Despite being set in an unnamed Texan city, *Ghost Rider* (Mark Steven Johnson, 2007) was a landmark film for Melbourne. It was the first international production to be made at the Central City (now Docklands) Studios, much to the relief of the heavily-invested state government. And it demonstrated to the world (or more importantly, to producers resident in a small part of southern California), that the city was willing and available to be made over and made up to fit even (especially!) the most stupid filmmaking fantasies. Announcing the imminent arrival of the production in October 2004, the *Herald Sun* boldly predicted that “[c]ity lanes, Telstra Dome and the Yarra River will be the stars of the new action film”. In fact Melbourne is, as the filmmakers intended, (virtually) unidentifiable onscreen.

For the Victorian State government, Ausfilm, Film Victoria and the Melbourne Film Office, this lack of specificity was something to be celebrated; a few months before *Ghost Rider* went in to production, the then State Minister for Innovation, John Brumby, declared that “it’s almost inconceivable that [*Ghost Rider*] won’t put Melbourne on the map internationally”. The map Brumby was referring to was not one that depicted real locations, but rather a map of possible worlds like this one produced a few years ago by Ausfilm to promote Australia’s capacity to play anywhere:
But although *Ghost Rider* is set in an unnamed city in Texas, keen-eyed spectators may spot familiar Melbourne sites including the Flinders Street Station pedestrian bridge in one scene, and an easily identifiable covered section of freeway in another. The fleeting appearance of these locations as the Ghost Rider burns around the city shocked me. I had never seen Melbourne so blatantly not-Melbourne. It was not that these shots were unexpected; I was watching the film precisely because it was made in Melbourne and because, at the time, I was researching the fluid but usually invisible and often unconsidered relationships between location and setting, place and representation that lie at the heart of so much contemporary international cinema. And it was not that they were accidental – what, after all, is ever accidental or unintended in such highly-planned, big budget cinema – but they still rose out of the scene and pricked me; they were in short, *punctum.*
In *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Roland Barthes distinguishes between the *studium* and the *punctum* of a photograph, the former being the “preferred reading” or intentional effect of a photograph or the field of common reference that an average spectator will draw upon in order to make meaning, with the latter being the “element that rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me… [the] accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (1). The latter is personal to the spectator, uncontrolled by the photographer. Although later in the book Barthes makes a distinction between photography and cinema that appears to quarantine the *punctum* to the field of photography, I think a case can be made for a cinematic equivalent. Barthes’ distinction seems to hinge on the immobility of the photograph and the extended time this allows for contemplation and for discovering the “accident” that speaks personally to the spectator. He writes:

> Do I add to the images in movies? I don’t think so; I don’t have time in front of the screen, I am not free to shut my eyes; otherwise, opening them again, I would not discover the same image; I am constrained to a continuous voracity; a host of other qualities, but not pensiveness; whence the interest, for me, of the photogram. (2)

Barthes contrasts the *posing* of photographic images with the *passing* of cinema: “in the Photograph, something has posed in front of the tiny hole and has remained there forever… but in cinema, something has passed in front of this same tiny hole: the pose is swept away and denied by the continuous series of images” (3). Arguably in the age of digital technology this is no longer true: it is now possible to capture and extract individual frames – photographs – and analyse or contemplate them at length. Indeed, this is precisely the work of so many: academic and students of film, publicists, editors of publications about film, and film commissioners and managers of location databases, that portfolio of images of a city’s versatility and potential that is now routinely used by agents of the location to pitch a place to producers.
*Ghost Rider* provided a wealth of new entries in Melbourne’s locations database. Such databases are essential parts of any place’s armoury in the international competition to host film and television production. The location database, and the often extensive pre-production work formerly undertaken by production companies – but now a normal part of a film commission’s business – is a form of “posing” in Barthes’ terms. Describing the act of knowingly being photographed, Barthes writes: “once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of ‘posing’, I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. This transformation is an active one” (4). It seems to me that this is exactly what happens to places that make themselves available for filming, or places which encourage their transformation into somewhere else through the activity of film commissions, location managers, and photographic databases of “unique” places that can be made to represent any number of other places real or imagined. That is to say, they undergo a deliberate, active transformation. The images in *Ghost Rider* of Melbourne posing as somewhere in Texas could be extracted from the film and used to market the city, though how successful this has been is still an open question.
The construction of production infrastructure like the Docklands Studios and the active pursuit of projects from beyond the locality to maintain local crews and facilities inevitably transform a place physically (albeit often only temporarily) as well as in terms of its image. Such transformations are justified on the grounds that they bring jobs and investment, and because they demonstrate the versatility of a location, expand its repertoire and, all being well, enhance the reputation of a place within the industry, thus increasing its chances of securing future production. The discourses around creativity, creative industries and creative cities, along with the emerging field of film-induced tourism studies, have helped to generate new understandings of the connections enabled and economic and social contributions made by migratory production. But it is rare for the agents of the location interest – film commissions, government ministers, local companies that will benefit from inbound production – to give any thought to the consequences of either the negative representation of place (eg. the Australian outback in *Wolf Creek* or any number of films about the “dead heart” of Australia) or the negative reaction to a film on the basis of how terrible (or, as in the case of *Ghost Rider*, how stupid) it is. It seems simply to be assumed that the transformation will be “innocent”, meaning it will “do no harm” (the original Latin meaning of the word) to the image of a place. The poses will simply be recycled and used to sell the place to other prospective producers or futur tourists who, perhaps, will look beyond the awfulness of a film when seeing promotional material for the city. But perhaps they’ll be discomfited by this not-Melbourne, as I was. Perhaps they’ll think: stupid film, stupid town. Perhaps the film will damage the city’s image in ways that the filmmakers and agents of Melbourne’s location interest never imagined or intended.

### Endnotes


### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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