

CHAPTER FOUR

Crew Adjacent

Location Experts, Spatial Creativity, and Logistical Quagmires

Locations are a fundamental requirement of all motion pictures, a statement so obvious that the contribution location experts make to the production process risks being overlooked and underappreciated.¹ Mobile Hollywood, after all, requires a destination. Sometimes it needs more than one, often simultaneously. Even stage-bound productions venture into nearby exteriors for second unit shoots. Still, with hundreds of crew members and background extras, a dozen or so trucks and trailers, tents for craft services and weather protection, and numerous rigs and other resources, a production cannot just show up at a private residence or public street corner. Locations must be *made* accessible to a mobile mode of production, and that process has increased in complexity and magnitude as the geographic scale of production has expanded around the world.

Prevailing accounts of contemporary creative labor have not devoted much attention to the work of location experts.² This absence may reflect how the dynamics of so much location work exceeds our presumptions about below-the-line labor. These

laborers lack the tactile artifacts we associate with other craft positions. They don't stitch a costume, paint a face, build a prop, or decorate a set. They also lack an explicit technical skill set we associate with trade workers. They don't construct interior set pieces, lay electricity cables, or drive camera rigs. Yet location experts are very much integral to the creative team whose well-honed contributions directly shape the look and feel of the motion picture or television series. They share an intimate creative partnership with producers, directors, and especially production designers, and while they may not immediately identify as craftspersons or trade workers, they possess a deep, comprehensive knowledge of each department's aesthetic and technical requirements, working particularly closely with the lighting, camera, and electrical departments.

As I will sketch below, location experts need to anticipate how the visual and functional needs of stakeholders shape a location's potential effectiveness and what, if any, adjustments are necessary to make it a safe and workable option that aligns with the material and symbolic dimensions of the script. They also must satisfy an extensive checklist of essentials (e.g., Does the location have access to electricity? Where can it accommodate parking or craft services?) and potential problems (e.g., Is the location near a busy motorway or under a flight path? Is the site weatherproof? Are there power lines that will interfere with overhead camera rigs?). Adjustments are often necessary, but they are made without exceeding the budget, of course. Listening to location experts recite the variable and overlapping scenarios they rehearse when scouting filming sites, one hears an impressive account of proactive troubleshooting, a constant and iterative exchange of "if, then" contingency plans. This is an imaginative process that nevertheless requires a

tremendous amount of logistical ingenuity to ensure the endeavor can move quickly and seamlessly through space to achieve its artistic objectives.

This chapter examines the spatial expertise of location workers. Similar to the fate of their below-the-line colleagues, technological change and workplace pressures have eroded some of the creative authority and autonomy of the location expert. They still very much love what they do but are in the throes of reconciling their passion with a growing burden to do more with less and more quickly across a larger geography. Yet paradoxically, the shifting spatial dynamics of Mobile Hollywood have elevated and intensified other aspects of location work. Here we see how the logistical labor of location experts is critical to making space accessible to a mobile mode of production. They must organize and manage the movement of people, equipment, traffic, and other resources within and between filming sites, and this labor is intended to remove obstacles—both anticipated and unexpected—that stand in the way of the temporal, spatial, and financial efficiency of capital accumulation, often with disregard for the immaterial borders that once separated a location expert's personal life from their professional livelihood.

THE TYRANNY OF TECHNOLOGY AND TRAVEL

In July 2017, Ed French was murdered in San Francisco. Three months later, Carol Munoz Portal was murdered in Mexico. Both men were location experts. Both men were killed while scouting for locations. French was working on a commercial project. Portal was employed by Netflix's *Narcos* (2015–17). The deaths prompted the Location Managers Guild International (LMGI) to include this passage in their media release

memorializing the men: “Location scouts and managers are often vulnerable, working alone while scouting dangerous environments. While such occurrences are rare, location pros can also be targets because of the equipment they carry.”³ Reports indicated French was murdered during a robbery that targeted his camera. Portal was scouting in a notoriously crime-ridden area. Explicitly invoking the Sarah Jones tragedy, the organization’s statement further linked the killings with the heightened awareness about crew safety more generally.

These concerns—being alone, being in a remote area, being a target—recurred throughout my conversations. Scouting, in particular, is one of the most precarious components of location work. As the LMGI message makes clear, scouts are alone, often in unfamiliar environs far from home, as they search for the perfect filming site. As this is part of the preproduction process, no one (besides the location experts themselves) really knows what they are doing or where they are doing it. Like any investigative journalist, they are “on assignment.” The murders of the location scouts in San Francisco and Mexico became reference points in my conversations soon after the incidents occurred, but across my interviews more generally many individuals recounted their own anxious stories: being in a bogged down vehicle in crocodile-infested waters, for example, or trekking fourteen miles through a desert when they anticipated being away for only a few hours. No mobile service. No producer. No familiar face waiting back at the hotel to summon emergency services when they failed to return on time.

There is a dark side to location work that aligns with a broader and more ambivalent narrative about the erosion of work and working conditions in the screen industries. This does not diminish the pride and pleasure these individuals express

about their work (even if the sentiments aren't always returned by producers), but it underscores a growing sense of disillusionment with the industry's motivations and priorities. One long-time location expert characterized the predicament for labor as a practical matter with more than a hint of nostalgia for a bygone era:

The industry has been corporatized, or whatever you want to call it. There is no creativity anymore. I would love to work on more independent projects, but I can't afford it. They can't afford my rate. [Names a recent installment of a high-profile franchise film.] I won't even see that movie. It's just so fucking stupid. But I took the job. It pays my mortgage! It's what we have to do. I'm lucky that I started in this industry years ago. I had the pleasure of working on other types of film, interesting films, mid-range budget films. No one makes them anymore. I wouldn't want to start out in the industry as it is today. It's all about money. Producers or studios or whatever don't care about creativity or craft. What can you do? You have to work.⁴

Despite the sense of resignation, the quote is symptomatic of a larger sentiment among screen media workers, both above- and below-the-line, who reiterate passionate commitments to their craft while acknowledging frustration with a system that seems at odds with the artistic impulses it appropriates for value.⁵

The contradiction here captures the power of capital to engender a form of social cooperation in which the performance of one's creative resilience or efficiency helps sustain the very operations that threaten to undermine those same pleasures. In other words, workers learn to conflate their economic value with the conditions that perpetuate their own precariousness. As the cases of Sarah Jones, Ed French, and Carol Munoz Portal demonstrate, the consequences of such professional commitments can

be tragic, but the principle is fundamental to independent contracting in general and the creative industries in particular.⁶ The system functions not only by outsourcing work to a saturated labor market but also by exploiting certain myths around work and identity that mobilize workers into a supply chain of immediately responsive but ultimately disposable human labor. This dynamic isn't inherently evil, as the rhetoric may very well "offer sites for self-expression that are unavailable in more conventional forms of livelihood."⁷ Indeed, the experience of location experts underscores their work as a site of both pleasure and peril, a series of inherent tensions and contradictions that is captured neither in radical critique of capital exploitation nor more liberal assessments of the creative economy.

The sections that follow look more closely at the ways technology and travel are transforming the nature of location work within mobile production. The first section draws attention to the concerns with creative autonomy and craftwork, especially as the import of technology to location work has increased alongside the need to operate across an expanded geography of production. The second section outlines how this geography requires workers to become mobile and highlights the toll constant travel takes on location experts.

Technology

Location experts—either scouts or managers—are some of the first individuals hired by a production, sometimes even before the director and production designer, so they can start breaking down the script into discrete locations. At this point, they visualize the spatial needs of a story, consider where they might find those locations or whether to build them on a soundstage, travel

near and far to capture an array of images, and then curate them into what they hope is a meaningful and productive complement to the collective vision for the project. Location experts often work most closely with the production designer to narrow thousands of images into a more manageable short list that is then presented to the director and cinematographer for further culling. As I will discuss in more detail below, tenacity, patience, commitment, and creative ambition are prized qualities that “good” location experts cultivate over time and reaffirm in their reflections on the profession. There’s also a sense of excitement and adventure associated with the scouting process. Such assignments can potentially send location experts “anywhere” as they are “often the first person on the ground to see if it’s even possible to shoot where they might want to shoot.”⁸ Depending on the size and scale of the project, this process can take anywhere from a few weeks to six months, all done before a single line of dialogue is recorded and often before the script is even finished.

Location experts take great pride in the creative and curatorial aspect of the scouting process. They are, after all, the experts here. In the not-too-distant past, location experts—many photographers by training—invested time in preparing for what are called “show-and-tell meetings” with producers, directors, and production designers. After weeks, sometimes months, of research, scouting, photographing, and culling from an expansive archive of images, the show-and-tell process is the first occasion for location experts to fully perform their professional authority and aptitude. Many recounted the “rush” they felt when retrieving 35mm prints from the developer (or in-home lab) and rapidly creating storyboards of potential shooting sites “just in time” for the late afternoon appointments. They create

folders for each location. Each folder opens with a key shot—the best of the lot—and then guides the viewer through the space: inside the door to the left, then to the right, and so on, giving the location expert complete control over their colleagues’ experience of the potential site. They tediously trim edges and create panoramic landscapes by taping together overlapping pictures. Sometimes those photo displays decorate an entire meeting room, not unlike in an art gallery.

These meetings provide the location expert with an opportunity to curate images to their creative counterparts and work collectively to identify the filming sites best suited to the project. Options, alternatives, and backups are necessary to accommodate the often idiosyncratic creative egos of the decision-makers. If Option A doesn’t emerge as a contender, the location expert needs to be ready to pitch Options B, C, or D. “I not only need to find a location that I think best fits the script, but also anticipate potential objections from the director or production designer in case our visions don’t quite match, or they have particularly strong opinions about what they want.”⁹ They also need to weigh potential sites against a range of other logistical and technical issues that can complicate the viability of one location over another, no matter which one “looks” best on film. Sometimes this process entails the decision about what *not* to show their creative colleagues—knowing that it’s often harder to talk a director or production designer out of using the “perfect location” based on technical or logistical obstacles alone. A location expert recounted an episode from early in her career when she had to persuade a director not to use what he considered the “perfect” location for a particular scene. She objected because the tide made the remote island site only accessible by rowboat, which not only raised significant health and safety

concerns but also presented practical transportation obstacles. There also was no electricity. “It was visually stunning, but I should have never presented it to him. I’ll never make that mistake again,” she reflected.¹⁰

The metaphors of detective work, globe trekking, and hunting are commonly invoked to describe the nature of the scouting process, driven by a sort of wanderlust that fuels these experts’ creative pursuits and professional obligations. For example, “It’s a very visual process at first. I immediately start visualizing ideas when I read the script. I grew up here. I know the city [Budapest] very well. So, some ideas come from memory. But *I am always hunting* for a new place and shooting and shooting and shooting [images] either because the script calls for [something different] or it’s just something we [location experts] do [naturally].”¹¹

The “hunt” allows location experts to balance familiarity with surprise and novelty. Discovering a new locale (even or especially in one’s own city), transforming an existing space for new purposes, or finally gaining access to a destination previously off limits for one reason or another are all described with a sense of personal satisfaction and professional victory. Such metaphors are not unlike the “trade stories” that John Caldwell describes as “narratives of self-affirmation,”¹² which are critical in the context of a highly competitive and saturated labor market. They not only distinguish spatial expertise as a particularly valuable and distinguishable creative input, but they also mark that expertise as not something “just anyone” can do but rather a professionally cultivated skill set learned over time and as the consequence of training.

Yet the stories also function on a much more fundamental level by conflating modest workaday pleasures with a compulsion

that filters across many aspects of a location expert's personal life. Everyone told me some variation of the same warning about the common hazards of their creative commitments: they're horrible drivers because they're paying more attention to the passing scenery than the road; they make for difficult travel partners, opting to snap photos of landscapes and buildings rather than take pictures of the family around the pool; they spend a lot of time just walking around different cities they visit looking up at the architecture rather than in front of them, and so on. Veteran experts often amass impressive personal archives from their scouting expeditions, a collection of images they have recorded over time that fits the particular creative needs of a project or simply "just because" the locale might work for some unknown project in the future. One of the most memorable experiences during my fieldwork occurred when a veteran location professional invited me into her home office. In addition to the posters and production memorabilia one might expect, the walls were lined with filing cabinets full of hundreds upon hundreds of photos with place-specific folder labels: "LA River Under 110 @ San Fernando"; "USC Hospital—Old County Morgue"; "Cemetery (Angeles Abbey)"; or simply "Grass Roof." The archive was a personal resource and point of pride for her—a first stop for any initial research that she largely navigated based on her own memory of where she filed what. Some of the locations already had appeared in films or television shows on her resume, but many were documented simply because she saw creative and functional potential in them.

The locations that make up the personal archive are not exactly proprietary material. Many are a mix of public and private spaces that for most of us just exist as a random street here or an office building there. Yet the archives transform those

static destinations into something more malleable, a location ready for its remake in the name of “just-in-time” creative production. For the location expert, the archive functions as professional currency and quality assurance in addition to his or her screen credits. It speaks to the vastness of their knowledge and the immediacy of their responsiveness. Having an archive of potential resources at their disposal limits the turnaround time and initial travel that a project requires. Like a sound recordist with her own gear or a makeup artist with his own bag of supplies, the archive (and camera) is a necessary tool of the trade that individuals commonly curate on their own dime and outside the confines of officially contracted work while driving around town, during family holidays, and on a leisurely stroll through the city.

There’s more than a semblance of handiwork here: the technical proficiency and creativity of photography, the enthusiasm for innovation and novelty, the scrapbook-like approach to the lookbooks, the meaning-making from expert curation, and the art of persuasive presentation to executives and colleagues. It is a craft, practiced over time, honed for excellence, and prized as a distinct skill. It also is highly socialized in its commitment to collaboration, necessarily balancing one’s individual labor inputs within the broader workshop-like environment of film production.

Yet today conditions are changing. Location experts are at much greater distances from producers, digital cameras have taken the place of 35mm film, the internet is home to millions of images from amateur photographers, and the cloud has become the default archive for professional scouting images. Sensing the changes, location experts acknowledge a pronounced ambivalence with respect to the impact technological change has had

upon their sense of value and creative identities. Location experts readily admit the internet makes their job a bit easier. In addition to the obvious efficiencies it creates with respect to speedy communication and travel logistics, extensive desk research before a physical scout helps narrow down options, thus saving the scout time, money, and potential travel hardship. Yet it simultaneously increases the burden of that task. The world is now at their fingertips, and producers or production designers can too easily disregard the expertise of their colleagues and encourage them to “keep searching,” because their own Google searches suggest there are additional and better options to consider. Anyone on the production team is a potential location scout by simply entering a few key search terms into Google Images.

Further, the cloud now offers an endless archive of images for producers to review at their leisure in place of the more personalized (and face-to-face) curation of what the location expert considers to be the best options. Rare are the 4 p.m. meetings when location experts would decorate production offices with their display boards and, in collaboration with the director and production designer, engage in tactile creativity: moving boards around, discarding unwanted options, and reorganizing preferred locations as they collectively narrow down their filming sites. The panoramic image also is at risk. Location experts can shoot more quickly, compile more images, and deliver on tighter deadlines without the time-consuming process of stitching together individual images, even digitally, into comprehensive landscapes.

Accordingly, the show-and-tell process increasingly occurs in isolation with little showing or telling involved: The producer, director, or production designer quickly scrolls through a

secure website on their own with minimal input from or collaboration with their colleagues in the location department. This is especially true for a scout searching in Budapest or the Gold Coast in Australia for a producer in Los Angeles. An Australia-based location expert tells me, “I can be on a helicopter taking images of the Great Barrier Reef around the Whitsunday Islands, and the producers will want me to send them those images before I’m out of the helicopter. Gone are the days of developing film and making lookbooks. Now, I just hand over a USB stick, or more likely, load images onto a [secure] website, then send an email.”¹³

As a consequence, many location experts are faced with information overload. No longer contending with the material limitations of a roll of 35mm film or the finite shelf space of personal archives, most location experts now have terabytes upon terabytes of images they store on numerous external hard drives with no meaningful way to organize and preserve that amount of information—they simply collect too much too quickly before moving onto the next job, where they do it all over again.

These trends align with a larger narrative about the erosion of creativity and craftwork in an entertainment industry seeking to stabilize its financial well-being at the expense of its workforce. Like the experiences of their below-the-line colleagues more generally, the creative and craft-like nature of a location expert’s work routines is increasingly subject to the edicts of managerial rationality that diminish creative authority, abandon commitments to quality, and ramp up productivity pressures in lieu of established workflows.¹⁴ In this case, producers and other studio executives increasingly prefer to review location images via email. They are less invested in the location expert’s commitment to their craft than in the inventory

they can produce, often at a moment's notice. As such, location experts often find themselves spending portions of nonwork time curating a personal archive as a repository of "immediately responsive research" for whatever queries might arrive in the future. This point is not meant to discount a location expert's creative passion or sense of agency, but to illustrate how the logics of Mobile Hollywood enable a form of self-discipline that comes at no expense to producers. As I argued in Chapter 1, producers simply prefer mobile production without the "mess" of creative investment.

Mobility

Existing work tends to frame the mobility of film and television workers in terms of the transient, project-to-project nature of their careers. For instance, Caldwell describes this as a "nomadic labor system" or "an amorphous enterprise," writing, "even after a technical worker has obtained employment and established credentials and competency, they still must hustle for every new production they hope to work on. . . . What usually results is that a small coalition of workers on one shoot will migrate in a loosely cohesive fashion to another shoot."¹⁵ As other commentators also have acknowledged, the tendency for department heads and other managerial agents to hire from a pool of workers with whom they share previous experience is a common feature in the entertainment industries, resulting in semipermanent work groups that migrate from one production to the next as a way to offset risk and increase trust.¹⁶ While below-the-line workers readily admit this dynamic reproduces exclusionary power dynamics, especially with respect to race and gender, they struggle to accommodate more inclusive practices within a

system that does not reward the time and investment it takes to generate such opportunities for disadvantaged workers.

For example, Calvin Starnes, an experienced grip, explains that labor budgets are fixed and time pressures are intense. Producers are not inclined to increase the resources necessary to create opportunities to hire and train new crew members, meaning efforts to diversify crew are delegated (or abdicated) to department heads. With fixed resources to support the team, bringing on a new hire means replacing an existing member rather than expanding the size of the crew. It's also perceived as a potential threat to the safety and efficiency of a team that has built up over time a particular work rhythm and shared sense of trust. Starnes elaborates,

You spend more time with these people than you do with your family, so you have to get along. It's tough to break into crews that travel together, no matter what color or gender you are, because there is a preexisting core. You can come in as a day player and then come in more regularly, but once you have your team, that's it until somebody leaves. . . . If you're forcing me to hire someone, you're creating a situation where I don't know if I can trust them, and I don't know their skill level. You're also telling me to hire an unknown over someone I already know and trust. . . . If it's an extra person who won't take a spot away from a core team member, give me whoever you've got. It diversifies the crew. It creates more work for more people. And it trains a larger, better workforce because it's putting the new person among a solid, experienced group of grips.¹⁷

Mobile production is not detached from these racialized and gendered dynamics. By introducing a more pronounced spatial dimension to project-based work, it further aggravates the injustices that already exist within the social relations of production and bestows additional privilege upon workers who can more

easily accommodate the demands of geographic transience by virtue of their class status, racial identity, gender, or nationality.

This is true of all below-the-line workers, though the impact on location experts stands out as particularly acute given the spatial dynamics of their labor. As Greg Elmer and Mike Gasher write, “The duties of location scouts, as digital and televisual librarians of sorts, articulate and adjudicate many complex global factors to local actors, mediating remote spaces to Hollywood and other production centers.”¹⁸ In a much more extensive case study of location experts, Myles McNutt links their local expertise to increasingly precarious livelihoods, arguing, “Their greatest asset is knowledge of a city, state, or region, a process that requires considerable time and experience. Their livelihoods are thus more vulnerable than many other workers [to the instability of mobile production].”¹⁹ In other words, the place-specific nature of their labor is integral to the mobility of production but comes at the cost of their own professional stasis. Location experts would need to “sacrifice long-standing relationships with the local community and [their] knowledge of local geography, only to replicate, at great effort, that knowledge in other locations if [they] wished to remain” employable within a mobile production apparatus that can change locations on a whim.²⁰

McNutt singles out television as particularly precarious for local workers, but such assessments are only partially accurate. In particular, the tendency to conflate local expertise with sedentary labor effectively downplays or elides the complex socio-spatial adjustments within the location department itself, a reconfiguration that makes mobility constitutive of the workplace and requires collaboration with a growing roster of colleagues that spans a production geography greater

than any one place. As mentioned earlier, resources—more so than medium—often determine how much of the initial location-related tasks are delegated to local counterparts in different regions around the world, but it rarely means the supervising location manager—the department head—or other key members of the department are free from any travel.

For example, Emma Pill, supervising location manager for the Bond film *Spectre* (2015), recalls having more than 125 individuals in her department scattered across Austria, Italy, Mexico, Morocco, Switzerland, and the UK. Still, after spending nine months researching possibilities from her London office, she scouted a short list of locations herself (in all places but Mexico) before presenting options to the director, Sam Mendes. Over the course of her career, her work has entailed travel and extended stays in Greece, Hungary, Iceland, and Norway, among other countries. “Fortunately, I love to travel,” she says before adding, “but it does take a toll on your relationships with friends and family.”²¹ Likewise, Naomi Liston, who hails from Scotland, supervised more than six primary locations (and even more secondary destinations) for the television show *Game of Thrones* (2011–19) from its headquarters in Belfast, while Los Angeles resident Wesley Hagan spends most of his time in Atlanta working on both films and television programs. For the Netflix series *Ozark* (2017–22), he was in Missouri to manage locations for the pilot but returned to Georgia for the duration of the program. Like many of his colleagues, he’s away from his home in Los Angeles more often than not. “I’m not getting calls for L.A. Hollywood is in Atlanta right now,” he says.²²

Highly sought-after location experts thus spend a significant amount of time in transit. At the height of their careers, leading location experts report being away for the bulk of a calendar

year—either scouting or filming on location—with momentary returns home between jobs. It's in those brief moments that they try to tend to neglected gardens; exercise and devote some time to their own mental welfare; and mend personal relationships with partners, children, and friends. In recounting her decision to retire from location work, Belle Doyle points to the toll frequent international travel and twelve-hour-plus days took on her health and well-being:

I was always on some transatlantic flight or European flight. I was going to Los Angeles, Cannes, Toronto, or Hong Kong. . . . It was never ending. I started having some health issues. My blood pressure was high. I had gained loads of weight. It got to a point—you know, I'm fifty—where my body was telling me I was working too much. It's all glamorous and lovely for a while, but then there's a moment of realization when you say to yourself, I'd rather be home watching telly with a cup of tea than attending another party at Cannes.²³

Concerns over basic health and well-being needs taken for granted in normal circumstances but put under undue stress in the context of what more than one location expert called “our gypsy lifestyle” was a pervasive concern. Living on planes and in hotels limits access to gyms, impinges on healthy diets, increases exposure to colds and flu, and hinders any sense of a “regular routine” in a consistent time zone. When you finally arrive at your destination, exhausted from travel, sleep in your hotel room usually prevails over physical exercise. Yet even sleep is not always restful. Stories circulate about encounters with bedbugs and cases of scabies contracted while on the road.

Professionals with enough industry clout can negotiate concessions to lessen the burden of mobility. Some of these deals are relatively modest, like business-class airfare. Location experts

simply travel too frequently and too far in compressed amounts of time with expectations to be “work ready” immediately upon disembarking the plane. Business class offers a chance to do prep work or take a nap. It also offers additional expediency: you board early, you can disembark more easily, and your bags normally arrive first on the carousel. Such privileges lessen the impact constant travel takes on productivity. Indeed, location experts easily conflate the value of comfort and convenience as a simultaneous boost to both personal welfare and professional obligations. These benefits may seem small, they recognize, but every minute gained lessens productivity pressures on the ground and affords location experts a sense of calm amid relentless deadlines.

Still, especially for less experienced workers, who lack the clout of celebrity talent who can commandeer first-class airfare or private flights, such small asks can quickly turn into major points of contention when negotiating with producers. Location experts struggle to fathom why such modest requests face so much scrutiny given the multi-million-dollar budgets to which producers are accustomed. “They will spend six figures on something to make the director happy or go over budget to [accommodate] changes we had to make because they decided to start filming before the script was finished. Why do we argue about small things?”²⁴ That such minor demands are considered “big wins” when producers agree to them is evidence of the degree to which workers are inclined to cooperate with the contradictory logics of mobile production—resilience is a sign of professionalism *and* a source of value for producers and studios.

Other location experts have taken more pronounced measures to offset the personal burdens of their professional obligations. Like Doyle, Lori Bolton made the decision to step back

from location work after the birth of her daughter in the late 1990s. “I decided I wanted to see her grow up,” she told me. Rather than step back completely, Bolton, who has worked in the industry for more than three decades, decided to focus her professional energies on location scouting rather than location management. Scouting, which typically ends before production begins, afforded her more control over her schedule and a healthier balance between home and work life:

Location managers have one of the most demanding jobs on set. You are accountable and available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week for the duration of the shoot. If you are filming somewhere else, you don’t even get to come home at the end of the day. I didn’t want to do that with a kid. [But the decision] was hard. I had just reached a certain level in my career and now I was backing away. . . . At first, it felt weird to put parameters around what I would and wouldn’t do. I [stipulated] that I wouldn’t be away from home for more than two weeks at a time. I was incredibly lucky people let me do it.²⁵

Despite her unease, it worked out well for her. In the last twenty years, Bolton has more or less maintained that schedule while scouting for some of Hollywood’s biggest and highest profile films, including *Pearl Harbor* (2001), *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* (2005), *Inception* (2010), *Saving Mr. Banks* (2013), *Insurgent* (2015), *A Wrinkle in Time* (2018), *The Lion King* (2019), and *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022). She became the first location professional invited to join the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and a founding member of the LMGI.

Yet limiting time away to a two-week scout rather than a six-to-eight-month sojourn on a distant production still provoked trepidation for Bolton. By framing the decision as one she was “lucky” enough to be “allowed” to make, she effectively undercuts

any sense of empowerment over her own work-life balance. Such language underscores how even highly decorated craft workers enjoy only a tenuous sense of autonomy in the context of contract work and surplus labor. Whether you are fighting for business-class airfare or hoping for more time with your family, there's always an eager new recruit ready to take your place if you are perceived as less amenable to the demands of the system.

In addition to documenting the personal tolls mobility extracts from location experts, I make the broader point here that it is simply too reductive to equate local knowledge with local labor. Location experts are now, themselves, highly mobile and must learn both the creative potential and bureaucratic processes of multiple locations, as both a consequence of and contributing factor to mobile production. Even in faraway destinations, local hires in Vancouver, Prague, or Budapest tend to serve as sources of expertise and coordination over a broader swath of the region. As I acknowledged in the previous chapter, if a production chooses Budapest as its production base, it is more likely to source second unit location needs from a regional network within Eastern Europe; it's simply more cost-effective. Croatia is a common destination for Budapest-based productions in need of seaside locations, for example, or Austria for productions that require castles, as years of conquest have destroyed such structures in Hungary. In these scenarios, the Budapest-based location team often assumes direct responsibility for the secondary destinations and spends time away from the city for the duration of those shoots. Still, it's not uncommon for the Budapest location experts—who likely report to a foreign supervisor from London or LA—to employ an assistant or coordinator in Austria or Croatia to assist with immediate needs. Ultimately, the department's makeup starts to reflect a

spatial heterogeneity that is dynamic and fluid, making the term “local hire” appear highly contingent in the context of ever-expanding production geographies.

As mobile production intensifies, the working relationships necessary to get the job done sometimes exacerbate many of the latent tensions and hierarchies that structure the division of labor. Staffing the location department and professional advancement in emergent production hubs stand out as particularly vexed issues. On the one hand, these concerns extend from what we already know about project-based careers: reputational capital and trust are the primary currency, existing professional relationships are key, the best jobs are reserved for an elite group of workers, and breaking this cycle of exclusion remains a challenge for newcomers. On the other hand, mobility has altered the socio-spatial character of most film and television crews, which exacerbates cultural tensions and biases in ways that tend to reaffirm existing power dynamics and hierarchies in the industry despite rhetoric around local job opportunities that policymakers like to champion.

As mobile production has accelerated rapidly in places like Atlanta, for instance, there is concern that job demand is exceeding labor supply. According to some of the more benign explanations, the city simply lacks the labor pool to adequately staff various below-the-line departments, including location work, and that can result in some nefarious activities among colleagues and collaborators. “Atlanta has enough quality crew for three major productions. But the city is so busy that you can’t keep your crew once you find them. If a higher profile production comes along, it will poach your best workers. We all talk to each other, so I don’t know why they think that’s a good idea, but they do it!”²⁶ A darker narrative—often spoken

about in hushed tones and off the record—links these structural concerns to an impending crisis. According to this logic, local “yokels” are advancing too rapidly without adequate training to meet the high-pressure demands of large-scale film and television production. Inflated egos rather than experience drive contract negotiations, and misplaced confidence dilutes the sense of professionalism and proficiency one normally develops over time. Safety incidents are invoked as evidence of what’s at stake, alongside a sense of exasperation that mobile production proceeds largely unfettered.

Adding to this frustration, regions outside of Los Angeles fall under the jurisdiction of different labor organizations (or lack of labor organizations altogether) with dissimilar career trajectories than what is customary in Southern California. Normally, a location manager can assume a certain level of competency and pay rates when he or she hires a key assistant, because union rules regulate the titles workers can use and the rate they earn based on their previous experience. Unions also maintain specific protocols for professional advancement: how many credits one must acquire as a coordinator before becoming an assistant manager, for instance, or before an assistant manager can take on more supervisory duties and departmental leadership. In places with different union locals or nonexistent union oversight, those basic assumptions about skills, proficiency, and salary simply don’t apply.

As a safeguard, veteran professionals tend to rely on trusted pools of available colleagues when work takes them away from home, regardless of where those individuals are based. Location expert Kent Matsuoka, for example, explains, “I spend about half of the year away from [my home in] Los Angeles. I immediately look at where I am going: who has filmed there, who is

filming there, who is planning to film there, who just left, and who we can bring with us.”²⁷ The semipermanent work groups mentioned earlier now travel together, especially within North America, where repeat visits to prominent production hubs build confidence. Hagan adds, “I may not know the region’s geography. But it doesn’t take long for a good location manager to figure it out. Once you’ve done two or three projects in an area, you get comfortable.”²⁸ They welcome local hires, particularly scouts and coordinators whose more intimate knowledge can help location experts get around a given location, but in places with a well-developed infrastructure, location experts are just as likely to turn to film commissions, tourism agencies, or service producers for support. Senior roles are thus reserved for a more elite group of workers who depend on their existing professional networks as springboards for mobile careers.

When mobile production ventures further afield to international destinations, local hires take on more prominent roles within the division of labor, often out of necessity. As described in the previous chapter, travel costs make it impractical to transport and house entire departments for extended periods of time overseas, while language and foreign bureaucracies increase the appeal of local expertise. Emma Pill, who, in addition to *Spectre*, was the supervising location expert for the Budapest-based production of *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), captures the tensions well:

I’ll admit it. I was frustrated at first when I learned I was the only one from the UK producers planned to take to Budapest. You always want an ally, at least one person you trust by your side, but I found my colleagues in Budapest exceptional. I depended on them a great deal. I don’t speak the language, so I had to trust that the information I shared with them was then translated and shared with property owners and businesses. I don’t have time to chase

them. I don't have time to follow up. I need to know [the task] will get done right the first time so that when the unexpected does happen, we're ready to respond to that problem without trying to retroactively fix our mistakes. If I have to ask at that point, "did [this information] get shared with everyone because it's now really important to implementing our [contingency] plan?" it's already too late.²⁹

Prague- and Budapest-based location experts similarly acknowledge that their good experiences far outnumber the bad, and that over time, they have developed long-standing relationships with producers and foreign location experts that translate into rewarding collaborations in which their expertise and autonomy are recognized, and they enjoy equitable footing with their international counterparts (despite differences in job titles and pay rates). Trust has been built up as interest in the cities has increased, and foreign crew return for subsequent productions over the years. This is especially true in Budapest, which has become the second busiest filming destination in Europe after London.³⁰ In these cities, the responsibilities of location experts largely mirror those of their foreign counterparts, but access to supervisory positions are rare except for the occasional project with more modest budgets that simply cannot afford to travel with a foreign crew intact.

This puts location experts in faraway destinations in a paradoxical position. While their labor inputs are critical for generating the sort of access and bureaucratic maneuvering mobile production requires, they almost always must negotiate their autonomy and expertise through a foreign head of department. The situation certainly produces mutual benefits in which both visiting supervisor and local hire learn from each other, but it's just as likely to raise on-set tensions. Budapest-based location

expert János Cserven explains, “I have worked on productions before where the producer is just more comfortable dealing with an American. I speak fluent English. I can explain the details of a location. I can negotiate with a crazy production designer. But the producer will just look around me for my [American] head of department.”³¹ Rudulf András, who spoke with enthusiasm about how much he learned from working with Pill on *Blade Runner 2049*, adds that not all of his collaborations have been as rewarding. Like Cserven, he describes worse-case scenarios that result from a foreign head of department who is there for what András calls “diplomatic” reasons: “It just creates more work for us. We have to entertain him. We have to show him around again and again. We have to explain everything to him so he can just re-explain it to producers, [which feels like] the only reason he is there.”³² From their perspectives, diplomacy just adds an unnecessary layer of middle management, a waste of time and money better spent on other things when they are fully able to accomplish the jobs themselves.

Like those of their below-the-line colleagues, the social relations of production that constitute the location expert’s professional collaborations are adjusting to a more mobile mode of production. Personal lives, professional routines, and working relationships are being reconfigured under the pressures of technology and travel to engender “commonsense” logics that help sustain Mobile Hollywood. Distances from home are greater, crew demographics are more transnational, and long-standing rituals are being reconsidered. Yet this is a contradictory process. For the location experts who help operationalize a mobile regime of accumulation, a sense of wanderlust continues to drive their enjoyment of a job despite the challenges they confront as a consequence of a life spent on

the road. As a grounded example of capital operations, it underscores how much mobile production “is composed through a continuous process of formation and deformation. More often than not, capital these days is disproportioned and struggles to assert its unity amid multiple internal conflicts and heterogeneous relations with its different outsides.”³³ In this case, aptitude, training, technology, and safety, among other workaday realities, simply point to a number of unstable principles that facilitate Mobile Hollywood’s expansion. At the same time, it also underscores the centrality of logistics, or acts of coordination, in producing the sort of environment that mobile production requires. Indeed, as they recalibrate their sense of value in Mobile Hollywood, location experts repeatedly cite the logistical complexities of location work as a site where the fragility of the entire enterprise is most explicit and thus the critical import of their work is most impactful, however invisible it remains to colleagues and casual observers. I turn my attention to those dynamics in the next section.

LOGISTICAL PRESSURES AND SERVICE DEMANDS

As location experts read a script, they start to match the narrative and desired aesthetic to a number of material locations—providing numerous creative options is key but so is the location manager’s logistical and technical expertise. They must know what is or isn’t achievable, creatively and functionally, in certain locations, and just as important, map that onto the production’s schedule and budget. As I have started to sketch, this is an imaginative process rife with quite practical complications. Sometimes these potential hiccups are directly related to the creative process itself. As location expert Doyle observes, “If a producer

needs a street for a 19th century drama, we know where to look. We also know there isn't just one street for 19th-century drama. Do you want urban or rural? What social class are the characters?"³⁴ Sometimes it's not about knowing where to look or what details matter but rather figuring out believable "cheats." How easily can the production "bend" one location to look like another, shooting Budapest, for instance, to look like Paris, as they did for the spy thriller *Atomic Blonde* (2017)? How can a location expert leverage practical locations, camera tricks, and visual effects to turn a rock quarry in Atlanta, Georgia, into the moon for *First Man* (2018)? Cheating a location can produce a more cost-effective alternative than traveling to multiple destinations (or a more plausible option when your location is the moon) but requires the location expert to do far more than find a simple 1:1 equivalency and call it a day. They must master a running list of the site's technical affordances, logistical pitfalls, practical deficiencies, and safety protocols, and then unite disparate stakeholders—from producers, directors, and gaffers to private businesses, municipal authorities, and residents—with conflicting interests and different levels of investment under a single workable plan for filming at the destination.

How does the light change throughout the day, or how might the tide impact access to the perfect beach location? What natural obstacles, like unpaved roads, might hinder access for trucks and related equipment? Who owns the site? How many storefronts need to be redecorated? How many residents need to be informed about the production? What traffic needs to be rerouted? What security detail is necessary? When is the location available, and at what cost? Where is there room for base camp, craft services, and curious onlookers? Is the site accessible, safe, and secure? How do we make it so? Does it have the

necessary amenities (like electricity)? If not, what equipment do we need to bring with us? Where do we park? Where do we eat? Where do we go to the bathroom?

Sometimes these duties place location experts in the role of “den mother” or “babysitter.” In a behind-the-scenes documentary about *Game of Thrones*, the location expert Liston, for example, is overheard discussing—with equal parts humor and serious intent—how she planned to prevent crew from urinating on an electrified fence that marked the perimeter of the production’s farmland location or from smoking near large propane canisters: “These big gas canisters, that’s all propane. You cannot sit there having a fag, otherwise the whole thing’s going to go up.”³⁵ In fact, Liston’s presence in the documentary (and penchant for profanity) was picked up in news reports and blogs about the show and circulated on social media as jovial evidence of the less-than-glamorous but demanding nature of the job. But it’s not all toilet jokes. At the other extreme, it’s worth quoting at length from the location expert Kyle Hinshaw to capture his mediation of conflicting demands and tremendous responsibility while working on the science fiction feature *First Man*:

Sometimes [the locations] process was frustrating because the producers wanted to shoot in Georgia as much as possible to take advantage of the tax incentive. So I was asked to come up with seemingly impossible practical options for the launch pad and Swing Arm in Cape Canaveral (ultimately shot at a Georgia power plant in the middle of the state), a location that could double as Ellington Air Force Base in Texas (the Perry Fairgrounds), and the moon surface (the Vulcan Quarry in Stockbridge). . . . Georgia Power took a lot of hand-holding. They had never opened up an active plant to a project of this size. . . . On top of security concerns, their facility houses massive amounts of coal and hazardous materials. Serious security and safety protocols have to be

maintained . . . so we had to be very detailed in our filming requests, and get all set plans pre-approved before we got the contract completed. It took multiple meetings, on-site visits and set plan proposals before everything was finalized. We had to distribute personal protective gear to the crew—hard hats, ear plugs, and safety vests. Our location team of about 20 people had to learn the different sirens for the plant—usually these initiated an evacuation protocol depending on what emergency situations was under way (fire, hazmat spill, dangerous weather, etc.). In the event of an emergency, we were responsible for evacuating the crew and performing a roll call at the muster station.³⁶

This is a far cry from any red carpet, but someone has to do it. Such “details” are very much in the location expert’s domain and stretch from mundane minutiae to quite serious procedures that, if disrupted, would not only impact the comfort and safety of cast and crew, but also upend the smooth and seamless operations of the entire production. As I have argued in the previous chapters, the operations of capital are rife with friction, and the messiness of those encounters affect how an expanded production geography is imagined, managed, and enacted by those workers who constitute it. If service producers occupy a critical but overlooked position within the internal governance of mobile production, location experts are on the front lines, literally mapping the efficient movement of people and things through space. The military metaphor is appropriate given the genesis of logistics in military history at a time when armies needed to coordinate the movement of people, supplies, and other resources across ever greater geographies and growing numbers of men.³⁷ (It was common to hear location experts themselves refer to their project management ephemera—from Gantt charts to Google maps—as their “battle plans.”) Coordinating mobility for maximum efficiency (and thus value),

however, is not a task done in isolation; it involves a much broader assemblage of people, property, and things that the location expert must reconfigure into a set of relations that are conducive to capital.

Location experts thus occupy a critical juncture between the rationality of project management technologies and the unpredictable encounters with real people and real locations. This work is inherently contradictory and fundamentally relational. On the one hand, the logistical nature of their work feeds into the mobile operations of production by anticipating and planning for disturbances, enabling a more flexible and immediately responsive regime of accumulation. Yet no amount of strategic planning or elaborately detailed Gantt chart can fully discipline the risk of internal or external disruption. As the geographer Kate Hepworth writes, “These imagined geographies of optimization and rationalization are only ever imperfectly deployed. They guide interventions into already existing environments, encountering the messiness and intractability of the spaces they aim to transform.”³⁸ On the other hand, then, the dynamic and contingent nature of logistical work produces new spatial configurations that create a distinct temporal rhythm and expand the social relations of production. For location experts, the structured sociality of film and television work extends across a number of fleeting alliances that are necessary preconditions for mobile production to (ideally) advance unfettered. These alliances are both formal and informal, the most crucial ones arguably are external to the production itself, and they operate according to a timeline that overlaps with but exists separately from the production’s official schedule.

As discussed, location experts often work alone and according to their own day-to-day deadlines during the scouting phase.

As the start date for production nears and location options are increasingly culled, they engage more and more of their colleagues in assessing filming sites to ensure the location meets the creative and functional needs of the various departments. Once the locations are finalized, they start rationalizing and optimizing the geography for filming. This work begins weeks, sometimes months, before the crew ever shows up. For example, reviewing a location department's schedule for a four-day shoot at an inner-city street corner of a major urban center for a large-scale blockbuster, members of the department were on site three weeks in advance to assist with preliminary electrical work, enable visual effects to scan the location (as it was standing in for somewhere else), and oversee the removal of commercial freezers from the alleys behind private businesses. The following week they installed closure warnings on the relevant pedestrian ways and roads, and dropped letters within a two-mile radius of the filming site. The formal "bump in" started the week before filming. Road closures commenced. Cars were relocated. Garbage bins were removed. Camera rigs arrived and were fenced off from the public. By the end of the week, the art department showed up to start redecorating storefronts, flipping street signs, and remaking anything that was incongruent with the site's scripted location. More letter drops and emails were sent to residents and businesses. A few days before filming, location experts oversaw the construction of base camp and cordoned off parking areas for two hundred crew members and more than fifty trucks.

While the crew shows up to commence filming according to the call sheet, members of the location department are there at least two hours prior to their colleagues—in this case, 4 a.m. Remember, location experts are responsible for the legal

agreements to film in a given area, so they are the first to arrive and the last to leave each day. Elements on the checklist for this particular location included ensuring private business were closed, traffic lights were turned off, public notices were placed correctly, extras knew where to wait, and security was stationed appropriately throughout the vicinity of the shoot. Once filming ended, the schedule for the location department extended another full week as members were responsible for returning everything back to its original condition, including a final letter drop and email to thank private businesses and residents for their cooperation.

All of these details are meticulously documented across a range of formats, including Gantt charts, Word documents, annotated maps, and formal contracts. For this particular four-day shoot (which required a month's worth of *scheduled* production work from the location department but resulted in less than five minutes of actual screen time), the location's folder—where the location expert managed the plans for the site—contained no less than two dozen such documents. Every location is rationalized in a similar way with their own folders full of individualized schedules, checklists, maps, signs, and contracts. Location schedules are staggered, running alongside the production schedule but maintaining their own temporal logic. While part of the location department is at a site where filming is taking place, colleagues are already at work at the next destination, prepping it for the crew to show up in a few weeks' time. As filming starts anew somewhere else, others remain at the previous site to erase any sign of the production ever having been there.³⁹

Thus, location experts are more autonomous and exist outside the daily production schedules and call sheets that constitute



Figure 9. Production signs in Brisbane for *Thor: Ragnarok*. Photo by author.

their colleague's work worlds. They are more mobile, constantly moving from one location to the next and back again as they work to make and remake space—to open up geography—for mobile production. It's labor largely abstracted from its most physical manifestation: the public signage that reroutes traffic or advises pedestrians they are entering a filming site (fig. 9). Vicki Mayer offers a compelling analysis of such images as evidence of a coded language that impinges on public space, redirecting (or disinventing) residents from the site “where the hidden labor of the film industry becomes manifest and visible.”⁴⁰ And yet the same signs are themselves both product of and distraction from

a regime of labor that remains largely alienated from the value creation that happens once cameras roll, but it is nevertheless central to its accumulation.

Filming in public or private spaces requires an immense amount of bureaucratic maneuvering on the part of location experts, who must negotiate permits and permissions with a legion of external parties: business owners, local residents, municipal authorities, state authorities, public transport officials, rubbish-bin collectors, portaloos providers, private security firms, and police and fire departments, among many others. They need permission to redecorate storefronts, fire semiautomatic weapons in residential neighborhoods, reroute public foot traffic through the inner city, and facilitate road closures on major interstate thoroughfares. This means knocking on doors, attending community meetings, coordinating with public agencies, posting public notices, and responding to press inquiries. The location department is the most public-facing and engaged department of a production. In each scenario, location experts must clarify in terms most appropriate to the particular audience what the production process entails, knowing so much of it is a foreign concept to those for whom Hollywood remains more a glamorous imaginary than a technical activity. In many cases, these locations are not Southern California, where Hollywood has historically constituted part of the economic and cultural fabric of the city.⁴¹

Negotiating with local politicians and public authorities has become especially tense given the growing magnitude of the requests from incoming producers and the increasing pressure on representatives to protect historic sites, neighborhoods, and residents. Sometimes it requires even more creative solutions, like the location expert who recalled with some pride the time

he had to hire a member of the 18th Street Gang in East Los Angeles to ensure the production could film in the area without interruption.⁴² The “informant” was paid for his service but also advised the production on what other residents would require payment to prevent theft and vehicle tagging while the crew was working. As the earlier reference to Hinshaw’s work on *First Man* illustrates, location experts often amass a wealth of knowledge, some having seemingly little to do with creative production. Another location expert tells me:

Filming in an open field is easy. Filming in a working hospital is incredibly difficult. I know so much about how different places operate: not just hospitals but power plants, mines, military complexes, palaces, and historical sites. Each has its own set of health and safety protocols and their own set of rules about what you can or cannot do and when you can do it and for how much [money]. There’s no training book that can prepare you for what you need to know or much you learn when your job requires you to find [solutions] for questions you never anticipate.⁴³

Of course, location experts must coordinate with internal stakeholders as well, like executive producers, directors, and production designers who hold key positions within the overall power structure of a production. The singularity of their creative visions—and often, their whatever-it-takes mentality—can strain the financial and human resources of the location department. It also often jeopardizes the logistical capacity of any given location, which can threaten the safety of the crew, harmonious relations with local communities, and the overall sustainability of the location itself by simply destroying it or creating political, social, or environmental circumstances that prohibit its use by future productions. A location expert in Budapest, for example, recounted to me one of his most

challenging scouts: a high-profile British film director who wanted to transform the city's Museum of Ethnography into a train station. Simple enough, but at the time, the museum was located in one of the country's most opulent buildings, originally the Royal Palace for Justice, which comes replete with royal waiting rooms and statues throughout its marbled interior that honor some of the greatest icons of the former empire. The director—not one known for his modest visions—first wanted the “unfamiliar” statues removed to make room for a full-sized locomotive that he hoped to bring into the building by removing an exterior wall, and further wanted to know what interior room was best for filling up with a mixture of (stage) blood and water. Location experts also must appease fellow crew members, who are quick to express dissatisfaction if the location poses exceptional difficulty or challenges to their work routines. “The director may love you for finding the perfect location. But if the grip department turns up with their trucks and they have to hike up a mountain for the location you found, they don't like you because you're the location manager. In fact, they hate you.”⁴⁴ Once filming begins at a site, a location expert is normally the first point of contact for any troubleshooting, from angry neighbors, misplaced extras, and lost caterers to unexpected weather, power outages, and property damage.

Given the contradictory pressures location managers face, they often speak about their position within a production in liminal terms. They walk a fine line between, on the one hand, the creative needs of the director and production designer and, on the other, the concerns of external stakeholders, such as property owners or transportation authorities. They are the only crew members who must deal with both the fantasy and reality of a production, meaning they contribute not only to

the production's fictional world but also contend with its material impact in the real world. It also means they understand, intimately, what happens when—in the words of one location expert—“the circus invades someone's backyard.” He continues, “It's really hard for a homeowner to understand the scale of what we're trying to do. At first, they don't even really believe me [that I work for a film production]. I have to translate the enormity of the process and make them aware of what might go wrong. It also makes me the person who they see as singularly accountable for this whole thing.”⁴⁵ This labor entails complex forms of preparation and coordination through which location experts work to unite disparate agendas around a common goal: a professional standard that is repeatedly described as “seamlessness of experience.” The emphasis here is to ensure the production remains a minimally disruptive occurrence for everyone potentially impacted by its presence, including the crew, the public, and the natural environment.

A JOB WELL DONE

The majority of location work is invisible, intangible, interactive, and performative, focused on producing an experience in which success—a job well done—is determined by the seamless coordination of disparate needs and agendas. There is a strong correlation here to the emotional labor performed by service workers. Location workers put an excessive amount of work into explaining, comforting, assuring, assuaging, convincing, supporting, and even apologizing. It's not uncommon to hear location experts discuss sincerely pleasurable “friendships” they've developed with certain property owners over time as a consequence of repeat use of their locations. Such relationships and

their maintenance persist outside the context of value creation but are transformed when location experts bring outside parties—from politicians and police officers to local neighbors and business owners—into the production itself. Access to a location is bought by the production, but the treatment of those who give permission—before, during, and after filming—is a key part of that exchange, much like the treatment of spa clients or hotel guests is a component of what is bought and sold in luxury service work.⁴⁶ Location workers themselves often disappear into the background of the very processes they help facilitate in the first instance: intentionally invisible, unnoticed, and unremarkable unless something goes awry. Service work, after all, rarely draws attention to itself unless the service is unsatisfactory.

Class relations between producers and technical laborers are easily read in antagonistic terms with respect to subordination, resistance, and control. The ways in which we have historically discussed below-the-line labor in industry studies have supported this analytical framework, and indeed, evidence in my own research suggests that there remains much value in approaching the conflicts between management and labor through such a lens. Yet by introducing questions about logistical pressures and service demands into the intricate and complicated matrix of socio-spatial relations that enable mobile production, we are confronted with a more amorphous form of work that, on the one hand, opens up the experience of work to relationships not solely defined by managerial dictates, and on the other hand, draws attention to acts of coordination—of people, things, emotions—that create the space necessary for Mobile Hollywood.