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Surveyors Stars Shine Brightly

The surveyors, their instruments and measurements in movies

You wouldn't believe in how many Hollywood style movies and scenes the surveyors, their instruments and measurements play their roles! John F. Brock, surveyor from Australia, is collecting and classifying information on such movies. Since his first screening at the XXI FIG Congress at Brighton in the UK on July 1998 he has collected further movies bearing reference to surveying. However for this article he concentrates on those movies in which surveying is the main theme or that the surveyor is the star of the production.

In erstaunlich vielen Hollywood-Filmen spielen Vermesser, ihre Instrumente und Messungen eine Rolle. John F. Brock, Geometer in Australien, sammelt und klassifiziert Informationen über solche Filme. Seit seinem ersten Beitrag am FIG-Kongress in Brighton 1998 hat er weitere Vermesser-Filme gesammelt. Der Artikel konzentriert sich auf Filme, in denen die Vermessung das Hauptthema oder der Vermesser der Star der Produktion ist.

Dans remarquablement beaucoup de films Hollywood les arpenteurs, leurs instruments et leurs mesurages jouaient un rôle. John F. Brock, géomètre en Australie collectionne et classe des informations sur de tels films. Depuis son premier exposé lors du Congrès FIG en 1998 à Brighton il a collectionné d'autres films d'arpenteurs. L'article met l'accent sur des films dans lesquels la mensuration était le thème principal ou l'arpenteur le star de la production.

È sorprendente notare in quanti film di Hollywood un ruolo importante sia svolto dai geometri, dai loro strumenti e dalle misurazioni. John F. Brock, un geometra australiano, raccoglie e classifica le informazioni su questi film. Nel 1998 al congresso FIG di Brighton ha presentato una prima raccolta di film che da allora è stata ampliata. Quest'articolo si concentra sui film in cui la misurazione è il tema principale o il geometra è il protagonista della produzione.

J.F. Brock

Surveyors in the Wild West

«The Fighting Kentuckian» (1949) starring «The Duke» John Wayne himself was also directed by him and co-starred the big man Oliver Hardy of Laurel and Hardy fame. It is a quite entertaining western, where the bad guy played by Philip Dorn sets out to steal land originally settled and staked out by French settlers, by pulling out or relocating the survey marks and then killing the town surveyor to prevent detection. Our hero Captain William Breen of the Kentucky Long Rifles played

by «The Duke» accepts the offer of the glamorous widow of the murdered surveyor to pose as the new «Town Surveyor» using the equipment of her husband in an attempt to get to the bottom of the scam set up by the crooks to dispossess the French settlers. In one memorable scene of the movie «The Duke» and the big man are discussing the capacity of each of them to successfully portray themselves as surveyors and Hardy points to the transit (theodolite) set up in the middle of the log cabin in which they are residing. He then says: «We don't know enough about those things to fool anybody!» to which Breen firmly replies: «Well. Sure we do! You've seen Army sur-



Fig. 1: Sarah Polley and Wes Bentley in «The Claim» (2000).

veyors at work – you grab that pole (staff) and go out that way and I'll stand behind this thing and wave at you!» (gesturing with two hands in a forward motion over his head) to which Hardy retorts: «Why don't you grab that pole and go out that way and I'll wave at you!» Breen thinks a short while before saying: «It's pretty silly – isn't it?» to which he responds: «Yep!» There are many other references to boundary markers and surveyors throughout the production, but another part which I found rather catchy, was when Wayne holds up a survey stake he finds laying on the ground to show Hardy what he had found, only to have it shot from his hand by an unidentified gunman! Yep! Surveying sure is a dangerous job in the wild Wild West!

Just to demonstrate how perilous surveys were in Hollywood western epics, we have two such examples in «Denver and Rio Grande» (1952) and «Western

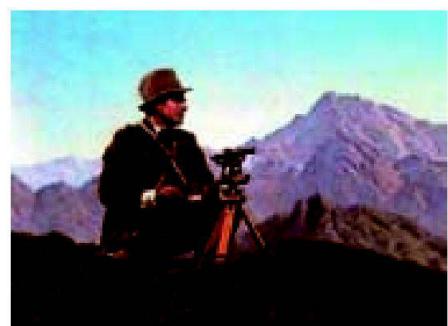


Fig. 2: James Mason in «Journey to the Centre of the Earth» (1959).



Fig. 3: Hugh Grant and Ian McNiece in «The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill But Came Down a Mountain» (1995).

Union» (1941). In the first «cowdy» we have Edmund O'Brien (Jim Vesser) playing one tough guy surveyor for the Denver and Rio Grande Railway Company, laying out the path for their railway lines. Sterling Hayden and Don Haggerty (Bob Nelson) play the two surveyors for the Carson City and San Juan Railway Company. They are surveying along the same route for their trains, which is clearly only suitable enough for one of the rail lines to be laid. When the three men confront each other, somewhere along the survey traverses there is a tense verbal altercation, where O'Brien threatens to throw Hayden's survey stakes into the river, which provokes a fist fight between Nelson and O'Brien and ultimately Nelson is shot dead by Hayden, but the blame for the killing is falsely transferred onto O'Brien. «Western Union» was set around the survey to lay out the path for the telegraph line through Indian land. Dean Jagger and Robert Young are the two land surveyors

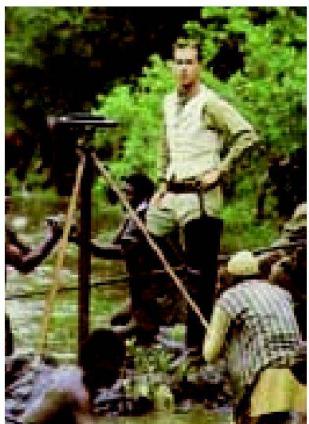


Fig. 4: Val Kilmer in «The Ghost and the Darkness» (1996).

employed by the company to carry out this task with Randolph Scott acting as their security patrol. One scene shows drunken Indians being allowed to search through the wagon train of the telegraph surveyors for trinkets to seize. When the leader of the band wants to souvenir the surveyor's transit, Scott wrestles it from his grasp and then attempts to ward off the subsequent knife attack with the instrument itself. However Young shoots the Indian before he has a chance to damage the vital piece of gear for the work in which they were engaged, which prompts Scott to knock him down for his extreme action. The camera pans around to show Chill Wills dead at the top of the telegraph pole with an arrow in his chest! You better believe that Wild West surveying sure is hazardous!



Fig. 6: Brad Pitt in «Seven Years in Tibet» (1997).

ing fissure. Now, not all that far away we have one of Josef Mengele's SS henchmen throw the dammonitoring surveyor from the top of the dam to a gory end at the bottom of the 300 metre drop in «The Boys From Brazil» (1975) which stars Gregory Peck.

«The Heritage of the Desert» (1932) is a great western starring Randolph Scott, where he plays the boundary surveyor employed by one of the land barons of the sheep country to confirm the delineation of his ownership to thwart the bad-guy-dressed-in-black claim jumper from staking a dubious claim over the estate. On the way to meet his engager Scott has his two horses shot from under him by the bad man's henchmen only to be rescued from dehydration by the very glamorous female lead, portrayed by Sally Blane. In one classic scene Scott wrestles a steer around the pen without losing his hat! Jumping to his feet he begins to discuss his planned movements with the land owner at which time he finally removes his hat to reveal that he was carrying the boundary survey plan under his hat all the



Fig. 5: «The Duke» John Wayne in «The Fighting Kentuckian» (1949).

Deadly Dangerous

Now there are a couple of rather obscure world movies (some with subtitles) in which the surveyor character meets his fate in very grisly fashion. In the love-spurned drama «Mararia» (1998) set on the Canary Islands, the geological surveyor played by British actor Iain Glen performs more than his contract services, when he courts the island beauty Maria before getting her pregnant. However the local doctor, who is obsessed with the beautiful damsel in distress, takes exception to the scornful attitude of the surveyor towards his princess, so sets about planting a rock pick into the back of his rival's neck then shoves the body and all of the scientific equipment down a steam-



Fig. 7: Charlton Heston in «The Ten Commandments» (1956).

time! Gun battles, bar room brawls and the ultimate ride off into the sunset with the fair damsel make this worth watching especially for the superstar surveyor Scott.

Ties with History

Coming forward a few more years to 1940, we see one of Cary Grant's first starring roles as the land surveyor Matt Howard, who is a personal friend of none other than the future US President Thomas Jefferson, another memorable surveyor of the States. In «The Howards of Virginia» Grant uses a circumferentor during a survey of an estate in Albemarle County, owned by the character played by Cedric Hardwick. Obviously utilizing this opportunity to impress the daughter of the landholder he boasts that he will be letting her father know that he actually owns more land than he had originally thought. Pushing even further forward to 1955, we emulate the feats of Lewis and Clark on their epic quest for the North-West Passage through North America in «Far Horizons». During this movie there are many improbable caricatures and scenes. For example, who would script someone like Donna Reed to fill the role of the Indian guide Sacagawea and who indeed would shoot footage of plane table surveying on the moving boat but celestial observations with a sextant on the land? Fred MacMurray and Charlton Heston are cast as the two legendary explorers in this colourful, if not authentic representation of true history.

Just the Land Surveyor

In a movie called «The Castle» (1968) there is absolutely no similarities to the highly entertaining Australian production of the same from 1997. In fact this black Kafka satire on the bureaucracy, set in some late nineteenth century Baltic village, is one of the most excruciatingly painful and lengthy wastes of celluloid that I have ever had the misfortune to endure. Having said all of that there is only one redeeming feature of this tiresome



Fig. 8: Cary Grant in «The Howards of Virginia» (1940).

monotonia being the character played by Maximilian Schell, who has been sent from a far off authority to survey the boundaries of the village. His first assignment is to make contact with the representatives of the Castle, but the whole movie revolves around his futile effort to do this because in the end he is shown running after a horsedrawn carriage, which has departed through the gates of the Castle. He is despised by the local villagers, told by the Mayor that his services are not required, refuses the job as janitor of the local school much to the chagrin of the headmaster and is left in no doubt exactly what the lady teacher and students think of him. He is referred to as «The Land Surveyor» at least sixty times throughout the three hour ordeal, usually in a very dismissive and derisive fashion. In one scene with a very rotund bureaucrat, who he wakes from a restful slumber at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, the regard for this expert is proved conclusively. The big man introduces himself as

«Bergin» but before our man can get his own name out the big fellow cuts him off by saying: «It doesn't matter! You're just the land surveyor!» Well, I never!

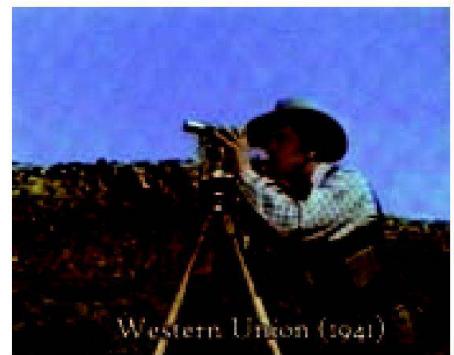


Fig. 10: Robert Young in «Western Union» (1941).

Surveying in the North

If ever you want to view a movie, which makes a statement about the world with its progress and prejudice along with casting surveyors as the lead roles, then I have two absolute beauties for you. «Dersu Uzala» (1975) won the Academy award for the best foreign film for the legendary Japanese producer Akira Kurosawa for very good reason. Russian army surveyor Vladimir Arseniev and his survey party set about their task of making a topographical survey of the Ussuri River region of Eastern Siberia in a very harsh climate. Along their exploration in the remote jungle area they meet up with a Goldi bushman named Dersu Uzala, who had never seen the city. Dersu lends his bush craft to guiding them through the unforgiving and treacherous terrain, at one time saving both the surveyor and himself from a snap blizzard at forty degrees below zero by cannily, using the surveying tripod with instrument atop as the frame for a hastily constructed grass mini-yurt. The tragic transition from bush jungle life to the cement city jungle gives a stark portrayal of the dark side of progress forced upon those, who would be better left alone. The French-Canadian «Map of the Human Heart» (1993) is a moving story of the bond, which materializes between a cartographer (Patrick Bergin) mapping



Fig. 9: Patrick Bergin in «Map of the Human Heart» (1993).

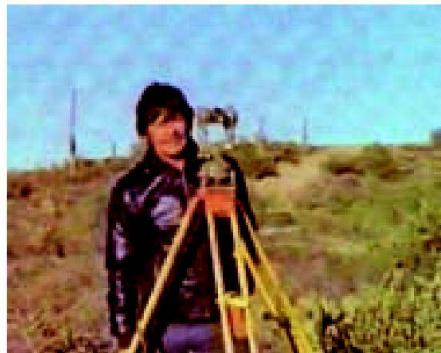


Fig. 11: Charles Bronson in «Death Wish» (1974).

the Arctic in the 1930's and a young Es-
kimo boy (Robert Joamie) and the effects
of human prejudices upon their lives.
There is quite a humorous scene of the
young boy's first encounter with survey-
ing instrumentation in the icy environ-
ment, which he calls home.

The Englishman That Went Up a Hill But Came Down a Mountain

Without question my personal favourite
in the surveying movie genre has got to
be the true story «The Englishman That
Went Up a Hill But Came Down a Moun-
tain» (1996), starring Hugh Grant and Ian
McNiece, who play the two surveyors sent
to confirm the height of the tallest hill in
Wales in 1917. When the townsfolk hear
the devastating news that the surveyors
have determined that their «mountain»
is 16 feet shorter than what is required by
the Home Office to classify it as such, they
stop at nothing to keep the two men in

town until they have built up the height
of their hill to the necessary level. Despite
torrential rainstorms and the impatience
of the two government officials they suc-
ceed in building up their mountain and
also getting the surveyors to re-measure
the height. Along the way Hugh manages
to win the affections of the most glam-
orous lead-lady played by Tara Fitzgerald
to complete a warmly memorable tale.

Many More Movies

Now if you think that there could not pos-
sibly be any more movies, which have sur-
veyors as the hero characters, please re-
member that I have told you about the
ones in which the story plot as well as the
main roles are built around surveying.
Please do not forget about the other great
actors who have been surveyors in movies
such as Charles Bronson in «Death Wish»
(1974), Val Kilmer in «The Ghost and the
Darkness» (1996), Brad Pitt in «Seven

Years In Tibet» (1997), James Mason in
«Journey to the Centre of the Earth»
(1959), Gene Raymond with Clark Gable
in «Red Dust» (1932), Edmond O'Brien
with Alan Ladd and Virginia Mayo as his
assistants in «The Big Land» (1957), Nigel
Stock in «The Great Escape» (1963), Har-
rison Ford in «Raiders of the Lost Ark»
(1981), Randolph Scott (again) in «Car-
son City» (1952), Charlton Heston as
Moses in «The Ten Commandments»
(1956), Wes Bentley in «The Claim»
(2000) or Pierce Brosnan as James Bond
007 telling Electra in «The World Is Not
Enough» (1999) that he had always want-
ed to see the survey marks to which she
was about to ski to down precarious
slopes!

You may like to look up my last two
papers on the net in the ACSM 2006
Conference Sessions Papers archives
(www.acsm.net/sessions06/Brock4241.pdf,
www.acsm.net/sessions06/Brock4242.pdf) which list up to 101 Hollywood style
movies, not all of which I have been able
to procure as of 2006. However, I am still
trying – and I suggest you do the same
too. Happy viewing!



Fig. 12: Harrison Ford in «Indiana
Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark»
(1981).

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