents like \textit{Low and Behold} and \textit{New Orleans, Mon Amour}. \textit{Treme}, the most conspicuous and comprehensive attempt to portray an “authentic” New Orleans, deflated the French Quarter-centric tourist narrative of the city while also offering the same sensory experiences a tourist would expect on a visit to New Orleans. In its thirty-eight-episode run, four were dedicated exclusively to Carnival season, while most of the others dealt with the preparations for Carnival by the Mardi Gras Indians, musicians, and chefs that Simon and Overmyer feature. All the while, the show engaged in the same strategies in portraying New Orleans attempted by the films and shows that the show actively parodies, but with a greater eye for detail and verisimilitude—a fact that the showrunners had no problem pointing out by explicitly referencing, poking fun at, and correcting these less “authentic” works.

A uniting philosophy of both sides of the neutral ground is the belief that New Orleans is a special place. How exactly the city is special remains the dividing point of the neutral ground. Katrina Verité texts like \textit{When the Levees Broke} argue that the city’s specialness lies in the

\textsuperscript{277} H. Wayne Schuth, “The Image of New Orleans on Film,” \textit{The Southern Quarterly} 19, no. 4 (1981),

\textsuperscript{278} Schuth.
people that live there: their resilience, their traditions, and their willingness to return in the face of unimaginable human and material devastation. On the other side of the street, Hollywood texts like *K-Ville* and *Now You See Me* (Louis Leterrier, 2013) emphasize the superficial: the iconography, the architecture, and the traditions that draw millions of outsiders to visit the city. Though *Treme*’s focus demonstrates the fallacy of Hollywood’s approach—you can’t have the traditions without the locals—the lengths to which the show favors those touristic aspects of New Orleans, orbiting each season around preparing for Mardi Gras, demonstrates the difficulty of making a sustained, “authentic” series about New Orleanians without incorporating Schuth’s dreaded New Orleans “stereotypes.” While avoiding an algebraic equation of New Orleans’ representation, the level of which *Treme* was a commercial success—with more viewers than any other Katrina Verité text, but far fewer than the most-watched post-Katrina Hollywood film—reveals that while there is a sustained interest in Hurricane Katrina, audiences prefer representations of New Orleans that meet preconceived expectations of the city.

Whether Hollywood favors traditional representations of New Orleans because audiences do, or vice versa, what is clear is that after Katrina, the images of the city propagated by the tourism and film industries became more intertwined. This intertwining occurs because of the economic investment that both New Orleans and Louisiana put into both industries. Mainstream Hollywood representations of Katrina have incorporated the hurricane without meaningfully exploring its implications on the city’s self-image. The result is a trend of New Orleans representation that paradoxically accounts for Katrina, but pretends that it changed little within the city.
CHAPTER IV. KATRINA HOLLYWOOD: A HURRICANE MARGINALIZED, EXPLOITED, AND OVERCOME

Following the beeps of hospital equipment and the labored breathing of the elderly Daisy (Cate Blanchett), the first sounds of The Curious Case of Benjamin Button (David Fincher, 2008) are rain falling on the window and the voice of a TV weatherman warning that “the storm system is still moving west.” As the camera zooms out from an extreme close-up of Daisy’s face, she asks her daughter, Caroline (Julia Ormond), what she is looking at. “The wind, Mom,” Caroline replies, as the scene cuts to her peeking out the hospital window. “They say the hurricane is coming.” The scene then progresses to the film’s first flashback, and later revisits this hospital a few times throughout the film. Each of these visits is accompanied by wind, thunder and rain escalating outside, and Daisy’s nurse (Faune Chambers Watkins) interjecting comments on how the hurricane is “gonna blow right by” and how she is going to “ride it out.” The film’s hurricane is, of course, Hurricane Katrina. Benjamin Button concludes with hospital alarms, radio announcements of a levee break in the Ninth Ward, and, in the film’s final images, the flood waters starting to rise.

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button rode the wave of productions that flocked to Louisiana following the passage of a film and television tax credit law in 2002. This law provided discounts in the form of generous and uncapped tax write-offs for any film or television production that shoots in-state. Before the law was capped by state legislators in 2014, Louisiana, and New Orleans in particular, was a haven for film and television production. In 2008, the year Benjamin Button was released, fifty-five other feature films were released that were shot in New Orleans alone.279

The tax credit law defines “Motion Picture” to include just about any commercial filming. This credit benefitted all of the Katrina Verité projects discussed in the previous chapter. However, rather than representing New Orleans as itself, the vast majority of these projects used New Orleans as either a nondescript location, or disguised as another location entirely. These projects ranged from big-budget blockbusters like *Jurassic World* (Colin Treverrow, 2014) and *Terminator: Genisys* (Alan Taylor, 2015), to mid-budget studio films like *Looper* (Rian Johnson, 2012) and *21 Jump Street* (Phil Lord and Chris Miller, 2012), to low-budget indies and genre pictures like *Trumbo* (Jay Roach, 2015) and *10 Cloverfield Lane* (Dan Trachtenberg, 2016).

Some of those films and TV shows that represent the city as itself subvert or challenge popular understandings of New Orleans, particularly in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. However, most of these New Orleans-set films and TV shows tap into some element of the city’s popular identity. These include period pieces that draw from the city’s colonial architecture and historical legacy of slavery, such as *12 Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen, 2013) and *Lemonade* (Beyoncé Knowles-Carter and Kahlil Joseph, 2016). Others, such as *The Skeleton Key* (Ian Softley, 2005), *The Last Exorcism Part II* (Ed Gass-Donnelly, 2013), *American Horror Story: Coven* (FX, 2013-2014), and *Preacher* (AMC, 2016-), draw upon the city’s supernatural identity and Creole and Voodoo folklore. However, the most popular representation of New Orleans continues to center around its “Big Easy” identity, a place where traditional moral conventions do not apply. These films and TV shows follow the *Easy Rider* tradition.

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281 This legacy of slavery can also be found in films that utilize Louisiana’s colonial architecture but are not set in Louisiana, including *Django Unchained* (Quentin Tarantino, 2012), *Free State of Jones* (Gary Ross, 2016), and *The Beguiled* (Sofia Coppola, 2017).
(Dennis Hopper, 1969) template of individuals coming to New Orleans to “let loose,” including the gamblers of *Mississippi Grind* (Anne Boden and Ryan Fleck, 2015), the grifters of *Focus* (Glen Ficarra and John Requa, 2015), and the best friends of *Girls Trip* (Malcolm D. Lee, 2017). Other films and TV shows focus on the exceptionality of its residents and cultural institutions, including *K-Ville* (FOX, 2007-2008), *Chef* (Jon Favreau, 2014), and *NCIS: New Orleans* (CBS, 2014-). Though these texts continue the tradition of hyperreal representations of New Orleanians established by *The Big Easy* (Jim McBride, 1986), at the very least, the New Orleans settings of these films were imagined with the city already in mind. Rather than representing new developments in New Orleans’ popular identity, or acknowledgments of neighborhoods and people that “we did not know even existed,” most film and TV productions continued presenting New Orleans as it appeared before the storm.

The previous chapter explored those films and TV shows that examined the crack in New Orleans’ façade left by Katrina, featuring the neighborhoods and people ignored by the tourism campaigns as they struggled to rebuild their lives. This “Katrina Verité” mode of representation, though less-seen than its Hollywood counterpart, emerged during a brief period when representations of New Orleans were not totally defined by the city’s exceptionalist identity. This chapter will look at the other trend of mainstream Hollywood representations of the storm and its aftermath, labeled “Katrina Hollywood.” The contrast between these two trends will show that Hollywood has struggled to reconcile New Orleans’ pre-Katrina identity with the aftermath of the storm, opting instead for marginalizing Katrina’s impact on the city, exploiting the storm’s effects for an unrelated narrative, or co-opting the storm into narratives of hope and

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282 *The Princess and the Frog* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 2007) even replicates the same artificial geographical proximity between New Orleans and Acadiana found in *The Big Easy.*
overcoming that often fly in the face of post-Katrina struggles. Collectively, these more commercial representations of Hurricane Katrina are less meaningful or challenging, often falling back on the same tourist areas, scenarios, and perceptions of New Orleans that defined the city before the storm. The superficiality of these representations can often be attributed to the last-minute incorporation of Katrina in the narrative, as many of these films changed their original locations to take advantage of the Louisiana tax credits.

In previous chapters, an attempt was made at balancing over-arching analysis of filmic trends and grounding those trends with a textual analysis of a representative filmic text. These texts were chosen for both their prominence as mediated representations of New Orleans, and for their representation of the overarching trends within their respective eras. With film and television about Hurricane Katrina, there are significantly fewer examples to analyze, since only a small number of productions about Katrina were made for broad audience in either film or television. Therefore, for this chapter, the single representative text will be abandoned in favor of a broader textual analysis of many relevant films and TV shows. While this approach will not delve into a single text in the detail provided for previous chapters, it will allow for a more holistic accounting of all of the trends at play in the Katrina Hollywood trend of New Orleans representation.

**Louisiana Tax Credits**

Runaway film productions, or Hollywood productions shot outside of Southern California, are a tradition dating back to the dissolution of the studio system in the late 1940s, and the emergence of international co-productions first pioneered by Italian producer Dino De
Laurentiis.283 A wide variety of factors contributed to runaway productions, including the increased mobility of filming equipment and efforts by cities to fill the employment gap left by declining manufacturing sectors.284 However, from the start, these runaway productions were motivated by fiscal incentives: studio executives took advantage of the direct subsidies provided by the governments of Great Britain, Italy, and France in exchange for filming overseas there.285 Though this era of overseas production was brought to an end by a federal law incentivizing domestic film production, it provided the template that would later be embraced by local, state, and national governments.286

By the 1990s, tax credits aimed explicitly at film productions became increasingly popular across the globe. These credits, which work as dollar-for-dollar reimbursements of production expenses, could be found on state/provincial and national levels. Ireland implemented a tax credit in 1993, while Canada and most Canadian provinces, especially British Columbia, would follow suit through the 1990s.287 Many other countries in Europe, Oceania, and South America gradually developed their own incentives, often in the form of cash rebates, which differentiate from tax credits in that they are provided directly to the production rather than being reimbursed via tax filing.288 Toronto and Vancouver would emerge as favorite filming locations

284 Miller, 467.
286 Cynthia Baron, 120.
287 Miller, 469.
for runaway Hollywood productions, with both cities vying for the title of “Hollywood North,” their cinematic identities defined by their geographical interchangeability with other world metropolises. However, the trend of providing what amounts to corporate welfare to multimedia corporations has been characterized by former Labor Secretary Robert Reich as an economic “race to the bottom,” by which municipalities provide increasing amounts of financial aid in exchange for increasingly diminished economic returns.

By the 2000s, U.S. states joined this race, as Georgia, Michigan, and New York, among others, implemented their own economic incentives. Louisiana’s state government had lured productions through informal tax loopholes since the 1950s, allowing productions to claim refunds for their productions. In the 1990s, the state competed with Canada’s incentives through a tax deduction for film producers through the existing Louisiana Film Commission. When this measure made little economic impact, the legislature moved towards copying their northern rivals with codified tax breaks for productions. This finally came in 2002, with the passing of the Louisiana Motion Picture Incentive Act. This law allotted for a 30% credit on in-state motion picture/TV expenditures, with no cap on how much could be spent. In other words,

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292 Mayer and Goldman.
Louisiana would reimburse the production company thirty cents for every dollar spent in-state. This percentage was among the most generous tax credits offered at the time: by comparison, British Columbia’s tax credit at the time was 33%, while Georgia’s own law passed in 2005 would also reimburse up to 30%. Like Louisiana under its new law, British Columbia and Georgia set no cap on eligible expenses.

This seemingly-simple system of quid-pro-quo overlooks the intricacies of Louisiana’s tax credit economy: for starters, the production is run by a newly-founded limited liability company (LLC), which limits the studio’s financial exposure and allows it to avoid paying state or federal taxes. Secondly, these tax credits cannot actually be used by productions—because the LLCs are not permanent companies, they provide no income to the state—so the credits are sold to tax brokers. These brokers in turn sell the credits in bundles, often at eighty-five cents on the dollar, to local businesses, wealthy Louisianans, and even the state government looking to reduce tax liability. Finally, while there is no cap on spending, there is a minimum: the law requires a production to spend at least $300,000 in-state, shutting out potential micro-budget independent productions. The labyrinthine machinations of these tax credits aside, the end result is that the Louisiana State Government paid major studios to employ local crew, extras, and catering, and to stay in local hotels.

Though no municipality received preferential treatment, the tax credit law naturally favored Louisiana’s largest cities, with Baton Rouge and Shreveport playing host to a large

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294 Miller, 469
number of Hollywood productions and their many infrastructural needs. However, no city benefitted more than New Orleans, the state’s largest and most populous city, with the hotels, infrastructure and photogenic locations already in place for the benefit of the city’s tourism economy.\textsuperscript{296} Though not instantaneous, the effect of the tax credits gradually showed in the number of productions in New Orleans. In 2003, only three non-documentary feature films were shot in New Orleans, all of which were set in either New Orleans or Louisiana. By 2004, that number was up to eighteen, with six of these productions either set within the city or Louisiana at large.\textsuperscript{297} Though the success of this program in drawing film productions is readily apparent, the effect that these productions had on representations of New Orleans is more elusive, given that a large percentage of these productions was not depicting the city as itself.

**Defining Katrina Hollywood**

In Chapter 3, Katrina Verité is defined as those post-Katrina documentaries or fictional film and TV shot in a documentary style, which focus on those residents and areas of Southeast Louisiana that were previously considered “invisible” to non-locals and marginalized by New Orleans’ tourist-driven economy. While varying in tone and subject matter, these films and TV shows are often unflinching in their representation of Katrina’s devastation, and frank in their assessment of the difficulty of rebuilding the city. These films were produced primarily by either

\textsuperscript{296} Mayer, 48-49.

\textsuperscript{297} Ed and Susan Poole, “Louisiana Film History: 2000s,” *Hollywood on the Bayou*, http://www.learnaboutmovieposters.com/newsite/Louisiana/titles/2000s/2000s.asp. This list, compiled by the Pooles, was audited to exclude Louisiana-shot films outside of New Orleans, non-feature-length films. Those non-documentaries shot in New Orleans were looked up to see if the synopses or available trailers/reviews revealed the film’s primary or secondary location as New Orleans.
independent film production companies or for prestige television, spheres of media production known for daring, alternative representations.

By contrast, Katrina Hollywood texts represent New Orleans in a manner similar to how the city appeared on-screen before the storm. While the devastated neighborhoods in the non-tourist areas may appear, filmed representations typically favor the popular, picturesque areas of the city, including the French Quarter and the Garden District, and reaffirm New Orleans’ “Big Easy” identity. While representations of New Orleans in the immediate aftermath of Katrina often ignore Katrina’s effect entirely, those that acknowledge the storm typically incorporate its aftermath into a narrative of redemption and rebuilding, in stark contrast with the more grounded depictions of rebuilding found in Katrina Verité.

From its inception, Katrina Hollywood texts aim to find the broadest audience possible, with most produced and/or distributed by either major or mid-major studios like Disney (Déjà Vu), Paramount (Benjamin Button) and Lionsgate (Now You See Me). Likewise, the TV shows were produced primarily by major television studios for their own networks, such as NCIS: New Orleans (produced by CBS Television Studios for CBS) and K-Ville (produced by Twentieth Century Fox Television for FOX). However, included in this trend are two relative outliers that did not emerge from these mainstream outlets. The Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans (2010) was distributed by First Look Studios, a short-lived independent film distributor, and directed by Werner Herzog, the German art cinema icon known for his very uncommercial

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298 Déjà Vu was distributed under the Touchstone Pictures label, used by Disney for their more “adult” films that do not fit the family-friendly reputation commonly associated with the Mouse. Now You See Me was produced by Summit Entertainment, an independent studio which, by the late 2000s, was most known for more mainstream films like the Twilight and Red franchises. After their purchase by Lionsgate in 2012, Summit has largely abandoned independent-minded film productions, with the exception of the occasional crossover film like La La Land (Damien Chazelle, 2016).
interests. Similarly, the first season of the anthology series *True Detective* (2013-) was written by crime novelist Nic Pizzolatto, directed by indie filmmaker Cary Fukunaga, and produced by HBO, a pay-cable outlet which, in addition to *Treme*, also produced Spike Lee’s Katrina documentaries *When the Levees Broke* (2006) and *If God is Willing and da Creek Don’t Rise* (2010). From their narrative content, neither *The Bad Lieutenant* nor *True Detective* would be considered to have broad commercial appeal: both are about self-abusive male police detectives who often operate outside the law, are prone to hallucinations, and abuse women and drugs.

However, both qualify as Katrina Hollywood texts for the two conventions that do align with mainstream entertainment: star power and intended audience size. *The Bad Lieutenant* stars Nicolas Cage, and while Cage’s star power was in decline by 2009, he was still popular enough to headline a major Hollywood production. Season one of *True Detective* is led by Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson, two movie stars crossing over to TV for a limited series, a move publicized at the time as a paradigm shift for television as a medium for A-List actors.

In addition, both projects had much higher budgets than the typical Katrina Verité texts: *The Bad Lieutenant* has a listed budget of $25 million, placing it within the same budgetary range as a mid-sized studio film. While *True Detective’s* season one budget is not disclosed, HBO’s purchase of the series rights for $5 million, combined with the estimated per-episode budget of $4 to $4.5 million, adds up to a relatively high budget even by HBO’s standards.

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299 *Knowing* (Alex Proyas), another Cage vehicle released that year, grossed $79 million in the United States, demonstrating Cage’s persisting viability as a box office star in 2009.


Lieutenant was a box office failure, grossing just over $1.7 million domestically, while True Detective was more successful in finding an audience, with its season finale watched live by an estimated 3.5 million viewers (by comparison, the series finale of Treme was watched live by an estimated 0.397 million viewers).\(^{302}\) Even when considering The Bad Lieutenant’s box office failure, it is clear that both of these texts were produced with larger audiences in mind than the average Katrina Verité text.

Beyond the commercial and star-power factors of Katrina Hollywood, however, The Bad Lieutenant and True Detective are united with their fellow Katrina Hollywood texts in their lack of interest in representing Hurricane Katrina directly, or in meaningfully exploring its aftermath. Before analyzing the Hollywood texts that do incorporate Katrina, it is important to consider why there are so few Hollywood representations of Katrina to begin with.

**Why is Hollywood Afraid of Katrina?**

From one perspective, Hollywood’s approach to representing Katrina indirectly is unsurprising, given the studios’ long history of using large-scale tragedies as backdrops for romantic or uplifting stories. From turning the 1906 earthquake into a musical romance in San Francisco (W.S. Van Dyke, 1936) to the narrativization of an oil spill as a story of personal heroism in Deepwater Horizon (Peter Berg, 2016), Hollywood has a long history of using tragedy to tell conventional Hollywood narratives. However, there is also an established

tradition of making films that delve critically into the causes of these tragedies, and the struggles of their survivors. Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, there have been uplifting stories of persistence, such as *World Trade Center* (Oliver Stone, 2006) and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (Stephen Daldry, 2011), and films that used the attacks as a backdrop to an unrelated story, like *Dear John* (Lasse Halström, 2010) and *Remember Me* (Allen Coulter, 2010). However, there are also films about 9/11, released in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks, that probe the attacks and their aftermath more critically. Prominent examples of this 9/11-equivalent to Katrina Verité include the fictional *25th Hour* (Spike Lee, 2002) and the documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, 2004). However, while most Katrina Verité films were produced on the margins of the film industry, *25th Hour* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* were respectively distributed by Disney and Lions Gate, and both found mainstream commercial success. There is also an established trend of films critical of the Bush Administration’s military response to the attacks with the War on Terror, such as *Lions for Lambs* (Robert Redford, 2007), *Rendition* (Gavin Hood, 2007), and *Stop-Loss* (Kimberly Peirce, 2008). Though finding less critical and commercial success, these films were nonetheless politically-charged movies released by mid-major and major studios offering direct challenges to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Their release demonstrates the possibility of mainstream film and television that critically explores the controversies surrounding a twenty-first century American tragedy.

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303 It is noteworthy that Spike Lee made films that delve into the aftermath of both 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina (*When the Levees Broke*), releasing both within a year of the tragedies.

304 It is worth noting that while *Fahrenheit 9/11* was originally set to be distributed by Miramax, then a subsidiary of Disney, but was rejected by Disney CEO Michael Eisner, leading producer Harvey and Bob Weinstein to buy the film’s rights outright from Disney and distribute it through the mid-major studio Lions Gate.

305 *Lions for Lambs* was released by MGM/United Artists; *Rendition* was released by New Line/Warner Bros., while *Stop-Loss* was released by Paramount.
There are many possible explanations for the lack of Hollywood films and TV shows that critically probe Katrina and its aftermath. One justification is that the media narrative surrounding Katrina fluctuated between depictions of lawlessness and an indictment of the government’s categorical failure. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, President Bush’s rhetoric emphasized “ideological unity of the nation in the face of ‘evil,’” which defined both the government’s and the media’s coverage of the terrorist attacks and military responses.\textsuperscript{306} By contrast, the initial narrative of Hurricane Katrina, driven by images on TV news, was lawlessness, looting and the need to reestablish order, a narrative that simultaneously exaggerated the degree of crime in New Orleans and perpetuated African-American stereotypes.\textsuperscript{307} The counternarrative to this initial depiction, vocalized by Spike Lee and other prominent black leaders and celebrities like Al Sharpton and Kanye West, centered on the failure by the federal government to properly respond to the storm, the othering of displaced New Orleanians as “refugees,” and the perceived indifference of President Bush to the plight of black citizens.\textsuperscript{308}

After 9/11, audiences connected with films that celebrated the heroism of first responders, the passengers and crew of United Flight 93, and U.S. soldiers fighting overseas. This latter trend has had an especially remarkable staying power, with \textit{12 Strong: The Declassified True Story of the Horse Soldiers} (Nicolai Fuglsig, 2018) being released nearly seventeen years after the covert invasion of Afghanistan that it depicts. By contrast, just as


\textsuperscript{308} Spike Lee, \textit{When the Levees Broke}. 
Americans were reportedly struck with “Katrina Fatigue” in the months following the constant coverage of the storm, so it seems that by 2013, studios were tired of depicting Katrina on-screen. This “fatigue” is evident not only in the lack of films produced by the studios, but the lack of independent films about Katrina that were picked up for distribution. With the exception of Beasts of the Southern Wild (Benh Zeitlin, 2012), a magical-realist reflection on a hurricane’s aftermath with a clear narrative demarcation from the real-life Katrina, none of the aforementioned fictional Katrina Verité films were picked up for distribution by major studios.

One noteworthy case study in this phenomenon of marginalizing Katrina is Hurricane Season (Tim Story, 2009), one of the few fictional films made by a Hollywood studio expressly about Hurricane Katrina. Produced by the mid-major Weinstein Company (TWC) and starring Forrest Whitaker, the film focuses on the true story of the boys’ basketball team of John Ehret High School in neighboring Jefferson Parish, which, with the help of several displaced New Orleans players, won the 2005-06 State Championship in the immediate aftermath of Katrina. Though ostensibly a story of uplift and triumph, unlike most Katrina Hollywood works, the film offers direct critiques of many post-Katrina realities for residents of New Orleans and the surrounding parishes. At different points in the film, characters come face-to-face with their devastated homes, consider whether it is worth it to rebuild their lives in the area, and chafe at being called “refugees” in their own country. The film also explicitly frames action outside of the typical tourist areas: the New Orleans neighborhoods of Holy Cross, Gentilly Terrace, and Seventh Ward are all established as the homes of the affected student-athletes. This nod to the Katrina Verité tradition, while telling a mainstream Hollywood story grounded in a popular genre, makes it perhaps the most “mainstream” representation of Katrina that does not kowtow to Hollywood stereotypes of New Orleans. Despite the film’s generic storytelling, or because of
the perceived unmarketability of a commercial film directly about Katrina, *Hurricane Season* was never released theatrically by TWC, going straight to DVD in 2010. Regardless of the reason for this distribution decision, TWC’s treatment of the film fits a pattern of Hollywood studios marginalizing films directly about Katrina.

A similar fate has affected the planned Katrina season of *American Crime Story (ACS).* If released, this forthcoming season of the TV anthology would be the highest-profile fictionalization of Hurricane Katrina since *Treme.* Following the critical and commercial success of the first season of *ACS,* Ryan Murphy announced that the second season would explore the failed aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, adapting Douglas Brinkley’s nonfiction work, *The Great Deluge* (2007), for the cable network FX. Despite the announced casting of Dennis Quaid as President Bush, Matthew Broderick as FEMA Director Michael Brown, and Annette Bening as Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco, this story was delayed until the show’s third season in favor of a true crime-focused season about the murder of Gianni Versace. Moreover, the third season’s focus was retooled in 2017, when it was announced that rather than focusing on the governmental failures surrounding Katrina as recounted by Brinkley, the season would instead adapt Sheri Fink’s *Five Days at Memorial* (2013), about Dr. Anna Pou’s decision to euthanize ill patients stuck in Memorial Hospital during the flooding. While this *ACS* season has yet to be released, this shift from a macro-level dissection of governmental failure in favor of a micro-focus on one doctor’s experiences during the storm reflects Hollywood’s ongoing reluctance to dissect the causes and controversies surrounding Katrina.

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The lack of interest of Hollywood studios and producers in making films or TV shows about Katrina is especially illuminating, because the vast majority of big-budget films dealing with Katrina were not conceived as films that even took place in Louisiana, but relocated there to take advantage of the state tax credits. However, it would be an oversimplification to discuss Hollywood studios as a monolith, or to attribute Hollywood’s reluctance to confront Katrina as an Adornoian attempt by Hollywood producers to refute the Katrina counternarrative and reaffirm American ideas of personal responsibility. Rather, it is more constructive to consider these representations within the actual context of these texts’ productions, which “still remains qualitatively different from assembly line production.” By first narrowing down which films and TV shows identify as mainstream, then comparing these texts with each other, recurring trends of both production and narrative strategy emerge.

**Katrina Hollywood Production Strategies: Relocating for Tax Credits**

In the post-Katrina era, only a small number of fictional feature films shot in New Orleans have actually been set in the city and incorporate Katrina in some way. Of these, the vast majority are low-budget independents that received a marginal theatrical release, if any at all. This leaves only seven texts that are set at least partly in New Orleans that include a storyline related to Katrina: *Déjà Vu*, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, *The Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans*, and *Now You See Me*. On the television end, with the exception of *Treme*, and individual episodes of non-New Orleans-set shows with “special episodes” centered around Katrina, Katrina-focused episodes can be found in the shows *K-Ville*, *NCIS: New Orleans*, and

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311 Ed and Susan Poole, “Louisiana Film History: 2000s.”
season one of *True Detective*. These film and TV texts remain the most important to an analysis of Hollywood’s response to Katrina, given their prominence as the highest profile representations of Katrina by the metrics of budget, box office, and television ratings.

Of these seven texts identified as Katrina Hollywood, only two—*K-Ville* and *NCIS: New Orleans*—were conceived as originally taking place in Louisiana. The rest—*Déjà Vu, Benjamin Button, The Bad Lieutenant, Now You See Me*, and *True Detective*—all relocated their settings to Louisiana in pre-production to take advantage of state tax credits. The financial incentives of filming in Louisiana, openly acknowledged by producers as the primary influence in their decision to film there, explains why so many Katrina Hollywood productions treat the hurricane as an afterthought. It also underscores the lack of interest by Hollywood in setting films there: had Louisiana tax credits not been available, *Déjà Vu* would have likely been set either in either Miami and Seattle. *Benjamin Button* might have kept the original short story’s setting of...

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312 *K-Ville* and *NCIS: New Orleans* were set and shot primarily in New Orleans. While *True Detective* was primarily shot in more rural areas of Louisiana, including Erath and Elmwood, it was partly set in New Orleans, and filmed in Fort McComb, a ruined fort just within New Orleans’ city limits. The television episodes are excluded because while all are interested in Katrina and a few are even set in New Orleans, none actually filmed in Louisiana, with their representations of the city are relegated to a handful of second-unit establishing shots. For accounts of how these “special episodes” from dramas have handled Katrina in narratives, see Lindsay Steenberg’s “Uncovering the Bones: Forensic Approaches to Hurricane Katrina on Crime Television” and Jane Elliott’s “Life Preservers: The Neoliberal Enterprise of Hurricane Katrina Survival in *Trouble the Water, House M.D.*, and *When the Levees Broke,*” both in *Old and New Media After Katrina*, edited by Diane Negra (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). Nahem Yousaf also discusses various crime dramas’ approaches to Katrina in “Regeneration through Genre: Romancing Katrina in Crime Fiction from ‘Tubby Meets Katrina’ to ‘K-Ville,’” *Journal of American Studies* 44, no. 3, Hurricane Katrina Five Years After (August 2010): 553-571.

313 Jerry Bruckheimer, Bill Marsillii, and Tony Scott, audio commentary for *Déjà Vu* (2006; Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2007). Though originally set in New York, the city rejected the film due to environmental concerns surrounding the film’s ferry explosion. In the audio commentary, Tony Scott notes that after Katrina hit, producers suggested...
Baltimore. The Bad Lieutenant would likely be set in New York. The New Orleans scenes in Now You See Me would be set in Atlantic City, while the producers of True Detective would have set the show’s first season in rural Arkansas.

In explaining the relocation of their productions to Louisiana and/or New Orleans, producers of these works are almost uniform in their justification: the tax incentives, yes, but there is also something special about the area. Benjamin Button screenwriter Eric Roth notes that after consulting with director David Fincher on locations with tax rebates, he started writing the script with New Orleans as the primary location and “all of a sudden there was a character there. You don’t have to write a description of it or anything. Everyone knows what it is. It has its own flavor, own taste, own smell and sights.” This sentiment is echoed by Déjà Vu director Tony Scott, who calls New Orleans “a city in a time warp…a romantic city,” and Now You See Me producer Bobby Cohen, who notes that after they settled on the location he and director Louis Letterier asked themselves, “If we’re gonna go to New Orleans, why cheat moving the production to either Miami or Seattle, given that the primary requirement of the location is that it needed to have some kind of ferry. This decision was ultimately rejected.


another city for New Orleans? Let’s have the movie take place in New Orleans."\(318\) The Bad Lieutenant director Werner Herzog acknowledges that the producers wanted to shoot in New Orleans for the tax credits, but that star Nicolas Cage also wanted to shoot there.\(319\) Cage, whose gaudy pyramid-shaped tomb in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 is a staple of walking tours of the city, has always been open about his love of the city, expressing his opinion to The Times-Picayune that “New Orleans stands alone in its kind of magical individually that only exists there.”\(320\)

Almost all of these firsthand accounts of why these productions relocated to New Orleans are open about the tax credits as a primary factor. Given that many of the quotes above come from interviews promoting the film, there is always the possibility that the filmmakers are embellishing for reporters, some of whom are writing for local publications. It is also likely that New Orleans and Louisiana’s status as recovering disaster zones played a part in some of these choices: the subplot of the New Orleans scenes of Now You See Me requires a city victimized by an insurance company in the wake of a disaster, which not all cities can fulfil. However, even within the productions that acknowledge Katrina, it is revealing how much producers emphasize the city’s pre-Katrina identity of being a magical, exceptional city, whether as a legitimate characteristic (as Scott and Cage argue) or as something that would be readily identifiable to audiences (as Roth and Cohen note). This drawing of productions to New Orleans’ perceived exceptionalism, and how this exceptionalism translated into representations of the city

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\(318\) Bruckheimer, Marsilii and Scott; Cohen and Leterrier.


on-screen, all but guaranteed that that Hurricane Katrina would not be the primary focus of the narratives.

**Katrina Hollywood Narrative Strategies: Marginalizing, Exploiting, and Overcoming**

Within these Katrina Hollywood texts, three distinct narrative strategies in representing Hurricane Katrina emerge: marginalizing the storm’s devastation, exploiting the aftermath of the storm as a narrative device for something unrelated to the hurricane itself, and co-opting the storm into a Hollywood narrative of overcoming hardship. The three trends are not mutually exclusive, and often overlap within the same media texts. Collectively, these films, the most quantifiably mainstream fictional representations of post-Katrina New Orleans (even the little-remembered *K-Ville* received more viewers on average than the more culturally resonant but little-seen *Treme*), demonstrate Hollywood’s dance around New Orleans and Katrina, with studio film and TV productions refusing to confront the storm and its ongoing aftermath.

**Marginalizing Katrina**

Not even a year had passed before Hollywood released a production that negated Katrina’s impact. Distributed by Walt Disney Studios in 2006, *Déjà Vu* is a science-fiction thriller centered on ATF agent Doug Carlin (Denzel Washington) attempting to solve a terrorist bombing of the Algiers Point Ferry using time-travel surveillance technology. After Katrina made landfall during preproduction, director Tony Scott expressed a desire to incorporate the storm into the narrative. Despite this expressed desire, Scott’s film treats Hurricane Katrina as a hinderance: something that must be acknowledged so that the film can move on to the action. This plays out in the film’s opening scene of the terrorist bombing: four minutes in, a

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321 Bruckheimer, Marsilii and Scott.
banner exclaiming “Katrina Made Us Stronger” briefly appears, followed a minute later by the ferry explosion that sets the plot into motion. This banner is the only overt reference to Katrina in the entire film, reflecting the context of the film’s production: Déjà Vu was in pre-production and chose New Orleans as a setting before the storm even hit, incorporating the storm’s immediate aftermath *ex post facto*. While this makes *Déjà Vu* a noteworthy cultural artifact, its actual treatment of the storm embodies a trend of representation, in which Hollywood attempts to incorporate the storm while marginalizing its actual impact on the city.

The primary mode by which this is accomplished is by continuing the pre-Katrina trends of filming primarily within the tourist areas of the city that were also among the least affected by flooding. *Déjà Vu* centers the action in these neighborhoods: the investigation is headquartered in the CBD, the apartment of one of the victims investigated is in the French Quarter, while the house of the victim’s father is in the Garden District. The film overstates the recovery of even these less-affected areas: Carlin is shown riding the St. Charles Streetcar in the Garden District, a line that, at the time of filming, had yet to be restarted and had to be towed off-screen by the production. Later in the film, when Carlin is escaping from a hospital, he is shown driving a stolen ambulance out of Charity Hospital, the hospital for the New Orleans poor and uninsured that never reopened after Katrina. This combination of favoring tourist locations with presenting still-out-of-service landmarks as operation exemplifies the marginalization strategy. Other than a handful of brief visual acknowledgments of the storm’s impact, a viewer watching *Déjà Vu* might not know about Katrina at all.

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Similar strategies of marginalizing the storm through geography and/or (mis)representation can be found in other post-Katrina Hollywood productions. 2013’s *Now You See Me* is about four Robin Hood-esque magicians who come together for a long-con revenge scheme against a debunker of magic. The film is escapism in the classical Hollywood sense, with lower stakes and a lighter humor than *Déjà Vu*. Appropriately, the film embraces New Orleans’ pre-Katrina popular identity as an exceptional party town, taking place during Mardi Gras and locating the majority of its New Orleans action in French Quarter. In one fascinating exchange, a French INTERPOL agent (Mélanie Laurent) explains to her FBI partner (Mark Ruffalo) that she was able to procure an apartment from a woman living in the Quarter because “here, speaking French is actually an asset.” This moment is a remarkable anachronism even for Hollywood, given that the last native francophones moved out of the Quarter nearly a century earlier.\(^{323}\) Even in accepting the moment as self-aware escapism, the scene constitutes a doubling down on New Orleans pre-Katrina identity, introducing the city as architecturally and linguistically stagnant for centuries.

Like *Déjà Vu*, *Now You See Me* presents areas of New Orleans as more recovered than they are at the time of production. For a scene that takes place in the fictional “Savoy Theater,” the filmmakers shot in the State Palace Theater of the CBD for the interior, using the Williams Research Center in the French Quarter as the exterior façade. Though the State Palace Theater is, as of 2018, still closed to the public, the filmmakers were able to hide this damage through set dressing, low-key lighting, and selective camera angles. The State Palace Theater was chosen for practical reasons: it was not being used by anyone, and while not functional as an operating

theater, “Hollywood magic” would make it work as a stand-in for one. However, as will be demonstrated, the theater’s usage is especially ironic, given the context of the stage performance within the film.

From its opening scene in a New Orleans hospital, The Curious Case of Benjamin Button relegates Hurricane Katrina to literal window dressing for the film’s reflection on the inexorable passage of time. The film’s flashback structure predates Katrina’s arrival, with the film favoring the nineteenth-century mansions in the Garden District. This includes the Nolan House, a mansion built in the 1830s that is used as the film’s fictional retirement home, and the center of the film’s New Orleans-based scenes. Though the film takes place primarily in the twentieth century, its usage of the storm as a bookend for its own unrelated, fantastical story of a man who ages backwards, and its post-Katrina favoring of tourist locales on-screen, contributes to the trend of marginalizing the storm in representations of the city. As will be later noted with the Katrina-centered narratives of NCIS: New Orleans, as more years pass from when the storm originally made landfall, this method of marginalization increasingly becomes the norm.

Exploiting Katrina

Near the mid-point of Déjà Vu, as law enforcement is tracking down its suspect in the ferry bombing, tracing him to a house in the Lower Ninth Ward. The Lower Ninth is established through four successive “blink and you’ll miss it” shots typical of the frenetic editing of late-era Tony Scott, showing houses, cars, and boats still lying derelict in the abandoned neighborhood. Like the “Katrina Made Us Stronger” banner from the opening of the film, this location was a post-Katrina script change. While the suspect’s house was originally in a

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nondescript suburb, Scott and screenwriter Bill Marsilii realized that the suspect’s house was the best chance to show an affected area of the city. The scene exemplifies the final approach that Katrina Hollywood texts take in appropriating Katrina: by using the city’s devastated landscape as atmosphere in the service of a narrative uninterested in the storm itself.

While it is paradoxical for a film to both marginalize and exploit Hurricane Katrina on-screen, Déjà Vu manages this balance through the very selective exposure it gives the devastated areas. The Lower Ninth Ward scene, lasting less than a minute of the film’s runtime, features no residents of the area except the bombing suspect, and the film quickly shifts to the suspect’s escape on an airboat. The tracking shot of row after row of ruined houses has become a stereotype in itself, a synecdoche nearly as identified with post-Katrina New Orleans as St. Louis Cathedral. However, while Katrina Verité and Katrina Hollywood films share the semantics, their syntactic applications of the Katrina wreckage are diametrically opposed. Verité films such as Trouble the Water (Carl Deal and Tia Lessin 2008) and Low and Behold (Zack Godshall, 2007) present the wreckage as people’s homes, and narratively focus on the consequences of storm for the individuals who live in them. By contrast, no locals are shown in the Ninth Ward of Déjà Vu: as Briallen Hopper observes, “Viewers never once see a survivor of Katrina, or hear about one. A brief helicopter-view shot of the ruins of the Ninth Ward recapitulates George W. Bush’s flight over the devastation, but in human terms it is as if Katrina never happened.”

Déjà Vu’s appropriation of Katrina for its sci-fi thriller narrative is a part of a larger trend of Katrina fiction in the written word and moving image. New Orleans has long been a popular

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325 Bruckheimer, Marsilii and Scott.
327 Hopper, 284.
location for crime stories that evoke the exoticism and danger associated with the city’s popular identity. Following Katrina, this tradition co-opted the Hurricane’s destruction into that narrative tradition: literary scholar Nahem Yousaf notes that following the storm, “there has been a proliferation of post-disaster crime novels,” along with crime fiction in both film and television. Yousaf’s definition of disaster crime focuses on the exploitation of the storm to service conventional crime narratives, including Katrina-centered episodes of *Bones* (FOX, 2005-2017), *Without a Trace* (CBS, 2002-2009), and *K-Ville*. While *K-Ville* at least attempts to engage with post-Katrina politics, the exploitation strand of Katrina Hollywood makes no such overture, instead using the storm’s physical wreckage for politically-devoid cinematic atmosphere. Though *Déjà Vu* certainly accomplishes this, texts that take this exploitative streak a step further are *The Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans* and season one of *True Detective*.

*The Bad Lieutenant* follows Terence McDonagh (Nicolas Cage), an NOPD homicide detective whose back injury, incurred while jumping into water to save an abandoned prisoner from a flooding jail, leads him into a downward spiral of drug addiction, gambling, and abuse of power. In one scene, McDonagh deprives an elderly woman of her oxygen tank in order to force the woman’s nurse into revealing the location of her son, a murder witness. In another sequence, McDonagh urges his drug dealer allies to shoot a dead mobster again, because “his soul is still dancing” (when the camera pans to the dead body, the soul is indeed shown breakdancing, as an iguana hallucinated by McDonagh walks past the body). The film’s bizarre, darkly comical tone, coined “neo-noir camp” by J.M. Tyree, was a result of the unlikely collaboration of veteran TV

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328 Yousaf, 556.
writer William Finkelstein’s pulpy script, Cage’s bombastic on-set improvisations, and director Werner Herzog’s preoccupations with themes of nature and inhumanity.\(^{329}\)

It is Herzog’s thematic interests that define how New Orleans is captured on-screen in \textit{The Bad Lieutenant}. The director is (in)famous for his long production shoots in the harshest natural conditions, including his treks into Amazon Jungle for \textit{Aguirre: The Wrath of God} (1972) and \textit{Fitzcarraldo} (1982), Antarctica for \textit{Encounters at the End of the World} (2007), and Siberia for \textit{Happy People: A Year in the Taiga} (2010). The New Orleans of \textit{The Bad Lieutenant} falls more within this filmic tradition than with any previous on-screen representation of the “Big Easy.” In a behind-the-scenes special feature, Herzog waxes poetic about how post-Katrina New Orleans has “something of a beast inside,” and stating that “Where I am is the jungle.”\(^{330}\) This attitude plays out in his representation of the city. After the prologue of McDonagh getting injured and receiving a medal of commendation, the first scene takes place in the Seventh Ward, on the corner of St. Anthony and Urquhart. This area of the Seventh Ward, a neighborhood that took heavy flooding during Katrina, is the film’s first establishing shot of the city. Buildings look worn and chipped, a spray paint tag from the post-Katrina house-searches is visible on one house, while the streets themselves are strewn with garbage. Police tape blocks off the passing residents from their homes, as police investigate the massacre of an entire family of Senegalese immigrants. Within the context of this story, Cage’s McDonagh is another megalomaniacal fiend in the tradition of Klaus Kinski, and New Orleans is his jungle, a wilderness that he only he understands because he embraces the madness at its core.

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\(^{329}\) J.M. Tyree, “\textit{Treme vs. The Bad Lieutenant},” \textit{Film Quarterly} 64, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 28; Rezayazdi.

In a later scene, as McDonagh is tracking down a suspect in the murders, he closes in on 1407 Clara St., on the border between the CBD and neighboring Central City. As he exits the cottage with his suspect, the Superdome looms in the background of the action, with a motorboat laying abandoned on the road, two ominous reminders of Katrina that go unacknowledged by the characters. In another sequence, McDonagh locates a sheriff’s deputy in a neighboring parish to get the speeding ticket dismissed for his bookie’s niece. The scene takes place on Interstate 10, with Six Flags New Orleans in the background. As McDonagh bickers with the deputy over the ticket, the roller coasters of the New Orleans East theme park, abandoned since the flooding, tower over the action like ancient ruins. The presence of Six Flags in this scene—like the Superdome, shown from a distance, and never addressed by the characters—highlights the impersonality of Herzog’s representation of New Orleans.\textsuperscript{331} As Tyree notes, Herzog’s New Orleans is “a wasted city, alternating between the rougher streets of Algiers…and a soulless, banal, and luxuriously corporate French Quarter scrubbed clean of urbanity, musical fizz, and lively human detritus.”\textsuperscript{332} Though the New Orleans of \textit{The Bad Lieutenant} is not as sparsely-populated as in \textit{Déjà Vu}, Herzog’s visual approach suggests that the city is a ruin that might be better off abandoned.

\textsuperscript{331} Though only New Orleans-set films are being analyzed for this category, it is noteworthy that other films not set in New Orleans use Katrina wreckage, especially the ruins of Six Flags New Orleans. Examples of this can be found in \textit{Killer Joe} (William Friedkin, 2011), \textit{Jurassic World}, and \textit{Dawn of the Planet of the Apes} (Matt Reeves, 2014), all of which use the wreckage of Six Flags as stand-ins for ruins in Dallas, the fictional “Isla Nublar,” and post-apocalyptic San Francisco. This appropriation of Katrina ruins totally removed within the context of storm represents another way in which Hollywood films superficially incorporate elements of the aftermath without directly addressing the hurricane’s human cost.

\textsuperscript{332} Tyree, 28.
Though sharing similarities and narrative and character archetypes with *The Bad Lieutenant*, season one of *True Detective* could not be more different in tone. While *The Bad Lieutenant* is dark, campy and over-the-top, *True Detective* delves into its own murder-mystery with grim seriousness. The film follows two detectives for the Louisiana State Police, the veteran Marty Hart (Woody Harrelson) and mysterious newcomer Rust Cohle (Matthew McConaughey), as they are haunted by a troubling murder case over the course of two decades. This season is set primarily in Vermilion Parish of distant Acadiana, and was filmed mostly in New Orleans-adjacent Jefferson Parish. Only one scene takes place explicitly in New Orleans, involving Cohle tracking down a male prostitute at a gay French Quarter bar. In its relationship to New Orleans, the season resembles *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, with the two detectives exploring the same bayou country beyond the protection of the city’s levee system as that Louisiana-set film.\(^{333}\) Like *Beasts*’ relationship with New Orleans, *True Detective* circles the city; not just in filming on the physical periphery of adjacent Jefferson Parish, but also the periphery of New Orleans’ popular identity, through the show’s blending of Mardi Gras traditions and post-Katrina imagery.

*True Detective* incorporates Katrina in the final two episodes of the series, both set in 2014: “After You’ve Gone,” in which Hart and Cohle reunite to solve an unresolved murder from 1995, and “Form and Void,” in which the two detectives finally confront the suspect that evaded them for almost twenty years. In “After You’ve Gone,” as Cohle is trying to convince Hart to help him reopen their old case, he describes a township around Erath, where Cohle’s

\(^{333}\) In one scene, Hart and Cohle’s investigation leads them to the fictional Pelican Island, a sinking, sparsely-populated fishing village on a barrier island with a population shrinking since Hurricane Andrew. The way that Fukunaga photographs and Cohle describes the region surrounding the island—“This pipeline is covering up this coast like a jigsaw. Place is gonna be underwater in thirty years”—is reminiscent of *Beasts*’ island of Big Drink, stripped of its magical/romantic varnish.
potential suspect is from, that has “a very rural sense of Mardi Gras…you know, men on horses, animal masks and such.” Hart chimes in that this is called “Courir de Mardi Gras,” a tradition associated with many Creole and Cajun communities in South Louisiana. Translated to “Mardi Gras Run,” this tradition was even the subject of the plotline of an episode of Treme, in which a character accepts an invitation to join the run by a Cajun friend. Typical of Treme, that HBO drama’s exploration of Courir de Mardi Gras is a respectful quasi-documentary look at a tradition little-understood outside of Louisiana. In True Detective, however, Courir de Mardi Gras’ imagery is appropriated by series creator Nic Pizzolatto as the calling card of a child-sex cult run by a powerful Louisiana family based in that township. Cohle then shows old photographs of Courir de Mardi Gras celebrations that feature “blindfolds, antlers, masks,” all of which were found on their murder victim twenty-five years ago. The killer’s calling card, primitive-looking artworks of twigs and string called “Devil’s Nests” by one character, were inspired by Cajun “bird traps,” and were done by a specially commissioned New Orleans-based artist.334 Though stemming from a Carnival tradition adjacent to but distinct from New Orleans’ own traditions, True Detective’s framing of Courir de Mardi Gras hinges on its audience’s understanding of Mardi Gras, an understanding that is certainly centered around the more widely-known New Orleans Mardi Gras.

Rather than merely appropriating Mardi Gras traditions, the episode interweaves this appropriation into the aftermath of Katrina. After the photos of Courir de Mardi Gras, Cohle shows Hart a series of photographs of the bird traps in ruined houses taken by an artist in

Kenner, a New Orleans suburb in Jefferson Parish. Cohle notes that the photographer “kept running across these stick-things” after Katrina. “I think our man had a real-good time after the hurricane. Chaos, people missing, people gone. Cops gone. I think he had a real-good year.”

Even without the episode or the photographs taken within city limits, there is a clear thematic relationship between the detritus and ruin associated with Katrina’s effect on New Orleans. With one monologue, overlapping images of devastation in New Orleans’ greater metropolitan area, Pizzolatto manages to interweave Cajun folk art traditions with real-life tragedies of missing persons and an abandoned city, all in the service of a mythology of child abduction and illicit sex.

The climactic scenes of “Form and Void,” the season finale, add another layer to the exploitation of Katrina imagery. Rust and Cohle track down their suspect, Errol Childress (Glenn Fleshler), at his family’s overgrown estate in Southern Louisiana. When Childress runs away, Cohle follows him into what appears to be a vast, man-made labyrinth of stone tunnels and caverns. The tunnels of this ruined labyrinth are overrun with gigantic bird traps. The labyrinth scenes were shot on-location in Fort Macomb, a military fort built in 1820 and abandoned in 1871. The fort's ruins are adjacent to the Venetian Isles neighborhood, an isolated area of New Orleans East that is just within the city limits. Though the scene is not set in New Orleans, the sequence represents the only instance of the show filming at a distinct New Orleans location.

On the one hand, this episode’s representation of Fort Macomb has little connection to Hurricane Katrina. While Fort Macomb was damaged by the storm, the fort was in a state of ruin for over a century before the storm hit. This pre-Katrina ruin would therefore not be normally identified with Hurricane Katrina in the way that a graffitied shotgun cottage in The Bad Lieutenant would be. On the other hand, the scene in “After You’ve Gone” interweaves Courir
de Mardi Gras iconography, Katrina-ruin photography, and the same bird traps that would later appear in the Fort Macomb scenes. This interweaving provides the necessary context to associate Fort Macomb with ruins of Katrina, if not the frame to see the fort as a Katrina ruin. Like a factory that was already ruined before the storm, yet shows up in CNN footage as evidence of the storm’s damage, the shift in visual context reorients the narrative of Fort Macomb from a nineteenth-century ruin to a Katrina ruin. While not as direct an evocation of Katrina’s ruins as can be found in Déjà Vu and The Bad Lieutenant, the exploitation of Katrina in True Detective, combined with its usage of Cajun iconography and Fort Macomb, evoke popular perceptions of post-Katrina New Orleans, all in the service of a supernatural mystery that Pizzolatto conceived before he even decided to film in Louisiana.

Overcoming Katrina

The idea of films as reflections of a culture’s predominant ideology, neutering political messages that challenge that hegemony, originated in Frankfurt School Marxism in the 1940s and 60s. While negating the arguments of Frankfurt School Marxists like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer of assembly-line production of Hollywood films, film scholars David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristen Thompson confirm this convention as predominant within

335 The music video for the Beyoncé album Lemonade (Beyoncé Knowles-Carter and Kahlil Joseph, 2016), which interweaves imagery of New Orleans neighborhoods and recreated images of a flooded New Orleans, establishes a similar context in its own filming of Fort Macomb. At one point, the music video cuts directly from Beyoncé singing the fort to her laying on the field of the Superdome.


the Classical Hollywood narrative, noting that “narrative resolution can work to transcend the social conflict represented in the film, often by displacing it onto the individual,” and that classical narration “accustoms spectators to a limited and highly probably range of expectations.” Even with the evolution of film narrative and form, these Classical Hollywood conventions remain entrenched in most mainstream film narratives. Adding to this endurance of narrative conventions is the spectacle that is representative of the current Age of the Blockbuster, which tends to render on-screen disasters apolitical and superficial. In the sphere of television, prestige dramas commonly found on cable networks popularized the increased serialization of TV stories, with narratives often working to delay gratification as long as possible. However, network television shows, including K-Ville and NCIS: New Orleans, continue to follow the model of Classical Hollywood, with some kind of resolution occurring at the end of each episode, and final resolution avoided to maintain the viability of the series.

Within several mainstream film and TV representations of Katrina, a trend emerges of narratives that happily resolve the challenges faced by New Orleans residents by story’s end. Whether through the unraveling of a labyrinthine conspiracy, a deus ex machina resolution, or a combination of both, Hollywood’s victims of Katrina face a far smoother road than the real victims appearing in When the Levees Broke or Trouble the Water, or in more unconventional fictional works like Treme and Low and Behold. These narratives of “Overcoming Katrina,”

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338 Bordwell, et. al., The Classical Hollywood Cinema, 82-83.
conforming to prevailing genre narrative conventions, stifle any intended or unintended political messages of the shows in favor of clean, happy resolutions.

An example of such a narrative of uplift and overcoming the human tragedies left by the storm can be found in the New Orleans-set scenes of Now You See Me. In the New Orleans stage performance by the lead characters in the fictional “Savoy Theater,” the four lead magicians call their sponsor, millionaire Arthur Tressler (Michael Caine), onto the stage. Under the guise of setting up another illusion, the magicians reveal Tressler’s net worth to the crowd on an oversized check: over $140 million. As one of them flashes a gigantic flashlight over the check, that amount gradually reduces, just as pieces of paper in the hands of audience members reveal their depleted bank accounts as suddenly flush with cash. As this happens, the audience receives an explanation from the Four Horsemen: the audience members, thought to be chosen at random, were chosen because of their victimhood. All of them lost their houses, cars, businesses, or loved ones, only to be loopholed out of their settlements by Tressler Insurance.

This scene taps into a real-life hardship that many New Orleanians faced after the storm: insurance companies either loopholing or lowballing financial settlements to policy holders whose homes received flood, hurricane, and/or wind damage. Through Hollywood magic, a theater full of such victims is given financial compensation for their hardships. The system of unfair insurance settlements, too systemic and widespread to be pinned on a single company or individual, is whittled down to a single instigator, who is left broke and defeated on-stage. Not coincidentally, a similar situation befell homeowners of Now You See Me’s original setting, Atlantic City, following Hurricane Sandy in 2012: thousands of insurance claims were either

denied or the settlements were lowballed, with allegations of widespread fraud by insurance companies pretending that home damages were not as bad as they actually were. The narrative interchangeability of these two tragedies is highlighted by the film’s dialogue: at no point does any character actually say the words “hurricane” or “Katrina,” opting instead the infomercial-ready description of “hard times that hit one of America’s most treasured cities.” Though Now You See Me’s New Orleans setting only makes sense within the context of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, which hit New Orleans in September 2005, this omission might have been decided upon to maintain the film’s airy, escapist tone. While the choices to not acknowledge the storm by name and to magically resolve a complex, real-life controversy within its narrative clearly demarcates the film from “reality,” it nonetheless contributes to a larger trend of New Orleans-set films that refuse to confront the storm’s impact on the city’s residents.

Now You See Me relocated to New Orleans for the tax credits, spinning the storm’s aftermath into a narrative of overcoming. However, appropriating the storm’s impact into an uplifting narrative is most acute in the productions that were set in New Orleans from the beginning: the TV police procedurals K-Ville and NCIS: New Orleans.

After Déjà Vu, K-Ville was the first major studio production to take on Hurricane Katrina, a short-lived police procedural that aired on FOX. Unlike Déjà Vu, which co-opted the storm mid-production, K-Ville was conceived as a post-Katrina production: it originated from a four-word pitch from FOX president Peter Liguori to the show’s creator, Jonathan Lisco: “cop show, New Orleans.” The title itself is an abbreviation of “Katrinaville,” which Lisco saw written as

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graffiti while on a ride-along with the NOPD. The *K-Ville* origin story makes it a rarity among Katrina Hollywood productions: a show that did not stumble into Katrina or incorporate it after the fact, but was conceived as a direct response to the storm.

Predating *Treme* by three years, Lisco did not set out to produce *K-Ville* with the ethos of authenticity that David Simon and Eric Overmyer embraced with their HBO drama. Even if he did, Lisco was limited by his network and his form: network TV shows, especially in 2007, were expected to closely follow a genre formula, and *K-Ville* certainly did that, with readily identifiable character archetypes, episodic plots, and minimal serialization of storylines. Despite these parameters, the showrunners expressed a desire to get the essence of post-Katrina New Orleans right: in an interview with Madeline Brand for *NPR*, Lisco expresses his desire to be “authentic when possible,” while set decorator Tim Cohen argues that the oft-mocked inaccuracies, like getting characters from the French Quarter to the West Bank in a block, is acceptable if they are able to spread awareness about New Orleans to the rest of the country. Madeline Brand, who interviewed Lisco and Cohen on of the show’s premiere, seems to take their arguments at face-value: Brand herself notes that “as in true life, recovery in ‘K-Ville’ is slow.” This slow recovery can certainly be seen in the central characters of *K-Ville*: Detective Martin Boulet (Anthony Anderson), a colorful and ethically-lax NOPD detective in the tradition of *The Big Easy*’s Remy McSwain, continues to struggle with coming to grips with his experiences policing during the flooding, and fights to keep his family together and in New Orleans.

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345 Brand.


347 Brand.

348 Brand.
Orleans. His new partner, Trevor Cobb (Cole Hauser), has the improbable backstory of a former gang member incarcerated during Katrina who took the opportunity of the flooded jail to start fresh and redeem himself. In every episode of the show, the writers directly confront a post-Katrina controversy, including opportunistic developers (Pilot), the Greet Dot Initiative (1.3: “Bedfellows”), and the controversial Road Home program (1.6: “AKA”). From their description, these plots resemble the probing into New Orleans’ controversies found in the Katrina Verité texts: episode 7, “Melissa,” even deals with unscrupulous insurance claims adjusters, the same subject explored in Treme and Low and Behold. The officers’ constant revisiting of the storm through Cobb’s survivor’s guilt and Boulet’s PTSD show an inability by the characters to move on from Katrina.

However, the structure and convention of a network cop drama undercuts the ongoing recovery implied by these characterizations: because of the show’s insistence on sticking to conventional narrative forms, K-Ville rarely concludes an episode without resolving whatever Katrina controversy they are exploring that week. The effect of this is the opposite of Brand’s claim in her NPR interview: unlike in true life, recovery in K-Ville always comes by episode’s end. Furthermore, the nature of the resolution, often centering around a hushed-up conspiracy, deflects the real-life government and private sector entities that contributed to the corruption,  

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349 The Green Dot Initiative was the idea put forward in the early stages of rebuilding that suggested certain areas of the city below sea-level be turned into “greenways,” or parks that would provide some buffer to any future floodwaters and cut down on neighborhood blight for neighborhoods where large numbers of people might not return. After a widespread backlash, the idea was scrapped. “Plan Shrinks City Footprint,” The Times-Picayune, December 14, 2005, http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2005/12/plan_shrinks_city_footprint.html; Michelle Krupa, “Many Areas Marked for Green Space after Hurricane Katrina Have Rebounded,” The Times-Picayune, August 23, 2010, http://www.nola.com/katrina/index.ssf/2010/08/many_areas_marked_for_green_space_after_hurricane_katrina_have_rebounded.html.
allowing the scandal to be pinned on isolated criminals. In both the Pilot and “Melissa,” the episodes’ respective controversies of land-grabbing in Boulet’s Ninth Ward neighborhood and a case of murder and insurance fraud are both the result of conspiracies by isolated parties. In the pilot, the land-grabbing is undertaken by the suspected developer’s racist daughter; in “Melissa,” it is a conspiracy between a single claims adjustor and a group of affluent homeowners. Both controversies are resolved by the exposure and arrest of the perpetrators: Boulet’s Ninth Ward neighbors defiantly tear up their “For Sale” signs, while the multiple families loopholed by the insurance company all receive generous settlements to avoid a costly lawsuit. This latter resolution even resolves a subplot of “Melissa”: the grateful homeowners receiving settlements all chip in to help repair Boulet’s crumbling house.

Following its release and abrupt cancellation, K-Ville received criticism from every direction: locals mocked the show’s stereotypical favoring of the French Quarter and its loose grasp of local customs and jargon; critics panned it for being cheesy and exploitive; and academics like Nahem Yousaf pointed out that the show’s NOPD-approved depiction of a flawed but heroic police department turns a blind eye to the scandals surrounding the department during the flooding.350 In the show’s representation of the city’s post-Katrina recovery, the creators’ hearts are in the right place, with each story reminding viewers that the city “needs to not be forgotten.”351 However, this effort is hampered by the narrative conventions of the show: unlike Treme, which is able to emphasize the unhealed and unresolved tragedies of the storm, K-Ville obligatorily resolves each Katrina scandal by the end of each episode. This chafing of

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351 Peterson.
structure and real-life tragedy reveals the continued inadequacy of mainstream storytelling conventions in dealing with real-life trauma and tragedy.

While *K-Ville* was oversaturated with Hurricane Katrina, the other New Orleans-set network show takes the opposite approach. Whereas all ten episodes of *K-Ville* dealt in some way with the aftermath of Katrina, CBS’s ongoing *NCIS: New Orleans* dedicates only one standalone episode and one seven-episode story arc of its first eighty-one episodes (2014-2017) to Katrina storylines. The standalone episode, “Billy and the Kid,” was the tenth episode of the second season, while the story arc, revolving around the fictional New Orleans neighborhood of “Clearwater,” ran from the seventeenth to the twenty-fourth episode of season three (aired March 14 to May 16 2017). This relative disparity in covering Katrina can be explained by a variety of factors. *K-Ville* premiered in 2007, conceived by producers as vehicle for capturing the cultural moment that New Orleans supposedly had in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane. *NCIS: New Orleans* debuted in 2014 as a spinoff to the popular D.C.-set procedural. Though the show was influenced, like *K-Ville*, by the availability of Louisiana’s tax credits, the producers’ justification of its New Orleans location was unrelated to the Hurricane: beyond New Orleans’ established “Big Easy” identity, there is a real-life Naval Investigative Service in New Orleans.\(^{352}\) While both “Billy and the Kid” and the Clearwater storyline end ostensibly with triumph, the overall marginalization of Katrina in *NCIS: New Orleans* is perhaps the most relevant aspect of the popular series.

In both “Billy and the Kid” and the Clearwater arc, Katrina is factored into the stories tangentially, with Katrina only partially related to a crime that NCIS is investigating. “Billy the Kid” opens with a montage: still images of the levees and flooded neighborhoods fade in and out, as the voice of an unidentified young girl recites a poem: “My mom said my city, New Orleans, will never float away. My city, New Orleans, is a mighty city. When the storm came, when the winds roared, when the levees let go, my city stayed. And souls were reborn.” This opening is followed by a flashback to the night of the storm making landfall, with Christopher LaSalle (Lucas Black), an NCIS agent who was an NOPD officer during Katrina, arriving at the scene of a murder of a Marine, whose description of the assailant just before death (“purple tattoo of ‘nothing’”) matches a similar description of a suspect in a present-day murder in a Bourbon Street diner. The episode makes casual references to Katrina throughout: NCIS agents reflect upon their experiences surviving the storm, the modern-day murder victim is noted to have fought against the Green Dot Initiative, and the flashback scenes to the post-Katrina investigation make vague references to the disorganization of law enforcement directly following the storm. Unlike the dark conspiracies of K-Ville, however, both the past and present-day murders in “Billy and the Kid” are unrelated to the storm. The Marine murdered before Katrina participated in a robbery of a naval station, with both the flashback and modern-day murders revolving around a dispute over the money that was mixed up in the confusion of the storm. This usage of Katrina, as a plot device that affected the characters but is no longer the subject of active scrutiny, reflects NCIS’ relative lack of interest in exploring Katrina controversies.

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353 The restaurant used as the crime scene, the Clover Grill, is a popular 24-hour diner, and was also used as a filming location in The Curious Case of Benjamin Button.
Katrina is also explored tangentially in a seven-episode story arc of season three, an investigation into a conspiracy connected to New Orleans’ corrupt mayor (Stephen Weber). The convoluted conspiracy, involving Chinese spies, Mexican drug cartels, corrupt NOPD officers, and the assassination of a congresswoman, revolves around the Mayor’s efforts to drive away the residents of the fictional neighborhood of Clearwater so that a naval station can be built there. Described as an immigrant community ignored by police and struggling since the storm, the location of Clearwater is never defined within the show.  

Throughout the storyline, the NCIS team is confronted with a standalone mystery that connects back to the arc, including gangs that are being paid to harass neighborhood residents (3.17: “Swift Silent Deadly”), FEMA money that is stolen by a former official (3.18: “Slay the Dragon”), corrupt NOPD vice officers stealing confiscated drugs (3.20: “NOPD Confidential”), and the climactic plan to flood Clearwater by dynamiting the levees (3.24: “Poetic Justice”).

By the end of the arc, every episode-long challenge to the neighborhood is resolved: the gang is defeated, the FEMA money is recovered, the corrupt NOPD officers are exposed, the final plan to flood the neighborhood is thwarted, and the mayor is arrested. The Clearwater neighborhood is not given such a neat resolution: though the conspirators are caught and the neighborhood saved, Clearwater itself is left as-is, with the implication that it will continue to lack employment opportunities and regular police protection. The K-Ville approach to this story would have found a way for every resident of Clearwater to receive some kind of financial settlement from the city, ending the story with some kind of unified celebration by the residents.

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354 In one establishing shot of the neighborhood, the Danziger Bridge, which crosses the Industrial Canal, is shown, which would place Clearwater either in New Orleans East or Gentilly, both neighborhoods that faced heavy flooding during Katrina.
The *Treme* approach would have focused on the continuing struggle of the residents to rebuild, despite a temporary victory.\(^{355}\)

*NCIS: New Orleans*, however, takes the third approach of not dwelling on the neighborhood at all: though Clearwater residents surface throughout the episode arc, by the season finale, they are all off-screen. The season and storyline end with a focus on the main characters working at NCIS, none of whom are Clearwater residents. The final scene of “Poetic Justice,” in which the NCIS team members reunite to help rebuild a main character’s bar in the Marigny that was blown up by the conspirators in the previous episode, promises a narrative of overcoming that also marginalizes the storm and its survivors.

It would be easy to criticize *NCIS: New Orleans* for its lack of Katrina coverage. However, when watching these episodes, I was struck by many positives of the show’s representations of the city. While the show’s two central locations—the NCIS office and the bar—are located in tourist-heavy areas of the French Quarter and the Marigny, the show’s episodes are set all over the city (there are only so many crimes that can occur in the Quarter).\(^{356}\) *NCIS* is not nearly as well-researched as *Treme*, but CBS procedural also does not get lost in the minutiae of local cultural tradition, something that the HBO drama was criticized for.\(^{357}\) The characters’ local accents are not overdone: though Bakula’s Pride started the series with an

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\(^{355}\) This is with the important caveat that *Treme* creators David Simon and Eric Overmyer, two journalistic storytellers and slaves to authenticity, would balk at the idea of inventing a neighborhood wholesale in the service of a narrative.

\(^{356}\) The exterior of the NCIS headquarters is a parking lot on St. Ann Street, with the interiors shot on a soundstage outside of the city. Pride’s bar is the R Bar on Frenchmen Street.

exaggerated New Orleans drawl, by later seasons that accent is gradually toned down.\textsuperscript{358} The lack of distinctive accents in the remainder of the cast—Lucas Black’s native Alabama drawl notwithstanding—was even praised by New Orleans-based writer Caroline Gerdes, who points out that not everyone in New Orleans has a Southern accent.\textsuperscript{359} Though these writers do not speak for the entire city—a brief search of the New Orleans subreddit will reveal more than a few disgruntled locals—as the Picayune’s Dave Walker points out, \textit{NCIS: New Orleans} averages the highest ratings of any non-sports program in New Orleans.\textsuperscript{360} The show’s average of fifteen million weekly viewers in the U.S., exponentially more than \textit{Treme}, makes it the most-viewed post-Katrina film or TV representation of New Orleans.\textsuperscript{361} While the popularity of the \textit{NCIS} franchise, and the production quality associated with that brand, are certainly factors in the show’s ongoing popularity, the show’s treatment of New Orleans as “a supporting character,” and its marginalization of Katrina’s aftermath, clearly resonates with viewers who appreciate a clear sense of location that the show takes pains to establish, and provides what is in essence a return to normalcy for representations of New Orleans.\textsuperscript{362}


\textsuperscript{361} Walker, “10 or So Reasons.”

\textsuperscript{362} Walker, “10 or So Reasons.”
Conclusion: Fixing the Levee Breach

Katrina Hollywood texts utilize three different narrative strategies in representing Hurricane Katrina, all of which defy the trends within the documentaries, independent productions, and prestige dramas of Katrina Verité. Through narrative and spatial distortion of the hurricane’s impact, films like *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* relegate the storm to a narrative prop, rather than a subject to be meaningfully explored. Through the superficial appropriation of Katrina wreckage and exclusion of actual storm’s human costs, texts such as *The Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans* create atmosphere by exploiting Katrina’s ruins for its own narrative ends. Finally, by offering clean, Hollywoodized resolutions to the real-life suffering of Katrina survivors, film and TV such as *K-Ville* offer an unrealistic and, at the time of the show’s airing, inaccurate account of how survivors were rebuilding their lives in New Orleans. The films and TV shows that this chapter identifies as Katrina Hollywood benefitted from tax breaks offered by the state; the settings of all but two stories were changed to accommodate those tax credits. The collective result of these representations is a body of mainstream film and television production that refuses to confront head-on the human struggles, failures, and scandals that plagued New Orleans in the years immediately following Katrina. Without ascribing collective conspiracy or removing the agency of individual agents and producers, it is clear that Hollywood largely saw Katrina as a narrative afterthought at best, an inconvenience at worst.

As more years go by, it is the dual strategy of *NCIS: New Orleans* that is the most likely template to be copied by future New Orleans-set film and television that addresses Katrina at all. The popular CBS show provided one on-screen representation of the storm, along with a seven-episode arc that both marginalizes the storm and offers a positive resolution to its conspiracy-
laced storyline. However, the show is primarily interested in using New Orleans as a readily-
identifiable backdrop for weekly mysteries, relegating Katrina to a casual reference or as a
footnote in a victim’s backstory. Even the first few years after Katrina made landfall in 2005, the
majority of non-documentary features were not focused on Katrina. By 2018, it is unlikely that
more than a handful of documentary productions will be made expressly about the Hurricane. In
the months directly following Katrina, media pundits acknowledged “Katrina Fatigue,” as non-
local audiences grew tired of the ongoing negative coverage surrounding the storm and the
government’s failure to properly respond to it. Now thirteen years removed from Katrina,
Hollywood might as well be experiencing “Katrina Amnesia.”

This may be too negative of a diagnosis, as there are good reasons for films to not dwell
on the hurricane this far removed from its landfall. Many neighborhoods are still struggling to
rebuild and repopulate, and many New Orleanians have yet to return to their city. However,
many Katrina survivors are attempting to move on with their lives, not eager to revisit the 2005
trauma in their art or entertainment. Filmmakers, obliging their own creative needs, are
embracing this progression by returning to pre-Katrina modes of representation, presenting New
Orleans much as it appeared pre-2005. If Katrina created a moment by which New Orleanians
and their neighborhoods outside of the tourist areas were being recognized, it appears that the
moment might have come to a close with the Treme series finale in 2013. Though non-New
Orleanians might recognize the name “Lower Ninth Ward” when used in conversation—isn’t
that where Brad Pitt is building all of those homes?—it has never been more unlikely that the
Lower Nine actually appears on-screen.363

363 Peter Whoriskey, “What Happened when Brad Pitt and His Architects Came to
Rebuild New Orleans,” The Washington Post, August 28, 2015,
Recent popular representations of New Orleans validate this mode of representation. *Girls Trip*, a surprise 2017 box office success, follows four longtime friends as they converge on New Orleans for the annual Essence Festival. *Girls Trip* is perhaps the hallmark convergence of the city’s film and tourism industries: it was actually filmed during Essence, a festival centered around the empowerment of African-American women, and one of the city’s major tourist events every Fourth of July Weekend. For the many audience members who saw *Girls Trip* in theaters, however, they would have not seen any part of the city outside of the airport, the French Quarter, and the CBD, which fits the average tourist’s experience in the city. The question to ask is not whether or not *Girls Trip* would have had a reason to film in Mid-City or the Lower Ninth, though given that the film was narratively and thematically centered around Essence Fest, it probably did not. The question is whether or not any New Orleans-set film or TV show has a reason to leave the handful of readily-identifiable tourist locations in the city. For a brief moment after Katrina, productions did. Today, unless a sailor is found dead in Algiers Point in *NCIS: New Orleans*, there is not.

Added to this dwindling interest in Hurricane Katrina are the reduced incentives even to film in New Orleans. Though the question of whether filming in New Orleans or anywhere else in Louisiana helps tourism is hotly debated, what is not debatable is the significant shortfalls in the state budget that emerged from the practice of handing out tax credits to productions.364 In 2015, facing massive budget deficits, Governor Bobby Jindal signed a bill passed through the state legislature that capped the previously unlimited amount of annual tax credits at $180

364 Miller, 472-473.
million, with a limit of $30 million that can be reimbursed by a single production.\footnote{Kevin Litten, “Bobby Jindal Declines to Veto Controversial Film Tax Credit Bill,” \textit{The Times-Picayune}, June 19, 2015, http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2015/06/bobby_jindal_declines_to_veto.html.} Many state reps who pushed for reform came from the rural parishes and smaller urban centers: though New Orleans, Shreveport, and Baton Rouge benefited from increased film production, most other areas of the state did not profit from the influx of in-state productions.\footnote{Litten.} The move was criticized by film industry figures in the state for hurting Louisiana’s viability in the market, and for not accounting for existent tax credits that had yet to be cashed in. Because of the decline in business following implementation of the cap, many studios and soundstages that opened in the wake of the initial tax credit boom closed their doors.\footnote{Tyler Bridges, “Major Downturn Plagues Louisiana’s Film, TV Industry ‘Hollywood South’ after Big Changes to Tax Credit Program,” \textit{The Advocate}, April 3, 2016, http://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/politics/legislature/article_e1e73ae2-4f92-527b-8da0-154f721accc6.html.} Many potential productions likely moved to Canada, New York, or Georgia, where a still-uncapped production tax credit is helping Atlanta claim the title of “Hollywood South” over New Orleans. Despite protest from industry officials, the cap was renewed by Governor John Bel Edwards in 2017, along with an additional five percent credit for those productions that film outside of the New Orleans area.\footnote{Associated Press, “Louisiana’s Film Tax Credit Program to Continue, with a Cap,” \textit{The Times-Picayune}, June 4, 2017, http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2017/06/louisianas_film_tax_credit_pro.html; Emily Fontenot, “Orleck on the Big Screen: Film Director Has Eye on Ship’s Equipment to Use in Naval Movie,” \textit{American Press}, January 13, 2018, http://www.americanpress.com/news/state/film-director-has-eye-on-ship-s-equipment-for-use/article_0a8fcd0-f88b-11e7-bb3d-f79410f180b4.html.}

This cap will not cease filmed representations of New Orleans: the city was sought out by film productions even before the tax incentives, and a 2018 survey of productions reveals that the
city continues to be a favored filming location in Louisiana. However, there is an ever-increasing time gap between Hurricane Katrina and the present, an eagerness by Hollywood to refocus on New Orleans' pre-Katrina identity, and decreased financial incentive to interchange Katrina with another natural disaster, as Now You See Me did. American film and television, reflecting the culture at-large, is moving on from Katrina, with Hollywood barely even having acknowledged it to begin with.

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CHAPTER V. CONCLUSION: EXCEPTIONAL AND DOOMED CITIES

Exceptional Cities

The belief that New Orleans is an exceptional city is widespread and accepted among the popular American imaginary. One of the primary aims of scholarship surrounding the city has been to explore and etymologize that exceptionality, seeking to understand how those perceptions originated and whether or not they are valid. In terms of its origins, most scholars point to a variety of factors: the “local color” accounts from the early nineteenth century, the city’s late-nineteenth century literary traditions, and the aggressive tourism campaigns by the city and region itself are all seen as contributors to this perception.370 Regarding the validity of that exceptionality, the debate is more split. Specific elements have also been pointed out for their uniqueness, including the city’s political resemblance to Caribbean and Latin-American cities, its unique sexual/racial dynamics, and the city’s French and Spanish-tinged architectural legacy.371 In the aftermath of Katrina, New Orleans’ particularities took on an especially commemorative tone. The city’s unique Mardi Gras traditions, the spirit of its citizens, and its African-American musical legacy—what Clyde Woods labels “the Black Vatican”—have been

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highlighted by local boosters, national journalists, and academics alike as justification for the city’s post-Katrina salvation.\textsuperscript{372} Despite its many supporters, many academics point out how this exceptionality is overstated and often inflated to serve preexisting narratives. Richard Campanella notes that “for all the singing of the uniqueness mantra in New Orleans, who can argue that most modern-day New Orleanians don’t speak English, indulge in national popular culture, shop at big-box chains, and interact socially and economically with other Americans and the world on a daily basis?”\textsuperscript{373} For all of its focus on Mardi Gras Indians and second-line parades, New Orleans has more similarities to the rest of the United States than differences.

The question, then, is why does this perception of exceptionality persist? The city’s reliance on tourism for its economic viability is certainly a primary factor: the exceptional New Orleans is the image that the city’s government and chamber of commerce certainly want outsiders to buy into. The geographic patterns of the city’s tourism reinforce this at every step, as visitors stay in hotels in the Central Business District, are guided towards the atmospheric, bawdy French Quarter and the picturesque Garden District. If tourists are “in the know,” they might make it down to the jazz clubs on Frenchmen in the Marigny. Tours of the antebellum plantations surrounding the city remain popular, but these areas, like the others mentioned, are marked by perceived geographical and cultural exceptionality. While the firsthand experience of outsiders visiting New Orleans remains an undeniable factor, the effects of the city’s


\textsuperscript{373} Campanella, \textit{Cityscapes of New Orleans}, 307.
representation in film and television is even more impactful, given its wider exposure of the city to non-locals than tourism. The effects of film and television representation on the popular identity of New Orleans have been acknowledged both directly and tangentially in previous studies of New Orleans, and in case studies of individual film and TV texts. What has been lacking, and what this study seeks to fulfill, is a broad historical accounting of how the city’s mediated identity evolved over time, and how that evolving identity related and contributed to perceptions of the city’s identity in American popular culture.

What is found in a history of New Orleans film and TV text are trends of representation that emerged from the media production conventions of each given era. The earliest representations of New Orleans in Classical Hollywood, filmed primarily on Southern California soundstages, were largely the refined costumed dramas and literary adaptations that were in-vogue throughout the 1930s and 40s. The on-location crime dramas, depicting a more modern “Americanized” city, resulted from developments in technology and taste that favored filming in the cities themselves, and from the inception of government assistance in exchange for a favorable representation of New Orleans. As these conventions expanded in the New Hollywood and Blockbuster eras, state-sponsored entities like the Louisiana Film Commission

facilitated representations that increasingly conformed to tourist perceptions of New Orleans without the emphasis on positive representations of city officials. Finally, as state-sponsored filmmaking culminated in the passage of film tax credits, the ensuing deluge of film and television representations often used New Orleans as a stand-in for another preconceived location. Those productions that did present the city as itself often portrayed the city in the most idealized light, continuing to favor those areas of the city already promoted by the city’s tourism commission. The relationship between filmmaking conventions and a city’s popular identity reinforces the tenets of New Film History, in which “contextual factors – the mode of production, the economic and cultural strategies of the studios, the intervention of censors” are accounted for in analysis of film and TV as historical artifacts. In other words, the standards of production, combined with filmmakers’ preconceptions of what they believed audiences expected of New Orleans, ultimately reinforced the “Big Easy” identity of New Orleans that dominates today.

Though this project highlighted what I believed to be the most important historical trends of representation, there were subjects and eras that fell beyond the scope of the study. These include early travelogue documentaries of Classical Hollywood; from the 1920s through the 1950s, documentary series such as MGM’s Traveltalks presented postcard-ready pictures of New Orleans that were overwhelmingly positive and picturesque. The effect of these travelogues on popular understandings of New Orleans is worthy of further exploration. Two other trends of representation that emerged post-Katrina are worthy of analysis. One is the representation of Katrina ruins in films not set in New Orleans: films such as Killer Joe (William Friedkin, 2011) and Dawn of the Planet of the Apes (Matt Reeves, 2015), though not

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set in New Orleans, appropriate the ruins and wreckage left by Katrina for their own narrative ends, echoing the exploitation thread of Katrina Hollywood explored in Chapter 4. Similarly, there exists a body of low-budget, straight-to-DVD action films that utilize the storm as a backdrop for gang-war action. Though not always shot in New Orleans, these films, including *Death Toll* (Phenomenon, 2008), *Jump Out Boys* (Amir Valinia, 2008), and *Streets of Blood* (Charles Winkler, 2009) represent yet another distinct trend of films that exploit the aftermath of Katrina, this time for z-grade pulp action. Any future exploration of New Orleans representations would be strengthened by accounting for these trends.

There are only two eras of New Orleans representation that stand apart from the French Quarter-centric “postcard” identity of New Orleans. The first of these is the Transitional Era (1947-1966) of Hollywood, in which the city was largely represented as a bustling metropolis, more defined by its industry and its modern downtown area than by any preconceived ideas of cultural exceptionality. The second of these came after Hurricane Katrina, which temporarily ripped away the tourist façade, and led to a trend of documentaries and fictional films that explored areas of the city beyond what was previously marketed to tourists. This “Katrina Verité” trend, like the “modern” trend of Transitional Hollywood, was short lived, and soon gave way to more established iconography of jazz, wrought-iron balconies, and gumbo.

Both trends serve as a reminder that for all of its allure, New Orleans’ old-world romanticism is an artificial construct. Had the city modernized its infrastructure in the 1950s and 60s, or somehow sought another economic path in the aftermath of Katrina, that tourist-friendly identity might not dominate perceptions of New Orleans today. Though Hollywood was cursorily interested in Katrina for a time, the trend of “Katrina Hollywood” films was short-lived, and mainstream representations have largely reverted back to pre-Katrina trends of
representing New Orleans, with the city’s geography compressed and distorted to better incorporate visual stereotypes of the city.

Is New Orleans truly exceptional? Mythic cities exist in every region of the United States. To name just a handful of examples, New York, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and Detroit qualify, all emerging from different areas of the country. New York’s multifaceted identity revolves around its status as America’s center of commerce, theater, and the immigrant experience, to name a few. Another one of the most diverse American cities, Los Angeles’ mythic identity is defined partly by the contrast between this multicultural landscape with the more whitewashed Hollywood glamour perpetuated by the films the region produces. A city defined almost entirely as a commercialist mirage in the desert, Las Vegas is perhaps the most single-minded mythic identity as America’s capitalist id. By contrast, Detroit’s popular identity is defined by its seemingly endless postindustrial decline, buoyed recently by emerging narratives of the city’s rebirth. All of these narratives have been informed, reinforced, and occasionally challenged in filmed representation.

However, it is even more important to consider the similarities that all of these cities share beyond the centrality of filmed representation. New York and New Orleans are both port cities of about the same age, both reeling from recent man-made disasters. Like Los Angeles, New Orleans represents the clash of Americanness with cultural otherness, owing to its cultural and geographic proximity to Latin America (New Orleans to the Caribbean, especially Cuba; Los

376 Deleyto.


Angeles to Mexico).\textsuperscript{379} Like Detroit, New Orleans has been plagued by years of deindustrialization, civic corruption, and white flight, with the city far less populated than at its peak in the mid-twentieth century. Finally, like Las Vegas, New Orleans trades on its image for survival, the two cities remaining the most conspicuous urban tourist economies in the country.

Each one of these cities has local traditions and institutions that their residents treasure and celebrate. Though each city has its own composition of multilingual and immigrant populations, a study would likely find the same proportion of citizens who, as Campanella points out, “indulge in national popular culture, shop at big-box chains, and interact socially and economically with other Americans and the world on a daily basis.”\textsuperscript{380} All of these cities are similarly defined by issues typical of all major American cities: race relations, suburbanization, quality of public schools, and gentrification. For all of their cultural nuances and landmarks in their skylines, there are more similarities among these cities than differences.

Within this context, filmed representation takes on the role of finding exceptionality among within the mundane. For film and television producers, this mythic version of the city provides a readily-recognizable backdrop in the service of a predetermined narrative. For city governments, mythic representation provides exposure that encourages people to visit the city. Not all representations even need to be positive: seemingly negative representations of cities, like those of 1970s New York, make for appealing cinematic settings, which can in turn contribute to their tourist appeal. Though Mayor Morrison in the 1950s traded incentives to filmmakers in exchange for positive representations of New Orleans, the current trend of representation is more complicated. The tourist-centered identity of New Orleans is now so entrenched that filmmakers

\textsuperscript{379} Gruesz; Deleyto, 221-224.
present the tourist image of New Orleans because that is the New Orleans audiences now understand and expect.

To use one final textual example, consider the case of *Chef* (2014), Jon Favreau’s independent feature about Carl (Favreau), a down-on-his-luck chef who rekindles his passion for food by going cross-country with his son Percy (Emjay Anthony) in a food truck. Midway through the film, Carl and his team arrive in New Orleans, driving over the Crescent City Connection as brass band music plays over the soundtrack. As the truck pulls up to a street, Percy asks his father if they are on Bourbon Street. “Nah, this is Frenchmen Street” Carl replies, “Bourbon’s for tourists. We’re in the Marigny.” Immediately after this casual dismissal of tourist-trap areas, Carl and Percy set out on foot for the French Quarter, so that they can get beignets at Café du Monde. After grabbing their beignets, the two eat their donuts while walking and talking through the French Market.

This two-minute sequence reflects decades-old patterns in New Orleans representations of geographic compression, favoring tourist neighborhoods, and perpetuating the narrative of the city’s exceptionalism. The walk from Frenchmen Street to Café du Monde is a significant two-and-a-half-mile stretch, but Carl and Percy get there in a seemingly short amount of time. Though their favoring of the Marigny and the Quarter is typical, *Chef* adds a layer of posturing to the moment: though they start and end their scene in tourist-popular areas, Carl begins their journey by presenting the Marigny as an insider’s location, disparaging the Quarter as “for tourists” (though they are tourists), then walking to the most popular area of the Quarter outside of Bourbon Street. The scene is topped off by a nice bit of mythologizing, as Carl insists to Percy that “They don’t taste like this anywhere else in the world.”
It is no surprise that film representations almost always gravitate back to the Quarter. The area is a geographical and demographical speck on the map of New Orleans, but from the 1920s onward has been preserved, packaged, and sold to tourists and audiences from around the world. All but the most radical filmed representations of New Orleans incorporate it: even the sophisticated *Treme* could not escape its orbit, even though it accurately depicts the area as a tourist trap. For many tourists, and for most film and television audiences, the French Quarter is New Orleans, and will continue to be New Orleans because of the established convention of the city’s cinematic identity. This self-fulfilling cycle of (mis)representation connects directly to theorist Guy Debord’s concept of the spectacle.

Writing in 1967, Debord defined the spectacle as “a social relationship between people that is mediated by images,” and as “both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production.” Debord was bemoaning not just the proliferation of mass media, but the widespread alteration of cityscapes for monetization at the expense of the working class. These images of the city became increasingly divorced from the democratic aspirations of its citizens. Framed within the context of Debord’s spectacle, filmed representation of New Orleans is a progression from the commercialization of the French Quarter, a project that started in the 1920s and culminated in a section of the city being thronged by tourists or occupied seasonally by the ultra-rich. Campanella’s description of this latter residential section, featuring “streetscapes [bearing] a museum-like stillness that would be eerie if they weren’t so beautiful,” even aligns with Debord’s accounting of “ancient sections” of cities “to be turned into museums,” defined by

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“tranquil side-by-sideness.” Production after production flocks to the Quarter for the same reason that New Orleans tourists gravitate to Bourbon Street: “to go and see what has been made trite.” The Quarter has, of course, been made trite in past film and television representations that established St. Louis Cathedral and Café du Monde as metonyms of the city. Even productions that flaunt a knowingness about the Quarter’s commercialization—Chef’s proclamation that Frenchmen, not Bourbon Street, is worth visiting—cannot bypass the spectacle. The Marigny’s growing popularity has already lead to grumblings of commercialization, leading to claims that Rampart Street is the new Frenchman, a cycle that will no doubt repeat itself once Rampart becomes too well-known to tourists. Within this state of affairs, to be a mythic city is to inevitably submit to mundanity, with the filming of the cityscape’s icons “both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production.” Even radical alterations of New Orleans cinematic landscape, like the Quarter-free Low and Behold (Zack Godshall, 2007), only retains its radicality if no one replicates its strategy.

As more time passes between Katrina and the present, characters strolling through the camera-ready French Quarter are likely to continue dominating film and TV representations of New Orleans. However, as the effects of global warming take their toll, New Orleans popular identity, and its place within Debord’s spectacle, will become more complicated.

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382 Campanella, Cityscapes of New Orleans, 71-72; Debord, #65, #170.
383 Debord, #168.
385 Debord, #6.
Doomed Cities

In 2017, the world watched the news in horror as yet another American city was inundated by a hurricane. As the slow-moving category-five Hurricane Harvey flooded entire highways and neighborhoods of Houston, the discourse circled back, as it does every hurricane season, to the existential threat of climate change on coastal areas. As the effects of climate change continue to raise global ocean temperatures, experts note that increasingly-powerful hurricanes will become increasingly likely: MIT and Princeton researchers suggest that “by the end of the twenty-first century, what are today’s 100-year-storms could occur every 3 to 20 years. They also predicted that with climate change, today’s ‘500 year storms’…could occur every 25 to 240 years.” Given that Harvey was Houston’s third “500-year” flood in three years, these estimates may be conservative.

Unlike Houston, New Orleans is a city whose identity has always revolved around the threat of storms. From Sauvé’s Crevasse of 1849 to the 2017 failure of the city pumping stations, seasonal storms and flooding are the reality of living in a city in which fifty percent of the landmass lies below sea level. Katrina laid bare the tremendous shortcoming of the city’s


levee protection system, and while the system that replaced those levees is an improvement, it will not stop future flooding, and is at best a stop-gap to the existential crisis that awaits New Orleans in the coming decades. As the city continues to sink, the waters continue to rise, and Louisiana’s barrier islands continue to flood and erode away, New Orleans is facing a potential future in which the sea level rises five to six feet around the city, over twice the city’s current elevation of two feet below sea level.

New Orleanians are not strangers to existential threats: some older residents survived Hurricane Betsy in 1965 and Katrina in 2005, rebuilding both times. Though New Orleans’ prevailing cinematic identity revolves around exceptionality and moral laxity, as Michael P. Bibler acknowledges in his analysis of Jezebel (William Wyler, 1938), there has also been a streak of disaster and doom within the city’s character: “The post-Katrina discourse of a perpetually doomed southern city evokes a myth that suggests a pattern in which New Orleans will succumb to tragedy over and over again.” This aspect of the city’s character, long dormant in filmed representations, reemerged after Katrina. Though onscreen interest in New Orleans’ fatalism waned in the years following Katrina, given the statistical inevitability of another Katrina-level storm hitting New Orleans, this side of the city’s popular identity will eventually reemerge.

However, as historian Andy Horowitz points out, a potential future as a city in existential peril is not exclusive to New Orleans. Writing in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey and Irma,

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390 Pilkey et. al., 41.

Horowitz notes that “New Orleans’s history is America’s history…Katrina is America’s possible future.”

Most of America’s mythic cities face futures just as dire in the face of global climate change: Las Vegas and Los Angeles face higher temperatures and depleted freshwater sources, while Los Angeles and New York both face the rising tide of sea levels. The fate of these cities as doomed was even foretold by cinematic representation. New York was portrayed as an underwater city as far back as 2001 in A.I. Artificial Intelligence (Steven Spielberg). Los Angeles’ mythic identity, which has accounted for environmental disaster on-screen as far back as 1974 in Chinatown (Roman Polanski), was portrayed as a future environmental hellscape in Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982) and Elysium (Neill Blomkamp, 2013). Las Vegas was similarly portrayed as a city abandoned to the desert in Blade Runner 2049 (Denis Villeneuve, 2017), and the subject of a similar water crisis in Paolo Bacigalupi’s dystopic novel The Water Knife (2016). There has even been an inverse-effect in the speculation of rebirth for cities in the future: in the Detroit-set Only Lovers Left Alive (Jim Jarmusch, 2013), a character muses to his partner on the city’s faded glory while admiring the ruins of the old Packard Plant. “But this place will rise again,” she replies. “There’s water here. And when the cities of the South are burning, this place will bloom.” The centrality of water in Detroit’s revival is confirmed by

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Rebecca Kinney, who notes that “Detroit’s promise then, as now, is dependent on its proximity to water.” Documentaries on New Orleans have confronted the city’s dire future of increasing hurricanes and rising waters, and dystopic fiction like Moira Crone’s *The Not Yet* (2012) envision a future of a flooded New Orleans of have and have-nots. Nonetheless, Hollywood remains reluctant to confront this future head on. The closest mainstream representations have come to accounting for this future are *The Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans* (Werner Herzog, 2009) and *True Detective* (HBO, 2013–), whose characters wander a post-Katrina Louisiana landscape that borders on the apocalyptic.

These emerging alterations to the mythic identities of these cities stand in stark contrast to their commercial and political realities. New York, Las Vegas, and Los Angeles continue to thrive economically, with steady increases in population despite the gathering warning signs for the city’s future. The same goes for Detroit’s continued population decline and economic struggles, demonstrating the complete disconnect between environmental sustainability and economic viability. Informed by past calamities and the damage wrought by Katrina, New Orleanians are far more aware of their city’s existential threat. However, the governmental and commercial framing of the storm as an opportunity to be capitalized on, rather than as a time to make hard decisions about where and what to rebuild, intimates that hard decisions remain for New Orleanians in the coming decades.

In his conclusion, Debord notes that the spectacle “erases the dividing line between truth and false, repressing all directly lived truth beneath the *real presence* of the falsehood.”

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394 Kinney, 148.

maintained by the organization of appearances.” Though New Orleanians are aware of the future challenges their city faces, the collective spectacle of city planning and filmed representation remains centered around the high ground of the French Quarter and the city’s “Big Easy” identity as a place where all worries should be left at the door. Even if Hollywood portrayed a future New Orleans in peril by, say, adapting The Not Yet for the screen, there would likely be very little effect on how New Orleanians live their lives. The disconnect between spectacular New Orleans and the existential future of the city underscores that while popular representation remains an important medium for understanding a city’s identity, commercial film and television remain a part of, rather than separate from, a capitalist system predicated on ignoring the future impact of environmental disaster.

Within the context of potential humanitarian crises, with New Orleanians facing the permanent loss of their home, neighborhood, and city, considering its effect on filmed representation is trifling at best, insensitive at worst. It is also not my place, as a non-native of the city, to indulge in apocalyptic scenarios for neighborhoods in which residents are still rebuilding their lives from recent calamity. However, what can be said is that any discussion of New Orleans’ exceptionality must account for its identity as a mediated city. The city’s “Big Easy” identity developed from written accounts, and was promoted by officials to attract tourists, but it was maintained and perpetuated by film and television, including by the film that embraced the moniker as both its title and its prevailing spirit. Whether refuting or affirming this identity, the most prominent New Orleans film and television texts have irrevocably inserted themselves into the discourse surrounding how the city is perceived. Even if the city no longer exists as it is currently understood, film and television representations of New Orleans

396 Debord, #219.
will remain crucial to perpetuating the city’s mythic status, for as long as the moving image is the predominant popular media. The case study of New Orleans illustrates the power of mediated images. The fact that film and television representations can shape the perceived character of an entire city is a reminder that studies in American culture benefit from close attention to the production of mediated images.
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APPENDIX A: FILMS CITED

10 Cloverfield Lane. Directed by Dan Trachtenberg. 2016.


12 Years a Slave. Directed by Steve McQueen. 2013.


Belle of the Nineties. Directed by Leo McCarey. 1934.


Blonde Venus. Directed by Josef Von Sternberg. 1932.


The Buccaneer. Directed by Cecil B. DeMille. 1938.


Cameo Kirby. Directed by Irving Cummings. 1930.


Dark Waters. Directed by Andre DeToth. 1944.

Dawn of the Planet of the Apes. Directed by Matt Reeves. 2014.


Deepwater Horizon. Directed by Peter Berg. 2016.


Dixiana. Directed by Luther Reed. 1930.

Dixie. Directed by A. Edward Sutherland, 1943.


Easy Rider. Directed by Dennis Hopper. 1969.

Ella Brennan: Commanding the Table. Directed by Leslie Iwerks. 2016.


Evangeline. Directed by Edwin Carewe. 1929.


Focus. Directed by Glen Ficarra and John Requa. 2015.


Flame of New Orleans. Directed by René Clair. 1941.


Gone with the Wind. Directed by Victor Fleming. 1939.


Hardboiled Rose. Directed by F. Harmon Weight. 1929.


JFK. Directed by Oliver Stone. 1991.


Jurassic World. Directed by Colin Treverrow. 2014.


King Creole. Directed by Michael Curtiz. 1958.

The King of New Orleans. Directed by Coodie Simmons and Chike Ozah. 2015.


Knowing. Directed by Alex Proyas. 2009.

Lady from Louisiana. Directed by Bernard Vorhaus. 1941.


Louisiana Purchase. Directed by Irving Cummings. 1941.


Madame X. Directed by Sam Wood. 1937.


Mississippi Grind. Directed by Anne Boden and Ryan Fleck. 2015.


The Mummy’s Curse. Directed by Leslie Goodwins. 1944.


New Moon. Directed by Robert Z. Leonard. 1940.


Old Hickory. Directed by Lewis Seiler. 1939.


San Francisco. Directed by W.S. Van Dyke. 1936.

Saratoga Trunk. Directed by Sam Wood 1945.


The Skeleton Key. Directed by Ian Softley. 2005.


Steamboat Round the Bend. Directed by John Ford. 1935.


Swamp Woman. Directed by Elmer Clifton. 1941.


Thunder Bay. Directed by Anthony Mann. 1953.

Thunderball. Directed by Terence Young. 1965.


Trouble the Water. Directed by Carl Deal and Tia Lessin. 2008.


Vancouver Never Plays Itself. Directed by Tony Zhou. 2015.

A Village Called Versailles. Directed by S. Leo Chiang. 2009.


APPENDIX B: TELEVISION SHOWS CITED

American Crime Story. FX. 2016-.

American Horror Story. FX. 2011-.


If God is Willing and da Creek Don’t Rise. HBO. 2010.


NCIS: New Orleans. CBS. 2014-.


Preacher. AMC. 2016-.

Treme. HBO. 2010-2013.

True Detective. HBO. 2013-.

When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts. HBO. 2006.


Without a Trace. CBS. 2002-2009.