

Hollywood Star: the Griffith Observatory in the Movies

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Abstract. Griffith Observatory's role in the movies is discussed. It has been in so many movies, it should have a star on Hollywood Boulevard. The Observatory's first film credit, *The Phantom Empire*, was shot even before the observatory opened to the public in May, 1935. As a film star, Griffith Observatory fulfilled a variety of predictable and often peripheral functions, but in two movies, *Rebel without a Cause* and *La La Land*, the observatory was key to the theme. Griffith Observatory's relationship with Hollywood is, however, deeper than all of these on-screen close-ups. At times, Griffith Observatory influenced Hollywood, and Hollywood technology, production standards, and storytelling priorities have all, over more than eight decades, been absorbed by Griffith Observatory.

Location, Location, Location

Griffith Observatory, one of southern California's most visible landmarks, is the hood ornament, or bonnet mascot, of Los Angeles. Owned and operated by the City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks (and also independently supported by Griffith Observatory Foundation), Griffith Observatory is an iconic part of the landscape and the most-visited public observatory in the world.¹ It is visible from everywhere in the Los Angeles basin and possesses the best piece of public observatory/planetarium real estate on the planet.

Occupying only a relatively small piece of property, it would fit inside an international professional soccer stadium. Griffith Observatory connects earth and sky visibly, physically, and conceptually. People are drawn to the place to get a little closer to the sky. Once there, they encounter two primary telescopes that work day and night to bring people

¹ The History of Griffith Observatory, <https://griffithobservatory.org/about/observatory-history/> [accessed 13 January 2023]; Stuart W. Leslie and Emily A. Margolis, 'Griffith Observatory: Hollywood's Celestial Theater', *Early Popular Visual Culture* 15, no. 2 (2017): p.227.

eyeball to the universe: the twin Zeiss refractor in the east dome and the triple-beam coelostat in the west dome. In fact, more people have looked through the Zeiss 12-inch refractor on the east side of the roof than any other telescope in the world. More people have seen the magnified face of the sun, spots and all, on Griffith Observatory's coelostat than any place else on earth – since 1935, more than 85 million visitors have entered the Observatory.²

From an unforgettable location on the south slope of Mount Hollywood in Griffith Park, Griffith Observatory overlooks Hollywood and is the best place to view the Hollywood Sign. This partly explains why Griffith Observatory is known around the world. Griffith The Observatory is itself a Hollywood Star with an eighty-eight-year career in motion pictures. It has been in so many movies, television productions, news reports, student films, and commercials, that it deserves to have a star on Hollywood Boulevard's Walk of Fame. Griffith Observatory has been cast as everything from the palace of Ming the Merciless on the planet Mongo in the *Flash Gordon* serials in the 1930s to Jor-el's Hall of Science on Krypton in the 1950s *The Adventures of Superman* television series.



² E. C. Krupp, 'Going Public', in Enrico Maria Corsini, ed., *The Inspiration of Astronomical Phenomena VI* (San Francisco, CA: Astronomical Society of the Pacific, 2011), p.461.

Fig. 1. Griffith Observatory. Photograph, Tom LaBonge.

As shown in Fig. 1, Griffith Observatory overlooks Hollywood from the south slope of Mount Hollywood, on the east side (far right) of this panoramic sweep of part of the motion picture capital, and the Hollywood Sign anchors the west flank of this view, just below the summit of Mount Lee. Larchmont Boulevard, the wide road on the left, heads north toward the Hollywood Hills but is blocked at Melrose Avenue. The high sound stages and water tower of Paramount Pictures Studios, a celebrated Hollywood production company, command the limelight in the centre.

Griffith Hits the Big Screen

Griffith Observatory's first screen role, in *The Phantom Empire* - a Saturday matinee Western-serial, featuring science fiction themes and a ~~singing~~ singing cowboy, launched Gene Autry into his star status. The scenes at Griffith Observatory were shot even before Griffith Observatory first opened to the public on 14 May 1935.³

Continuous use by Hollywood turned Griffith Observatory into a Hollywood Star and iconic Los Angeles location. The observatory grounds hosted a telepathic robot in 1954's *Tobor the Great*. The year before, in *Phantom from Space*, an extra-terrestrial visitor crashes his flying saucer in Santa Monica Bay and like so many southern California tourists heads straight to Griffith Observatory. The Amazing Colossal Man was electrocuted in front of the observatory in the finale of 1958's *War of the Colossal Beast*.

Although identified incorrectly as 'Griffith Park Planetarium', Griffith Observatory is unambiguously affiliated with Hollywood in this mid-twentieth-century automobile travel sticker (Fig. 2). Yet, sometimes Griffith Observatory goes un-credited. An unmistakable image of Griffith Observatory appears in the first frames of *Death from a Distance* (1935), and the film opens with a murder in the Forest Park Planetarium. The planetarium here, however, is a set and not the new and about-to-open Griffith Observatory planetarium in Griffith Park. More than sixty years later, Griffith Observatory stunt-doubles as Springfield Observatory for 'Lisa's Date with Density' (15 December 1996, season 8, show 7, episode 160), the site of her first kiss.

³ E. C. Krupp, 'Public Performance', in David DeVorkin and E. C. Krupp, eds, *Public Astronomy, Los Angeles Style* (Los Angeles: Griffith Observatory, 2021), p.106.

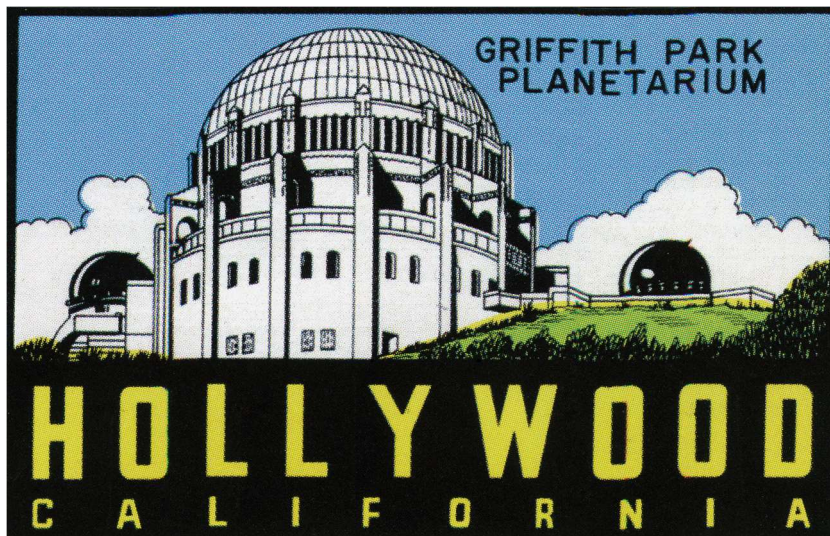


Fig. 2. A mid-twentieth-century automobile travel sticker of Griffith Observatory.

A String of Blockbusters

Arnold Schwarzenegger materialized back from the future on Griffith Observatory's front lawn in *The Terminator*. In real life, the actor eventually wound up in the California Governor's office. That is the cinematic power of Griffith Observatory and another example of the inspiration of astronomical phenomena.

Griffith Observatory returned to pulp fiction in 1991 in Disney's *The Rocketeer*. Griffith Observatory closed for a week to accommodate the shoot. There were Nazis all over the front lawn, and a German war zeppelin seemed to skirt over the domes.

In 1996, in the sweeping and epic aerial opening of *The People vs. Larry Flynt*, Griffith Observatory provided the punch line for a joke about residents of Los Angeles. And in 1999, Steve Martin mocked Hollywood in *Bowfinger* with a movie about making a movie at Griffith Observatory.

Griffith Observatory was the secret Federal headquarters for domestic espionage in *The End of Violence* in 1997, and 1999's *Love Stinks* transformed the front lawn into a romantic and private dance floor. *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* is particularly memorable. On 14 October 2002, after Griffith Observatory had closed for a \$93-million, it performed as a set for one more motion picture before excavation and heavy construction began a five-year renovation and expansion project. The

Charlie's Angels' film crew blew up a car in the horseshoe of Observatory Road, just north of the Astronomers Monument (see Fig. 3).⁴



Fig. 3. Image of *Charlie's Angels'* film crew blowing up a car. Photograph, E. C. Krupp.

The billboard for *Dragnet*, the 1987 Los Angeles Police detective movie based on the celebrated television show, advertised the film with the television show's catchphrase, which also coincided with Griffith Observatory's motto, 'Just the Facts'.⁵ At one point, officer Joe Friday and his girlfriend, parked in a convertible on a night like every night in light-flooded Los Angeles, are starting to fall for each other. She looks up into the night sky from the Observatory's hilltop view of the city and exclaims, 'Oh, Joe, look at the stars. There must be dozens of them'. And in 1987, when the 1950s television show *Dragnet* was turned into a motion picture, Griffith Observatory appeared on advertising billboards and played a role in the film. The Los Angeles police detectives and Griffith Observatory embrace a common principle: 'Just the facts' (Fig. 4).

⁴ E. C. Krupp, 'Observatory in Exile', *Griffith Observer* 67, no. 10 (2003): pp.6–18.

⁵ E. C. Krupp, 'An Icon in the Landscape', *Griffith Observer* 52, no. 7 (1988): p.13.

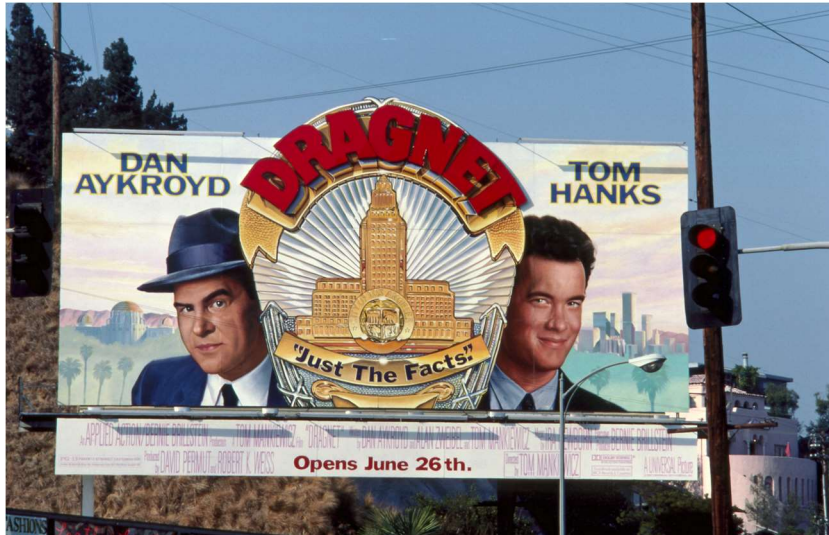


Fig. 4. *Dragnet* billboard. Photograph, E.C. Krupp.

Despite the 30 October 2006 deadline for Griffith Observatory's reopening, the observatory was obligated, before reopening, to accommodate *Transformers*, in which giant alien shapeshifting robots made everyone wonder if the City of Los Angeles Department of Public Works Bureau of Engineering had done its calculations correctly.

It is impossible to catalogue all of Griffith Observatory's credits — on the big screen, in television drama, in documentaries, on the news, in the weather reports, in advertising, and on the Internet. They total thousands. *Rebel without a Cause* was, however, a watershed. In 1955, it was the first movie to portray Griffith Observatory as Griffith Observatory. The Observatory's cosmic vocation was a key symbolic driver of the movie's theme, and the film even included a sequence in a planetarium show. That's why there is a *Rebel without a Cause* Monument, with a bust of James Dean and a perfect view of the Hollywood Sign, on the west side of the hilltop (Fig. 5).⁶ The Monument salutes the first film to cast the observatory as itself and frame the film's meaning with the observatory's astronomical

⁶ Mark Pine, ed., *Griffith Observatory Reopening Guide 2006* (Los Angeles: Griffith Observatory, 2006), sec.5, p.4.; Kara Knack, 'Griffith Observatory, James Dean, and the Universe', *Griffith Observer* 79, no. 5 (2015): pp.2–16, 24; Krupp, 'Public Performance', p.107. <https://griffithobservatory.org/exhibits/exterior-exhibits/rebel-without-a-cause-monument/> [accessed 13 January 2023].

identity. Co-starring with James Dean, Griffith Observatory provides a picture point for the Hollywood Sign.

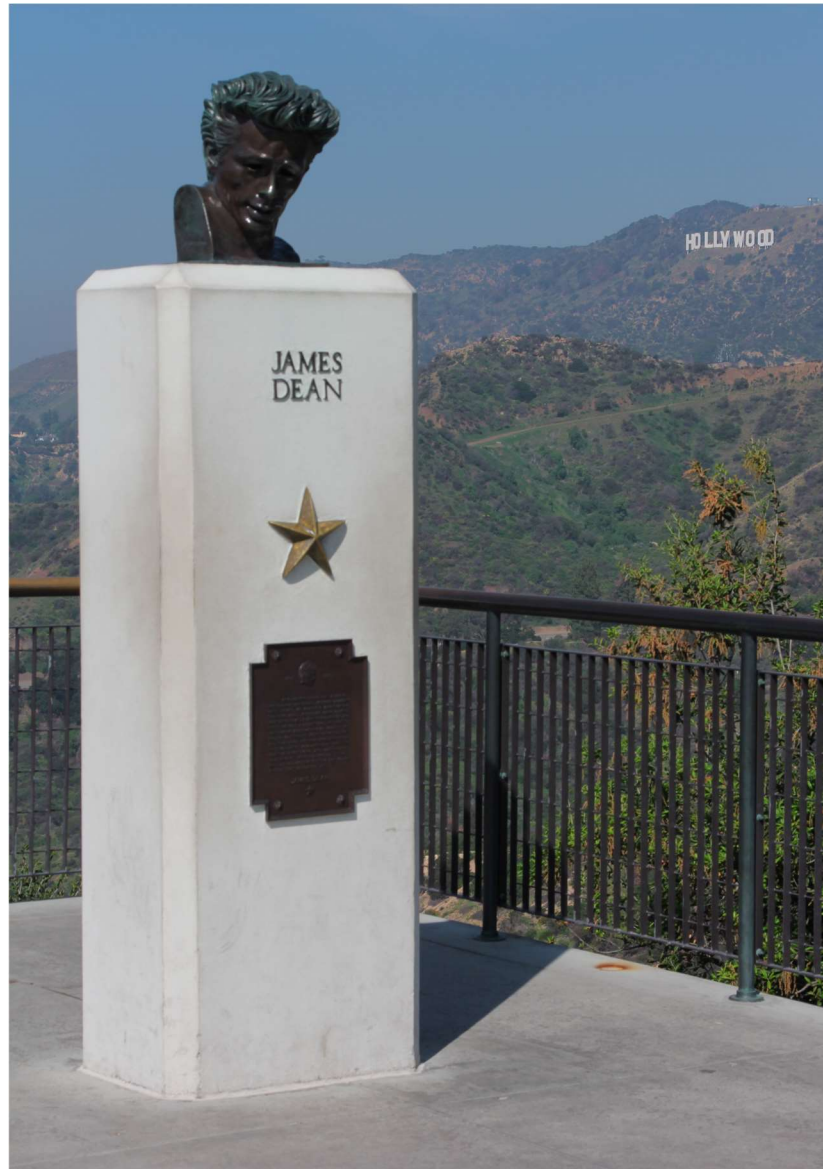


Fig. 5. Griffith Observatory's *Rebel without a Cause* Monument.
Photograph Griffith Observatory, Anthony Cook.

When a production team for *La La Land* booked a shoot at Griffith Observatory in 2016, I didn't think much about it. The title seemed uninspired, and I figured the movie would be more of the same.

On the day of the filming, with the Observatory packed with crew, monitors, and other equipment, I stopped to watch on a live monitor the shoot of Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling sneaking into the exhibit halls. I was stunned. The cameras moved so elegantly, so unexpectedly, so deliciously, so singularly from the Tesla Coil and into and around the W.M. Keck Foundation Central Rotunda and up to the Hugo Ballin murals and down to the Foucault pendulum, I knew and said the movie would be a classic and that Griffith Observatory would make its most profound appearance since *Rebel without a Cause*. *La La Land* won four Academy Awards. Like *Rebel without a Cause*, *La La Land* leverages its theme with the meaning and character of Griffith Observatory. Griffith Observatory is key to the film.

The most recent Hollywood Griffith Observatory blockbuster is *Adele: One Night Only*, a live performance recorded on-site at the observatory, which practically stole the show with its grandeur and is in part responsible for the five Creative Arts Emmys the effort won.

The Art and Craft of Hollywood

For Hollywood, however, Griffith Observatory has been more than just a set, more than just another pretty face. The relationship between Hollywood and the Observatory is deeper than all of Griffith Observatory's close-ups on the Silver Screen. Hollywood and Griffith Observatory have influenced each other, and the proximity of Hollywood is one the factors that determined the character of Griffith Observatory. At times, Griffith Observatory influenced Hollywood; Hollywood's technical skills have at times been hired by the Observatory. Hollywood technology, production standards, and storytelling have, over nearly nine decades, been absorbed by Griffith Observatory and integrated into its programmes and productions.⁷

Griffith Observatory's engagement with Hollywood's crafts specialists is evident on entry through the North Doors to the W.M. Keck Foundation Central Rotunda on the historic level of the building. The room is dominated by the Foucault pendulum at the centre and by the Hugo Ballin murals that put celestial mythology on the octagonal ceiling and panels of the sciences on the upper walls. Ballin possessed multiple skills, among

⁷ Krupp, 'Public Performance', pp.100–21.

them film production. Two of the six artists who provided sculptures of the six luminous astronomers on the Astronomers Monument also had Hollywood connections.⁸ George Stanley created the sculpture at the entrance to the Hollywood Bowl and also designed the Oscar. Archibald Garner worked as a designer at 20th Century Fox Studios.

Roger Hayward created a giant model of part of the moon for the original Griffith Observatory exhibit program. Visitors viewing it as the lighting changed to suggest the moon's orbital movement sensed they had travelled to the moon for a close-up of the surface. Hayward also worked for Disney and created the moon model that was used to make the special effects for Disneyland's 1955 Rocket to the Moon ride. Disney also consulted with Griffith Observatory's Dr Clarence Cleminshaw. Dr Robert S. Richardson, another astronomer who worked at Griffith Observatory, collaborated with pioneering space artist Chesley Bonestell for special effects in *Destination Moon*, the 1950 film that attempted to portray future space travel realistically. Bonestell also painted landscape panels for Griffith Observatory's planetarium, where Dr Alter, Griffith Observatory's first Director, pioneered space travel shows that transported audiences to the moon, through the solar system, and beyond. In time, other Hollywood artists leveraged their skills and imagination on behalf of wraparound planetarium landscapes. Michael Minor, who had propelled the visuals for *Star Trek II*, contrived several landscapes and visual effects for Griffith Observatory in the 1970s. In 1973, Lois Cohen began working as a planetarium artist and by the time she retired had painted hundreds of panoramas and other panels of illustration. Before her career at Griffith Observatory, however, she had designed the famous hot-air balloon in Michael Todd's *Around the World in 80 Days*, had worked as an illustrator at Disney, and had many other film credits, including *An American in Paris* and *Ziegfeld Follies*.⁹

An Arc of Education and Entertainment

In a sense, Hollywood was already in Griffith Observatory's DNA before the Observatory was designed. The fundamental principles for Griffith Observatory were detailed by its benefactor, Colonel Griffith J. Griffith, in his will, which in 1919 specified the inclusion of a movie theatre because he understood the power of theatricality and wanted to ensure that astronomy and science were experienced immersively and emotionally. He

⁸ Anthony Cook, 'Six Decades with Six Astronomers on the Front Lawn of Griffith Observatory', *Griffith Observer* 58, no. 11 (1994): pp.1–11, 21.

⁹ Krupp, 'Public Performance', pp.108–12.

consulted with local studios about equipment and films before his death. By the time Griffith Observatory was going into design, more than a decade later, the Zeiss planetarium projector had been invented. The Griffith Observatory stakeholders determined that the inclusion of a planetarium theatre would coincide with Griffith's objectives.¹⁰ On opening in 1935, Griffith Observatory's planetarium was the third in the United States, the first west of the Mississippi, and the first on the Pacific rim.

As early as 1936, Dr Dinsmore Alter wanted to transform Griffith Observatory's planetarium into a more dynamic vehicle, where narration prevailed over exposition and where a populist vision merged astronomical spectacle with cinematic showmanship.¹¹ Alter was unable to develop the transformative technology he imagined until 1948 and his *A Trip to the Moon* planetarium show. Its 'space-travel' projectors immediately turned it into the most popular planetarium show in Griffith Observatory history. Late, overflow shows had to be added most nights. In the two years that followed, Alter created seven different space-travel planetarium shows, and he continued to develop more elaborate projection technology, designed and fabricated by Griffith Observatory technical staff, until his retirement in 1958. He required a variety of devices, including variable-focus lenses, and so rocketed his audiences to fanning luminous clouds of the Orion nebula, to the unimagined stellar density of M13—the globular cluster in Hercules—and to the rippling arms and bulging core of the Andromeda galaxy. A variety of special effects was contrived, including a rotating rocky asteroid that just missed colliding with the planetarium audience.

The Griffith Observatory efforts caught Hollywood's eye. The space-travel shows particularly influenced Disney, which subsequently produced and broadcast animated space-travel shows on television and certainly inspired the two viewscreens in Disneyland's Rocket to the Moon ride.

Alter knew what he was doing. In 1941, he wrote, 'It is necessary that the demonstration give a strictly scientific account of the celestial phenomena, dramatized, however, in order that it may appeal to people who know no astronomy at all, and thus cause them to come to an

¹⁰ Gordon Whitnall, 'The Founding of Griffith Observatory', *Griffith Observer* 24, no. 5 (1960): pp.55–57.

¹¹ Dinsmore Alter, 'A Trip to the Moon and the Apparatus Which Produces It', *Griffith Observer* 12, no. 8 (1948): pp.85–88, 94.

entertainment from which, incidentally, they will profit'.¹² The Sirens of Hollywood had sung in the studios below the Observatory, and Alter had heard them. None of this seems remarkable in our era. In Alter's time, it was visionary.

Alter was, of course, allied with Griffith Observatory's educational objectives. He was, however, also bonded with spectacle. Although he never compromised accuracy, he valued simplicity and was driven to achieve maximum theatrical impact. These values continue at Griffith Observatory to the present and are evident in the technology and the programming of the Samuel Oschin Planetarium, where all-dome digital animation partners with the incomparable Zeiss Mark IX Universarium star projector, with an original musical soundtrack that meets cinematic standards, and with a live performer in what may be the most carefully crafted entertainment dome in the world and the most technically complex theatre in southern California.¹³ Production of *Signs of Life* required Griffith Observatory to build and operate its own animation studio, with render farm, the Griffith Observatory Satellite, on the other side of Griffith Park. The studio, however, is useless without the artists. The 8K, 60 frames-per-second production required an experienced producer, an experienced director, digital graphics specialists, and motion-picture-production talent. Those resources were available because Hollywood is next door, and through them Griffith Observatory's theatrical heritage was informed by Hollywood production standards and storytelling priorities.

Griffith Observatory reopened after its five-year redevelopment closure with the grandeur of a Hollywood première on 29 October 2006. Light that left the star Gienah (epsilon Cygni) in 1935, the year Griffith Observatory first opened, was captured by the Observatory's 12-inch Zeiss refractor telescope on the east (left) side of the roof and redirected to the *O* in 'Observatory' above the monumental north doors. It then triggered the projection of a star-spangled landscape of Milky Way in Cygnus the Swan across the observatory's domes and walls to signal Griffith Observatory's official return to space (see Fig. 6).

¹² Dinsmore Alter, 'The Sky as a Show', *Griffith Observer* 5, no. 8 (1941): pp.92–94.

¹³ E. C. Krupp, 'Navigating Celestial Renewal at Griffith Observatory', in Jon Elvert, ed., *Proceedings of the 21st International Planetarium Society Conference* (Hilo, HI and Baton Rouge, LA: International Planetarium Society, 2013), pp.46–51.



Fig. 6. Griffith Observatory, reopened after its five-year redevelopment closure. Photograph Griffith Observatory, Anthony Cook.

Summary

There are three things that make Griffith Observatory what it is: Location. Location. Location. In part, that location means Hollywood, not just its landmarks and boulevards but its grip on the imagination. From the beginning, Griffith Observatory has been a Hollywood heartthrob and for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and for the entire astronomical universe. Griffith Observatory deserves an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor.