

The background features abstract, overlapping green geometric shapes, primarily triangles and polygons, in various shades of green, creating a modern and dynamic visual effect. The shapes are layered, with some appearing more prominent than others, and they frame the central text.

NEW ORLEANS IN FILM AND TELEVISION

Image Credit:
The Historic
New Orleans
Collection,
2003.0156.1.
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Why New Orleans and Louisiana?

- ▶ The roots of film and television representation began with 19th century literature and 20th century marketing campaigns for the city (*Playing the Big Easy*)
- ▶ The stories of people in Louisiana, the range of locations, the sense of history, and the association with the occult and Mardi Gras all draw film production to New Orleans and Louisiana (*Hollywood on the Bayou*)
- ▶ *Evangeline* in 1929 was one of the earliest Hollywood productions to film in New Orleans, it starred Dolores Del Rio who was enticed toward filming in Louisiana when the director informed her that Louisiana scenery could not be duplicated in California (*Louisiana Film History: A Comprehensive Overview*)
- ▶ Filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille praised Louisiana as the location for *The Buccaneer* because “here one can walk back 125 years in five minutes” (*Louisiana Film History: A Comprehensive Overview*)

Image Credit:
The Historic
New Orleans
Collection,
1997.62.1



Creating the Big Easy

- ▶ Visitors in the 19th century described New Orleans as pleasant, but primarily a business and trading city like most prominent American cities (*Creating The Big Easy*)
- ▶ Between the 1890s and 1910s, New Orleans tourism revolved around Mardi Gras revelers and men who wanted to take advantage of legalized sex work in Storyville (*Creating The Big Easy*)
- ▶ Closure of Storyville in 1917 made the attractions of the city less male-centered and illicit, and the city became a less dangerous and more respectable tourist destination (*Creating The Big Easy*)
- ▶ Women in New Orleans worked to reform and sanitize the French Quarter for tourism by restoring dilapidated buildings and encouraging law enforcement to increase presence in the area(*Creating The Big Easy*)
- ▶ White Creole culture and the French Quarter were glorified, even when the quarter was a mostly immigrant neighborhood and no longer a center of wealth. This pattern was reflected in popular films such as *Jezebel*. (*Creating The Big Easy*)

Image Credit: The
Historic New
Orleans Collection,
2013.0002.3



Pontchartrain Billy

Pontchartrain Billy, an alligator, was captured in a swamp near New Orleans in 1906, and nearly all large alligator jaws seen on movie screens from then until the 1960s were his. Because his jaws automatically opened when a chunk of meat was dangled above his head just above the camera's field of vision (source).

Early Films

- ▶ Early films focused on the elites of Creole society and the danger of the city, often in juxtaposition to one another
- ▶ *The Buccaneer* did this by comparing the upper-class New Orleans with the dangerous world of pirate Jean Lafitte
- ▶ *Jezebel* contrasted Antebellum Southern gentility with the danger of disease
- ▶ *Jezebel* was filmed mostly in California but heavily influenced by Louisiana. The head of LSU's opera department was hired to ensure Louisiana authenticity in the film, including hiding outside accents and approving the sets (*Louisiana Film History: A Comprehensive Overview*)
- ▶ Films that took place in New Orleans were consistently associated with danger such as corruption, swamps, crime, and disease
- ▶ Producer Joe Pasternak was inspired to make *The Flame of New Orleans* because he was tired of films which focused on New Orleans only as a place of war and epidemics (*Louisiana Film History: A Comprehensive Overview*)

Mardi Gras

- ▶ Mardi Gras reinforced themes of romanticism and chivalry in the South that imitated old-world Europe with royalty and nobility (*New Orleans Carnival Balls*)
- ▶ Political change after the Civil War meant the wealthy elites who lost political control during Reconstruction could maintain social power through Krewes (*New Orleans Carnival Balls*)
- ▶ Mardi Gras combined whimsy and entertainment with implicit social commentary on their power within society because the elites of society were elevated above the “common” people (*New Orleans Carnival Balls*)
- ▶ Idolization of the “Lost Cause” Antebellum South was furthered by comparing it to European nobility
- ▶ Dances performed at Mardi Gras balls were similar to those done in Europe’s aristocratic society (*New Orleans Carnival Balls*)

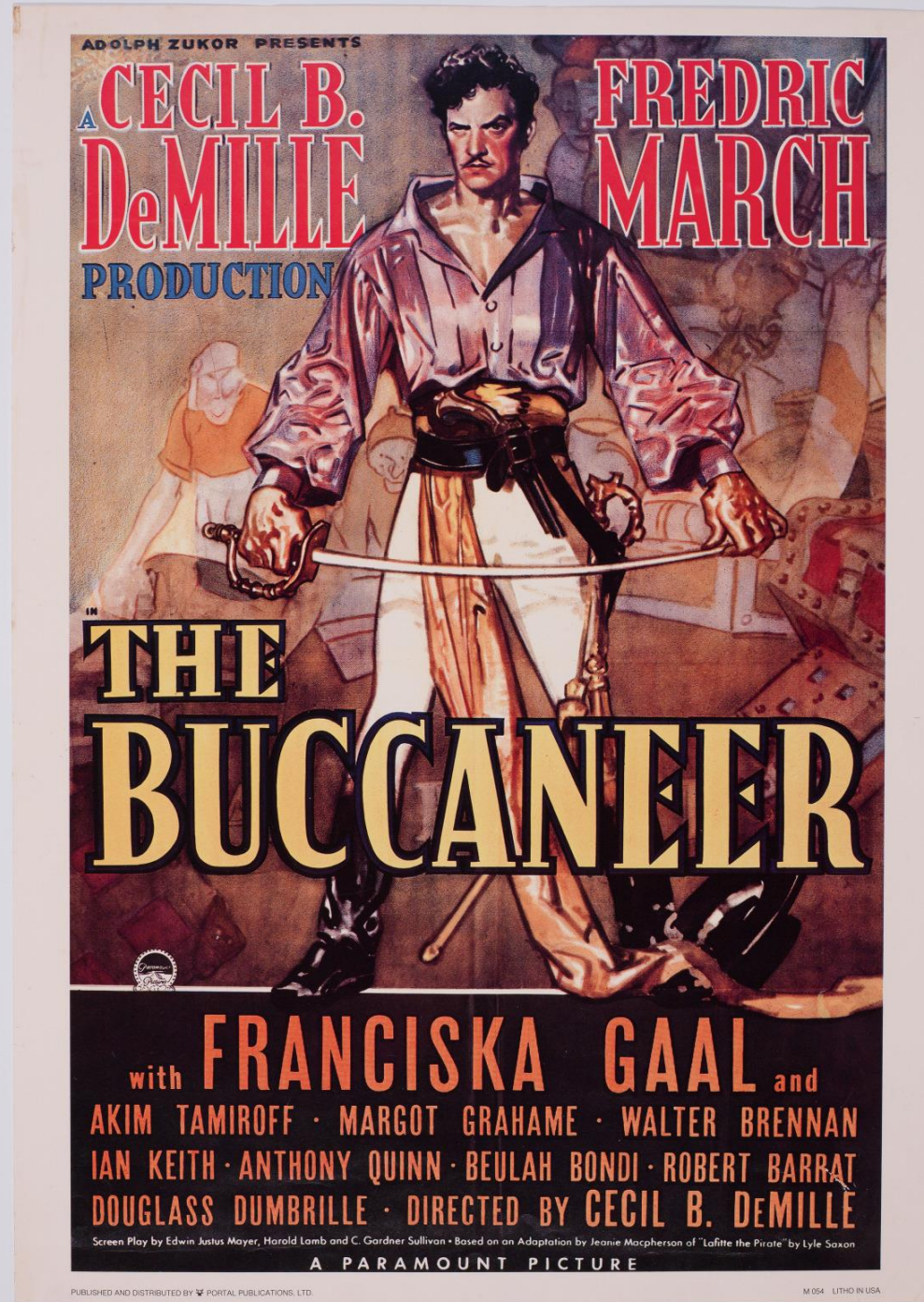


Image Credit:
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Collection, SC
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Jezebel (1938)

Image Credit:
The Historic
New Orleans
Collection, SC
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New Orleans as a city
of danger where the
outlaws have power



Increases in Tourism

- ▶ After World War Two, efforts to advertise New Orleans and draw in tourists increased dramatically and played into the image of the romantic, playful city (*Creating The Big Easy*)
- ▶ National fascination with the French Quarter and New Orleans's historic and romantic beauty grew as other American cities became more industrial and dominated by modern skyscrapers (*Creating The Big Easy*)
- ▶ Tourism emerged as a pillar of the economy after the Great Depression and as shipping and the other important industries of the city declined (*Creating The Big Easy*)
- ▶ Making New Orleans seem exotic and foreign promoted tourism, while the elements of the city that created the uniqueness of New Orleans were sanitized so that white American tourists could comfortably enjoy the city (*Creating The Big Easy*)
- ▶ Focusing on the French Quarter made it a visual shorthand for the rest of New Orleans onscreen (*Creating The Big Easy*)

Image Credit:
The Historic
New Orleans
Collection,
1981.290.67



Louisiana on Film

Early films such as *The Buccaneer* used the wildness of the bayou to heighten the sense of drama and danger in the movie.

Image Credit:
The Historic
New Orleans
Collection, SC
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King Creole (1958)

King Creole's cinematographer used dark, moody lighting to capture the “seedy but seductive” atmosphere of the French Quarter. (*Louisiana Film History: A Comprehensive Overview*)

The Creole City

- ▶ Notable writers' depictions of the city merged with tourism boosters to create the prolific imagery associated with New Orleans (*Creating The Big Easy*)
- ▶ White Creole writers shaped the way Americans think of New Orleans and Louisiana by promoting the idea that the city and state were exceptional and that they were the true inheritors of Francophone blood, language, and culture (*Imagining The Creole City*)
- ▶ Creole elites like Bernard de Marigny became notorious for lavish debauchery, increasing the perception of New Orleans as a place of reckless decadence (*Imagining The Creole City*)
- ▶ Historians such as Charles Gayarre defined Creole identity through whiteness (*Creoles of History and Creoles of Romance*)
- ▶ Gayarre also spread the mythology that many white Creoles in Louisiana are descended from European nobility who were knights, lords and ladies (*Creoles of History and Creoles of Romance*)

A Streetcar Named Desire (1951)

- ▶ *A Streetcar Named Desire* emphasized the decaying past of New Orleans, portraying it as a city stuck in a loss of grandeur and frozen in time (*Playing The Big Easy*)
- ▶ Blanche and Stella were the last remnants of a faded Creole dynasty that destroyed itself with debauchery, with one sister remaining stuck in the genteel past and the other attempting to move on into the seedier modern world (*Playing The Big Easy*)
- ▶ The film juxtaposed the gentility of the Antebellum south and grittiness and danger of New Orleans (*Playing The Big Easy*)
- ▶ The decaying Elysian Fields apartments are a visual symbol for the rotting decadence of New Orleans, a city that is not genteel but where gentility goes to die (*Playing The Big Easy*)
- ▶ Director Elia Kazan also filmed *Panic in the Streets* in New Orleans (*Louisiana Film History: A Comprehensive Overview*)

Race and Tourism

- ▶ When tourism became central to New Orleans's economy, Mardi Gras transitioned from a way for the city's wealthy white elite to preserve their power into a tourist-focused celebration which prioritized public pleasure for profit (*Creating The Big Easy*)
- ▶ Tourism forced black New Orleans residents to step back for the sake of the "city's" welfare, actually just for white residents and tourists (*Creating The Big Easy*)
- ▶ Initially, jazz and blues were rejected as "black music", but then their popularity caused the genres to be whitewashed and venues promoted white, not black, jazz musicians (*Creating The Big Easy*)
- ▶ Icons like Louis Armstrong were celebrated while the city's government and leaders still supported segregation, revealing the hypocrisy behind the tourism industry (*Creating The Big Easy*)

Hurry Sundown

Hurry Sundown, filmed in 1967, was the first major motion picture starring black actors to be filmed in the south. The cast and crew received death threats from the KKK, had their car tires slashed and had to be protected by armed state troopers. (*Louisiana Film History: A Comprehensive Overview*)



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The Historic
New Orleans
Collection, SC
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Moving Forward

- ▶ As glorification of the Antebellum south declined, New Orleans began to position itself more as a European city than a Southern one (*Playing The Big Easy*)
- ▶ New Orleans was featured in many popular “B” movie horror films, focus on the occult (*Louisiana Film History: A Comprehensive Overview*)
- ▶ New Orleans held on to old world beliefs, so many movies and television shows capitalize on New Orleans as a supernatural city (*World Film Locations: New Orleans*)
- ▶ In 1990, director Ethan Coen referred to New Orleans as a “depressed city that hasn’t been gentrified”, the reason he and his brother chose the city for a 1929-set period piece based in an unnamed city (*Louisiana Film History: A Comprehensive Overview*)
- ▶ The south and Louisiana become a metaphor for the best and the worst of America (*Glamour and Squalor: Louisiana on Film*)
- ▶ New Orleans represented a rejection of practicality, propriety, and progress (*Glamour and Squalor: Louisiana on Film*)

Belizaire the Cajun (1986)

Focused on the rugged
danger and beauty of
the swamp and bayou,
and the ways in which
New Orleans and
Louisiana are more wild
than the rest of
America.



Image Credit:
The Historic
New Orleans
Collection,
2011.0061

Pretty Baby

The film was controversial because it featured child prostitution. It depicted New Orleans and Storyville as a place without morals full of sexual corruption.
(*Glamour and Squalor: Louisiana on Film*)



Image Credit:
The Historic
New Orleans
Collection, SC
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Anne Rice and New Orleans

- ▶ New Orleans is portrayed as a sensual, ripe and decaying city in Anne Rice's works (*Haunted City*)
- ▶ The author's interpretation of the city is naïve about race, especially when concerning Confederate history, and falls into the trap of romanticizing the genteel Antebellum south by ignoring the injustice and racism of slavery (*Haunted City*)
- ▶ Cemeteries are aboveground because otherwise the dead would rise, cities of the dead and a city with constant death disease especially (*Haunted City*)
- ▶ The presence of unnamed slaves in *Interview With The Vampire* were excused as a relic of the time, also part of larger trend of ignoring the “hard parts” of New Orleans/Louisiana history (*Haunted City*)
- ▶ The dangers of the bayou were contrasted with the dangers of the vampires, encouraging an image of Louisiana and New Orleans as places full of danger and mysterious power (*Haunted City*)

Relocating to New Orleans

- ▶ *Benjamin Button*, *Déjà Vu*, *Now You See Me*, and *True Detective* were all originally not set in New Orleans but moved their productions to benefit from the tax credits (*Playing The Big Easy*)
- ▶ Many movies filmed in New Orleans after the 2000's tax credits aren't even set in New Orleans or Louisiana (*Playing The Big Easy*)
- ▶ Moving the film to New Orleans gave writers and directors a sense of character for the city that would be familiar to audiences, "city in a time warp" (*Playing The Big Easy*)
- ▶ *Benjamin Button* director David Fincher praised New Orleans as having both history and warmth, making it an ideal setting for the film (Times-Picayune)
- ▶ Fun fact: *Now You See Me* used the Williams Research Center for exterior shots (*Playing The Big Easy*)
- ▶ *Déjà Vu* moved to New Orleans because it was the only city that would risk the environmental and safety hazard of blowing up a real ferry in a real port for the film (*The City That Déjà Vu Forgot*)

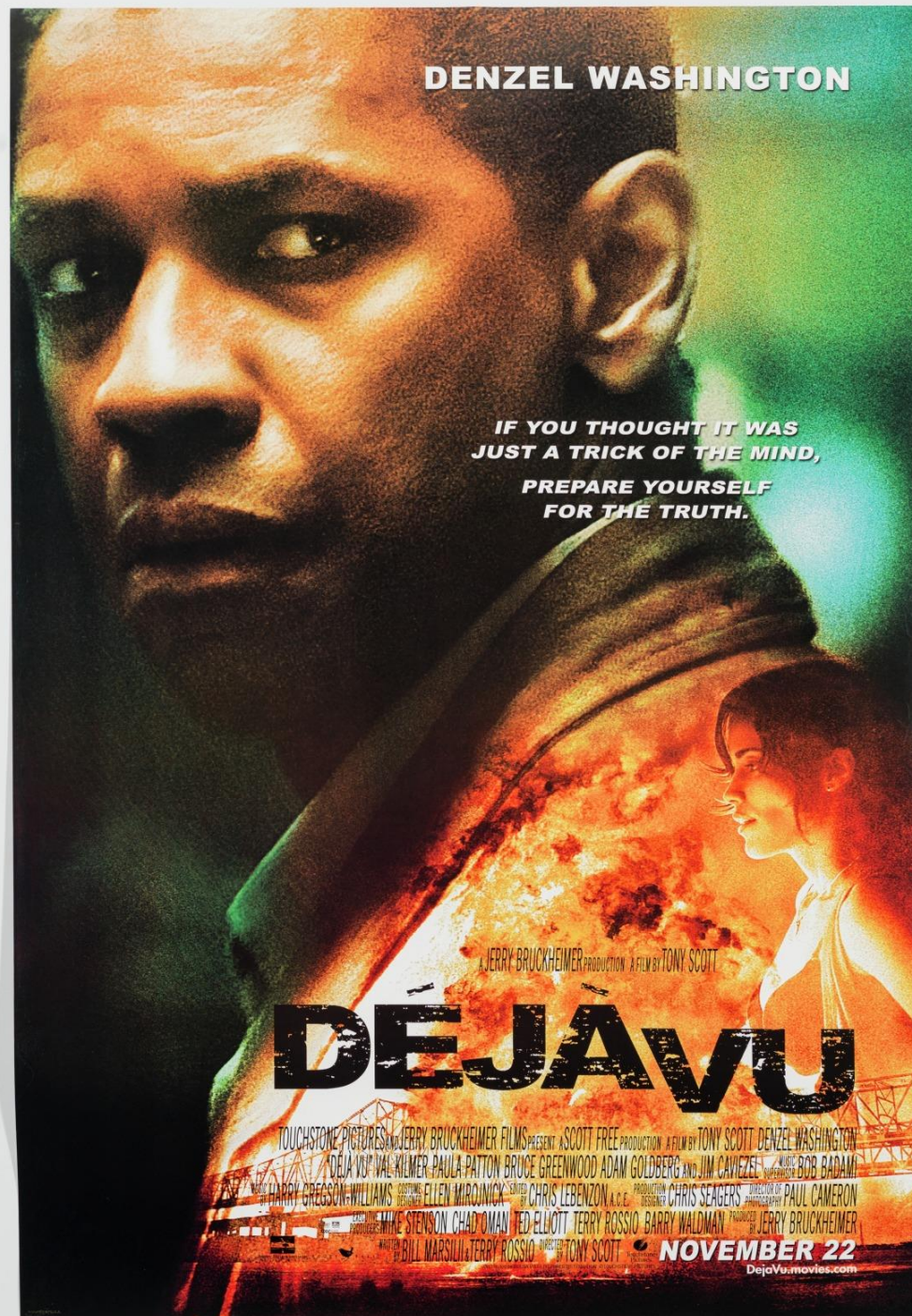
Hurricane Katrina

- ▶ New Orleans is a city that focuses more on the present than the rest of America because, thanks to disease and disaster, it has always been a city where tomorrow is not guaranteed (*Why New Orleans Matters*)
- ▶ The underprivileged, and especially the African American, community of New Orleans that was devastated the most by Katrina is the same one that deserves credit for so much of what makes New Orleans special: jazz, food, parades, second lines (*Why New Orleans Matters*)
- ▶ Film and television crews don't care about rebuilding the city in the long term because they are only there temporarily (*Why New Orleans Matters*)
- ▶ It is impossibly painful and difficult to capture the depth of Katrina's tragedy, and its impact on New Orleans, which is why so few have tried to in film and television and those who have tried have done a poor job
- ▶ Most honest depictions of the disaster have been from documentary films such as *Trouble the Water* and Spike Lee's *When The Levees Broke*
- ▶ The challenge is being accurate about the reality of tragedy without being revisionist

Deja Vu

Katrina hit during filming, so the production decided to stay in New Orleans as a matter of pride and rewrote the plot to feature the hurricane (*The City That Déjà Vu Forgot*)

Image Credit:
The Historic
New Orleans
Collection, SC
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Deja Vu

- *Déjà Vu* presents an “Americanized” New Orleans, a departure from films that have emphasized New Orleans’s foreignness and place as a city that is more European than the rest of America (*The City That Déjà Vu Forgot*)
- The film displaces Katrina with terrorism because there is a bomb attack, not a natural disaster, as the focal point of the film (*The City That Déjà Vu Forgot*)
- Many were worried that actually blowing up a ship for the film would cause the Mississippi to flood again so soon after Katrina, but the city allowed director Tony Scott to do it anyway (*The City That Déjà Vu Forgot*)
- The film’s decision to focus on the American-ness of New Orleans meant ignoring the un-American “third world” levels of inequality in the city which Katrina revealed (*The City That Déjà Vu Forgot*)
- Filming did not happen in the areas that were heavily damaged by the storm, allowing viewers to avoid the real consequences of the disaster (*The City That Déjà Vu Forgot*)
- Race in the film ignores the realities of race in New Orleans, with African-American actor Denzel Washington’s character representing the government (*The City That Déjà Vu Forgot*)
- The reality of New Orleans after Katrina was cast aside in favor of making a film with more commercial appeal (*The City That Déjà Vu Forgot*)

Katrina Hollywood vs Katrina Verite

- ▶ Of the two approaches to dealing with the hurricane, Katrina Hollywood appropriates the disaster for profit and production value, whereas the Katrina Verite approach attempts to tell an authentic story about the disaster (*Playing The Big Easy*)
- ▶ *Déjà Vu* is an interesting example because its use of terrorism brings up the competition between 9/11 and Katrina as the defining tragedy in American memory (*The City That Déjà Vu Forgot*)
- ▶ Spike Lee's *When The Levees Broke* argues that resources that should have gone to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina were devoted to the Gulf War (*The City That Déjà Vu Forgot*)
- ▶ *Benjamin Button* incorporated Hurricane Katrina to reinforce the film's general theme that nothing lasts (The Collider)
- ▶ Is it better for movies to ignore Katrina or to try and incorporate it if their story does not have anything to do with the hurricane?

Quote from Benjamin Button Screenwriter Eric Roth

“Then when I wrote exterior New Orleans street day there was like no doubt because all of a sudden there was a character there. You don’t have to write a description of it or anything. Everybody knows what this is. It has its own flavor, own taste, own smell and sights and everything and that’s so traditionally American and such a unique cross-cultural sort of place, so that it started inhabiting the whole thing without me having to do anything.” (The Collider)

Treme

- ▶ Treme insults tourists and outsiders, yet most of the show focuses on the parts of New Orleans that the rest of America associates with the city and is familiar with (*Playing The Big Easy*)
- ▶ It's tendency to be pedagogical and lecture its political and artistic arguments instead of dramatizing them (*The Atlantic*)
- ▶ The dialogue and action feels stilted and unnatural because it was attempting to be profound (*The Atlantic*)
- ▶ This tone meant Treme seemed more like something designed to be admired rather than enjoyed (*The Atlantic*)
- ▶ Concerns about homogenization of New Orleans culture have been voiced since the 1850's and authenticity has always been a fluid concept (*The Atlantic*)

Conclusion

- ▶ Many film and television works have used New Orleans, and some have done it better than others
- ▶ Trying too hard to convey a message makes the content less entertaining, preachy, and contradicts so much of what the “Big Easy” is about
- ▶ It is difficult to balance wanting a product to be a commercial success and trying to tell a story that is honest and authentic
- ▶ New Orleans as a location sends an instant message to viewers and becomes another character in any story
- ▶ The city’s rich and difficult history means there are many stories to tell, it is a place that can mean different things to different people
- ▶ New Orleans will always be a place where television and movies are filmed not just because of tax incentives but because it is unlike anywhere else in America

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