

## Heaven and Hell, Paris and Texas: Place Names in Film Titles

FRED TARPLEY

An examination of place names in movie titles will often lead not only to discovery of a wealth of trivia, to boasts for favored geographical settings, and to an index to the appeal, popularity, and cinematic associations of toponyms, but also to identification of some pitfalls in onomastic methodology as well.

A preliminary consideration must determine which movie titles are to be examined for the inclusion of place names. If one of the underlying assumptions is that the study will reveal which place names continue to make an impression on the American consciousness, there would be no reason to include films that are not in circulation on movie or television screens. If definitive lists are desired, the most detailed filmographies likely to be found are those for the *American Film Institute Catalogue* for the decades of 1921–30 and 1961–70, but unfortunately catalogues for other periods are not available.

Lists of film titles developed primarily for copyright research have no annotations about the story line and would leave questions unanswered about some of the film place names. For example, a listing with reviews or comments could verify that in the title, “Welcome to Hard Times,” a place name is indeed involved. In a careful classification of place names, evidence would be needed to determine if “Mississippi Gambler” alludes to the river or to the state and whether any of the titles containing “Washington” refer to the state or to the District of Columbia. When detailed reviews are required, *The New York Times Film Reviews (1913–1980)* is a dependable reference although many Saturday matinee westerns and other low-budget movies still available for viewing were not reviewed by the discriminating critics of the *Times*.

For the purpose of this study, the corpus of titles to be analyzed is *TV Movies*,<sup>1</sup> edited by Leonard Maltin, a respected film critic, and listing approximately 15,000 movies shown on regular and cable TV, as well as more than 1,500 features made for television. Because more feature films reach American audiences today on TV screens than on theatrical screens

and because films still scheduled on TV have often withstood some test of time, Maltin's *TV Movies* seems to be the appropriate list for an initial investigation of place names used in film titles. The great majority of films are American productions, but international films are also included.

By the third page of Maltin's alphabetical listing, another problem in methodology arises, that of determining if "Acapulco Gold" should be included as an example of a film containing a place name. The brief review confirms what is already suspected – the plot deals not with precious metal in the Mexican seaside resort, but with drug smuggling in another setting. The decision was made to consider "Acapulco" a place name since the city lent its name to the drug which became the subject of the film.

The adjectival form of place names also requires policymaking. The preliminary plan to exclude adjectival forms was reversed in the interest of equity when it was discovered that "African Treasure" would have been excluded while "Texas Carnival" would have remained. Another dilemma not easily resolved was the acceptance of "Boston Blackie," "Tokyo Joe," and "Frisco Sal" as film titles containing place names while eliminating "Tony Rome" as a coincidental surname.

After the catalogue of titles and ground rules for classification were established, the investigation moved quickly. The titles were then alphabetized by the place names occurring in the title, whether as an initial word or in another position. Because films listed with identical titles were both unrelated films as well as remakes of earlier versions, each occurrence was considered a different title. "The Thief of Baghdad," filmed in 1924, 1940, 1961, and 1978, was counted four different times with the belief that each subsequent version would present the place name with the same impact as four different films.

Among the approximately 16,500 film titles examined, 4,890 titles contained one or more place names, representing nearly 30% of those analyzed. The use of two place names in a single title was encountered rarely, as in "Africa – Texas Style," "From the Earth to the Moon," "Main Street to Broadway," and "Skatetown, USA." The only triple use of place names encountered in a film title was in "Texas, Brooklyn, and Heaven," the screen version of *Eddie and the Archangel* by Texas novelist Barry Benefield. The completion of a parallel study of the uses of first names and surnames in film titles will provide insights into their role and relative frequency in comparison with place names in film titles.

When the repeated use of place names was tabulated, the most popular toponym in feature titles was "Hell." Even after elimination of instances of "Hell" used as an expletive rather than as a place of evil and pain,

thirty-one titles remained that included "Hell" and another eleven contained "Hell's." Some of the better known films making use of this toponym are "Hell to Eternity," "Gate of Hell," "Frankenstein and the Monster from Hell," and "Hell's Kitchen." In contrast, "Heaven" was included in nineteen titles, with only three instances of "Heaven's." Typical of the use of the name are found in titles such as "Heaven Can Wait," used in two unrelated movies (one of which was a remake of "Here Comes Mr. Jordan"), "Leave Her to Heaven," "All This and Heaven Too," and "All that Heaven Allows."

Because of the figurative nature of "Heaven" and "Hell," the earthly prize for the most popular place names in film titles should be awarded to "Paris." The reference here is clearly to the French capital, which is a favorite setting for all types of screen stories. The name may be found in thirty-five titles signalling many moods, as in "April in Paris," "To Die in Paris," "Worst Woman in Paris," "To Paris with Love," both "Maid in Paris" and "Made in Paris," "Paris When It Sizzles," "Good Girls Go to Paris," "Is Paris Burning?" and "Last Tango in Paris." Each use of "Paris" refers to the French capital city, but a feature film completed in 1984 has a title referring to Paris, Texas, the second largest Paris in the world. For all the popularity of Paris, France, in film titles, the name of the country is to be found only in one film – "Reunion in France" – and "French" is confined to nine film titles.

As a possible index to the degree to which the various American states have captured the imagination of film makers, a tally of references to the fifty states and the District of Columbia was reviewed. Of the fifty states, seventeen have not been recognized in a single film title. Absent in the lists of film titles are Alabama, Delaware, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, West Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin. Nineteen film titles contain "New York," but descriptions of the plots reveal that the reference is being made to the city and not the state. Only in "New York, New York," is the state recognized in the second half of the title. North Dakota and South Dakota must share recognition in the five film titles using the word "Dakota" without specific identification to one of the states. For North Carolina and South Carolina, the only shared reference is in "Carolina Cannonball." Two of the three occurrences of "Mississippi" are to the river and only one to the state. All seven uses of "Washington" in film titles are to the District of Columbia and not to the state. By adding the Dakotas and the Carolinas to the number of states without specific representation in movie titles, the number increases to twenty-one.

For states whose names are included in film titles, the following indicates the frequency rank and the number of instances:

1. Texas, 21;
2. California, 15;
3. Oklahoma, 9;
4. Arizona, Kentucky, Missouri, Montana, 6 each;
5. Wyoming, 5;
6. Hawaii, Kansas, 4 each;
7. Alaska, Louisiana, Minnesota, Oregon, Virginia, 3 each;
8. Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, Nevada, Tennessee, 2 each;
9. Arkansas, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Michigan, Mississippi, New York, Utah, 1 each.

Future editions of *TV Movies* will no doubt include New Hampshire among the states whose names have been mentioned in film titles because of the mid-1984 release of "Hotel New Hampshire." An indication that the results would be quite different if other catalogues of film titles had been consulted is seen in the fact that Don Graham, in *Cowboys and Cadillacs, How Hollywood Looks at Texas*,<sup>2</sup> listed 130 movie titles containing "Texas" or "Texan." Graham's compilation relied on no single source but upon every film list available for extracting titles of films made between 1902 and 1982, many of which are no longer in commercial archives.

The listing of this study will expectedly bring a rebuttal from states insisting that there are additional film titles in which appropriate homage has been paid. Such state loyalists would be reminded that this study was based only on those films listed in *TV Movies 1983-84*. If this study provokes future film productions to include the neglected states in their titles, a part of its purpose will have been fulfilled.

Apart from state names, the many American locales named in film titles are not always in direct proportion to population. The most frequently repeated American place name in the film titles examined is "Broadway," a natural development resulting from the popularity of Broadway musicals in films. Thirty-one films refer to Broadway in their titles. Second only to "Broadway" in frequency is "Hollywood," tying with "Texas" by inclusion in twenty-one movie titles and reflecting the self-absorption among Southern California film producers as well as the mass appeal of the film capital. Although Hollywood is only a small part of Los Angeles geographically, the west coast metropolis is represented by name in only two film titles and then by initials, in "Streets of L.A." and "Welcome to L.A."

Following "Broadway" and "Hollywood" in frequent usage of American place names in film titles are "New York" (City) in eighteen

titles, "Brooklyn" in eleven, and "Chicago" in nine. Of the fourteen instances of "Bowery," eleven are in films that were part of the "Bowery Boys" series, and of the eleven instances of "Boston," eleven are in films that were part of the "Boston Blackie" series. Rise and fall in the popularity of film settings may be observed in the use of "Reno" in four film titles – all for releases before 1957 – and the use of "Las Vegas" in eight film titles – all for releases after 1955. "San Francisco" is used six times, and the nickname "Frisco" appears five times. Six film titles referred to "West Point," but only one called "Annapolis" to public attention.

The often-discussed problem of "United States of America" as an awkward national name comes into focus when it is noted that "USA" is found only three times in film titles beside nine instances of "America" and eighteen of "American."

In international place name references, the locales favored after "Paris," with thirty-five occurrences, are "Africa," thirteen; "China," eleven; "Shanghai," eleven (all before 1961); "Baghdad," ten; "Rome," nine; "Hong Kong," eight; "Berlin" and "Tokyo," seven each; "Pacific," six (with only two references to "Atlantic"); and "Monte Carlo" and "Rio," five each. All other uses of international names fell below a frequency of five. At the interplanetary level in film titles, "Earth" occurs thirteen times, "Moon" twelve times, and "Mars" six times.

Mixed with the place names that may be found in gazetteers are those that are creations of the script writers who understand that the nature of a film is sometimes suggested by its title alone. Smiles are provoked by the titles of comic films such as "Aaron Slick from Punkin Crick," "Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend," "The 30 Foot Bride of Candy Rock," and "WAC from Walla Walla." The promise of action and suspense comes from "Tension at Table Rock," "Fury at Sundown," "Duel at Durango," "Bad Day at Black Rock," and "Ambush at Cimarron Pass," also with western settings suggested by the titles.

The teenage audience for a horror film entitled "Ghost of Dragstrip Hollow" is identified by the title and no one would expect to be saddened by "Maytime at Mayfair" or "Hustler of Muscle Beach." On the other hand, "Battle of Bloody Beach" and "King of Kong Island" alert audiences to other emotions. Script writers and film producers have shown sensitivity to public connotations of movie titles and to box office receipts by changing titles after films are released. "Gun the Man Down" was retitled "Arizona Mission," while "Count of Bragelonne" became "The Last Musketeer."

So strong is the appeal of alliteration that the question arises if the place

name has been chosen to alliterate with another part of the title or if another component was created to match the sounds of a place name. In the case of “Tuttles of Tahiti,” was the family named “Tuttle” because it was predetermined that they would live on Tahiti, or was Tahiti chosen to be the island after the Tuttle family was created as the characters for the film?

Whatever the creative process, most of the places that figure prominently in a screenplay are given names. Only “Street with No Name” and “Man from Planet X” use unknown names, and in so doing create a hint of mystery.

In a review of the patterns of place name usage in film titles, the researcher can account for repetition of well-known settings in the formula for successful series of films such as those following the adventures of Charlie Chan, Boston Blackie, Maisie, and the Lone Wolf, who had a predictable itinerary that took them to Broadway, Hollywood, Reno, Monte Carlo, New York, and Shanghai if the series lasted long enough. What happened in the plot was signalled to audiences in advance by the place name setting.

Feature films, probably more than any other influence, have formed public impressions of places never visited in person. Those impressions are reinforced with each showing of a film depicting that place or using in its title a place name to be identified with the screen drama. Despite some areas of methodology to be refined, the onomastic analysis of film titles can reveal significant information about popularity, connotations, and periods of frequent usage for place names.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Leonard Maltin, ed., *TV Movies*, 1983–84 revised edition (New York: New American Library, 1982).

<sup>2</sup>Don Graham, *Cowboys and Cadillacs, How Hollywood Looks at Texas* (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1983).