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Cinemasces: Cinematic Sublimity and Spatial Configurations

— or —

Learning from Los Angeles

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of

Philosophy in Film and TV

by

Carolin Kirchner

2018

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Cinemascesapes: Cinematic Sublimity and Spatial Configurations

— or —

Learning from Los Angeles

by

Carolin Kirchner

Doctor of Philosophy in Film and TV

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Kathleen A McHugh

Due to the shift in production practices and the availability of lighter camera equipment in the mid-1960s, filmmakers began to cinematically explore Los Angeles (LA) many environments. Utilizing the city's diverse neighborhoods, unique architectural styles, and geographical topography, their films created imaginary spaces that sought to specifically represent LA, but also reflected post-war American urban restructuring processes in general. European filmmakers John Boorman, Jacques Demy, Agnès Varda, and Michelangelo Antonioni seemed to be especially perceptive regarding the specificity of the spaces they encountered in Los Angeles, and their films illustrate ambivalent feelings toward the built environment—feelings that seem to run parallel to cultural and theoretical investigations taking place in the academy. Aided by the founding of the UCLA School of Architecture and Urban Planning, a new wave of scholars and theorists utilized

Los Angeles in their writing as the most important case study for the postmodern megalopolis. Like Boorman, Demy, Varda, and Antonioni, neither of the leaders of this theoretical interest in Los Angeles— Kevin Lynch, Jane Jacobs, Reyner Banham, and Edward Soja —were native Californians. Thus, the films in question need to be considered within the broader framework of a developing critical spatial awareness characterized by the re-evaluation of lived environment and built space, which was shaped by an outsider’s perspective.

The main concern of this dissertation is to establish a connection between artistic depictions of space and the socio-cultural analysis of spatial realities, landscape and lived environment, the sublime and the everyday. The concept of the sublime landscape constitutes the theoretical framework for my analysis of cityscapes. While the sublime as both theoretical and aesthetic concept serves as the lynchpin of this project, I do not provide a definitive genealogy of the sublime. Rather I situate Boorman’s *Point Blank* (1967), Demy’s *Model Shop* (1969), Varda’s *Lions Love* (1969), and Antonioni’s *Zabriskie Point* (1970) as engaging with tropes that can be found in theorizations of the sublime landscape, while speaking to an entirely different spatial experience—one that is entirely postmodern.

This dissertation of Carolin Kirchner is approved.

Chon A Noriega

Stephen D Mamber

Dell Upton

Kathleen A McHugh

University of California, Los Angeles

2018

Dedication

For Ajus,

who is as charming as Don Ameche

as witty as William Powell

and as firm a believer in dialogic ethics as Martin Buber.

To the man who continues to challenge me and always asks the ‘right’ questions.

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And Mona, thank you for your support, friendship, and close reading of my dissertation.

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Vita

EDUCATION

- 2012 **San Francisco State University:** M.A. in Cinema Studies,
Thesis: “Aesthetics, Apathy, and the Myth of the Genius in Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Lili Marleen* (1981)”
- 2010 **Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz:** M.A. in Cinema and Media Studies,
History and Comparative Literature
Thesis: “There’s no place like home: The Depiction of the Home Front in the films of the 1940s”

PUBLICATIONS

CHAPTERS:

- “Traces of Noir: Neo-Modernist Revisionism and the vernacular cityscape in Jacques Deray’s *The Outside Man* (1972).” In *Urban Noir: New York and Los Angeles in Shadow and Light*, edited by Cynthia J. Miller and James J. Ward, 89-104. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017.
- “Cover Girl.” In *Stilepochen des Films: Classical Hollywood*, edited by Norbert Grob and Elisabeth Bronfen, 268-272. Stuttgart: Reclam, 2013.
- “*Memorias del Subdesarrollo/Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968).” In *Encyclopedia of Cuban Cinema*, edited by Salvador Murguia and Sean O’Reilly: 5 manuscript pp. [accepted]
- “Sublime abject or abject sublime—Sublimation and Jouissance in Andrzej Żulawski *Szamanka* (1997).” In *Negative Pleasures: The Cinematic Sublime*, edited by Nathan Carroll: 20 manuscript pp. [accepted]

ARTICLES:

- “Aesthetics, Apathy, and the Myth of the Genius in Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Lili Marleen* (1981).” *Cinematic Codes Review* 1, vol. 2 (Summer 2016): 27-50.
- “Fassbinder’s Germany: (Un)bewusste Geschichtsschreibung.” *New German Review*, Volume 26: 12 manuscript pp. [in press]
- “The Production of an aesthetic Thirdspace: The vernacular cityscape in Gary Beydler’s *Pasadena Freeway Stills* (1974).” *The Arts in Society: International Journal of Arts Theory and History*: 17 manuscript pp. [accepted]
- “Political Modernism and Art Cinema: Ennui as Structuring Principle in *Dillinger è morto* (Marco Ferreri, 1969).” *Pacific Coast Philology*: 23 manuscript pp. [accepted]

CONFERENCE PAPERS

- 04/2018 **Association for Art History—Annual Conference:**
“The artist-mediated image: Embodied experience and the vernacular cityscape in Gary Beydler’s *Pasadena Freeway Stills* (1974)”

- 03/2017 **SCMS (Society of Cinema and Media Studies):**
 “Traces of Noir: Neo-modernist revisionism and the vernacular cityscape in Jacques Deray’s *The Outside Man* (1972)”
- 11/2016 **PAMLA (Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Conference):**
 “The Last Frontier: The Suburbanization of the desert in Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Zabriskie Point* (1970)”
- 10/2016 **MPCA (Midwest Popular and American Culture Association Conference):**
 “Flânerie and the Sublime Spectator: Jacques Demy’s *Model Shop* (1969)”
- 08/2016 **Eleventh International Conference “The Arts in Society”:**
 “The Threat of Placeless Spaces: Places and Non-places in John Boorman’s *Point Blank* (1967)”
- 07/2016 **Fifth Annual London Studies Conference, Film and Media 2016:**
 “Political Modernism and Art Cinema: *Dillinger is Dead*”
- 04/2016 **UCLA’s Department of Germanic Languages Conference:**
 “Fassbinder’s Germany: (Un)bewusste Geschichtsschreibung”
- 03/2016 **University of Indiana, Bloomington, 10th Annual Landscape, Space, and Place Conference:**
 “Towards an Aesthetic of the Revolutionary Sublime: Counter-Aesthetic and Counter-Culture in Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Zabriskie Point* (1970)”
- 11/2011 **SFSU’s 13th Annual Cinema Conference:**
 “Heavenly Bodies Revisited: Stardom, Hollywood Myth-making and the Biopic in the 1950s and 1960s”

AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

- 2017-2018 UCLA Dissertation Year Fellowship
- 2012-2015 UCLA Regents Fellowship
- 2010-2012 Fulbright Scholarship (2010-2012)
- 2010-2011 Fulbright Gateway Program and Enrichment Seminar
- 2011 Quadrille Ball scholarship
- 2009-2010 Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz Förderungsstipendium for M.A. research

FOREWORD

This project is based on a set of relationships—the interaction between actual space and depictions of space, the sublime object and the sublime experience, the producer and the recipient of the text, the engagement between aesthetic text and theoretical discourse, as well as the readerly, and writerly response. In it I analyze the depiction of post-war Los Angeles in films of European directors that were produced between 1967 and 1970. I flank this discussion, when appropriate, with literary, socio-cultural, historical, aesthetic texts, and works of art that display a similar concern for the postmodern cityscape, thereby emphasizing the significance of urban spaces as an aesthetic and narrative trope in the artistic as well as the theoretical production of that time. In all of these texts it is the sublime, in some shape, form, or wording that “rears its [not so very ugly] head.” If we keep in mind that the sublime is by definition subjective, in that it is the subject that bestows the object with a sublime quality, my selection of texts is by no means definitive. And even though what I construe as sublime in these texts is shaped by both my biography—as a European living in Los Angeles—and my understanding of the term, I intend to exemplify what particular aspects in them have led me to situate them within the concept of the sublime. While this might not lend itself to a general theory of cinematic sublimity, as Lap-Chuen notes, “we can take objects construed as sublime as providing...terms to construe the sublime.”¹

¹ Tsang Lap-Chuen, *The Sublime. Groundwork towards a Theory* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1998), 45.

INTRODUCTION - CINEMATIC SPATIALITY AND THE QUESTION OF THE SUBLIME CITYSCAPE

The match of film and world, is a matter of representation, and representation is in turn a matter of discourse, of the organization of the images, the definition of the ‘views’, their construction.²

Depictions of landscapes, as complex combinations of found or chosen features, emphasize the incredible variety of possible interrelations that make up the world; cinematic landscapes...rely on the frame to both suggest a reading and limit the range of interpretations.³

Thus far, the scholarly discourse on the filmic depiction of spatiality has revolved around two poles, “land/cityscape cinema” and “land/cityscape *in* cinema.” While “land/cityscape cinema” refers to the medium’s ability to render space aesthetically, “land/cityscape *in* cinema” denotes cinema’s potential to “redeem” physical space; to function as a sort of “moving pictures” archive of actual geographical spaces/places. The former discourse interrelates cinematic spatiality to spatial representation in other visual arts—such as painting and photography—and outlines the medium’s contribution to the landscape tradition due to its ability to transcend the two-dimensional and static spatiality of photographic and painterly still lifes by adding movement. The latter discourse focuses on the cinematic image’s indexical quality to document the features of a given space either as a visual manifestation of or aesthetic commentary on certain spatial conditions.

While both categories focus on the content (“what” the camera shows of the landscape) and the form (“how” the spatial content is rendered), a clear distinction exists between the two regarding the function of the depicted space. Whereas P. Adam Sitney in his seminal essay “Landscape in the Cinema. The Rhythms of the World and the Camera” argues that the genre of

² Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 26.

³ Graeme Harper and Jonathan Rayner, “Introduction - Cinema and Landscape,” in: *Cinema and Landscape*, ed. Graeme Harper and Jonathan Rayner (Bristol: Intellect, 2010), 17.

landscape cinema is limited to the films of European and North American avant-garde filmmakers, Martin Lefebvre's notion of "landscape cinema" allows for an expansion of the category to narrative films.⁴ For Lefebvre, the narrative functions as "either that which conceals landscape or that which may be interpreted to reveal it," instead of just providing a setting for the fictional events.⁵ In contrast to Sitney, Lefebvre actively considers more recent currents in anthropology, cultural geography, and urban studies in which the concept of landscape is applied to the lived environment and does not merely connote a "view of nature emancipated from the presence of human figures and offering itself for contemplation."⁶ Furthermore, as his discussion of the landscape as "aesthetic genre" acknowledges the discourse on the same in art history, it has informed my investigation of cinematic landscapes.⁷ While both Sitney and Lefebvre have contributed immensely to the discourse on cinematic landscapes, Edward Dimendberg's *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (2004) functions as a model for my investigation of cityscapes. It is his analysis of the ways narrative films have commented on and engaged with the massive urban restructuring processes in post-war American cities, in particular Los Angeles, that has instructed my approach.⁸

⁴ Cf. P. Adams Sitney, "Landscape in the Cinema. The Rhythms of the World and the Camera," in: *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, ed. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 103.

⁵ Martin Lefebvre, "On Landscape in Narrative Cinema," *Canadian Journal for Film Studies* Vol. 20, No. 1 (Spring 2011): 76.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁷ While Lefebvre mentions the Kantian sublime in regard to the aesthetic rendering of landscapes, he does not employ the concept for his analysis of cinematic landscapes.

⁸ More recently in *Film, Mobility and Urban Space* (2012) Les Roberts has coined the term "media-city" to describe a web of different topics such as the image of the city in visual media, as well as cinema as a media archive of urbanism. Describing his goal as "mining the temporal layers

Instead of arguing that the films I selected ‘created’ the genre of “cityscape cinema,” my project contextualizes filmic renderings of urban landscapes within the broader framework of a developing critical spatial awareness characterized by the re-evaluation of lived environments and built spaces. My selection of texts—John Boorman’s *Point Blank* (1967), Jacques Demy’s *Model Shop* (1969), Agnes Varda’s *Lions Love* (1969), and Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Zabriskie Point* (1970)—is based on four criteria: First, their time frame coincides with the decline of the Hollywood studio system leading to a quest for new talent as well as a change of production practices. Second, the period marks the origin of the scholarly discourse around urban restructuring processes in which Los Angeles oftentimes served as an exemplary case study for a new form of urbanity. Third, all four films were helmed by European filmmakers and present a unique mediation on the cityscape of the time, often “redeeming” and aesthetically rendering then-contemporary urban spaces. And fourth, the texts employ tropes that can be found in theorizations of the sublime landscape, while speaking to an entirely different spatial experience—one that is entirely postmodern.

Particularly, the fourth criterion demands further explanation because even though the notion of the sublime has taken up a significant position in art history, the concept has been almost irrelevant for the analysis of cinematic spatiality. If the concept of the sublime is invoked in film theoretical writings, the focus is either placed solely on the sublime quality of landscape depictions—thereby continuing the line of thought proposed by Immanuel Kant—or the very notion of a cinematic sublime is refuted entirely. For example, Ross Gibson asserts that, “the

of visuality and urban form” in order to “confront the material and symbolic landscapes of present and future urban space,” Roberts envisions cinematic depictions of spatiality as a useful analytic tool for understanding urban space and the discourse on that space.

See: Les Roberts, *Film, Mobility, and Urban Space. A Cinematic Geography of Liverpool* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), 5.

camera is not a machine designed for expressing sublimity - either of the Romantic pantheistic kind or the post-modernist, supra-systematic kind.”⁹ In order to reappropriate the concept of the sublime for my analysis of cityscapes while incorporating it into film studies, it is my main concern to establish the connection between the discourse on cinematic landscapes and the painterly landscape tradition. While the sublime as both theoretical and aesthetic concept forms the lynchpin of this project, I do not provide a definitive genealogy of the sublime. Rather I focus on commonalities between writings on the landscape sublime and the theoretical discussion of Los Angeles as put forward by urban theorist, architectural scholars, and sociologists such as Edward Soja, Reyner Banham, Mike Davis, and Allen Scott. At first glance the discourse on the artistic rendering of space and the socio-cultural analysis of spatial realities seem to inhabit antagonistic positions, but I demonstrate that the vocabulary used to describe both spatial experiences and the spaces themselves is consistent. Rather than positioning my selection of texts as exemplary, uniform manifestations of filmic space’s “overall meaning,” or grand narrative, I offer one possible interpretive framework that furthers a theorization of the cinematic sublime.

Regarding the organization of this dissertation, I first provide an outline of the ways the sublime has been theorized in various disciplines, focusing on those that are relevant for my later analysis of cinematic texts. In the second chapter I situate the cinematic “spatial” turn in the mid-1960s in the larger cultural framework characterized by the inchoate scholarly interest in the city as uniquely American urban form. In the next four chapters I analyze the depiction of Los Angeles in *Point Blank*, *Model Shop*, *Lions Love*, and *Zabriskie Point* in regard to their engagement with tropes characteristic of the sublime. In chapter 3 “The Picturesque vs. the Sublime Cityscape -

⁹ Ross Gibson, “Camera natura: landscape in Australian feature films,” *Framework* 22/23 (Autumn 1983): 50.

John Boorman's *Point Blank*," I focus on the film's juxtaposition of Los Angeles as non-place and San Francisco as place. Additionally, I argue that while the former is associated with qualities ascribed to sublime landscapes in that it is a threatening "illegible" space ushering the protagonist into a state of alienated isolation, the latter is depicted as picturesque. In chapter 4 "Flânerie and the Sublime Spectator - Jacques Demy's *Model Shop*" I analyze the film's engagement with Los Angeles through the figure of an Americanized flâneur which functions as a *Rückenfigur* [back figure] opening the spectator's eyes to the sublimity of the vernacular cityscape. In contrast to Demy's focus on the urban passage, Varda's *Lions Love*, as I discuss in chapter 5 "Fragmentation, Excess, and a Feminine Sublime," contrasts the anonymous exterior environment with the seemingly safe "home," while juxtaposing Hollywood and Los Angeles, Los Angeles and New York, as well as old and new Hollywood. As Varda is mainly concerned with imaginary rather than geographical spaces/places, it is the question of the sublime form and the feminine sublime that informs my discussion of the film. In chapter 6 "Towards a Revolutionary Sublime: Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point*," I discuss the director's depiction of the urban and rural spaces as part of his larger investigation of "the American scene" of both the youth movement and the establishment. His land-and cityscapes display features of the sublime, while also inscribing the concept with a political dimension.

CHAPTER 1: CONSTRUING THE SUBLIME

We...need to articulate not only *how the sublime works*, but also...*what it is for*...¹⁰

There is no essence of the sublime. Instead what we encounter is...shared “family resemblances.”¹¹

The sublime is gathering place for all the elements in art that the Cartesian aesthetic had suppressed or not accounted for.¹²

The sublime evades a singularly universal definition for both the experience brought about by the aesthetic encounter with the sublime object as well as the topological space or object deemed to bring about this experience. In contrast to “beauty”, the sublime, as Mary Mothersill summarizes, is not a “standing concept.”¹³ Rather, it can be seen as a collection of ideas that have to be evaluated in both their local and historical environment as they change drastically over time and in respect to the cultural context in which they are perceived.¹⁴ In his book, *The American Sublime*, Rob Wilson similarly concludes that the sublime has to be historicized so that it does not “degenerate into one of those vapid critical terms which, like auratic and demonic, one inflicts nowadays mostly on italics.”¹⁵ Before I come back to the discursive problems caused by the concept of the sublime, I will outline a set of preliminary observations regarding the ontology of

¹⁰ Rob Wilson, *The American Sublime. The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 27.

¹¹ David. B. Morris, “Gothic Sublimity,” *New Literary History*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (1985): 300.

¹² Samuel Holt Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 233.

¹³ Mary Mothersill, *Beauty Restored* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 232.

¹⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, 232f.

¹⁵ Wilson, *American Sublime*, 169.

the conceptual sublime that can serve as a basis for understanding the term. Following Tsang Lap-Chuen's definition, these aspects are:

- I) The subject *construes* the object in a particular way.
- II) The object *evokes* in the subject certain thoughts and reactions.
- III) The subject is in a certain kind of *affective* state with regard to the object.
- IV) The object is taken to *instantiate* something important in a particular way for the subject.¹⁶

Lap-Chuen's useful groundwork accounts for the relation between the subject and the object in which the object is (subjectively) construed as "sublime" object, while then also bringing about an affective state that allows the subject to go beyond his/her initial construction of the object as inanimate, subjectifying the object in return. Thus, while the subject's faculty of reason is at first overturned by the unexpected affective change the object brings about, we are able to comprehend this "flow of phenomenal experiences...by abbreviating the spatio-temporal complexity of the phenomenal work."¹⁷ The encounter with a sublime object forces us to question the boundary between self and other, conscious and unconscious, perception and imagination, rational and phenomenological experience, material reality (the "real") and immaterial thought (the "ideal"). As such, the encounter also offers us a different affective engagement with our surroundings or everyday life in which the sublime object *qua* its aesthetic rendering "reveals a foundation in ultimate structures, which are immanent to, but customarily concealed within, that life."¹⁸ Lap-Chuen speaks here to locating the sublime in the everyday where it might not at first be recognizable, while additionally asserting that the construction of the sublime object is

¹⁶ Tsang Lap-Chuen. *The Sublime*, 25.

¹⁷ Paul Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime. From Morality to Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) 171.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 172.

predicated on its socio-spatial context. Other scholars such as Rob Wilson and Mary Mothersill have also concluded that the definition of the term is culturally, spatially, and historically informed, thereby arguing against a universal understanding of the term. Rather, Wilson distinguishes three eras or periods—the romantic, the modern, and the postmodern—in which the concept has undergone significant changes. In the romantic sublime (as proposed by Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke) the locus of the sublime is in nature, while in the modern and postmodern sublime the experience is displaced to urban space and oftentimes concerned with, but not identical to, technology.¹⁹ Additionally Kant’s notion of the sublime is rooted in his belief in transcendence; and in the postmodern sublime, the dialogue between man and God has been entirely superseded by “an implied dialogue between man and various technologies.”²⁰ Starting with the Kantian sublime this chapter will provide an overview of the changes the concept has undergone.

The Kantian Sublime

Before Kant, there was *On the Sublime* (περι υψους) dated to 1st Century AD by an unknown author, though it has been attributed to Dionysius Longinus. While Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux’s translation of the treatise 1674 brought the term into the vernacular, Immanuel Kant’s *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764) and *Critique of Judgment* (1790) initiated a renewed interest in and more vigorous inquiry into the sublime during the late 17th and early 18th century. While Longinus used the term to describe the aesthetics and effects of rhetoric, Kant came to define it as mode of consciousness brought about by an encounter with

¹⁹ Cf. Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime*, 164.

²⁰ Wilson, *American Sublime*, 32.

nature. He asserts, “the sublime is not to be sought in things of nature, but only in our ideas.”²¹ The sublime experience arises out of the cognitive failure of the mind to connect “the aesthetical estimation of magnitude formed by the imagination” with “the estimation of the same formed by reason” bringing about a feeling of pain or “negative pleasure.”²² But this temporary failure of our cognitive ability to form a concept or comprehend the infinity of nature is ultimately resolved as our faculty of reason allows us to form new categories of understanding. Our understanding is predicated on our capacity to reflectively judge an object, and Kant differentiates four reflective judgments; the agreeable, the good, the beautiful, and the sublime. While the agreeable is purely subjective and the good is the objectively ethical, the beautiful and the sublime have a character of subjective universality with teleological implications. For Kant, a judgment of beauty is informed by pleasure or displeasure.²³ Thus, when an object is observed as suitable for cognition, the experience of free play between the understanding and imagination causes the subject to experience pleasure.²⁴ Importantly, the concept of aesthetic judgment is subjective but universal because as Kant notes “[i]f someone likes something and is conscious that he himself does so without any interest, then he cannot help judging that it must contain a basis for being liked that holds for everyone.”²⁵ For Kant, the built environment—and everything that is not “nature,” either geographical features or meteorological phenomena such as lightning or thunderstorms—does not

²¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Nicholas Walker, and James Creed Meredith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 80.

²² Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 82.

²³ Cf. Monk, *The Sublime*, 8.

²⁴ Cf. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 325.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 53f.

constitute a potential site for subliminal encounters. Instead architecture, a painting, or an object can be beautiful if it fulfills a purpose and/or adheres to an ideal type.²⁶ For example, a building can be characterized as beautiful due to its location, architectural style, its function, as well as its embeddedness in the cityscape. In contrast to the beautiful, the Kantian sublime is defined as purposeless—or the purpose is incomprehensible to us—and “formless” in that we cannot judge it according to an ideal archetypal conception of the object.

Presenting the Unrepresentable - Sublime Content vs. Sublime Form

Two aspects of the Kantian sublime—sublime content and form—have proven challenging to theorizations of the sublime as normative category for the evaluation of aesthetic works. Furthermore, a distinction between the types of sublime objects is necessary. On the one hand, these are ones we encounter in the material world (*I and the Abyss*), including both natural and urban space. On the other, they can be artistic objects representing a mediated perspective—that of the artist. While for Kant aesthetic objects are of secondary importance, the discourse on the sublime since the late nineteenth century has been concerned mainly with the aesthetic mediation of the sublime experience through works of art.²⁷ Furthermore, by defining the sublime as vast and infinite beyond comprehension as well as formless and thus, beyond representation, Kant seems to negate the possibility of artistically mediated sublime experiences. It is this question of representation that forms the basis for Jean-Francois Lyotard’s “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” (first published in 1984) and Malcolm Andrews’ “Astonished beyond Expression” (1999). While both pose a similar question—“How does one represent that which, almost by definition, is

²⁶ Cf. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 85f.

²⁷ Cf. Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime*, 152.

unpresentable, is ‘beyond expression’?”—their conclusions about the artistic rendering of the sublime diverge along the lines of sublime image and sublime content.²⁸ Whereas Lyotard discusses an experiential sublime brought about by abstract avant-garde art, Andrews focuses on the figurative rendering of sublime content in landscape paintings. The sublime content, or Andrews’ tropes of the “landscape sublime” still adhere to the tropes established in the Kantian sublime—mainly the immensity and vastness of the natural world. Appropriating Kant’s distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, Andrews points to the difference between the picturesque—aiming at representing a uniform, familiar, and commodified spatiality—and the sublime, which “happens anywhere, once the film of familiarity is lifted or pierced” and thereby creates an “aesthetic disturbance” that “dislocate[s] and renew[s] vision.”²⁹ While Andrews discusses recurring visual themes constituting the genre of the “landscape sublime,” Lyotard uses Barnett Newman’s 1948 manifesto “The Sublime is Now” as a starting point in order to re-appropriate the Kantian sublime for his analysis of abstract expressionism.³⁰ In the article, Lyotard asks how the sublime can be understood “as a ‘here and now’?” and concludes that the title of Newman’s essay has to be understood “not as *The Sublime is Now* but as *Now the Sublime is Like This*.”³¹ Through the repeated use of the word “now,” Lyotard emphasizes that the concept “isn’t

²⁸ Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 142.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

³⁰ see Barnett Newman, “The Sublime is Now,” in: *Art in Theory, 1900-2000. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 581.

³¹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” in: *The Inhuman. Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 89, 93.

their [Kant's and Burke's] sublime anymore," while also positioning modern art practices well within the parameters of the established art historical discourse.³² For him the sublime functions as a prism through which to understand contemporary art practices that formally challenge the aesthetic traditions of their time. He comes to define it as a transformation of or break with traditional modes of artistic, social, and political experience or knowledge, that serves as a marker of difference and rupture until the discursive framework is reconfigured to include the formerly unknown and uncontainable. Furthermore, by claiming that "the sublime is perhaps the only artistic sensibility to characterize the modern," the philosopher proposes a discursive shift from site-specific to experience-specific considerations of the sublime.³³ For Lyotard, modern art's "infinite contemplation of infinity" brings about a "negative pleasure" similar to the one Kant describes as arising out of the encounter with the sublimity of nature.³⁴ Thus, in his analysis abstract art at once engages with questions of representation and exhibits characteristics commonly attributed to the sublime such as the monstrous and formless.

Sublime Cities and Los Angeles

The openness of the concept of the sublime—grounded in the indefinability and indeterminacy of the idea—explains its pervasiveness in a variety of discourses. It is Robert Smithson who turns his attention to the sublime qualities of what he calls "the new city." In "Two Attitudes towards the City"—an undated one-page document that most likely served as a cursory first draft for the artist's 1966 presentation at the Yale School of Architecture—he opposes "The

³² Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," 93.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 98.

Old” with “The New City. The former stands for traditional centrifugal urban forms predicated on a distinction between center and periphery, while the latter represents postmodern urbanities lacking a distinguishable core. Though Smithson describes the “Old City” as “organism,” displaying a “nostalgia for the country or nature...the simple, the peaceful, the innocent” and an “idyllic past,” “the new city” is characterized by “facades, the abstract, monuments... grandeur and emptiness” and “the sublime.”³⁵ By describing the experience of the (sub)urban sprawl of post-WW II American cities as sublime, Smithson highlights the interrelatedness of the discourse on the sublime and urbanism and emphasizes the concepts applicability to the everyday environment.

While not explicitly mentioned in the discourse on the experience of postmodern space, the language used to describe affective responses to Los Angeles echoes those of the experiential sublime. In particular, the vastness of the megalopolis, its “grandeur and emptiness” as well as repetitive structure void of historical markers pervades the writings of urban theorists such as Edward W. Soja who classifies Los Angeles as a “decentralized mega-city.”³⁶ In *The History of Forgetting* (2008) Norman Klein highlights similar aspects of the metropolitan area, defining it as heteropolis—a “suburban nodal ‘sprawl’ that claims to have no center, and no organizing principle except its internationalist collage.”³⁷ One can sense the city’s experiential quality in Klein’s writing, as he describes Los Angeles as “efficient, sensually liberating, strangely free of an urban

³⁵ Robert Smithson, “Two Attitudes towards the City,” 1966.

³⁶ Edward Soja, “Los Angeles, 1965-1992. From Crisis Generated Restructuring to Restructuring-Generated Crisis,” in: *The City. Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Allen J. Scott and Edward Soja (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 434.

³⁷ Norman Klein, *The History of Forgetting. Los Angeles and the Erasure of History* (London: Verso, 2008), 48.

center, like a cognate of abstraction in art, a Rothko painting where the center floats in an existential absence.”³⁸ For the theorist, L.A. offers an experience of elation and dejection at once, an assessment that Roland Barthes seems to share. Barthes emphasizes the binary between threatening and experiential qualities offered by cities such as Los Angeles, while emphatically concluding that they offer “a strange liberation from classical codes of urban experience.”³⁹ Recalling Jane Jacobs’ *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), in *Invisible Cities* Italo Calvino offers a more pessimistic perspective, in which suburban Los Angeles comes to stand for the “death” of more traditional city structures offering lively, densely populated neighborhoods.

When the forms exhaust their variety and come apart, the end of cities begins...there is an outpouring of networks without beginning or end, cities in the shape of Los Angeles...without shape.⁴⁰

Klein’s, Barthes’, Soja’s, and Calvino’s assessments of the city’s extended urban fabric, its vastness and immensity that lacks “legibility,” is already present in Kevin Lynch’s *The Image of the City* (1960). After conducting a five-year study of Boston, New Jersey, and Los Angeles, Lynch defines the perceptual experience provided by the latter as decidedly different than those of the former which consist of identifiable landmarks, neighborhoods, districts, and centers. Summarizing his findings Lynch concludes:

When asked to describe or symbolize the city as a whole, the subjects used certain standard words: “spread out”, “spacious”, “formless”, “without centres.” Los Angeles seemed to be hard to envision or conceptualize as a whole. An endless sprawl, which may carry pleasant connotations of space around the dwellings, or overtones of weariness and disorientation, was the common image. Said one subject:

³⁸ Klein, *The History of Forgetting*, 50.

³⁹ Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), 30.

⁴⁰ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 139.

“It’s as if you were going somewhere for a long time, and when you got there you discovered there was nothing there, after all?”⁴¹

As one of the first theorists to provide a quantitative analysis of Los Angeles vis-à-vis older city structures, Lynch’s investigation of the city was later recast in terms of a neo-Marxist assessment. In *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future of Los Angeles* (first published in 1990) and *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (1998) Mike Davis foregrounds the threatening quality of the vast urbanity. For him, the city is not only pervaded by an “ecology of fear,” but also becomes a “stand-in for capitalism in general,” a wasteland of commodified non-places.⁴² Even though Davis’s investigation of Los Angeles is pessimistic and almost apocalyptic in its outlook, he subscribes to the notion of a socio-spatial dialectic as put forward by Soja.⁴³

‘Native’ vs. European Sublime

In *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre* (1991) Rob Wilson explores the motivation behind the appropriation of the sublime to the North American land- and mindscape as well as the tropes prevalent in this American sublime. Offering a definition of the American sublime he states:

To affirm, as American difference, that the sublime abided in a kind of vast nothingness...wherein art could begin again to generate new structures of

⁴¹ Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), 40-41.

⁴² Mike Davis, *City of Quartz. Excavating the Future of Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 2006), 17.

⁴³ Reaching back to the early 1970s Soja’s more than thirty year-long scholarly exploration of Los Angeles, is informed less by Karl Marx than by Henri Lefebvre and Jorge Luis Borges, in particular his notion of the “aleph” as signifying a single point in space that contains all other spaces. Similarities to Foucault’s “heterotopia” aside, Soja, as indicated by the title of his last book *My Los Angeles* (2014), has come to define the metropolitan space like no other, advocating for a macro- instead of a micro-geographical perspective.

Cf. Edward W. Soja, *My Los Angeles: From Urban Restructuring to Regional Urbanization* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), 11ff.

elevation...the American sublime came to exist as “newness,” even forgetting its own tradition and history.⁴⁴

While Wilson focuses on literary works—poems by Anne Bradstreet, William Livingston, Walt Whitman, and Wallace Stevens among others—he provides a useful account of the concept’s complex discursive history in literary and critical theory. For example, he discusses how the political inscription of the sublime has been revoked in the light of postmodern aesthetics and theories and the resulting disbelief in teleological progress. While previously the North American landscape’s vastness was ascribed characteristics of the sublime, thereby legitimizing the rightfulness of territorial expansion, the sublime also functioned as a “private trope.” As such it constituted “a social site wherein artists render the “totality” of the American landscape/environment representable ... to a collectivity.”⁴⁵ Additionally, Wilson highlights not only the thematic shift from the sublime nature to the sublime in urban space, and the individual to the collective, but also defines the artistic rendering of a postmodern sublime. As Wilson observes: “This newer sublime entails an experience of technological space and commodity-infinity which ungrounds and decenters the human agent to a condition of mute subjugation.”⁴⁶

While Wilson situates the sublime in vernacular space, he problematizes its potential national inscription. Asking, “How does one stand to behold the *Americanization* of the sublime?,” Wilson concludes that a definition of the concept has to move beyond such universal ramifications and must address a specific national context.⁴⁷ Thus, Wilson distinguishes between a European and American (“native”) sublime, in which the latter speaks to the particularity of the American

⁴⁴ Wilson, *American Sublime*, 192.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

landscape and experience.⁴⁸ As the main characteristic of this American sublime Wilson identifies its dynamic quality, or more specifically its constant reiteration of the idea of “American bigness, space, speed, and bulk,” which Wilson locates in the works of American poets from Ralph Waldo Emerson onward.⁴⁹

Furthermore, he asserts that in the American sublime “native” tropes—such as self-reliance, nationalism, subjugation—figure prominently. Thus, the American sublime can be characterized as a “conviction of dematerialized power awaiting national use, eventuated in a figure of ‘self-reliance’ [in which] ...artistic aggression was sublimated into a national performance.”⁵⁰ For Wilson, the European sublime is predicated on the opposition between self, society, and nature—as indicative of God—while in the Americanized sublime this opposition is superseded by “an implied dialogue between man and various technologies.”⁵¹ This shift from nature to technology as locus of the experiential sublime becomes even more pointed in the postmodern discourse. Defining this “sublime beyond the sublime” as countersublimity, as “tenaciously ordinary and ugly,” Wilson locates it in the cityscape with its vernacular architecture.⁵² This countersublimity is informed by neo-Marxist theories in that it acknowledges

⁴⁸ The question might also be “how does one stand to behold the Europeanization of the sublime,” as Wilson ascribes picturesque instead of sublime qualities to the landscape, declaring:

Europe is not so much sublime in vastness and potentiality, as it is picturesque in associations, a place of timeworn achievements and ruins, domestications, objects bleared with the touch of human history. (Wilson, 131f.)

⁴⁹ Wilson, *American Sublime*, 23.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 32f.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 46.

the inscription of the term with a socio-spatial analysis of processes of inequality and capital.

Speaking to both the post-Marxist sublime and the cinematic sublime, he asserts:

[It] is the post-Marxist sublime of infinite mirror-glass, neon hyper-realism, steel “hyperspaces.” Not purely textual, this force materializes...in megastructures...This dissemination of Capital into urban skyscrapers is now so ordinary, so “vernacular” in its disposition of everyday space that we take it for granted as a given...As contemporary moviegoers must realize...the natural sublime has been superseded by icons expressive of a technological sublime.⁵³

The Technological Sublime

In regard to the exacerbation of the sublime in *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* (1999) Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe notes that technology has come to embody the characteristics of sublime as it is “terrifying in in the limitless unknowability of its potential...and is thus at once unbounded by the human, and, as knowledge, a trace of the human now out of the latter’s control.”⁵⁴ Utilizing the casing of a computer as an example for the flawless and surface quality of the “techno-sublime,” as it “tells one nothing about how the computer works,” he indicates the parallels between beauty and the sublime, stating that both share common terminology.⁵⁵ In addition, while Gilbert-Rolfe does contrast the “techno-sublime” with the sublime in modernity, in that the former is defined as simultaneous, invisible, and electronic and the latter is mechanical and process oriented, he does not demarcate the borders between the modern and the postmodern sublime. The postmodern sublime, as I read it, produces literal instead of virtual spaces, is concerned with the human instead of the post-human, and evokes, instead of being engulfed by,

⁵³ Wilson, *American Sublime*, 215.

⁵⁴ Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* (New York: School of Visual Arts, 1999), 128.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

terror and nothingness.⁵⁶ In contrast to Gilbert-Rolfe, David N. Nye does speak to the difference between the postmodern and the technological sublime, asserting that the emergence of the latter is a “two-century long American project” of technological achievements; man-made objects such as railroads, skyscrapers, bridges.⁵⁷ Nye’s interrelation between modernity, the industrialized city, and the technological sublime, is shared by literary scholars such as Zoltán Simon, who in *The Double-edged Sword: The Technological Sublime in the American Novel between 1900 and 1940* (2003) classifies the first four decades of the twentieth century as the “culmination of the technological sublime.”⁵⁸ Aside from the historical contextualization of the technological sublime, there are other differences between Nye and Gilbert-Rolfe’s definition of the “techno-sublime.” In the introduction for *American Technological Sublime* (1996) Nye asserts that “if any man-made [object] can be called sublime, surely the Golden Gate Bridge can.”⁵⁹ For Gilbert-Rolfe the techno-sublime is not brought about by an encounter with extraordinary objects, such as the Golden Gate Bridge, which constitutes an exemplary piece of civic engineering. Rather it can be located in ordinary electronic devices such as computers, in “its limitlessness, which can’t be spatialized, and as such is an invisibility apparent to vision but unrealizable by it.”⁶⁰ Thus, whereas Nye invokes Kant’s concept of the dynamic sublime, in that the might of the Golden Gate Bridge confronts us with our own physical limitations, Gilbert-Rolfe describes a sublime, associated with the infinite

⁵⁶ Cf. Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, 137f.

⁵⁷ David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), xix.

⁵⁸ Zoltán Simon, *The Double-edged Sword: The Technological Sublime in the American Novel between 1900 and 1940* (Budapest: Wolters Kluwer Group, 2003), 7.

⁵⁹ Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, xi.

⁶⁰ Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, 52f.

proliferation of magnitudes, and therefore, the mathematical sublime. Furthermore, while Gilbert-Rolfe utilizes Lyotard's definition of the postmodern sublime for his discussion of art works, Nye argues that Lyotard's theory is not applicable to direct but rather mediated experience, thereby, questioning the concept's usefulness for anything other than the discussion of works of art.⁶¹

A Note on Gender and the Sublime - or the Feminine Sublime

Many theorizations of the sublime, including Kant's, are predisposed on a "general"—that is a male—subject. In the Kantian sublime, the individual struggles to comprehend an "other" that is formless or unknowable, one that is exceeding the everyday and familiar.⁶² The alignment of women with nature/chaos and men with reason/order is a given in Kant's theorization. Thus, the experience of the sublime becomes synonymous with the male self's ability to master the other, enabling it to confirm and/or enhance his own existence. Offering a psychoanalytic assessment of the Kantian sublime, theorists such as Thomas Weiskel in *Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (1976) and Neil Hertz in *End of the Line: Essays on the Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (1985) read Kant's concept in terms of its evocation of the terror and desire of the pre-Oedipal phase. According to Neil Hertz, the sublime experience is predicated on a transfer of power in which the self encounters and overcomes an obstacle.⁶³

⁶¹ Cf. Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, xixf.

⁶² This "other"—especially if placed within the framework of psychoanalysis—recalls Sigmund Freud's uncanny which "is in reality nothing new or alien but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression." Suffice to say that the uncanny is also inscribed as female!

See: Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock, and Hugh Haughton (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 64.

⁶³ Cf. Neil Hertz, *End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 53.

Additionally, as Weiskel asserts, while the sublime functions as a disrupting force initially experienced as threatening, the (male) subject's capacity to conceptually and/or intellectually render the experience and diminish its affective force, ultimately reinforces the boundary between self and other.

Additionally, both Kant in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* and Edmund Burke in his 1757 *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Beautiful and Sublime*, align women with the beautiful and men with the sublime. According to Kant, "the sublime moves, the beautiful charms," and while "the sublime must always be great; the beautiful can also be small," the former "must be simple" while the latter "can be adorned and ornamented."⁶⁴ Burke similarly declares that it is this charm, smallness, and delicateness that men are drawn to in the opposite sex.⁶⁵ Kant goes on to conclude that women should aspire to beauty instead of the sublime, asserting that:

On the other hand, strivings and surmounted difficulties arouse admiration and belong to the sublime. Deep meditation and a long-sustained reflection are noble but difficult, and do not well befit a person in whom unconstrained charms should show nothing else than a beautiful nature. Laborious learning or a painful pondering, even if a woman should greatly succeed in it, destroy the merits that are proper to her sex.⁶⁶

As Christine Battersby observes, it is this implicit gendering of the concept that has barred female artists from adopting it more commonly as a trope. In her assessment, the sublime—due to its evocation of mastery, repression, vigor and detachment—is rendered as masculine, while the

⁶⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 47f.

⁶⁵ Cf. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Lanham: Dancing Unicorn Books, 2016), 42, 113, 91ff.

⁶⁶ Kant, *Observations*, 78.

female experience is ascribed attributes such as beautiful, ephemeral, and social.⁶⁷ While that might be true regarding her selection of texts [and female artists' reluctance to mention the term], she fails to acknowledge that Longinus in *On the Sublime* references Sappho's poems as example of what he defines as "sublime writing." In *The Feminine Sublime* (1995) Barbara Freeman problematizes his understanding of Sappho's writing which for him, as much as the other works—by Homer, Plato, and Aristophanes among others—he discusses, "harmonizes disparate elements in order to create an organic whole."⁶⁸ Rather Freeman sees Sappho's work as foregrounding "the activity of self-shattering," while Longinus aims to "domesticate and neutralize the very excessiveness Sappho's text bespeaks."⁶⁹ For Freeman, Longinus' reading is paradigmatic for later theorizations of the sublime in which the excess that characterizes Sappho's as well as her female predecessors' work is sublimated to reinforce the male subject's "wholeness." Alternatively, she proposes a feminine sublime which she defines "as the attempt to articulate the subject's confrontation with excess in a mode that does not lead solely to its recuperation."⁷⁰ So how does one stand to observe this feminine sublime? While not providing a definitive answer, Freeman's assessment of the feminine sublime as a "desire for excess itself; ... the wish for, sublimity" is an

⁶⁷ Cf. Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 24ff.

⁶⁸ Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 15.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 16.

intriguing one.⁷¹ A sublime sustaining “a condition of radical uncertainty,” while resisting “visual or linguistic formulation but is there nonetheless,” is one I hope to trace in Varda’s *Lions Love*.⁷²

Conclusion

This chapter provided an account of the emergence and many re-emergences of the concept of the sublime in a variety of disciplines such as philosophy, urban studies, gender studies, psychology, sociology, art history, critical theory, and literary criticism. It is the sublime in urban and natural space, in poetry, literature, architecture, painting, technology among others, as well as the sublime object, subject, and experience that functions as the focal point of this literature review. And it is all of these iterations of the sublime that have lead writers, theorist, and artists to view it as an appropriate expression of their time, may it be romanticism, modernism, or postmodernism. While there are many more theorizations I could have included, these are the most relevant ones for my analysis of cinematic texts. In the coming chapter, I offer a historical context for this analysis, focusing on the creative, social, and political environment Boorman, Demy, Varda, and Antonioni found themselves in during the tumultuous late 1960s.

⁷¹ Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime*, 30.

⁷² *Ibid.* 12.

CHAPTER 2: AN OUTSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE

In light of the ever-growing competition of television, the changing taste of the younger generation, and the influx of European movies, the American film industry had to adapt. As Dennis Harvey put it in his piece “Viva Viva! And viva Varda—courting Hollywood with a *Lions Love*,” “in the late 60’s, the Hollywood studios freaked out. They’d spent decades making artless movies for everybody; when that no longer seemed to work, in desperation they let young filmmakers make art movies for themselves.”⁷³ Additionally, both the availability of lighter camera equipment as well as realist styles of filmmaking—such as Italian neorealism, the Nouvelle Vague and British Free Cinema—led to a shift in production practices. Technological innovations such as the handheld camera Arriflex 35BL, the lightweight Panaflex, as well as the mobile filming equipment Cinemobile, made on-location shooting the norm rather than the exception.⁷⁴ While the increased usage of on-location shots can be seen as a response these changes within the industry it also speaks to the discovery of Los Angeles as a unique city space. According to Robert Carringer, “at the same time that Los Angeles was beginning to discover itself as the foremost postwar American city, the Hollywood film industry was discovering contemporary Los Angeles as a major subject.”⁷⁵ While during the heyday of the studio era, “the city’s malleable, chameleon-like quality had often been a significant asset,” starting in the mid-1960s Los Angeles “developed a well-

⁷³ Dennis Harvey, “Viva Viva! And viva Varda—courting Hollywood with a *Lions Love*,” *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, February 22, 2006: 68.

⁷⁴ Cf. Lawrence Webb, *The Cinema of Urban Crisis. Seventieth Film and The Reinvention of the City* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 35.

⁷⁵ Robert Carringer, “Hollywood’s Los Angeles. Two Paradigms,” in: *Looking for Los Angeles. Architecture, Film, Photography, and the Urban Landscape*, ed. Charles G. Salas and Michael S. Roth (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2001), 260.

defined and self-conscious onscreen presence.”⁷⁶ Both narrative as well as avant-garde films made extensive use of Los Angeles locations. While in the former—such as Bill L. Norton’s *Cisco Pike* (1972) or Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown* (1974)—the locales served to underscore the “emplacement” of their fictional characters in a distinct landscape, the latter took to a depiction of ‘pure’ landscapes void of the human figure. Less constrained by economic considerations, and standardized patterns of mainstream cinema, experimental filmmakers such as Hollis Frampton, Stan Brakhage, or Michael Snow abandoned narrative conventions and instead utilized film technology to recreate something akin to human perception. Because they showcased both natural scenery and the built environment, P. Adams Sitney concludes that cinematic landscapes were a creation of avant-garde cinema.⁷⁷ While I would not go as far, Sitney is correct in his assessment of their foregrounding of “framing” and “perspective,” both of which are concerns of landscape paintings. In addition, Pop artists such as Ed Ruscha and David Hockney initiated a consideration of Los Angeles as subject worthy of aesthetic inquiry. Their works display “a new aesthetic sensibility towards consumer culture ...recast[ing] the perception and experience of ordinary landscapes.”⁷⁸ What becomes apparent when one looks at the films of European filmmakers is that their attraction to Los Angeles coincides with this broader cinematic and aesthetic investigation of the city. Outsiders, such as Boorman, Varda, Antonioni, or Demy proved to be perceptive to the specificity of the space they encountered, and consequently their films mirror these ambivalent feelings towards the abstract built environment. But their assessment was scrutinized by American

⁷⁶ Webb, *The Cinema of Urban Crisis*, 156.

⁷⁷ Cf. Sitney, “Landscape,” 106.

⁷⁸ Eric Avila, “Essaying Los Angeles,” in: *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of Los Angeles*, ed. Kevin R. McNamara (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 181.

critics such as John Pastier who concluded that “outsiders have often derided Los Angeles as a huge movie set...there has never been any serious attempt to define and interpret the city’s physical and social environment throughout film history.”⁷⁹ I strongly disagree with Pastier’s assertion because I see the films of foreign filmmakers as well as those of their American peers as illustration of Fredric Jameson’s notion of cognitive mapping. Utilizing Jameson’s model for film analysis, Lawrence Webb asserts that cognitive mapping consists of three processes: the implicit—the “territory enacted by the film through locations it represents”;—the implied—the protagonists within narrative system; and the explicit—“the mapping carried out by the audience as part of spectatorial experience.”⁸⁰ According to Jameson, architecture and film, in particular, allow for an understanding of postmodernity and its “structure of feeling” to mediate the gap between knowledge and experience while also enabling the spectator to inhabit a possibly unknown space. For example, films connect this unknown space to the spectator’s already existing knowledge of spaces and representations of the same.⁸¹ Furthermore, films also “redeem” urban space, or conserve features thereof that might not have been chronicled otherwise but that can read within new contexts. As Siegfried Kracauer observed, “the camera exposes the paraphernalia of our former existence, stripping them of the significance which originally transfixed them so that they are changed from things in their own right to invisible conduits” channeling the past within present

⁷⁹ John Pastier, “L.A. gets the Hollywood Treatment,” *The Los Angeles Times*, October 15, 1973: 62.

⁸⁰ Lawrence Webb, *The Cinema of Urban Crisis. Seventieth Film and The Reinvention of the City*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 27.

⁸¹ Cf. Frederic Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping,” in: *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 356f.

experiences, as well as visual and tactile plasticity.⁸² Similarly, outlining the ability of the work of art to retrieve space, George Perec asserts,

Space melts like sand running through one's fingers. Time bears it away and leaves me only shapeless shreds. To write: to try meticulously to retain something, to cause something to survive; to wrest a few precise scraps from the void as it grows, to leave somewhere a furrow, a trace, a mark or a few signs.⁸³

Thusly, both Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping and Kracauer's concept of the redemption of physical reality are predicated upon the primacy of the visual, while simultaneously showing a concern for connecting everyday reality to aesthetic experience, as well as defining their interrelation. In Antonioni's, Boorman's, Demy's, and Varda's films urban space is redeemed but also depicted through the perspective of an (European) "other." This particular feature of their engagement with the urban space has not constituted the same rich scholarly field of inquiry, as for example, the exiles in the studio era. Other than Norman Kagan's *Greenhorns: Foreign Filmmakers Interpret America* (1982) which provides mainly descriptions of the films' production and extended summaries of the plot, there is no monograph dedicated to the topic. But the questions that guide Kagan's inquiry are very similar to the ones that structure my project. In the foreword to the book, Erik Barnouw provides a condensed version of its trajectory:

The selected group is diverse in background, but all are auteur directors of distinguished achievement and high standing, whose work regularly reflects their personal visions... We can assume that the films reflect, to a considerable extent, their impressions of us... To what extent is he [the director] feeding back into our film world ideas about America that Hollywood itself has disseminated, and

⁸² Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film. The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p.

⁸³ Georges Perec, *Species of Space and Other Pieces*, trans. John Sturrock (London: Penguin, 2008), 91.

perhaps set in motion? To what extent do the films represent widely held views abroad about America?⁸⁴

Barnouw acknowledges Kagan's book is about "auteur directors of distinguished achievement and high standing whose work regularly reflects their personal vision"—Boorman, Demy, Antonioni, Varda, Miloš Forman, Jean-Luc Godard, John Schlesinger—as is my dissertation. While most of the scholarship on Boorman, Demy, Varda, and Antonioni situates their American films in their overall oeuvre, it fails to acknowledge their relationship to other L.A. films directed by Europeans at the same time.⁸⁵ In contrast, I treat these texts as exemplary of foreign filmmakers' cinematic engagement with the city, thereby continuing Kagan's line of thought. Crucially we must consider that these four films document their directors' first, and in most cases, only encounter with the city, American culture, and the movie industry. Therefore, while I am not trying to argue that an auteurist analysis of *Zabriskie Point* or any of the other films should be completely discarded, I am opting for a closer reading of the films' visual strategies in relation to the topics they depict, the discourse they contribute to, and their production context.⁸⁶

More recently, while not focusing specifically on European filmmakers, Lawrence Webb has discussed the outside factors leading to the preference for location shoots, which are a useful

⁸⁴ Erik Barnouw, "Foreword," in: *Greenhorns. Foreign Filmmakers Interpret America*, by Norman Kagan (Ann Harbor: Pierian Press, 1982), x.

⁸⁵ As an example one can turn to Seymour Chatman's, Sam Rohdie's, or Murray Pomerance's analysis of *Zabriskie Point* as displaying Antonioni's recurring interest in spatiality. See Seymour Chatman, *Antonioni, Or The Surface Of The World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Sam Rohdie, *Antonioni* (London: BFI Publications, 1990); Murray Pomerance, *Michelangelo Red Antonioni Blue. Eight Reflections on Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

⁸⁶ Following Theodor W. Adorno, positioning works of art within a coherent "genius" narrative fetishes and diminishes their impact. Thereby, an auteurist reading not only distances the film text from its cultural and historical context, but also obscures the thematic exigencies that unite the individual works.

See: Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2010), 254.

addendum to Kagan's book. In the aptly titled *The Cinema of Urban Crisis* (2014), Webb chronicles the industrial changes as well as the symbiotic relationship between filmmakers and law makers, both concerned with responding to the crisis of the post-industrial city. His assertion that the capitalist re-branding of the urban space, and the scholarly as well as artistic interest in the same go hand in hand, certainly provides a supplement to my discussion of the cultural *zeitgeist*.⁸⁷ Focusing on the tax incentives with which city governments encouraged studios to film on location, he asserts that they "came to view films as one route toward culture-led regeneration and a potential avenue for rebranding themselves nationally and internationally."⁸⁸ Webb credits Los Angeles Mayor Sam Yorty as a critical force in promoting an anti-runaway rhetoric by establishing the Office of Motion Picture Coordination, thereby redefining LA's on-screen portrayal and foregrounding the city's socio-economic and cultural influence.⁸⁹ The renaissance of Los Angeles in films was rather short lived as by 1974 70% of the production had moved to less expensive locations that offered less restrained, nonunionized labor conditions.⁹⁰ Furthermore, while shying away from calling it a "regional aesthetic," Webb points to the differences between the cinematic rendering of Los Angeles and that of East Coast cities. For Webb the stylistic and cinematographic techniques displayed by L.A. films include "an emphasis on motion and fluidity; the compression and distortion of space with zoom lenses and the accentuation of surface over depth; persistent use

⁸⁷ Peter Lev's *The Euro-American Cinema* (1993) provides a discussion of the financial and industrial ramifications of the collaborations between US and European co-productions filmed and thereby works well as a companion piece for Webb's *Cinema of Urban Crisis*.

⁸⁸ Webb, *The Cinema of Urban Crisis*, 28.

⁸⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 155.

⁹⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, 35.

of reflective materials in their mise-en-scène; and the use of filters and ‘flashing’ film stock.”⁹¹

In addition to Carringer’s, David E. James’, and Klein’s work on Los Angeles in films, there is also a large body of work that discusses how literary texts narrate the city experience which I utilize to speak to the cinematic rendering of the same. As David Fine in *Imagining Los Angeles* summarizes, LA novels often center on the “distanced perspective of an outsider,” thus presenting an “act of entry, [as well as] the discovery and the taking possession of a place that differed significantly from the place left behind.”⁹² It is this focus on the outsider as navigator of an unknown space that leads to an intensified exploration and interest in the new surroundings. A current that runs through LA fiction is a sense of temporal and spatial dislocation, which allows the spectator an engagement with the city in the present but also in terms of “a past carried from some *other* place.”⁹³ Thus, Fine comes to the conclusion that “Los Angeles is constructed as a whole different civilization,” in which “history is not so much absent as it is dispelled; it exists as a different geography.”⁹⁴ But by classifying LA fiction as “biregional,” “bicoastal,” and as in the case of British expatriate writers, “binational” he excludes a discussion of potential differences between the depiction of the city in the works of artists from Europe in contrast to the ones from North America. Instead he points to the underlying similarities in literary production concerned with urban form, which he sees in recurring tropes of “dislocation and estrangement,” as well as

⁹¹ Webb, *The Cinema of Urban Crisis*, 158.

⁹² David Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles: A City in Fiction* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press. 2005), 15.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 16f.

“unreality, masquerade, and deception,” all of which are caused by the outsiders’ encounter with a spatially, historically, and culturally incomprehensible environment.⁹⁵

Mark Shiel offers a more pointed analysis of the slight differences in the cinematic works of European in contrast to American filmmakers by linking them to their particular national cinematic contexts as well as changes in production practices. He concludes that US artists highlight specific geographical features of urban space, representing the limits of urban sprawl, “suburban conformity, and televisual superficiality.”⁹⁶ Furthermore, he observes that these cinematic works are also often framed in terms of middle class anxieties and “urban angst.”⁹⁷ In contrast, foreign filmmakers have offered a more critical outlook on the urban space which for them constituted “a telling landscape of the future, [...] a place of latent or actual armed aggression, hard-edged modern commercial architecture, garish color, and constant automobile mobility.”⁹⁸ What unites both the foreigners’ and the “natives’” discussion of urban space is that the narrative events unfold in “the relatively comfortable locales of Venice Beach, Santa Monica, Hollywood, Beverly Hills, and Malibu,” thereby precluding any in-depth discourse on the racially and economically diverse makeup of the city.⁹⁹ In *The History of Forgetting* Klein offers an explanation for this elision, by assigning responsibility to the disengaged mode of white artists, for whom social and racial conflict “is roped off, like a museum display, or like ashes blown from a

⁹⁵ Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles*, 15f.

⁹⁶ Mark Shiel, “The Southland on Screen,” in: *The Cambridge Companion to the literature of Los Angeles*, ed. Kevin R. McNamara (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 151.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 152.

fire.”¹⁰⁰ Regarding the films I discuss, one can see a similar emphasis on the experience of white outsiders in a (at least in reality) racially diverse space. Only two of the films I discuss—*Point Blank* and *Zabriskie Point*—acknowledge a non-white subjectivity, even though the focus is clearly on the threat this subjectivity might pose for the white “majority.” This concentration on white subjectivity originates in the privileged perspective of the filmmakers themselves who encountered a dispersed, fragmentary urban form in which each ethnicity and class was limited to a specific area, which they did not encounter nor have access to. In his discussion of detective novels, Fine foregrounds the classist division of the neighborhoods, but his assertion goes hand in hand with the exclusion of certain non-white populations from certain neighborhoods as well. For Fine, LA “is already a microcosm and forecast of the country as a whole, a new centerless city in which the various classes have lost touch with each other because each is isolated in its own geographic compartment.”¹⁰¹

Whereas the racial tensions in post-1965 Los Angeles do not play a significant role in the four films, the political turmoil does provide the backdrop for three of the four films.¹⁰² According to Mark Shiel, “the intense anomie generated by Los Angeles’ synthetic surfaces is explicitly linked to the ongoing war in Vietnam and the antiwar movement then active in the city.”¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Klein, *The History of Forgetting*, 82.

¹⁰¹ Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles*, 120.

¹⁰² The films of Antonioni, Demy, and Varda thereby differ from the cinematic output of American filmmakers at the time. According to Webb, neither the uprising in inner city neighborhoods such as Watts in 1965, Detroit or Newark in 1967 nor the leftist and radical political movements were depicted in the films at the time. Notable exceptions being Haskell Wexler’s *Medium Cool* (1968) and Stuart Hagmann’s *The Strawberry Statement* (1970).

see Webb, *Cinema of Urban Crisis*, 15.

¹⁰³ Shiel, “The Southland,” 151.

Zabriskie Point, more so than *Lions Love* and *Model Shop*, does provide a critical perspective on white middle-class youth as their comfortable economic situation has rendered them helpless, aimless, and ineffective. Faced with the urgent need to act, to shape or change the socio-political landscape, the protagonist, which Kagan describes as “new American types,” retreat.¹⁰⁴ In contrast, *Point Blank* does present a protagonist who is very much a man-of-action, a dominant father figure—“The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit, updated,”—just the type that the protagonists in the above three films are rebelling against.¹⁰⁵ While the films’ portrayal of the America of the late 1960s might be lacking in some of the above mentioned respects, they “can make us see...the very ideology from which they emerge,” allowing for a European perspective on American capitalist ideology.¹⁰⁶

Conclusion

While Martin Lefebvre asserts that cinema “has a long history of showing the natural world,” most studio era films limited the depiction of space to a few short establishing shots in order to introduce the spectator to the fictional setting.¹⁰⁷ In this chapter I have discussed the changes in production practices in the 1960s that lead to the cinematic exploration of the everyday environment. In their films European and American directors utilized the city’s diverse neighborhoods, unique architectural styles, and geographical actualities in order to create an imaginary space that was both specifically LA, but also indicative of the structure of American

¹⁰⁴ Kagan, *Greenhorns*, 64.

¹⁰⁵ T.J. Ross, “Point Blank: A Stalker in the City,” *Film Heritage*, 5 (Fall 1969): 23.

¹⁰⁶ Wilson, *American Sublime*, 36.

¹⁰⁷ Lefebvre, “On Landscape,” 61.

metropolises in general. I complemented this historical outline with a summary of some of the narrative as well as aesthetic tropes prevalent in the cinematic output of the time. In the coming chapters I discuss Boorman's *Point Blank*, Demy's *Model Shop*, Varda's *Lions Love* as well as Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* as reflective of the cultural, aesthetic, and intellectual *Zeitgeist* as well as displaying tropes of the sublime. In regard to *Point Blank* this discussion will entail considerations of the picturesque and sublime, places and non-places, ruinscapes and cityscapes.

CHAPTER 3: THE PICTURESQUE VS. THE SUBLIME CITYSCAPE - JOHN BOORMAN'S *POINT BLANK*



Figure 3.1: Walker (Lee Marvin) is set up at a money-drop along the canalized Los Angeles River in Boorman's *Point Blank* (1967).

(San Francisco) was all in soft, romantic, pastel shades - a very beautiful place - but the complete opposite of what I wanted for the film. I wanted my setting to be hard, cold and in a sense, futuristic. I wanted an empty, sterile world, for which LA was absolutely right.¹⁰⁸

As both the British director John Boorman and his screenwriter Alexander Jacobs had resided in London prior to traveling to the Southern Californian city, theirs—just as the protagonist in *Point Blank*—was very much a travel story itself. Jacobs had worked as an assistant to producer David Deutsch on Boorman's first feature film, a knockoff of Richard Lester's *A Hard Day's Night*

¹⁰⁸ Stephen Farber, "The Writer in American Films," *Film Quarterly* Vol. 21, No. 4 (Summer 1968): 5.

(1965), and the two struck up a friendship that led to the later collaboration on the script for *Point Blank* and *Hell in the Pacific* (1968).¹⁰⁹ Whereas Lester's film featured the Beatles, *Catch us if you can* (1965) focused on the much less known British pop rock group The Dave Clark Five, but in each of their renderings of mid-1960s London, both directors' productions are strikingly similar. *Catch us if you can* does differ from Lester's film in that it is essentially a road movie, following the band's westward journey from London to the Devon coast. Quickly two strikingly different spaces are introduced; a formula that Boorman also followed when shooting *Point Blank*.

Critics at the time of *Point Blank*'s release noticed the foregrounding of specific urban settings, but failed to acknowledge and analyze the importance of the space beyond its role as establishing the setting of the action. Arthur B. Clark's review in *Films in Review* praises the "interestingly color-photographed shots of Alcatraz, San Francisco and Los Angeles," but is more concerned with the shortcomings that he sees in the "blah" story.¹¹⁰ In a 1967 *Time* review the (uncited) author proclaims, "*Point Blank* is one of those forgettable movies in which only the settings change—the violence remains the same."¹¹¹ Philip French gives slightly more attention to the film's spatial representation, mentioning both the iconic use of Alcatraz and Boorman's depiction of Los Angeles as "Nowhere City."¹¹² Stephen Farber takes up a similar position as

¹⁰⁹ John Boorman, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy* (London: Faber & Faber, 2004), 117ff.

¹¹⁰ Arthur B. Clark, "Review. *Point Blank*," *Films in Review* Vol. 18, No. 8 (October 1967): 508.

¹¹¹ 22 September 1967 *TIME* review.

¹¹² Philip French, "Review. *Point Blank*," *Sight & Sound* Vol. 37, No. 2 (Spring 1968): 98.

French here references Alison Lurie's semi-autobiographical novel of the same title, in which an East Coast couple has a difficult time adjusting to their new living environment Los Angeles that they experience as superficial and culture-less. The wife is especially appalled by the city's artificiality:

French by stating *Point Blank* “illuminates the American city, in the language of dream, not social document.”¹¹³ Further, T. J. Ross asserts that the main protagonist’s urban passage can be seen “as overt expression of suburban consciousness,” in that “clearly, he knows his way around the city, through which he tours, however, with the detachment of the commuter.”¹¹⁴ Contemporary film historians such as Michel Ciment, Robert Carringer, or Andrew Spicer also acknowledge the importance of the Los Angeles setting for the story but do not significantly expand on prior discussions of the same. According to Carringer, *Point Blank* “shows more of Los Angeles than perhaps any previous film,” oscillating between the two paradigms that he sees as constitutive of the cinematic depiction of LA as “commodified Arcadia” and/or “pathological cityscape.”¹¹⁵ Spicer sees the film’s rendering of Los Angeles “as representative city of modernity, anonymous and indifferent.”¹¹⁶ Similarly, Ciment points to the “placelessness” of the modern American metropolis in which the “feel of any particular city is absent” so that the Los Angeles that *Point Blank* depicts stands in for “The City...modern, anonymous and indifferent.”¹¹⁷

Look at those weird freak people ...those dressed-up little girls, and that old woman with the orange hair, and that man who had practically nothing on but bathing-trunks. And the houses. Everything’s so exaggerated, so unnatural.”

Alison Lurie, *The Nowhere City. A Novel* (New York: Avon, 1969), 9f.

¹¹³ Farber, “The Writer in American Films,” 4.

¹¹⁴ T.J. Ross, “Point Blank: A Stalker in the City,” *Film Heritage*, Vol. 5 (Fall 1969): 23.

¹¹⁵ Carringer, “Hollywood’s Los Angeles,” 257, 247.

¹¹⁶ Andrew Spicer, “Problems of Memory and Identity in Neo-Noir’s Existentialist,” in: *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), 53.

¹¹⁷ Michel Ciment, *John Boorman* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 66.

Although the above quotes give the impression that the spatial representation in *Point Blank* has been duly assessed, an in-depth analysis of space in the film has so far not been attempted. What is overlooked by all of the authors mentioned above is the opposition that the film sets up between San Francisco and Los Angeles, in which the former stands in for a more traditional metropolis composed of a compact and “legible” structure, while the latter indicates a post-modern fabric in which the clear boundaries between center and periphery are blurred. Furthermore, the opposition between these two types of cityscapes is also based on the former being defined as “beautiful” and the latter taking on qualities of the sublime cityscape. Focusing on the representation of urban space, my analysis is two-fold: Considering the emphasis that Boorman and Jacobs place on the locations used in the film, I trace *Point Blank*’s production history and specifically the “change of place” from the novel, Richard Stark’s *The Hunter*, to the first screenplay (by fellow Englishmen Rafe and David Newhouse) to the first two revisions of the script by Jacobs.¹¹⁸ In the second part of the analysis I complement the genesis of the script with a visual analysis of the film, interrelating its juxtaposition of the two cities to Marc Augé’s “place” and “non-place” with the distinction between the picturesque and the sublime.

Spatial Itineraries: New York - San Francisco - Los Angeles

“Every story is a travel story - a spatial practice.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ My decision to focus on only three of the six scripts derives from the significance of the changes in the settings in them. The later script versions include only minor additions such as name changes.

¹¹⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 115.

The production history of *Point Blank*—from novel to screen—chronicles three distinctive changes in location: Richard Stark’s novel *The Hunter* published in 1962 is set in New York City but provides very little description of the city space where the action unfolds. References to New York are sparse and limited to street names. The characters are oftentimes described by the spaces they inhabit in order to show their social status: “Justin Fairfax walked into his park-side Fifth Avenue apartment.”¹²⁰ Similar to the standard practice of studio era films of the 1930s and 1940s the evocation of the location in *The Hunter* alerts the reader to the urban setting but offers an abstract metropolitan setting instead of a clearly definable metropolis.¹²¹ There is however an emphasis on different modes of transportation—taxi cabs, busses, trains, airplanes—and the places providing them—the greyhound station, a car rental place, the airport. The protagonist of the novel, Parker, traverses the city on foot, thus experiencing it from a centripetal perspective. Relying upon the infrastructure of a compact city space, and his fluency of this particular urban fabric, Parker achieves his revenge.

In the first version of the script the screenwriters Rafe and David Newhouse changed the setting from New York to San Francisco. As Boorman asserts, “it was kind of a tour of SF,” in which all major locales of the city are visited.¹²² Although the script has some shortcomings, the more specific anchoring of the story in its location transforms the previously rather abstract urban space to a more specific display of the unique features of the city. The use of this cityscape still adheres to notions of the “picturesque,” in which “spectacular, ‘authentic’ settings” are

¹²⁰ Richard Stark, *The Hunter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 127.

¹²¹ For example, a standard studio era film like *This Gun for Hire* (Frank Tuttle, 1942), although distinctly marked as set in Los Angeles, contained not more than one minute of actual footage of the city.

¹²² Farber, “The Writer in American Films,” 5.

showcased.¹²³ The script opens with aerial shots of San Francisco, the Golden Gate Bridge, and Alcatraz and ends with a cab driver asking the protagonist “What do you think of our city? Ain’t it the greatest?”¹²⁴ To establish the setting, close-ups on signs of tourist sites and street names continuously reference the exact locations. Furthermore, specific neighborhoods are used to indicate the social milieu of the characters: the office building of the syndicate is in the financial district; Stegman’s car lot is located in North Beach; the money exchange takes place in Chinatown (which throughout the script is described as run-down, mysterious and for the Anglo-American visitor, an inscrutable environment); and the showdown between Parker and the Outfit is staged at the waterfront. The sense of the city that is conveyed in the script is still very similar to the one in the Stark novel in that Rafe and David Newhouse only vaguely gesture toward an unspecific urban space that has very little bearing on the narrative actions; there is no indication of a correlation between setting and story—the location is just a setting.

However, after Alexander Jacobs was hired as screenwriter the locations came to serve a different purpose and took on a more important role in the storyline. Immediately, Jacobs suggested moving most of the plot to Los Angeles, a city which—even though he had merely spent a month there while preparing the screenplay—had left a big impression on him, a decision he explained as following:

Both of us [Jacobs and Boorman] were extraordinarily attracted by Los Angeles - I still am - and we both hated San Francisco, hated it in the sense that it wasn’t for our picture, and it was very much a touristy sort of town, a town sort of on the asshole of America...If you couldn’t face the Middle West and the West and what modern America is, you retreated to SF and hung on for your dear life. It’s a very sweet sort of city, but it’s obviously not America. I love LA because it seems to me

¹²³ Sitney, “Landscape in the cinema,” 104.

¹²⁴ Rafe and David Newhouse, *Point Blank* (dated 10/05/1966), 152. Margaret Herrick Library: Special Collections, MGM/Turner Scripts.

to be absolutely what America is, at least one aspect of America, and it doesn't kid around...you either take it or you don't take it.¹²⁵

In Jacobs' screenplays the emphasis is placed on a juxtaposition of San Francisco—as “a very sweet sort of town”—and Los Angeles—as a visual metaphor of “what modern America is.” While San Francisco is introduced through the “touristy” sites also mentioned in the Newhouses' script, Jacobs foregrounds Los Angeles' lack of historic places and the vastness of the urban sprawl. Describing the narrative transition from San Francisco to Los Angeles in almost cinematic terms Jacobs starts the paragraph with “known” places—Alcatraz and the Golden Gate Bridge—only to leave the reader/viewer in the vast expanses of the Southern Californian metropolis:

The boat and Alcatraz, and the Golden Gate Bridge with its great bay are left to recede below, becoming smaller and smaller until they merge and melt into Los Angeles: the city in which Lynne and Resnick may be lying somewhere; the city which Parker will search for retribution and vengeance. ... In a wide, flat arc, the limitless grid of the city is spread out below. And spreading everywhere, curling and looping and driving through the heart of it are the freeways with their unending streams of cars which make LA the unique motor-city of the Universe. On one of them drives Parker.¹²⁶

Here, and throughout the script, Jacob renders Banham's *Autopia* by focusing on LA's car culture as the most defining feature of the city.¹²⁷ Later on “Parker is driving through some deserted, run-down streets,” “is caught in the rush-hour traffic”; and when Parker tries to get

¹²⁵ Stephen Farber, “The Writer II. An Interview with Alexander Jacobs,” *Film Quarterly* Vol. 22, No. 2 (Winter 1968-1969): 7.

¹²⁶ Alexander Jacobs, *Point Blank* (dated 12/05/1966), 15. Margaret Herrick Library: Special Collections, MGM/Turner Scripts.

¹²⁷ In the second revised script Jacobs added additional L.A. locales, many of which did not make it into the final version of the script. Again, Jacobs focuses on the city's vernacular architecture—e. g. supermarkets, gas stations, parking lots—and the protagonists' motorized passage through the city. In a lengthy scene, the protagonist—now called Walker—follows his wife Lynne around the city, observing a meeting between her and her young lover on a vista point overlooking the city, and trailing her on her daily errands.

information from Stegman he uses a car as a torture device by repeatedly crushing the vehicle against the immense concrete structure of a freeway bridge, “killing” the car instead of the terrified Stegman.¹²⁸ The car here becomes both a means of navigating the city, of spatial mastery, and a device to assert physical force over others. In addition to emphasizing modes of transportation, Jacobs also highlights the dimension of the city space by including references to nighttime Los Angeles. For example, “Parker gazes out at the panorama of LA below him. The Strip is alight. Beneath it, other boulevards and avenues glitter.”¹²⁹ Or, later Parker again gazes at “the lights of Los Angeles [as they] twinkle far below the hillside down.”¹³⁰

In addition to the vastness of the space, Jacobs emphasizes the artificial quality of the built environment—manicured gardens, palm tree-lined streets, swimming pools—while rendering the landscape as hostile and dangerous to the protagonists. Aligning with the screenwriter’s acknowledgement that the city is “a desert, it’s on desert land, it literally lives on desert land,” Jacobs’ L.A. is an asphalt desert disguised as oasis.¹³¹ Another aspect of the built environment that Jacobs’s script registers is the fortress-like architecture that Mike Davis sees as characteristic for the fortification of private space in Los Angeles. The living spaces that members of the syndicate inhabit are protected and fortified. For example, Bronson’s mansion “looks like a house - but it

See: Alexander Jacobs, *Point Blank* (dated 01/03/1967), 13. Margaret Herrick Library: Special Collections, MGM/Turner Scripts.

¹²⁸ Jacobs, *Point Blank* (dated 12/05/1966), 31, 84, 36.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* 26.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹³¹ Farber, “The Writer II,” 10.

acts like a fort,” it “is stocked as though for a siege.”¹³² Mal’s penthouse—which is compared to “Fort Knox”¹³³—is another example of this “security-obsessed urbanism.”¹³⁴

Another one of Jacobs’ additions is the scene in the *Movie House* nightclub which also functions as an excellent visual metaphor for the city space. “Movie House,” references both the most important industry of the city as well as the inscription of Los Angeles with its own images, and the scene—both how Jacobs wrote it and the way it looks in the film—renders the implicit voyeurism of cinema. The description also highlights the voyeuristic quality of the set:

Under the stage is a bar with a line of men slumped on stools, their mostly bald heads catching the spilled light from the stage as they crane up to watch the show. The gauze screen is on the right of the stage. Rose’s face and body are subjected to weird effects both violent and erotic in this attempt to stimulate a psychedelic experience. To the right of the screen, a scantily clad dancer gyrates in the spotlight. The left-hand side of the stage is occupied by a Negro quartet [sic]. They are dressed in black. Only their instruments are lit.... Downstage a Negro [sic] singer is doing a “Shout” act and is moving to the tempo of the projected images. His shouts and screams punctuate the music and accompany the images on the screen.¹³⁵

As the only scene featuring non-white performers it is cringe worthy as only two years before, the Watts riots had brought the spatial injustice of racial segregation to the public’s attention. In the “Movie House” however, African American performers animate the white, affluent middle-class audience to “shout.”¹³⁶ In the venue the white—and mainly male—customers are provided with a place that allows them to look at the sexualized “other” (women and African Americans). The outcry of minorities against racial discrimination is reinstalled within the status

¹³² Jacobs, *Point Blank* (dated 12/05/1966), 90f.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹³⁴ Davis, *City of Quartz*, 223.

¹³⁵ Jacobs, *Point Blank* (dated 01/03/1967), 29.

¹³⁶ Cf. Edward W. Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 136f.

quo, in which African Americans, as well as women, are only displayed as exotic or erotic objects to be gazed at by the male, white patrons of the club.

In addition to the above-mentioned scenes, Jacobs also referenced actual concrete structures of the built environment to highlight the differences between Los Angeles and San Francisco. Those in Los Angeles—such as the river drainage canal—are not only immense and minimalist in design but also at times indecipherable as to their function.

The empty drainage canal runs dead straight across an outlying area of LA -- a deep, wide and square, white concrete channel, gouged out of the earth, dry and dusty. Its banks are flat and bare. The freeway arches over it at one point.¹³⁷

In contrast Jacobs selected structures for the San Francisco scenes that are unobtrusive and compatible to their natural surroundings, such as Fort Point:

Ahead is the arched suspension of the Golden Gate Bridge. A ship is passing beneath it. Its wake washes the rocks on the shoreline...Lying in the lee of the bridge, the Fort juts out on a promontory into the bay itself. It is unused now, but still retains a desolate, rugged grandeur. Windowless, its walls rise sheer, giving no clues to what it contains.¹³⁸

While both the drainage canal and Fort Point are grandiose in size, in the description of the historic monument Jacobs emphasizes the interconnectedness of the built with the natural space. While the canal is “gouged out of the earth,” implying a violent reshaping of natural space, Fort Point is an extension of the natural landscape, adding to its “picturesque” appeal.¹³⁹ At this point I would like to turn to Boorman’s visual rendering of the differences between the two urban spaces, in particular to the ways he inscribes them with sublime and picturesque characteristics.

¹³⁷ Jacobs, *Point Blank* (dated 12/05/1966), 78.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 103Af.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 103Af.

Memory, Place, and the Picturesque

In the first ten minutes both settings are introduced as distinctly different “physical” and “imaginary” spaces: San Francisco is depicted as a place, in that it is “relational, historical, and defined through identity,” while Los Angeles is depicted through a series of “non-places.”¹⁴⁰ The opening montage provides a fragmented backstory for Walker’s quest for revenge and thereby inscribes the space with a subjective quality; the lapses in time and spatial setting make it difficult to construct a concise chronology of past events. Instead of an establishing shot to introduce the setting, the first image is a close-up of the protagonist’s face, illuminated by a red spot light. To disorient the spectator further, in short succession we hear gunshots, while a human figure is repeatedly shot and finally collapses in the corner of a prison cell. The location of the incident is impossible to determine as the set is dimly lit, and the frame is dominated by the credit title *LEE MARVIN* set in stark white letters to contrast the dark color composition of the visuals. As the camera moves closer to the body lying on the floor, Walker’s face again becomes the focus of the frame. In the voice-over narration Walker asks, “A prison cell...How did I get here?”, thereby self-reflexively acknowledging his and the spectator’s confusion. In the following montage the audience is provided with a very condensed version of the events leading up to the shooting—Mal (John Vernon) and Walker’s reunion; Mal’s plea for help; Lynne (Sharon Acker), Mal and Walker in Alcatraz; Mal’s plan for the heist recounted in another voice-over; the betrayal. Short vignettes are bound together in a dream-like hallucinatory web of spatial and temporal layers. We are left to fill in the blanks: Mal and Walker had been friends; they planned one last coup to start a new life with the proceedings; Walker’s wife Lynne got between the two, leaving Walker [lethally] shot on

¹⁴⁰ Marc Auge, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995), 77.

the floor of the prison cell and Lynne and Mal on the run. Continuing the ambiguity and instability of the storyline, Walker then wonders, “Did it all happen...a dream,” and the spectator shares his sentiment. During the first six minutes the cinematic space is entirely abstract and incomprehensible: The camera captures the characters’ faces or bodies in tightly framed shots, then again pulls away to counterpose the human figure against the massive, desolate structures of the prison. The credit sequence resumes on a freeze frame of Walker – *POINT BLANK* in white letters over his image frozen in time. Walker paralyzed by his past, in the prison, endlessly trying to escape the memories of the “place.”¹⁴¹

Seven minutes into the film the only thing decipherable about the setting is that it is a deserted penitentiary, and thus Boorman latently provides the viewer with the geographical location. He films the skyline of San Francisco in a long establishing shot as Walker enters the frame from screen left and stumbles into the bay. Located on the north end of the peninsula and surrounded by the bay on one side and the Pacific Ocean on the other, the cityscape might easily be identifiable, but the voice-over provides further context. The voice belongs to a tour guide which is revealed in the following shot of Walker on a tourist boat. Boorman acknowledges San Francisco’s appeal to tourists both through the images (panorama shots) and the audio (the tour guide), highlighting both its picturesque landscape as well as its place in the cultural imaginary.

¹⁴¹ Only few viewers would have picked up on the location at this point as there were few productions to date that featured footage of Alcatraz, one being John Frankenheimer’s *Birdman of Alcatraz* (1962). In contrast to Boorman, Frankenheimer chose a traditional establishing shot to introduce the setting though. *Point Blank* does visually allude to the film, as the montage sequence in the beginning features a shot of a bird sitting on a barbed wire fence. Furthermore, Boorman refers to the 1936 and 1937 as well as the infamous 1962 prison break attempt in which three inmates attempted to escape Alcatraz by swimming across the bay. While we only see Walker walk into the water, in the next shot Walker is on a tourist boat as the voice over recounts the escape attempt—which might or might not have been successful as neither the convicts nor their bodies were ever found. Just as their fate Walker’s is not entirely clear either, which Yost acknowledges by asking him, “How did you make it across?”

According to Stephen Tedeschi “the picturesque values abstract aesthetic form of landscape over the physical land itself,” the picturesque appeal of a landscape then depends on perspective and visibility.¹⁴² Boorman here offers us the cityscape as an “artificially constructed image perceptible from multiple points of view,” highlighting the picturesque appeal of San Francisco. Its cityscape—in particular the horizontal and vertical shifts, the specificities of the land, with hills and valleys, and the body of water surrounding it—is rendered from the distance, and thus the viewer can appreciate the picturesque view. Other than a short scene at the waterfront, Boorman does not show his protagonists in the city, but rather—as in the panorama shot and the scene on the tourist boat—in front of the city. According to Malcolm Andrews, while the picturesque can be appropriated and replicated, the sublime “cannot [be] appropriate, if only because we cannot discern any boundaries.”¹⁴³ Andrews’ assessment of the sublime and the picturesque recalls that Sir Uvedale Price expressed in his *Essays on the Picturesque, as compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful*. In it he concludes that:

Infinity is one of the most efficient causes of the sublime...to give [an object] picturesqueness, you must destroy that cause of its sublimity; for it is on the shape and disposition of its boundaries, that the picturesque must in great measure depend.¹⁴⁴

It is a difference between the containable and the uncontainable cityscape that Boorman highlights. In the long shots the skyline of San Francisco can be neatly contained within the widescreen frame—whereas later, when Los Angeles is shown, the city extends well beyond the

¹⁴² Stephen Tedeschi, *Urbanization and English Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) 141.

¹⁴³ Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art*, 142.

¹⁴⁴ Uvedale Price, *Essays on the Picturesque, as compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful; And, on the Use of Studying Pictures, for the Purpose of Improving Real Landscape. Volume 1* (London: Printed for J. Mawan, 1810), 84.

frame. While the skyline of San Francisco indicates the city's overall structure, that of Los Angeles (in the 60s, at least) is indistinguishable from that of most major US post-WWII metropolitan areas. The difference between the two cities being—in short—that the former is totalized from one perspective (the view from Alcatraz), whereas the latter is not introduced in a traditional establishing shot but rather a series of shots of the city—the airport, streets, buildings—intercut with images of Walker and Lynne. Thus, while San Francisco is framed as picturesque landscape, L.A. is presented as kinetic and mobile, both qualities that Lawrence Webb sees as definitive of the city's cinematic image.¹⁴⁵ While San Francisco can be observed from a tourist boat—which Boorman features in the initial meeting between Walker and Yost (Keenan Wynne)—L.A. calls for, as Nicholas Green asserts, new “codes of looking.” To “read” Los Angeles we cannot rely on totalizing view rather we have to “single out, sift and move across the meanings of public spaces.”¹⁴⁶

Instead of the vernacular architecture showcased in the scenes set in Los Angeles, the locations Boorman features to depict San Francisco are historic sites. Attesting to the city's picturesque qualities and to Boorman's and Jacobs' assessment of San Francisco as a “touristy sort of town,” the director selected Alcatraz and Fort Point as places signifying the city's as well as Walker's past. Following Marc Auge, places bring together three dimensions by functioning as a concrete, geometrically defined site of identity, history and relations of reference.¹⁴⁷ In addition, both buildings were defunct at the time *Point Blank* was filmed; while Alcatraz had served as a

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Webb, *The Cinema of Urban Crisis*, 163.

¹⁴⁶ Nicholas Green, *The Spectacle of Nature: Landscape and Bourgeois Culture in Nineteenth-Century France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 31.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Auge, *Non-Places*, 76f.

federal prison until 1963, it was abandoned and falling into ruin.¹⁴⁸ Fort Point, built before the American Civil War as a defense against warships, had also ceded its original function and instead had become a National Historic Site. Both Alcatraz and Fort Point have therefore become places of memory, historical as well as personal/individual remembrance, ruins of modernity as one might say: “The ruin is a ruin because it seems to have lost its function or meaning in the present, while retaining semantic potential.”¹⁴⁹ Alcatraz and Fort Point in the film have lost their purpose but are preserved as belonging to “history.” In *Point Blank* this “objective” history, the history of the structures and their function, is complemented with Walker’s “subjective” history—one that we would not find in history books. The opening highlights that “the subjective lived body and the objective world are passionately intertwined,” that body-subject and objective world “are reversibly capable of acting upon being and being acted upon.”¹⁵⁰ Close-ups of Walker’s physique set against the backdrop of the built environment visually represent the “mutual enfoldedness” of all things.¹⁵¹ The centrality of the protagonist’s body in the frame dissolves the boundaries between screen and self, allowing the viewer to enter in an interobjective relationship with the world unfolding before him/her. We share Walker’s sense of disorientation as we are equally lost within the cinematic space. While Boorman later in the film instills Marvin’s physique with a threatening quality by framing him in long shots, the editing here highlights the fragility of his body.

¹⁴⁸ Nathanael Rich, *San Francisco Noir* (New York: Little Bookroom, 2005), 111.

¹⁴⁹ Julia Hell, Andreas Schönle, “Introduction,” in: *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle (Durham: Duke University, 2010), 6.

¹⁵⁰ Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 278, 294.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 307.

Sublime “Non-Places”

While San Francisco is depicted as a place personifying Walker’s past as well as a bygone era of city planning, in Los Angeles the isolation of Walker from his surroundings becomes the focus. Here he is mostly depicted in long or medium-long shots. Boorman’s rendering of Los Angeles throughout the film links Walker’s alienation to spatial anxiety, which Larry Gross sees as a defining feature of what he deems “Film Apres Noir.” Discussing *Point Blank*, Jean-Luc Godard’s *Alphaville* (1965), Nicolas Roeg’s *Performance* (1969), and Robert Altman’s *The Long Goodbye* (1973), he notes that:

Space has replaced character as the problematic element. All questions about meaning are questions about spatial continuity, about the visual logic underneath identity. The hero is not in an ambiguous world, but rather a discontinuous one; this distinction is the principle of the film après noir’s distance from its predecessors. Film noir was rooted in the sense of irreversible moral decay. Film après noir is rooted in the sense that moral enquiry is no longer a relevant category.¹⁵²

This discontinuity of space is illustrated by Boorman’s rendering of Los Angeles as a series of subliminal “non-places;” places, uninhabited, and de-individualized, in which the experience of the sublime is brought about by the contemplation of “a dehistoricized vacancy of space.”¹⁵³ Speaking to the sublime as a vacant space, in his 1935 poem “The American Sublime” the poet Wallace Stevens similarly proclaims that “the sublime comes down to the spirit itself ... in vacant space.”¹⁵⁴ Boorman foregrounds both this vacancy and immenseness of the “non-places” constituting the urban space throughout, so that the cinematic Los Angeles becomes a symbol for

¹⁵² Larry Gross, “Film Apres Noir,” *Film Comment*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (July-August 1976): 44.

¹⁵³ Wilson, *American Sublime*, 174.

¹⁵⁴ Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 131.

the “immense experience of lacking a place.”¹⁵⁵ The LA sites are built “in relation to certain ends,” defined by words and texts “establish(ing) the traffic conditions...in which individuals are supposed to interact.”¹⁵⁶ They produce “contractual relations,” and “are there to be passed through.”¹⁵⁷ The office building, the fast food diner, the public places (the beach walk, the cemetery), but even Lynne’s, Brewster’s or Mal’s apartments with their modern, luxurious interior evoke the sterility and anonymity of hotels. Chris’s (Angie Dickinson) home, filled with personal objects and memorabilia, which actually can be interpreted as a “place,” is destroyed by members of the syndicate. Walker does not even have a temporary living situation, but rather is shown in constant movement from one location to the next. Just as his name indicates, he has to move, to walk, even though this relentless activity only points back to his rootlessness and isolation, because as de Certeau describes, “to walk is to lack a place.”¹⁵⁸ In regard to the protagonist’s uprootedness, it is telling that Boorman chose LAX as the first LA location. Firstly, the space traversed by Walker is at the time incomprehensible, an underground terminal without direct sunlight, basked in fluorescent neon-colors. Thus, the airport, or rather the terminal, “where one is made to pass through tubes like a hamster and is never inside but is rather situated between two outsides,” functions as a visualization of Walker’s transition from one city to the next, symbolizing the continuation of his past life into his present, transposing the interior state into the exterior space.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 103.

¹⁵⁶ Auge, *Non-Places*, 94, 96.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 102, 104.

¹⁵⁸ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 103.

¹⁵⁹ Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, 38.

Secondly, Boorman does not introduce the change of place according to the set of tropes—the ride to the airport, the terminal, the plane taking off and landing—that Anthony Eastrope sees as characteristic for films of that period such as *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967).¹⁶⁰ In contrast to the formula described by Eastrope, Boorman does not show Walker’s journey but his arrival, which James Mitchell Martin likens to Orpheus emerging from Hades, an “exterminating angel returned to the living.”¹⁶¹ Furthermore, the airport design, including the Paul Williams designed “Theme Building” (1961), an exemplary piece of Googie architecture, displayed “the aroma of Los Angeles in the sixties—newness, postcard sunset color, and intimations of aerospace profundity.”¹⁶²

The montage not only illustrates the “placelessness” of Los Angeles but also visually and aurally “re-introduces” the protagonist, Walker. Shots of Walker strutting down an empty LAX hallway are intercut with Lynne’s face refracted through and reflected in various mirrors. The soundtrack of Walker’s footsteps connects the different settings; the ominous audio track haunts the images and gives the impression of determination and physical force. While Walker’s figure is presented in a long shot, further highlighting his masculine stature, Lynne is seen in fragmented close-up and medium close-up shots. She is confined to private spaces such as her bathroom and the beauty salon that serve “the cult of the body.”¹⁶³ Walker is introduced as a body in motion, while Lynne remains static, her face scrutinized by and investigated by the gaze of the camera.

¹⁶⁰ Anthony Eastrope, “Cinecities in the 1960s,” in: *The Cinematic City*, ed. David B. Clarke (Routledge: New York, 1997), 132.

¹⁶¹ James Mitchell Martin, “Point Blank,” *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 38, Spring 1968: 40.

¹⁶² Peter Plagens, *Sunshine Muse: Art on the Westcoast, 1945-1970* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 122.

¹⁶³ Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London: Verso, 1989), 35.

The endless refraction of her body in the mirrors of the beauty salon introduces the setting as city of surfaces, of infinite reflections, similar to the graphic and representational depthlessness of Ruscha's paintings, both city and human body as Antonin Artaud's *corp sans organes*. Consequently, in the barely two-minute-long montage "the city is visualized as a collage of different ecologies, disorder, architecture and mixed media, layers of historical memory."¹⁶⁴

The artificial quality of the color composition adds to this depiction of Los Angeles as city of surfaces. As Boorman summarized, "the film was very stylized, each scene with its own color; we ran the whole gamut of colors from beginning to end, moving from cool ones to warm ones."¹⁶⁵ Although the director originally intended to shoot the film in black-and-white, the use of colors proved to be ideal for the setting. Boorman's cinematographer Philip Lathrop, who had worked on Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958), depicts LA in an expressionist fashion, reminiscent of classical noir's chiaroscuro aesthetic as city of "sunshine and noir."¹⁶⁶ In the night-for-night scenes, Walker's face is oftentimes the only detail visible in the black-in-black composition, imbuing his physique with a shadowy and threatening quality. He seems most in his element when he can vanish into the darkness, absorbed by night. In contrast, in the daytime scenes the Metrocolor film stock is used to its fullest advantage to create images of surface beauty in striking colors. The color composition in both night- and daytime scenes stands out as quite artificial, which, given the subject matter, is very fitting. As Jean Baudrillard summarizes, "America is neither a dream nor reality. It is hyperreality."¹⁶⁷ The look of the film reflects this hyperreal quality

¹⁶⁴ Webb, *The Cinema of Urban Crisis*, 25.

¹⁶⁵ Boorman quoted in Ciment, *John Boorman*, 76.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. Brian Hoyle, *The Cinema of John Boorman* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 38.

¹⁶⁷ Baudrillard, *America*, 50.

through the juxtaposition of “the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed.”¹⁶⁸ The camera draws attention to the superfluous details of the commodified environment only to reintegrate the colors, textures and objects again in a blurry tapestry. The glut of objects in Brewster’s house, the collage of female bodies and faces in Chris’s nightclub, and the assortment of beauty products in Lynne’s bathroom are comparable to Robbe-Grillet’s excessive descriptions of objects that are “never drawn in third dimension, in depth”, that have “no being beyond phenomenon.”¹⁶⁹ Through reflections in windows or mirrors the two-dimensionality of the images and the focus on surfaces is highlighted throughout the film: When Walker drives to Lynne’s house, the car window reflects the city. Almost as in a split screen frame, Walker’s upper body is shown in a medium close-up, while at the same time in the (screen) left side of the window the “passage through space, with constraints established by speed and motion” is depicted through snapshot-like glimpses.¹⁷⁰

In *Point Blank* the car becomes “the modality through which the now-diffused metropolis is primarily encountered.”¹⁷¹ And although Boorman “visualize(s)” Los Angeles “in the American way, from the perspective of the car,” his emphasis on the mechanized urban passage does not suggest that the space can actually be made comprehensible through the character’s passing through it.¹⁷² In contrast to the “walking cure” outlined by Dimendberg which posits the “practice

¹⁶⁸ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16, Vol. 1 (Spring 1986): 22.

¹⁶⁹ Roland Barthes, “Objective Literature: Alain Robbe-Grillet,” in: *Jealousy*, by Alain Robbe-Grillet (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 15.

¹⁷⁰ Weinstein, “The First American City,” 35.

¹⁷¹ Dimendberg, *Film Noir*, 173.

¹⁷² Steve Jacobs, “Between E.U.R. and L.A., Townscapes in the Work of Michelangelo Antonioni,” in: *The Urban Condition. Space, Community, and Self in the Contemporary Metropolis*, ed. Dirk De Meyer, Kristiaan Versluys (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1999), 339f.

of urban passage” as a means to render the alienating verticality of the city through the horizontal movement of walking, in Boorman’s L.A. the “illegibility” of the urban space is already assumed.¹⁷³ While the car can provide the means to navigate the urban text, it also “further privatizes experience, devalues the public realm, and by force of time spent in travel, contributes to isolation.”¹⁷⁴ Oftentimes the camera perspective does not align with the point of view of the driver but rather looks in on Walker, doubly trapping him in both the confinement of his car and the larger confinement of the alienating “abstract” city space. It is not so much, as Anne Friedberg asserts, that in the perspective of the driver “the windshield becomes a private television” in which the environment unfolds “as a narrative screen space,” but rather that Walker becomes visually linked to the city, so that the audience sees his story unfolding against the backdrop of the city space he drives through.¹⁷⁵ The changing backdrops that Walker passes through also illustrate another characteristic of the city. It is impossible to grasp the geographical distance between the depicted places, especially because the streets all resemble each other, substituting historical markers with the seemingly identical neon signs registering for the spectator only as blur of colors. While the formless and limitless sublime that Boorman depicts is not opposed to a sublime made out of specificity, hardness, and mathematics, the space here is dynamically sublime in its might and magnitude—as our understanding of it is based on an aesthetic rather than a rational judgement. While we do not rationally comprehend the distances traversed, the signs and billboards seen, the amounts of buildings passed by or the streets traveled on, our intuition allows

¹⁷³ Dimendberg, *Film Noir*, 119ff.

¹⁷⁴ Weinstein, “The First American City,” 35.

¹⁷⁵ Anne Friedberg, “Urban Mobility and Cinematic Visuality. The Screens of Los Angeles – Endless Cinema or Private Telematics,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 1 (2002): 186, 184.

for an aesthetic estimation of the size of the city.¹⁷⁶

The Camera's Gaze, Surveillance, and the Panopticon

Viewed from the perspective of the driver, the city becomes a disconnected web of “non-places,” a “travel story” from one situation to the next. Panoramic long shots further emphasize the immense dimension of the cityscape: Seen from the elevated perspective of both the cemetery and Brewster’s house in the Hollywood Hills, the urban structure extends endlessly, and is only restricted by the mountains on one side and the ocean on the other. The constant change from one location to the next speaks to the layering of different urban experiences, all contained in one geographical region. Boorman carefully introduces each setting, but then moves on to the next just as Walker’s quest leads him from one person to the next. The hotel in which Mal lives is introduced through a traditional establishing shot of a sign indicating the name of the venue as *The Huntley*. When Chris and Walker are driving around the building, subjective POV shots aligning with his gaze emphasize the verticality and the seemingly impermeable facade of the building. Again, and again, Boorman’s camera surveils his characters as they are surveilling one another; Walker looking through the binoculars at the *Huntley*, Walker watching Chris ascending in the elevator to Mal’s apartment, Walker observing Mal and Chris in bed together. But it is not only Walker who is watching, he is also constantly under surveillance by the omnipresent Yost, who remains a shadowy figure in the background. But then again, even Yost’s activities are being documented by the syndicate. Thus, in the film, the society of spectacle has become a society of surveillance where surveillance is “both global and individualizing,” and thereby the city space is a Panopticon “in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 260.

exercised.”¹⁷⁷ In the syndicate the “dream of a transparent society, visible and legible in each of its parts”—asserted through surveillance methods—is already a lived reality.¹⁷⁸

In addition, the organization’s criminal activities remain “invisible” to the larger society and the law enforcement institutions because they take place in private. The space that the syndicate members inhabit is protected from the public view and fortified against unwelcome intruders. The syndicate members’ facade of social status and financial prosperity is just as impermeable as the spaces they inhabit. But even within the syndicate, space is used as a “means of control, and hence of domination, of power,” mirroring the power relationships between the Organization’s members.¹⁷⁹ As Walker moves higher up the ranks of the syndicate, he also moves up spatially. The messenger boy delivering Lynne’s money leads him to Stegman. Being the last in the chain of command, Stegman’s car lot is on ground-level, providing no protection or cover. The spaces that the other syndicate members inhabit are less accessible to Walker; they are fortified cells, protected by mechanisms of surveillance and security. Mal’s apartment in the Huntley is policed by bodyguards and can only be accessed by a private elevator. Carter’s office, located in a modern skyscraper in downtown, can be entered after various security checkpoints and anterooms with secretaries have classified the visitor as “safe.” Brewster’s mansion is completely shielded from view, nestled into the hillside and only accessible by a private road that leads up to the house. From the ground-level car lot, to the Penthouse apartment, to the skyscraper office and then finally to the house on top of the mountain, Walker’s quest leads him half-way through West-

¹⁷⁷ Michel Foucault, “The Eye of Power,” in: *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, trans. and ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 156.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁷⁹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 26.

Los Angeles, but the variety of locations does not constitute a whole. In contrast to the use of the panorama shots to indicate the “wholeness” of San Francisco, Los Angeles remains a fragmented collage of different places and experiences. The fragmentation as well as the emphasis on transportation and the passage through space mirrors what Wilson describes as the dynamic sublime which expresses “the lure of American bigness, space, speed and bulk.”¹⁸⁰

The scenes on Big John’s car lot, the beach walk in Santa Monica or of Walker in his car and walking through the neon-lined night-time LA highlight the horizontality of the city, in which space exists in abundance. In the presentation of San Francisco on the other hand—especially in the long shots when Walker swims the bay and when he talks to Yost on the tourist boat—the verticality of the built space is highlighted. The panorama shots of the San Francisco skyline show the city from afar, skyscrapers and houses crammed together on a tiny island surrounded by water. The ruins of Alcatraz and Fort Point are equally depicted as part of the natural landscape; they order themselves “into the surrounding landscape without a break.”¹⁸¹ In the flashback sequence narrated by Lynne, the emphasis is on the congruency of natural and built space as well. “Do you remember...?” sets in motion a montage sequence constituted out of spatial and temporal ellipses summarizing Walker’s and Lynne’s love story and the events following up to the betrayal. The space in which these short vignettes take place is abstract and void of any geographical or architectural markers. The pier on which Walker and Lynne first meet could be anywhere, nothing marks it as in San Francisco. In a short scene of Lynne and Walker, the enfoldedness of the human figure in the objective world is further illustrated by their dive into the waves. Then when Lynne,

¹⁸⁰ Wilson, *American Sublime*, 23.

¹⁸¹ Georg Simmel, “The Ruin,” in: *Georg Simmel, 1858-1918. A Collection of Essays, with Translations and a Bibliography*, trans. and ed. Kurt H. Wolff (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1959), 263.

framed by Mal and Walker, sits in the car, the windshield reflects the trees at the side of the road. The windshield here reflects nature, very much in contrast to the reflections on Walker's car when he drives through L.A., which only mirror built structures. While the depiction of San Francisco invokes the harmonious co-existence of built and natural environment, the presentation of Los Angeles highlights an "abstraction of the presence of nature."¹⁸² Nature is rendered as artificial commodity which can be seen in the stark green lawn at the cemetery and the unnatural blue of Brewster's swimming pool. The complete annihilation of nature is further emphasized in the presentation of the public space. Walker is constantly presented against the confinement and immense proportions of modern architecture, showing him as solitary figure in rather desolate urban voids. Two scenes are especially important in this regard: while Walker waits in front of the syndicates' office building, he is entrapped, almost absorbed into the abstract geometrical exterior of the building. The empty riverbed is an even more direct example for the use of space as source of anxiety. On the one hand the open space inside the riverbed conveys the experience of agoraphobia, on the other hand it is also "functionally indecipherable."¹⁸³ At the same time the space is absurd in its current uselessness and pervaded by a "sense of porosity, flux, and impermanence."¹⁸⁴ This sense of ephemerality characterizes most of the L.A. locations in the film. In contrast to Alcatraz, Big John's car lot, the *Huntley Hotel* or the Fast Food Diner will never become monuments; they are "non-places," built to fulfill specific infrastructural needs and accordingly will be demolished and rebuilt according to those needs. Brewster's house in the Hollywood Hills visualizes this overlap of "place" and "non-place" by suggesting the

¹⁸² Weinstein, "The First American City," 25.

¹⁸³ Cf. Carringer, "Hollywood's Los Angeles," 260.

¹⁸⁴ Weinstein, "The First American City," 36.

characteristics that Gaston Bachelard ascribes to the “hut,” only to then render it as an impersonal non-space. Even though the mansion is “far from city cares” and “stands quite alone on the horizon,” it lacks the “hut’s” existential components.¹⁸⁵ Instead of offering the “felicity of intense poverty,” the house is filled with electronic gadgets that only alienate the human being further from her surroundings.¹⁸⁶ When Walker tries to find Chris, he stumbles from room to room, turning off one electronic object after the next, finally hearing her voice electronically enhanced from the loudspeakers that are placed everywhere. As a perfect example of the “commodified Arcadia,” the house is both artificial paradise and commodified nightmare, as well as an expression of the contemporary sublime.¹⁸⁷ In it, “the proliferation of systems is not only the norm but the model and where the issues are not the incomplete and the rough but the intersection of differences and repetition as difference.”¹⁸⁸

Conclusion

...It’s not a city, it’s an area to live in...How long you can survive in it is a personal decision. LA says “Be what you feel, but you’ve got to want what you feel, and then seek what you want.” In that sense it’s marvelous. It’s a town to get very tough in...¹⁸⁹

In *Point Blank* Boorman depicts his two Californian locales, San Francisco and Los Angeles, as diametrically opposed urban forms. While the former represents the protagonist’s past

¹⁸⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. M. Jolas and John R. Stilgoe (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 31, 36.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁸⁷ Carringer, “Hollywood’s Los Angeles,” 257.

¹⁸⁸ Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, 54f.

¹⁸⁹ Farber, “The Writer II,” 10.

as well as serves as a stand-in for older, centered city structures, the latter presents a new chapter in both Walker's life and urban living. In order to visually highlight their diverging urbanities, Boorman utilizes framing and editing to divest San Francisco with characteristics of the picturesque and Los Angeles with those of the sublime. Rendering the former in long shots, thereby showcasing the skyline with its iconic sites—Coit Tower and Pioneer Park, Central Tower (also known as Call Building), the turn of the century skyscrapers in the financial district—the camera provides a panoramic view from the distance. In contrast, the latter is depicted through street scenes instead of panoramic vistas. Walker is restlessly moving from one space to another, illustrating that he is not at home in Los Angeles, as his wife and best friend's betrayal has left him uprooted. The Los Angeles that Boorman and Jacobs depict is, as the screenwriter asserts, “not a city, it's an area to live in...”—this Los Angeles does not offer the comforts of a centered, centripetal city. While San Francisco is inscribed with history and a nostalgic longing for the past, Los Angeles possesses threatening undertones, it is “a town to get very tough in” and where one has to be tough to survive. It is this “toughness” that the protagonist of *Model Shop* essentially lacks, even though that is not the focus of Jacques Demy's film. The film does present two very different stories of survival in Los Angeles, while also painting a picture of the Southern Californian metropolis. But instead of contrasting L.A. with other forms of urban structures, Demy focuses on the specificity of the experience that motorized metropolises offer its users.

CHAPTER 4: FLÂNERIE AND THE SUBLIME SPECTATOR - JACQUES DEMY'S *MODEL SHOP*



Figure 4.1: George (Gary Lockwood) behind the wheel in Demy's *Model Shop* (1969).

“The Model Shop” is the result of one man’s love affair with a city. It might also be described as a reverse runaway production since it is being filmed in Los Angeles by a Frenchman.

Jacques Demy first saw Los Angeles three years ago... He was fascinated by what he saw and vowed to return and film a movie in its streets.

“I hope to catch the flavor of the city, which is really exceptional, unique,” says the gifted French filmmaker. “For me, there is real poetry here. Los Angeles is the future; Paris, the past.”

But “The Model Shop” is not the story of a city. It’s about people, young people struggling to find themselves in today’s society.¹⁹⁰

While Columbia Pictures might have had high hopes for the first and only American feature of the visionary French filmmaker Jacques Demy—as illustrated by the euphoric description of the film’s director and the production in the studio press kit’s fact sheet—the director’s sojourn to

¹⁹⁰ Fact Sheet: News Columbia Pictures, *The Model Shop* (5/1968). Margaret Herrick Library, Core Collection.

the US did not result in a film that satisfied or reached American audiences. Alexander Horwath called it “an impressive moment in the new American cinema,” and noted that it was “just another seed in the spawning of what is to remain an imaginary parallel history of Hollywood.”¹⁹¹ Most books on Demy only mention the film in passing, if at all.¹⁹² Indeed the film only became commercially available on DVD in the US in 2009.¹⁹³ While the film received mostly positive reviews at the time of its release, it vanished from American screens too quickly to have any significant impact on the film industry.¹⁹⁴ Many reviewers acknowledged that while visually beautiful, Demy’s presentation of US culture lacked authenticity. As one reviewer noted, Demy “failed to do much that is impressive with respect to either background or people,” so that his “attempt to illuminate the at-odds-with-society world of hippies ... doesn’t ring true.”¹⁹⁵ Gary Arnold called it “a torture to sit through,” mainly because, as he saw it, “Deny [sic] seems lost in a barren and alien setting,” remaining an “exile” who is not able to be “transplanted and assimilated

¹⁹¹ Alexander Horwath, “A Walking Contradiction (Partly Truth and Partly Fiction),” in: *The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser and Alexander Horwath (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), 90.

¹⁹² In general, there is almost no critical survey of the director’s work in the English language other than Anne E. Duggan, *Queer enchantments gender, sexuality, and class in the fairy-tale cinema of Jacques Demy* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), which does not discuss *Model Shop*, and the more recent book by Darren Waldron, *Jacques Demy* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2015), which provides a rather cursory 6-page analysis of the film. There are more books on Demy in French, but again most of them, as for example Olivier Père, do not analyze the film in detail.

¹⁹³ Cf. Dave Kehr, “Traffic and Daydreams: In a City of ‘Pure Poetry’,” *New York Times*, September 6, 2009: AR9.

¹⁹⁴ Charles Champlin remarked that *Model Shop* “will slip away as one of the most widely unseen films of the year.” see Champlin, “‘Model Shop’ May Leave the Screen unseen,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 1969: G1.

¹⁹⁵ unknown author, “Model Shop,” unknown publication, February 15, 1969.

into all-American soil.”¹⁹⁶ Pauline Kael’s assessment of the film was even more critical, calling “his way of looking at American youth ... amateurish and without depth.”¹⁹⁷ What most critics agreed on was Demy’s striking rendering of the cityscape, as it constituted the most noteworthy feature of a film “short on plot and pregnant with atmosphere.”¹⁹⁸ Dale Munroe concurred that the film is “visually ... one of the most articulate films ever made,” calling it “an experience,” while criticizing that “the scant dialogue sounds stilted” and “the pace of the picture is slow.”¹⁹⁹ Besides Munroe, Richard Gertner also remarked on the director’s love for the city and concluded that “Demy deserves a citation from the L.A. Chamber of Commerce” because, “by photographing it [the city] with the eye of a poet, he has often made that not-too-attractive city look positively beautiful.”²⁰⁰ Vincent Canby also proclaimed that *Model Shop* “looks and sounds like a film made by a sensitive tourist.”²⁰¹ Further, a critic for *Playboy* sensed a certain amount of “boyish infatuation with a chunk of urban geography,”²⁰² while John Mahoney, in his review for *The Hollywood Reporter*, defended the film against any possible criticism by East Coast critics leveled against the film. Mahoney compared the film to Evelyn Waugh’s LA novel *The Loved One* (1948)

¹⁹⁶ Gary Arnold, “Model Shop,” *Washington Post*, May 23, 1969: B14.

¹⁹⁷ Pauline Kael, “The Current Cinema: The Lady From Across the Sea,” *New Yorker*, February 22, 1969.

¹⁹⁸ Richard Gertner, “Model Shop,” *Motion Picture Herald*, February 19, 1969.

¹⁹⁹ Dale Munroe, “‘Model Shop’ Poetic Tribute to Los Angeles,” *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, March 19, 1969: 3-4.

²⁰⁰ Richard Gertner, “Model Shop.”

²⁰¹ Vincent Canby, “Screen: ‘Model Shop’ Looks Out on Los Angeles,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1969: 30.

²⁰² unknown author, “Review,” *Playboy*, May 1969.

and concluded that Demy not only arrived in Los Angeles with “open eyes, heart and mind,” but also “with the freshness of vision that is his special grace,” and thus “found poetry here which has eluded native film-makers.”²⁰³ Arthur Knight in “To Los Angeles, with Love” called the “entire treatment...lyric” and indicated that the city “has never been so affectionately, so rhapsodically photographed.”²⁰⁴

While reviewers at the time certainly noted Demy’s infatuation with the city—which he admitted freely to in interviews—there has not been an attempt to analyze the director’s portrayal of urban space.²⁰⁵ Although the film could be dismissed as uncritical in its rendering of Los Angeles—especially because Demy filmed the space as basked in pastel colors and sunshine—it is evident that something is brewing under the surface, that “something’s happening.”²⁰⁶ Demy’s Los Angeles is populated by anti-war activists, leftist journalists, hippies, and dropouts like George (Gary Lockwood), who cannot, or rather do not want to, fit into the capitalist society. In contrast to the people he encounters, George expresses his discontentment through his nomadic wandering through the city, mirroring his growing disengagement with and withdrawal from everyday life. But while many critics regarded the fragmentary plot and unmotivated characterizations as the film’s liabilities, I argue that Demy employs these aesthetic and narrative strategies to translate his own exploration of Los Angeles (via his male protagonist) into a cinematic rendering of a flaneurial passage. It is the places and sites Demy chooses for his filmic Los Angeles, as well as

²⁰³ John Mahoney, “Col’s ‘Model Shop’ Fine,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 4, 1969.

²⁰⁴ Arthur Knight, “SR Goes to the Movies: To Los Angeles, with Love,” *Saturday Review*, February 22, 1969: 60.

²⁰⁵ Kevin Thomas, “Demy, Anouk Meet Again--In L.A., Of All Places,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 21, 1968: C14.

²⁰⁶ Thomas, “Demy, Anouk Meet Again,” C14.

George's movement between them in particular that serve as the focal point of my discussion of *Model Shop*. Additionally, I discuss how George (and in extension Demy) not only provides us with a visual stand-in for our own exploration of the cityscape, but also similar to the *Rückenfigur* in Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), renders the space as sublime.²⁰⁷

Real and Imaginary Places, Sites and Non-sites

The writers came into an expansive landscape that appeared to them to have no discernible center, no reigning architectural style, and no sense of a regional past that, despite the mission and Spanish-derived buildings cropping up everywhere, could exert any local aesthetic authority or convince them that they had, in fact, arrived in a *place*.²⁰⁸

While David M. Fine, as indicated in the quote above, discusses how writers recreated Los Angeles in their novels as “knowable” place, the same can be said for Demy's depiction of the space he encountered. Although Demy prominently features real locations all over the city, he also “make[s] [the city] over into his own milieu,” as Pauline Kael noted, thereby, inscribing the space with a lyrical quality reminiscent, but not identical to his earlier depictions of French seaside towns.²⁰⁹ The director's love of Hollywood films had been on full display in his earlier work, in particular *The Young Girls of Rochefort* (1968)—a musical featuring two American stars, Gene Kelly and George Chakiris. But now working in the US for the first time, Demy paid tribute to Neorealism and the Nouvelle Vague in *Model Shop* more so than to the Classical Hollywood

²⁰⁷ Cf. Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art*, 143.

²⁰⁸ Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles*, 16.

²⁰⁹ Pauline Kael, “The Current Cinema.”

cinema.²¹⁰ This influence can be seen in his decision to film mostly on location—he proclaimed that “this won’t be a Hollywood movie”—and wanted to include “real people whenever possible.”²¹¹ Furthermore, in the film, Demy highlights the uniqueness of the space, or as Mark Shiel summarizes:

Los Angeles [is shown] as a patchwork of horizontal, high-speed, and depthless landscapes by employing a panoply of mobile cinematic techniques such as aerial shots, hand-held cameras, cameras mounted on vehicles, and rapid zooming and panning.²¹²

But it is not singularly exterior locales and their façades that Demy depicts in the film, rather he contrasts various places—Gloria’s Venice house, the rock groups’ mansion, Lola’s shared apartment, the Model Studio, the newspaper office—with public spaces, primarily the streets of Los Angeles. The beginning of *Model Shop* directly speaks to this public-private dichotomy. The film opens with a reverse iris wipe, in which a circular shape opens onto an establishing shot introducing the setting: a dirty backstreet in Venice, surrounded by oil derricks and the beach screen left. Even though Gloria’s (Alexandra Hay) house is located directly at the beach, natural sounds—such as the ones generated by the ocean— are annihilated through the diegetic sounds, because the only outside noises that are audible are the pumping of the oil derricks, cars driving by, and an airplane flying above. The camera slowly pulls backwards to reveal more of the scenery in which beige, greyish blue, and mostly washed out, monochromatic colors dominate. Gloria’s house is a small one-story shack, with the bedroom windows facing an oil pump. In contrast to the outdoor color scheme, in the interior of the apartment is furnished with

²¹⁰ Demy mentioned Roberto Rossellini’s *Europa, 1951* as inspiration.

²¹¹ Thomas, “Demy, Anouk Meet Again,” C14.

²¹² Shiel, “The Southland on Screen,” 152.

psychedelic posters, walls and most of the furniture of a flesh pink and reddish-purple hue. Clearly decorated by Gloria—the brick-a-brac could belong to a teenager, the house provides an apt metaphor for Gloria’s child-like nature and enthusiasm—and nothing indicates George’s presence in the space other than a pair of his jeans and a white T-shirt drying outside. George does not truly inhabit the space, nor does he care to, because in it he is confronted with a lifestyle and values in which he has no interest: family, stable relationships, friendships, and set career paths. George’s ennui is similar to that of the superfluous man, a character type that originated in Alexander Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* (1823-1825) even though the term was taken from Ivan Turgenev’s novella *The Diary of the Superfluous Man* (1850). In Russian literature the superfluous man is a “tragic or romantic hero unsuccessful because of society’s inability to respect or understand the individualist who is an outsider on account of his superior qualities.”²¹³ In conversations with Gloria and his friends, George makes it clear that he wants to create something meaningful, but he is dissatisfied with the possibilities open to him. Instead of building commercial buildings he seems interested in building landmarks such as the Empire State Building (as Gloria sarcastically points out), though is not willing to work his way up; rather he expects to be given access to the financial means and complete creative freedom with which to do exactly as he pleases.

While Gloria is shown mainly within the confines of her home, George is constantly on the move. This is to avoid further confrontations with her, but also to borrow money from his friends to pay his car payments. Instead of filming his car ride in its entirety, Demy chooses to condense his protagonist’s traveling time and the geographical distance he traverses by showing George driving down Sunset Boulevard immediately after leaving Venice. George stops at a parking lot

²¹³ Ellen Chances, “The Superfluous Man in Russian Literature,” in: *The Routledge Companion to Russian Literature*, ed. Neil Cornwell (Routledge: New York, 2001), 113.

where one of his old friends works hoping to borrow money to pay for his car. This is when he encounters Lola who in appearance and demeanor could not be more different than Gloria. While Lola's elaborately made-up brunette hair is veiled in a white scarf that matches her knee length white dress and most of her face is covered by large black sunglasses, Gloria wears her light blond hair open and her dresses fashionably short. George's instant infatuation with Lola is reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), in which Scottie Ferguson (James Stewart) trails and falls in love with Madeleine Elster (Kim Novak), allured by her elusiveness. Lola is very different from George's current girlfriend and he is smitten with her beauty; he decides to follow her to a secluded mansion that might very well be her home. While on pursuit the camera remains mostly behind him, whereas she is shown from the front (not adhering to the protagonist's POV). Later on, after a brief visit at his friend's house, he returns to the mansion where he last saw Lola. But her car is gone, and when he tries to ask for her at the home a female voice responds that no one came to the house (which also recalls a scene from *Vertigo* in which Scottie follows Madeleine to a house, but the landlady claims that she has not seen anyone come in). For George the cityscape seen through his windshield becomes an "endless cinema screen," and while he inhabits the role of the spectator (and director), he casts Lola (Anouk Aimee) in the starring role of his "screenplay."²¹⁴ Thus, in *Model Shop* his car functions as "a kind of capsule, its dashboard the brain, the surrounding landscape enfolding like a televised screen," a form of entertainment that he passively enjoys rather than participating.²¹⁵ Furthermore, Lola and George's interaction throughout the film mirrors what Kathleen McHugh describes as the "women in traffic" trope, which "depicts[s] or more or less

²¹⁴ Anne Friedberg, "Urban Mobility and Cinematic Visuality," 186.

²¹⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, trans. Sheila Faria Glasa (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 77.

depend[s] upon women's movement, upon their self-motivated traffic through the diegesis."²¹⁶ So while George's interest in her is predicated by her movement through the city (vis-à-vis his POV), her independence causes him anxiety as it violates "the Victorian binary 'men move/women stay home'."²¹⁷ Therefore, only when he sees her enter her workplace, does he feel like he can break through the screen—so to speak—and can actively approach Lola, because his assessment of her occupation makes her seem more attainable and gives him "access" to her.²¹⁸

While the film title alludes to a "Model Shop," Lola's workplace in the film is entitled "Model Studio," thereby negating (or shifting) the implication of the space from one of consumerism—a shop, an establishment with material goods to be bought and conversely sold—to a creative space, a studio, where one can rent equipment to "produce" an aesthetic object; a photograph. Etymological implications aside, both the Model Shop and Studio serve not only as a metaphor for the image obsessed film and entertainment industry— which is predicated on the

²¹⁶ Kathleen McHugh, "Women in Traffic: L.A. Autobiography," in: *Media/Cultural Studies. Critical Approaches*, ed. Rhonda Hammer and Douglas Kellner (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009), 424.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ This accessibility is also expressed in terms of the costumes; while Lola wore a veil, a mid-length dress, and sunglasses in their first meeting in the car lot, she first takes off the scarf while walking in front of George on the sidewalk, and in the Model Studio she strips to her underwear. This slow process of Lola's unveiling recalls the deployment of opacity in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich. Proclaiming mist or fog as modalities of the sublime, Friedrich likens their deployment in his paintings to a veil covering a woman's head.

When a region is covered with fog it seems larger and more sublime; like the appearance of a young woman covered with a veil, it heightens the imagination and raises expectations. The eye and the imagination are more attracted by misty distances than by what is closely and clearly seen.

(Caspar David Friedrich, "Äußerungen bei Betrachtung einer Sammlung von Gemälden von größtentheils noch lebenden und unlängst verstorbenen Künstlern," in: *Kritische Edition der Schriften des Künstlers und seiner Zeitzeugen*, ed. Gerhard Eimer in collaboration with Günther Rath (Frankfurt am Main: Kunstgeschichtliches Institut der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, 1999).

constant stream of young hopefuls trying to “make it big” in Hollywood—but also function as an “effectively enacted utopia,” in which “all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted,” therefore constituting what Michel Foucault describes as a heterotopia.²¹⁹ According to Foucault, heterotopias “either create a space of illusion that exposes every real space or create[s] a space that is other, another real space, more perfect than ours,” such as colonies or brothels. The Model Shop is “at once absolutely real...and absolutely unreal,” both in the sort of interaction between customers and models it sets up, as well as in the type of “real” and “imaginary” space it offers.²²⁰ George and Lola’s relationship is predicated on the fact that he pays her to pose for him. Just as when George was following her going about her everyday tasks, here too is Lola exposed to his (and the camera’s) gaze.

Furthermore, the Model Studio as a heterotopic space “presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable,” in that the space is not freely accessible and is predisposed according to certain rules that structure the engagement with the space and the models.²²¹ The rules of the Model Studio are outlined by the receptionist, so that George understands how he should behave in the space. Later on, when he returns, he cuts off the receptionist, because he has already heard the regulations, so he knows how to engage with the space. The layout of the Model Studio itself on the one hand spatializes the concept of opening and closing, mainly through the division of the freely accessible entrance area and the actual studio—windowless room, garishly decorated in various shades of pink—which are connected through a dark, labyrinthine corridor. But on the other hand, the layout of the studio also

²¹⁹ Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 24.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 26, 27.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

corresponds to Jacques Derrida's notion of "invagination," which he describes as "the inward refolding of *la gaine* [sheath, or corset], the inverted reapplication of the outer edge to the inside of a form where the outside opens a pocket."²²²

As Lola enters the room, their exchange is curt; he neither wants to choose outfits for her to wear nor requests specific poses. She later on points out that he does not seem too interested in photography; he replies he is more interested in her. Even though George turns her presence into a material object (a mechanical reproduction of her), the photograph also speaks to a presence, that of the photographer, which is manifested through the photograph. But while his presence is invisible, her presence is visibly depicted in the image translating their power dynamic into cinematic images. Dialog is sparse in the scene other than Lola's inquiries about which way to pose, so that the clicking of the camera takes on a rather depressing tone, indicating the amount of photographs and thus time they still have left with one another. Throughout the scene we see Lola through the camera with which George takes pictures, we see both the "now" and taking of the picture. Similarly to Walter Benjamin's assessment, that the "image is dialectics at a standstill,"—meaning that it is both "the Then and the Now" at the same time—George's relationship with Lola exists on these two temporal planes.²²³ According to Roland Barthes, the ontology of the photograph consists of a "superimposition of reality and the past," which he calls the *noeme* or "that-has-been," because it is predicated on "the necessarily real thing which has been placed

²²² Jacques Derrida, "Living on: Border Lines," in: *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, Jacques Derrida and Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 264f.

²²³ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 476.

before the lens, without which there would be no photograph.”²²⁴ So later on when George returns to Gloria’s place and looks at the photographs of Lola, they function as “a certificate of presence” by reassuring him that he was there with her, while also allowing him to relive or “resurrect” their interaction, even though the mobile image can never coincide with a motionless image.²²⁵ Thus, when Gloria rips up the photographs, George returns to the studio, not just because he does not really have any other place to go, but also because the photos in themselves were only an imperfect (motionless) substitute for Lola.

This time, the scene that follows plays out almost exactly as before, only George follows a different receptionist through the dark hallway. This time, however, he is not taking pictures; he just came to talk in the hope that he might expand his acquaintance with Lola into a relationship instead of a business transaction. She reluctantly agrees, mainly because they find one commonality; they both love Los Angeles:

Lola: And I love the city.

George: That’s surprising. You know, most people hate it. So that’s two people liking it, and that’s a good enough reason to go out and get a drink.

During their first encounter in the outside world, Lola and George remain separated from each other, even while they are talking as it is staged in their cars. Offering them a semi-private space, their vehicles allow them to feel a level of comfort to share intimate details more so than the Model Shop, a space of contractual obligations. When they get to her apartment, it is striking how much all the interior spaces—Gloria’s house, the rock groups place, Lola’s apartment, even the newspaper office—look the same. They are almost identical in their *mise-en-scène* and color palette, giving them an unspecific atmosphere that says very little about their inhabitants. The only

²²⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 76f.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

specific detail is a photo album with photographs of her ex-husband and son, as well as a former lover. The inclusion of these photographs is important in that it connects *Model Shop* to Demy's other films while again pointing to the image as a way of remembering, of pictorial manifestation of the past. Again, we can return to Barthes' discussion of the ontology of photography, because for Lola the pictures do not "necessarily say what is no longer, but only and for certain what has been," thus, allowing her to revisit a past life to which she longs to return.²²⁶ But at the same time, this wish to return to the past or the place of memory is futile. Although she may return to France, the France of her past as well as her nuclear family do no longer exist. The photographs function both as a reminder of a happier past life, which is transposed into an image and roped off like a museum piece (as Barthes would put it), though concurrently as "wound[s]" because they remind her that she cannot truly re-inhabit this particular memory.²²⁷ But the pictures also allow Lola to "own" these past experiences because they "mechanically repeat what could never be repeated existentially," and thus display "the Tuché, the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real in its indefatigable expression."²²⁸

Driving Cures

As a matter of fact, his unassertive little movie could just as well be subtitled "Coming of Age on Chevron Island." It's a film which understands that ours is a pneumatic, nomadic culture, that all of us spend inordinate amounts of time in our cars, rutting along Santa Monica or up La Cienega or across Selma or out Melrose, for all the world like refugees from the novels of Raymond Chandler.²²⁹ In movies as in life cars are used for transportation, romance, flight, lurking, sleeping, thrills, pursuit and death, deliberate and accidental.

²²⁶ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 85.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 12ff.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

²²⁹ Charles Champlin, "'Model Shop' May Leave Scene Unseen," G1.

But the movies always never tell the rest of it like it really is. They rarely get to the car as a way of life, trusted old buddy, rotten traitor, who lets you down in the clutch and elsewhere, security blanket, place of high-speed meditation and spicy reveries, and over-heated prison cell. I admired Jacques Demy's ill-fated "The Model Shop," [sic] because Demy tried to tell some of those things.²³⁰

Demy, in contrast to many European visitors (as well as East Coast transplants)—accustomed to centripetal European cities and their vast networks of public transportation—embraced both Los Angeles and driving. In fact, his assertion that he "learned the city by driving - from one end of Sunset to the other, down Western all the way to Long Beach," almost exactly mirrors that of another foreigner emphatically praising Los Angeles.²³¹ Visiting the city in the early 1970s the British architectural scholar Reyner Banham observed that in this "uniquely mobile metropolis" one had to adopt the "local language"—the language of movement—"in order to read" the (sub) urban fabric "in the original."²³² In *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (first published in 1971) Banham echoed the sentiment Ruscha expressed in his works, *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965) and *Every Building on Sunset Strip* (1966); to Banham, Los Angeles seemed a "sundrenched fantasy of democratic equality, premised upon convenience, mobility, and consumer choice."²³³ In order to provide a different perspective on "this giant city,"

²³⁰ Charles Champlin, "A Traffic Jam That Lasts A Full Year," *Los Angeles Times*, July 31, 1969: C1.

²³¹ Jacques Demy quoted in Kevin Thomas, "Demy, Anouk Meet Again," C14.

²³² Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles. The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 5.

While Demy focused on more on essential differences between European cities and L.A., Banham hoped to illuminate the similarities between them. For example, in the 1972 Julian Cooper documentary *Reyner Banham loves Los Angeles*, he draws parallels between his native London and Los Angeles, noting that the "Georgian squares are the true prototypes for Los Angeles."

²³³ Eric Avilia, "Essaying Los Angeles," in: *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of Los Angeles*, ed. Kevin R. McNamara (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 184.

he felt impelled to write the sort of travelogue that only a foreigner could write.²³⁴ Banham focuses mainly on the interrelation on urban space, vernacular architecture, and the palimpsest of transportation channels that he classifies as the fourth ecology of the city. Recalling the criticism leveled against European filmmakers' depiction of the city, Banham's emphatic response to the city's Autopia was, at the time, less than revered by American contemporaries. *Los Angeles Times* writer John Pastier, for example, criticized Banham's "essentially touristic view of the freeways [that] elevated driving on them into a sublime experience that ignored the essential banality of the daily commute."²³⁵ Joan Didion found the commute equally repugnant, characterizing it as "the dead center of being there ... there is nothing ...to encourage the normal impulse toward "recognition" or narrative connection."²³⁶ For Pastier and Didion, driving becomes intrinsically linked to a purpose, getting to from one place to another—work, supermarket, school—whereas, for Banham, and Demy for that matter, the car and the freeway are aestheticized objects, therefore, removed from considerations of necessity and purpose.

The importance of the car as primary mode of transportation was also not lost on filmmakers or writers at the time, as can be gathered from Mark Shiel's assertion that films such as Mike Nichols' *The Graduate* (1968) explored driving as "a prominent subject for representation in its own right."²³⁷ But in both works of art and life, as Curt Gentry outlined in his apocalyptic

²³⁴ Banham, *Los Angeles*, 18.

²³⁵ John Pastier, "British Examines Four 'Ecologies' of Los Angeles Area," *Los Angeles Times*, June 13 1971, 11.

²³⁶ Joan Didion, *Sentimental Journeys* (London: Flamingo, 1994), 111.

²³⁷ Shiel, "The Southland on Screen," 151.

semi-documentary fable *The Last Days of the Late, Great State of California* (1968), cars were the quintessential object of the SoCal lifestyle:

Much has been written of the auto as sex symbol, status badge, part of the human anatomy, alter ego, projection of the individual's personality. In Southern California it was all these things and more.

Basically it was the only way to get from one place to the next.

...Second, the auto was an escape device... Friday was "getaway day" ... as residents fled to beaches and mountains.

Third, the auto was an oasis of privacy in a world that daily grew more crowded.²³⁸

But Demy went even further; he did not only center most of the film around the activity of driving; but also framed it through two different cultural identities, one American (George) and one French (Lola), though the former is privileged in the film. Furthermore, the car in *Model Shop* functions as a visual synecdoche of the myth of the American dream as well as AMERICA as a whole. Growing up in France, as his wife Agnès Varda pointed out, owning an American car constituted one of the goals Demy hoped to achieve, the other being to shoot a film in Hollywood.²³⁹ His interest in cars is evident in many of his films; *Lola* (1961) begins with a long shot of a man wearing a white Stetson hat entering a white Cadillac and ends with him, Lola and his son leaving Nantes for New York, as revealed in *Model Shop*; the protagonist of *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964) is a mechanic who operates an American style Esso station; but for George in particular, the car functions as more than a mode of transportation. Rather, it serves various means. For George, the car—in a way reminiscent of Joe Gillis (William Holden) in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950)—functions as an extension of his legs, so that the thought of losing it because he cannot meet the payments poses a threat to his mobility and mobile way of life. In

²³⁸ Curt Gentry, *The Last Days of the Late, Great State of California* (New York: Putnam: 1968), 169f.

²³⁹ See Varda quoted in Kevin Thomas, "Life Comes First, Film Second for Agnès Varda," *Los Angeles Times*, September 7, 1969: Q63.

contrast to Guy Debord's declaration, that "the automobile is [a] supreme good of an alienated life," George is not ushered into an alienated state, but his car serves as a social catalyst or even an inanimate protagonist.²⁴⁰ It provides him with a tool to not only initiate the relationship with Lola but also to connect with acquaintances. Similar to Banham's assertion that "the city will never be fully understood by those who cannot move fluently through its diffuse urban texture, cannot go with the flow of its unprecedented life," George is shown as constantly on the move, driving from his house in Venice through Hollywood and the Hills.²⁴¹ While George's "stories of journeys and actions are marked out by the 'citation' of the places that result from them or authorize them," the places he encounters only shortly interrupt his passage through the city, functioning as tableaux that draw out the possible life paths open to him.²⁴² Furthermore, his constant movement not only indicates his restlessness but also his inability to take on adult responsibilities. Because as Michel de Certeau points out, "to practice space is to repeat the experience of childhood."²⁴³

In *Model Shop*, the cityscape is "defined by not knowing, non sequitur, a radical uncoupling of cause and effect, and the visual wormholes that lead us from one extraordinary location to the next."²⁴⁴ The narrative tissue that holds the thread of George's trajectory together is as fragmentary and unstructured as the city space itself. The sense of indeterminacy and chance that structures Demy's screenplay can, according to John Lechte, also be seen as the main characteristic of

²⁴⁰ Guy Debord, "Situationist Theses on Traffic," in: *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1991), 57.

²⁴¹ Banham, *Los Angeles*, 5.

²⁴² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 120.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁴⁴ Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2011), 232.

postmodern cities. For Lechte, the logical entity to inhabit this space of uncertainty is the flâneur—”without past or future, without identity”—because his or her trajectory is characterized by the same uncertainty in that it lacks “fixed spatial coordinates.”²⁴⁵ But George’s flâneurial passage through the city also allows him to attach himself to the one thing that “is a given.” As Doreen Massey asserts, while time is interior and immaterial, space—by being stretched out around ourselves—is outside and can thus be physically inhabited.²⁴⁶ For George, then, being [*Dasein*] is being in space—and moving through it. This being in space, while offering a physical attachment to material space, cannot be separated from a being in time. Just as George moves from one place and one encounter to the next, the progress of the narrative reminds both us and the protagonist of the progression of time, and thus, the very impossibility of “remaining” in place (which for the protagonist means that he cannot avoid his deployment to Vietnam).

Similar to the “walking cure” proposed by Edward Dimendberg, in which the city user is able to transform the alienating space into a legible and knowable environment by walking through the city, driving seems to—at least—temporarily alleviate George’s troubles.²⁴⁷ Driving “cures” his alienation by reassuring him that he is in charge as he knows how to navigate the palimpsest of streets, overpasses, and neighborhoods. Thus, the city streets, highways, and freeways seem to function as something akin to an “id-way” that allows George to physically distance himself from both his current situation—his girlfriend asking for a serious commitment and imploring him to finally find a job—and his uncertain future. Instead it offers endless possibilities and new

²⁴⁵ John Lechte, “(Not)belonging in postmodern space,” in: *Postmodern Cities and Spaces*, ed. Sophie Watson and Katherine Gibson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995): 103.

²⁴⁶ Cf. Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE, 2005), 117.

²⁴⁷ Cf. Dimendberg, *Film Noir*, 118ff.

encounters.²⁴⁸ “The act itself of passing by...activity of passers-by,” confronts George with the unexpected; for example, when he encounters Lola, experiences new places by following her, or meets old friends.²⁴⁹ While George’s flâneurial passage is neither entirely aimless nor purposeless—as he does need to collect enough money to make the payment on his car—he still recalls the figure of the Benjaminian flâneur. In his discussion of Edgar Allen Poe’s “Man in the Crowd” and Charles Baudelaire’s poems, in *The Arcades Project* Benjamin describes the flâneur as intoxicated by the experience of wandering through unknown/strange/foreign streets.²⁵⁰ Thus, the flâneur re-enacts (what Jean Starobinski sees as constitutive of modernism) both “the loss of subject among the crowd” and “inversely, absolute power, claimed by the individual consciousness.”²⁵¹ Benjamin positions flânerie as a potential “cure” to alienation in that the experience or encounter of the urban space might accustom the flâneur to shock sensations and he/she may thus develop cognitive/sensory skills to combat or lessen the shock effect’s impact.²⁵² While the modernist flâneur is able to reconcile the notion of self/subject hood with that of the

²⁴⁸ Cf. Patrick O’Donnell, “Postwar Los Angeles: Suburban Eden and the Fall into History,” in: *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of Los Angeles*, ed. Kevin R. McNamara (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 63.

²⁴⁹ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 97.

In Demy’s Los Angeles, while driving down Sunset one might happen to drive upon an acquaintance in a similar fashion to meeting him/her on foot, at a farmer’s market or café. As everyone drives convertibles in Demy’s Los Angeles, there is not necessity to step out of the car to have a conversation.

²⁵⁰ Cf. Walter Benjamin, “The Arcades of Paris,” in: *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland, and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 880.

²⁵¹ Jean Starobinski, *The Living Eye*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 110.

²⁵² Cf. Susan Buck-Morss, “The Flaneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore: the Politics of Loitering,” *New German Critique* Vol. 39 (Fall 1986): 114.

crowd and/or the spectacle by re-envisioning himself as a spectator, the postmodern flâneur (or we could also call him/her “supermodern” following Marc Auge’s schematization) is confronted with “entirely new experiences and ordeals of solitude, directly linked with the appearance and proliferation of non-places.”²⁵³ In George’s case these “ordeals of solitude” are partially self-imposed as he does not find solace in being a detached observer of urban life, rather he longs to produce something of meaning as well as to belong. But both the spaces he frequents—the Model Studio, diners, offices in car dealerships, parking lots—and inhabits—Gloria’s home—do not provide him with a place. While the Benjaminian flâneur can return to the tranquility of his home after a stroll in the streets, George can exit the freeways—but only to find himself still seated in his car.

Unveiling Los Angeles - The Sublime Vernacular

It was as if I had never seen Los Angeles on the screen the way it appeared to me in reality. I felt the desire to show this city to my American friends.²⁵⁴

George guides the viewer through the filmic Los Angeles, remaining a mostly immobile figure, sitting in the car, reminiscent of another immobile spectator of the sublime, Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. The painting depicts a solitary figure whose back is turned upon the viewer, he looks out on a mountain range clouded in fog and contemplates the infinity of the landscape. According to Laure Cahen-Maurel, the *Rückenfigur*—similar to fog or mist—functions as “one more mode of opacity;” it obscures part of the landscape and also “does

²⁵³ Auge, *Non-Places*, 93.

²⁵⁴ Jacques Demy, *Stadtkino-Programm*, 153 (1989): 6.

away with the face.”²⁵⁵ While the anonymous figure disconcerts the viewer, it performs a positive function in that it “institutes a form of reflexivity in which we oscillate between two modes of contemplation, between the outer eye and the inner eye.”²⁵⁶ Thus, although we are unable to see all of the landscape stretching out in front of us, we have to imagine it in its entirety. While Demy “does not do away with the face,” his protagonist functions as a *Rückenfigur* inviting us to contemplate on the landscape with him but also on him in the landscape. Instead of POV shots, the camera is positioned either behind George (in the back seat) or in front of him (with the camera attached to the hood of the car), so that his upper body takes up half of the frame. In contrast to Friedrich’s *Rückenfigur*, even when the camera is positioned behind him, George’s face is partially visible in the rearview mirror, therefore the landscape is obscured further as we do not have access to the entirety of it. It is one shot in particular in which Demy recreates Friedrich’s iconic *Rückenfigur*, and this is also the only panoramic view that he provides of the city. In the scene George follows Lola to the house in the Hills and then looks upon the expansive city below, leading him to explain later on:

I stopped at this place that overlooks the whole city. It was fantastic. I suddenly felt exhilarated there. I was really moved by the geometry of the place, its conception, its baroque harmony. It’s a fabulous city. To think some people claim it’s an ugly city when it’s really pure poetry it just kills me.

The landscape Demy’s *Rückenfigur* is giving us access to can be defined as sublime, as much as the one in Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* or *Monk by the Sea*, even though the director implements different modes of opacity than the painter. According to Cahen-Maurel,

²⁵⁵ Laure Cahen-Maurel, “The Simplicity of the Sublime. A New Picturing of Nature in Caspar David Friedrich,” in: *The Relevance of Romanticism. Essays on German Romantic Philosophy*, ed. Dalia Nassar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 198.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

of the two modes of visibility—opacity and transparency—the former “remains the general rule of the sublime” in speaking about Friedrich’s deployment of mist or fog in his paintings as it points to the infinitude and scale of the landscape.²⁵⁷ Instead of “the veiling principle” of mist and fog, Demy utilizes editing and sound; instead of elevated views of nature, he chooses ground-level shots of the city; instead of grandiose mountain ranges, he renders “facets that ‘native’ artists often overlook”—the vernacular, residential, commercial Los Angeles.²⁵⁸ Of particular interest to him are locales, not easily accessible—or even of interest—to tourists, such as oil derricks in Venice, vista points in the backstreets of the Hollywood Hills, photography shops (located on Selma), dinners, pool halls, and the Model Studio.²⁵⁹ As Ralph Waldo Emerson describes in “The American Scholar”, the sublime presence might be found in the common and the familiar:

I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low...The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body... show me the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking as always it does lurk, in these suburbs and extremities of nature.²⁶⁰

Demy as another scholar of American life directs his gaze at the everyday urbanity, celebrating the commonplace and rendering it in such a way that surpasses a mimetic portrayal of the city. What makes his depiction sublime is that it lifts the veil of familiarity and thus “dislocate[s] or renew[s] vision,” which Malcolm Andrews defines as one of the characteristics of

²⁵⁷ Cahen-Maurel, “The Simplicity of the Sublime,” 195.

²⁵⁸ Unknown author, *Stadtkino-Programm*, 153 (1989): 6.

²⁵⁹ In my estimation the Model Shop is located Sunset Boulevard between Fairfax and La Brea Avenue.

²⁶⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in: *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 78.

the sublime.²⁶¹ If the sublime functions as an “aesthetic disturbance” how Demy renews our vision of the city is by both reclaiming the everyday urban environment as possible site for an aesthetic encounter and re-envisioning it via his protagonist’s passage through it.²⁶² For example, Demy defamiliarizes the actual geography or structure of the city as he condenses three very different environments—the Plains of Id, Surfurbia, and, more or less, Autopia—into a much denser area.²⁶³ In *Model Shop* Demy features three neighborhoods—Venice, Hollywood (and the Sunset Strip), and the Hills—the former two of which are not adjacent to one another—but through the use of hard cuts his protagonist is “transported” from one to the next. Here, the “cinematic rhythm” is used to create meaning, as according to P. Adams Sitney, montage serves as a “fundamental tool for expressing and organizing the music of the landscape.”²⁶⁴ Instead of portraying geographical actualities of the environment, the landscape is used to “echo the minds of human figures within them.”²⁶⁵ In George’s case that is both his enjoyment of the anonymity provided by urban life and his acknowledgement of the type of behavior a metropolis such as Los Angeles invites. Demy mirrors his protagonist’s sentiment in his portrayal of the horizontally stretched out cityscape compelling the casual onlooker to cast a disinterested glance while highlighting the necessity for a more in-depth evaluation of the vernacular. The images of the city display the “disorienting play

²⁶¹ Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art*, 149.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 149.

²⁶³ Even though Rainer Banham classifies the freeway system—Autopia— as constitutive of what he deems one of the ecologies of Los Angeles, Demy similarly depicts the city’s streets in the film as “a single comprehensible place, a coherent state of mind, a complete way of life.” (Banham, *Los Angeles*, 213)

²⁶⁴ P. Adams Sitney, “Landscape in the Cinema,” 117.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

of surfaces” characteristic of Pop Art with its flattened-out images, glittering facades, garish billboards, and street signs.²⁶⁶ It is not from the street level but an elevated perspective that George comes to fully appreciate his environment. Furthermore, by condensing three very different environments—the ocean, the hills/mountains, and the urban—Demy showcases Los Angeles’ unique features. Connecting these different environments to one another are the streets on which much of the film occurs. Thus, Demy’s Los Angeles captures what Cees Nooteboom describes as the essence of the city, as it is “a *fluid*, a ‘moving’ city, not only a city that moves itself up again, displaces and regroupes itself—but also a city in which movement, *freedom* of movement, is a strong premise of life.”²⁶⁷ It is the very movement in between spaces more so than the spatial actualities Demy is interested in, and while his Los Angeles features actual spaces, allowing the audience to comprehend that the plot takes place in “the city,” it also is a subjective, imaginary space.

Another significant way in which Demy “renews” as well as subjectifies our vision of the city is by creating two distinct soundscapes.²⁶⁸ While he utilizes Western art music—Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Das wohltemperierte Klavier* (1722-1742), Robert Schumann’s “Kinderszenen Nr. 12: Kind im Einschlummern” (1883), Rimsky-Korsakov’s “Scheherazade, Op. 35: I. The Sea and Sinbad’s Ship” (1888)—to reflect the main protagonist’s inner state, he also incorporates a

²⁶⁶ Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 107.

²⁶⁷ Cees Nooteboom, “Autopia,” in: *Looking for Los Angeles*, 15.

²⁶⁸ I am using the term “soundscape” according to the definition provided by Emily Ann Thompson: “Like a landscape, a soundscape is simultaneously a physical environment and a way of perceiving that environment; it is both a world and a culture constructed to make sense of that world.”

See Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002), 1.

contemporary score composed by the rock group Spirit. Demy had seen the band perform while visiting Los Angeles and chose them because they not only captured the musical vibe of the megalopolis, but also lived the countercultural lifestyle that he saw as a pervasive element of the Southern Californian scene.²⁶⁹ Firstly, Demy mostly relies on non-diegetic music, so instead of incorporating the “sounds” of the city, he opts for recordings of canonical music that drown out any background noise. Secondly, when he is using the contemporary rock songs, he relegates them to the background, therefore prioritizing diegetic sounds (mostly the dialog and to a lesser degree motivated surrounding noise). While Demy had used music in most of his prior films to either narrate the plot or deepen the characterization as well as further the story progress, the explicit tonal difference between the classical pieces and the 1960s psychedelic rock soundtrack by Spirit creates a dissonance that is only partially resolved by the images.²⁷⁰ Demy utilizes classical music for George’s journey through the city and Spirit’s soundtrack for all scenes taking place inside—in the Model Studio, Gloria’s house, Lola’s apartment, the band’s house. The pieces chosen by Demy move from Bach’s cerebral work from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*—whose significance lies in its situatedness in the universal, the rational, and the spiritual—to Schumann’s *Kinderszenen* which characterizes the naiveté of both the rock group’s band members and George. Finally, Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Scheherazade*—whose colorful orchestration is reminiscent of the eroticism of the *One Thousand and One Nights* upon which it is based—suggests George’s move from a position of cerebral dispassion to the desires of the body. While both the canonical pieces and the soundtrack are detached from the direct political/societal situation, Demy uses newscasts on the

²⁶⁹ Cf. Betsy Ann Bogart, “Music and Narrative in the French New Wave: The Films of Agnes Varda and Jacques Demy” (PhD Thesis, University of California-Los Angeles, 2001), 31.

²⁷⁰ Cf. Amy Herzog, *Dreams of difference, songs of the same. The musical moment in film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 135.

radio twice in the film to imply the historical situation. But even though both of these intrusions occur in George's semi-private space (his car), he quickly switches the channel to exclude the threat of the outside, and returns to Schumann and Rimsky-Korsakov's compositions, which reflect his inner state. The transition between the three pieces stages his emotional development. Thus invigorated by the sexual encounter with Lola and his sexual/sensual awakening, he declares his love to her, and his intent to not only see her again, but also potentially start a life with her. When he returns to Gloria's place, she is about to leave, and when he calls Lola's house he finds out that she has already left for France. Through the window we see that his car is picked up because he could not raise enough money for the outstanding payment. Thus, he loses his most prized possession, the symbol of his independence and mobility. While George talks to Lola's roommate, the camera zooms in on his face, and he declares his love for Lola. This indicates a certain maturing process, as he seems genuinely interested in "trying" to build a relationship with someone. As the camera comes closer and closer to his face, before the screen turns to black, his dialog is indicative of the futility of his relationship as well as the impending draft. In his ending dialog George is reduced almost to a stutter, but when he concludes—"I just wanted her to know that I'll try and begin again. You know what I mean. I just wanted her to know that I was gonna try. Yeah, sounds stupid, but I can you know. A person can, you know, always try. Yeah, always try."—his words seem simultaneously hopeful and helpless.

Conclusion

As much as Boorman's *Point Blank*, Demy's *Model Shop* is essentially a travel Story, though its protagonist's journey is not predicated on reaching any specific destination. Rather—as in a bus tour of a city—it is cyclical, ending at the same location it begins, Gloria's house in Venice. Even though George comes to navigate the urban form through his car, his

passage through Los Angeles resembles Dimendberg's "walking cure" in that it allows him arrange parts of the city into a coherent whole.²⁷¹ Or to be more precise, the ground-level representation of George driving "gives of sense of emotional and functional order to the city."²⁷² Furthermore, the constant shock *Erlebnis* [experience] of the visual stimuli with which George is confronted as he traverses space rapidly, provides us with an experience similar to the Benjaminian flâneur. While the protagonist functions as a *Rückenfigur* that guides us through the space, it is Demy that highlights the uniqueness of the urban space. It is through the editing as well as the partially diegetic score that the viewer comes to comprehend the vernacular cityscape as sublime. While most of Demy's film takes place in the streets of Los Angeles, Varda's *Lions Love* is mainly set in interiors. Her depiction of LA is therefore a very different from the ones of Boorman or Demy; Varda's is one that juxtaposes disparate elements, references the studio era's legacy while discussing 1960s Hollywood, one that uses the interior to speak to exterior space, and one in which plastic as a material symbolizes the essence of Los Angeles.

²⁷¹ Cf. Dimendberg, *Film Noir*, 173.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 119-120.

**CHAPTER 5: FRAGMENTATION, EXCESS, AND A FEMININE
SUBLIME - AGNÈS VARDA'S *LIONS LOVE***



Figure 5.1: Varda foregrounds Hollywood's self-celebration in *Lions Love* (1969).

The basic thing about L.A. ... was that it lacked the dimension of time. ... there were no seasons there, no days of the week, no night and no day; beyond that, there was (or was supposed to be) no youth and age. But worst, and most frightening, there was no past or future - only an eternal dizzying present.²⁷³

In "Lions Love" Viva! and Jerome and James are in love. With each other. They rent a house in the Hollywood hills. It's filled with plastic imitations of everything. The stars are imitations themselves. Of actors... "Lions Love" is also an imitation. Of an Andy Warhol film.²⁷⁴

²⁷³ Lurie, *Nowhere City*, 333.

²⁷⁴ John Torzilli, "The Foreign Cinema: Agnès Varda's 'Lions Love,'" publication not mentioned, November 11, 1969.

In 1969 Agnès Varda was planning and filming *Lions Love*, for a fraction (one tenth to be exact) of Demy's one-million-dollar budget.²⁷⁵ The production in general was the opposite of those of Demy, Antonioni, and Boorman. As Varda was unable to find a studio to back her, she secured funding from a Philadelphia garment manufacturer.²⁷⁶ Instead of giving her actors a script, she allowed them to “freak out, improvise, say stupidities,” and Varda would “take the best and type it.”²⁷⁷ Regarding the set, which consisted mainly of a rented house on St. Ives above the Sunset Strip, crew members were encouraged to bring their own furniture, decorate it, as well as paint the walls.²⁷⁸ Speaking to the atmosphere on the set, in her thinly veiled autobiography *Viva Superstar* (published in 1970) Viva recalls “we all got stoned and whenever Adele asked us to do something we didn't like we just gave her a blank stare and then started giggling. “I can't talk to any of you,” she complained. “You don't HEAR me.”²⁷⁹

Working without much interference from either the public or the industry, few critics at the time seemed to have been aware of Varda's film.²⁸⁰ The handful of reviews that exist focused

²⁷⁵ Cf. Thomas, “Life Comes First,” Q63.

²⁷⁶ Cf. Bernard Bastide, *Agnes Varda Filmographie* (Paris: Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, 1994), 22.

²⁷⁷ Thomas, “Life Comes First,” Q63.

Varda goes on to explain that her decision was based on Demy's experiences in Hollywood: “I should learn something from my lovely husband, I decide, and must not take the risk of writing English dialog myself.”

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Viva, *Viva Superstar* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1970), 201.

Viva uses decoy names for all individuals involved—considering that there are descriptions of sexual encounters and drug use with celebrities such as Jane Fonda and Roger Vadim, she was probably concerned about defamation suits. She refers to Varda as Adele.

²⁸⁰ While the film has experienced a revival in the last five years, there is to this date no thorough discussion of *Lions Love*. Hopefully its release on Criterion as part of a box set including

on *Lions Love*'s depiction of Los Angeles, its style, and discussion of Hollywood stardom. In regard to her portrayal of the city, Varda was mostly praised. In the program notes for the New York Film Festival, the film is described as “celebration of Hollywood more beautiful and more daring than ‘Le Bonheur,’” in that it offered “a penetrating view from the L.A. scene from an intelligent outsider.”²⁸¹ Other reviewers such as Vincent Canby drew comparisons to her director-husband's *Model Shop*—even though her film was not mentioned in any of his reviews. Canby concluded that while Demy “tried unsuccessfully to capture the banal beauty that is Los Angeles...[Varda] does just that...without seeming to try very hard.”²⁸² On the other side of the spectrum, John Mahoney asserted snidely that, “Miss Varda seems to believe that Peck, Hayworth, Lancaster, DeHavilland and Monroe Streets were named for the stars,” speaking to her complete misapprehension of her working and living environment.²⁸³ Another reviewer noted the film's “self-indulgent falseness,” resulting from the director's attempt “to chew on more random Americana than she can easily digest.”²⁸⁴ Beverly Walker, who worked as a publicist on *Zabriskie Point*, presented a slightly more nuanced criticism of *Lions Love* regarding Varda's depiction of Los Angeles:

Varda's film is not realistic to Los Angeles. There was no communal life to speak of there. All the people in LION'S LOVE [sic] are entrenched New Yorkers! Varda and Demy created their own, very special, environment in Hollywood, which was

three of her other California films—*Uncle Yanco* (1967), *Black Panthers* (1968), and *Mur Murs* (1981)—might occasion an increase in scholarship and audience interest.

²⁸¹ New York Times, New York Festival, September 14, 1969.

²⁸² Vincent Canby, “Film Fete: Viva, Ragni and Rado in ‘Lions Love’,” *New York Times*, September 22, 1969.

²⁸³ John Mahoney, “Frisco Film Festival Sees Agnes Varda's ‘Lions Love,’” *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 31, 1969: 8.

²⁸⁴ unknown author, “Review: Lions Love,” *Playboy*, January 1970.

more like Paris in that it revolved around food and included many Europeans living in L.A. or passing through, and other displaced persons such as myself!²⁸⁵

In their assessment of the film overall, critics were equally divided. John Torzilli considered Varda's work to be "the epitome of fatuous self-indulgence carried to a point of wrecked self-excess," "wasteful," and full of imitations."²⁸⁶ Mahoney classified the film as "vapid and vain," remarking condescendingly that "Miss Varda has been wasting her time and considerable raw film stock for two years."²⁸⁷ Others were less critical, proclaiming that in *Lions Love* "the wastefulness of the very essence of time can be studied with poignancy, perception."²⁸⁸ In addition, Nigel Andrews described it as "an anarchic collage on the theme of the American dream, [and] its bizarre extremes."²⁸⁹ Less divisive was Varda's portrayal of Hollywood, past and present. According to Kent, "the substance [of *Lions Love*] is built around the mix of what the film capital may have been and what it seems to be today."²⁹⁰ Similarly, Richard Whitehall deemed the film to be "record [of] a particular moment in time, [which] in Miss Varda's [case] is...the Hollywood of the golden past [and] the one of an uncertain future."²⁹¹ This "Hollywood of the golden past" is depicted as "a playland haunted by ghosts of dead movie stars, either in street-signs

²⁸⁵ Beverly Walker quoted in Alexander Horwath, "A Walking Contradiction (Partly Truth and Partly Fiction)," 88.

²⁸⁶ Torzilli, "The Foreign Cinema."

²⁸⁷ Mahoney, "Frisco Film Festival Sees Agnes Varda's 'Lions Love,'" 8.

²⁸⁸ Unknown author, "Experimental Feature," *Box Office*, October 10, 1969.

²⁸⁹ Nigel Andrews, "Lions Love," *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1972.

²⁹⁰ Kent, "Lions Love," *Variety*, September 24, 1969.

²⁹¹ Richard Whitehall, "Agnes Varda's 'Lions Love': A moment in Hollywood-time," *L.A. Free Press*, October 31, 1969: 38.

or emblazoned sidewalks along Hollywood Boulevard.”²⁹²

As evidenced by the reviews at the time of its release, *Lions Love* juxtaposes disparate elements, it eludes classification, it celebrates excess. It is about a new Hollywood, while alluding to the old; it features outsiders (people associated with New York and San Francisco), while having them pose as “insiders”; it references Warhol’s cinema, while relying heavily on Varda’s signature aesthetic; it foregrounds the impact of television, while championing the importance of the movies; it is a film about Los Angeles, while featuring few L.A. locations. It is this sense of fragmentation that according to Barbara Halpern Martineau is constitutive of Varda’s work which “begins with contemplative harmony and moves towards revolutionary fragmentation, generating tensions of subject-matter and approach around the issues of time, women, and cinema.”²⁹³ If as W. J. T. Mitchell asserts, the sublime “goes beyond the ‘combination’ of opposites in a single object, and involves the transformation of one into the other in the extremes,” does Varda’s depiction of Hollywood and Los Angeles represent this process of transformation?²⁹⁴ Analyzing Varda’s use of textual references as well as her questioning of binaries—old and new Hollywood, Los Angeles and New York, stardom and fame, inside and outside—I argue that it is this sense of excessive fragmentation that make the film a sublime object.

The Specter of Old Hollywood...and a Commentary on a New

Hollywood: It’s a magical city with its typical streets, enormous boulevards and enormous studios. Everyone who comes here has, at some point or other, to test

²⁹² Program Note, San Francisco Film Festival, October 26, 1969.

²⁹³ Barbara Halpern Martineau, “Subjecting her Objectification *or* Communism is not enough,” in: *Notes on Women’s Cinema*, ed. Claire Johnston (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1975), 37.

²⁹⁴ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 128.

his private life against the “Hollywood thing.”²⁹⁵

Varda, as indicated in the quote above, sees Hollywood as predicated on antagonisms. Here the “magical” exists alongside the “typical,” the “private” is pitted against the “public Hollywood thing,” and Hollywood is a city consisting of “enormous” boulevards and studios. Functioning as a quasi-commentary on *Lions Love*, film historian Carlo Clarens asserts in the beginning, “there never was such a place as Hollywood—Hollywood is a state of mind.” David Fine, describing conventions of the Hollywood novel—some of which Varda’s film shares—similarly concludes that “Hollywood in such works is a state of mind, an absent present, less a place than a textual site for the self-construction of identity.”²⁹⁶ In Varda’s portrayal the film industry as well as film production in general are sidelined and exist only on the periphery of her meditation on fame, failure, and (artistic) freedom. By choosing to begin and end *Lions Love* with Michael McClure’s 1965 *The Beard*—the protagonists attend a performance of it and later read passages from it—Varda foregrounds the performative element of film stardom based on the cult of personality. McClure’s 60-minute play revolves around Billy the Kid and Jean Harlow, “two ghosts from two periods of the American past.”²⁹⁷ Through his selection of cultural icons, the playwright presents these periods—the American West and Hollywood—side-by-side, thereby interrelating the westward expansion to, what might be called a second Gold Rush, that is the move of film industry from the East to the West Coast. According to Martin Gottfried the play caricatures celebrity culture by depicting its protagonists as “two super-sized sex-symbols...[that] represent ultra-sex,

²⁹⁵ Agnès Varda, and Andre Cornand, “Lions Love,” in: *Agnès Varda: Interviews*, ed. T. Jefferson Kline (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2014), 50.

²⁹⁶ Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles*, 70.

²⁹⁷ Norman Mailer, “Forward” in: *The Beard & VKTMS* by Michael McClure (New York: Grove Press, 1985).

American-style.”²⁹⁸ Additionally, both Billy The Kid (Henry McCarthy) and Jean Harlow (Harlean Harlow Carpenter) died in their early twenties, manifesting a cultural image of eternal youth. Thus, they became mythical archetypes in the lore of the popular imaginary of a society obsessed with youth and terrified of old age.²⁹⁹

Walking into the theater, Viva, James Rado, and Gerome Ragni interrupt the rendition of the play and command everyone’s attention, even eliciting applause for their *Selbstinszenierung* (self-presentation or comportment). Their arrival on the scene marks the arrival of a new Hollywood. Varda herself saw the film as a “documentary of Hollywood,” stating that she “wanted to do a film about young actors - a new breed of actors - trying to make it in Hollywood.”³⁰⁰ Most of the creative personnel involved were unmistakably part of the counterculture: Viva had made her name in Andy Warhol’s factory; Rado and Ragni had penned the successful hippy musical *Hair* (1967); Michael McClure himself, whose play was banned for obscenity several times, was part of San Francisco’s Beat Generation.³⁰¹ Addressing her exposure to and interest in McClure’s

²⁹⁸ Martin Gottfried, “Theatre: ‘The Beard’,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, October 25, 1967: 55.

²⁹⁹ Their lasting relevance in popular culture can be seen in various media, speaking to their impact as cultural icons, especially in 1960s pop art, plays, comics, and bio-pics.

see *The Left Handed Gun* (Arthur Penn, 1958), the by Charlton Comics published *Billy the Kid* series (1957-1983), Warhol’s *Harlot* (1964), *The Carpetbaggers* (Edward Dymtryk, 1964), Michael McClure’s *The Blossom, or Billy the Kid* (1964), *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968), *Harlow* (Alex Segal, 1965), *Harlow* (Gordon Douglas, 1965). Additionally, Marilyn Monroe was very much an updated Harlow, not just in terms of her looks, but her personal life—her middle name was Jean—and demise also mirrored Harlow’s.

³⁰⁰ Thomas, “Life Comes First,” Q63.

³⁰¹ “McClure is considering making a film with undergrounder Bruce Connors... Andy Warhol reportedly already has filmed a version but without McClure’s permission.” And in fact, Warhol did adapt the play, without McClure’s permission with Gerard Malanga and Mary Woronov in 1966.

see Unknown author, “The Beard,” *Variety*, March 8, 1967: 70.

The Beard as well as New York underground films, Varda noted that,

It's a collage of what happened to me in Hollywood in 1968. I was in Hollywood when McClure's play opened. I was there when Kennedy's assassination happened. I watched it all on TV. There I met Viva. And the only movies I saw in Hollywood I liked were Andy's movies.³⁰²

Again, Varda's statement points to a set of antagonisms. She is not introduced to Viva in New York, does not see Warhol's films there either, and did not attend a performance of McClure's work in the Bay area, even though she filmed two documentary shorts up north—*Uncle Yanco* and *Black Panthers*—there prior to coming to Los Angeles. In a scene following the stage performance, this opposition or contradiction occurs again in her montage. Following an improvised dialog revolving around the concept of stardom, Varda intercuts shots of individual stars on the walk of fame, flashing cameras, an American flag, a sheriff's badge, and street signs (named after stars). By relating film stardom to cultural/national icons/symbols, Varda foregrounds their constructedness. Furthermore, she points to the entanglement of mediated images—as those provided by Hollywood—and everyday existence. When immediately after the title sequence, Varda intercuts shots of light bulbs such as those found on vanity tables spelling out the film's title, *Lions Love* with close-ups of the three protagonists, she comments on traditional notions of Hollywood stardom. While Varda employs certain tropes that can be found in the Hollywood novel—as well as the Hollywood melodrama, she does not exactly mirror their narrative trajectory. According to Mark Royden Winchell, Hollywood novels are characterized by a thematic opposition between myth—Hollywood as embodiment of the American dream—and anti-myth—in which it is portrayed as American nightmare.³⁰³ Furthermore, Eckhard Grabe points out that

³⁰² Varda cited in Kagan, *Greenhorns*, 129.

³⁰³ Cf. Mark Royden Winchell, "Fantasy Seen: Hollywood Fiction Since West," in: *Los Angeles in Fiction*, ed. David M. Fine (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 183.

Hollywood novels from the 1960s onward—such as Lurie’s *The Nowhere City* (1965) and Joan Didion’s *Play it as it lays* (1970)—paint the city as a cultural wasteland, “als Vertreterin des neuen Amerikas ..., um in der Tradition von West das Scheitern des amerikanischen Traums zu belegen [as example of a new America in order to depict the dissolution of the American dream in the tradition of Nathanael West”].³⁰⁴ While they critically evaluate the city, Lurie, Didion, and Varda depict films as socio-cultural phenomenon instead of assessing them in terms of a high- vs. low-culture distinction. Additionally, Varda’s depiction of Viva, Rado, and Ragni aligns very much with Didion’s portrayal of Hollywood industry personnel as both self-involved and narcissistic.³⁰⁵

So “what kind of stories can be told about, or created by, people devoted so single-mindedly to the present?”³⁰⁶ While Varda’s protagonists—as the ones in most Hollywood novels—“live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates tradition,” Varda asserts that there are stories to be told and that by giving performers agency they are able to tell them—with a little coaching, maybe the help of editing, and drugs—by themselves.³⁰⁷ Varda’s depiction of stardom merges Hollywood and New York, as well as past and present in that both are predisposed to blurring the line between reality and fiction. Arriving at the performance of *The*

³⁰⁴ Eckhard Grabe, *Cinematologie und Poetologie. Kunstbetrachtung im Hollywood-Roman* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1992), 186.

³⁰⁵ In Didion’s novel the main protagonist Maria, and her estranged husband Carter, are portrayed as incapable of creating meaningful works of art as “ihre Erkenntnisfähigkeit gleicht dem begrenzten Aufzeichnungsvermögen der Kamera, die ausschließlich die Oberflächenrealität des unmittelbar Präsenten widerspiegeln kann [their comprehension/knowledgeability is similar to the ability of the camera to record the surface reality of the immediate present].” (Grabe, 199)

³⁰⁶ Sandra K. Hinchman, “Making Sense and Making Stories: Cognition and Narration in Joan Didion’s *Play It As It Lays*,” *Centennial Review*, 29 (1985): 461.

³⁰⁷ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernity and consumer society,” in: *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), 125.

Beard the protagonists position themselves as recognizable celebrities—or in Viva’s case not just a star but a superstar!³⁰⁸ Varda’s inclusion of the play implies that there are similarities between Harlow’s and Viva’s stardom and that the studio era’s silver screen sex goddess might even be on the same continuum as Warhol’s Superstar.³⁰⁹ Furthermore, the opposition between them points not only to two antagonistic concepts of stardom, but also of different times in which the mythic studios of the classical era were replaced by lesser successors such as Warhol’s Factory. Or as the film’s title indicates both—Harlow and Billy the Kid, Viva, Ragnó, and Radi, Varda and Clarke—are actors.³¹⁰ As Kent observed, “actors in Hollywood were once called lions.”³¹¹ Varda’s “lions” though, as Dennis Harvey qualifies, “aren’t lions—they’re preening Persian cats, laying dazed and

³⁰⁸ As a side note: While working with Warhol, Viva through the sheer determination of being famous, promoted herself as not just *a* but *the* first Superstar! Thereby she defied Warhol’s conception of stars as “ordinary people, with no particular attributes of distinction.” [Watson, *Factory Made*, 269-70] However Viva—in contrast to Factory contemporaries such as Taylor Mead, Brigid Berlin, Billy Name or Andrea Feldman—seemed to overestimate her appeal to a broader audience. While she did land small cameos and bit parts in films such as *Midnight Cowboy* (John Schlesinger, 1969), *Cisco Pike* (Bill Norton, 1972), and *Play It Again, Sam* (Herbert Ross, 1972), she never entirely transcended her underground cinema roots. Rather than transforming herself into a fictional character, she was more gifted at playing Viva.

³⁰⁹ In another scene, Viva is reading gossip magazine featuring an article about Mia Farrow and Frank Sinatra, whose union can be seen as a literal and symbolic marriage of pre- and post-studio era Hollywood. But the scene also speaks to the layering of public and private persona, or their intersection of both.

³¹⁰ The longer title *Lions Love (... and Lies)*—which was shortened when the film was first released—indicates actors are liars. Thus, in the context of the lions—Hollywood—in extension serves as a city of illusion or lies.

³¹¹ Kent, “Lions Love.”

The “lion” might also refer to the studio Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, whose films featured a roaring lion prior to the titles. Furthermore, according to its motto, MGM had “more stars than there are in heaven.”

sullen in the Cali sun.”³¹² Nor do they even aspire to be actors. Varda states as much in the film’s press release:

They don’t want to be actors, Jerry, Jim, and Viva, they want to be famous—but on the other hand, they don’t care, Hollywood won’t break them, they’ll live their lives. They don’t play the game of Hollywood...They want something else. It’s a new breed of becoming successful...³¹³

This new type of stardom blurs the line between reality and fiction. By intercutting scenes from the on-stage exchange between Billy the Kid and Jean Harlow to the exchange between Viva, Rado, and Ragni in the film, Varda’s editing performs and exacerbates this blurred dichotomy. According to Herbert Kastle’s 1968 *The Moviemaker*, “here [in Hollywood] it was all mixed up... movies and real life, all mixed up,” as Varda indicates through the interrelation between the staging of *The Beard* and the protagonists’ home life.³¹⁴ As Kent observes in his review, Varda “at times presents the characters as real people simply captured by the camera, at other times as actors playing characters, and at still other times as real actors playing themselves.”³¹⁵ The dialog draws attention to this layering of actors/real people/actors playing themselves, when Viva complains, “I thought I’d be in a movie, have a script, learn lines. I’m tired of being nude [...] I wanted a real soapbox part [...] But once again I had to make up my own lines.”

But there are also elements of doubling regarding other aspects of the film. By casting Viva, Varda acknowledges Andy Warhol’s films but nothing in Varda’s film recalls the production methods of the Factory. Warhol however fashioned himself in the role of a studio era Hollywood producer, delegating tasks related to the actual production of the film to his Factory entourage, in

³¹² Harvey, “Viva Viva! And viva Varda,” 68.

³¹³ Varda cited in Kagan, *Greenhorns*, 143.

³¹⁴ Herbert Kastle, *The Moviemaker* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 524.

³¹⁵ Kent, “Lions Love.”

particular to Paul Morrissey.³¹⁶ Furthermore, by casting director Shirley Clarke—a founding figure of the New York independent cinema—as her on-screen Doppelgänger, Varda fictionalizes her own struggle of finding funding for her films in Hollywood. As studio executives demand to alter every aspect of the film Clarke pitches, she attempts to kill herself—but decides that she does not want to “enact” that part of Varda’s script, so that Varda plays the role—of a female director attempting suicide—herself.³¹⁷ Again in contrast to Clarke’s sentiment in the film, Varda returned to Los Angeles to make two more films, and proclaimed during her work on *Lions Love* that, “We [Demy and Varda] really love California. In New York you have the same kind of tied-up intellectual pressures as in Paris. Here people are trying to make a true open healthy life.”³¹⁸

Indeed, the Southern Californian lifestyle Varda depicts is congruent with that attributed to Los Angeles—though one might debate its “healthiness.” As Gavin Lambert observes in his Hollywood novel *The Goodbye People* (1971), “in the old days, you ran away to Hollywood because you wanted to be in the movies, now you just wanted to be free.”³¹⁹ Similarly Gentry asserts, “in matters of morals, Southern California was, by and large, permissive.”³²⁰ While very much in keeping with the assessment of L.A. lifestyle in media, Varda’s evaluation of the US counterculture and her portrayal of artists belonging to it is fraught with oppositions. Assessing

³¹⁶ Cf. Steven Watson, *Factory Made: Warhol and the Sixties* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 138ff.

³¹⁷ Clarke’s character echoes a stable *dramatis personae* of the Hollywood novel, the artist figure who is fighting against the Hollywood system in order to keep his/her artistic (intellectual) integrity.

³¹⁸ Thomas, “Life Comes First,” Q63.

³¹⁹ Gavin Lambert, *The Goodbye People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), 142.

³²⁰ Gentry, *The Last Days*, 188.

the leftist scene in an interview with Kevin Thomas, Varda voices her opinion that “[the population is] fighting against money, plastic, artificial fabrics. Also fighting against racism and poverty... They don’t play middle class and say they’re radicals.”³²¹ But *Lions Love*’s protagonists, while decidedly opposed to a middle-class lifestyle, expresses very little interest in anything other than themselves. Their discussions of their socio-political environment points to their intellectual vacuity; they are not fighting against poverty or racism—or for anything really. While there are similarities to Demy’s portrayal of his disengaged, detached protagonist in *Model Shop*, he does depict a more intellectually engaged and political counterculture as George’s friends write for—and founded—a leftwing newspaper function. *Lions Love* might be read as a companion piece to Joan Didion’s more pronouncedly bleak assessment of the city in *The White Album* (first published in 1979). In it, she concludes that Los Angeles essentially “symbolizes a moral dead end where underlying values of capitalism have given way to the hedonism and narcissism of 20th century consumer capitalism.”³²² Less negatively charged but still similar in its sentiment, Gentry “suggested that in moving to Southern Cal, people left their morals behind; far more likely, they learned they had to tolerate the more relaxed codes - at least - or be miserable.”³²³ While the former might be true for the three main protagonists in Varda’s film, ‘Shirley Clarke’ seems less willing to tolerate the SoCal lifestyle and is thus portrayed as the unrelenting New Yorker, unwilling to compromise their artistic integrity for mainstream popularity—which also proved to be true for

³²¹ Thomas, “Life Comes First,” Q63.

³²² Avila, “Essaying Los Angeles,” 185.

³²³ Gentry, *The Last Days*, 188.

Demy and Antonioni.³²⁴

Hollywood vs. Los Angeles ...and the Rest of the Country

To Agnes Varda in “Lions Love”...and to her husband Jacques Demy...Los Angeles exists. Which is a pleasant change from the usual condescension. And both have shaped their films around the city itself. The real theme in both movies is how Los Angeles appeared to a sympathetic observer in 1968. ...Both Demy and Miss Varda look at this city with a nostalgia for its past and an affection for its present.³²⁵

Varda most certainly shaped *Lions Love* “around the city itself” but there is very little footage of Los Angeles in it. In the beginning when Clarens picks up Shirley Clarke from LAX and drives her to the protagonists’ Hollywood Hills home, Varda uses non-diegetic music to underscore her presentation of Los Angeles as extension of Hollywood. She accompanies a montage sequence of street signs referring to names of film stars with Johnny Mercer and Richard A. Whiting’s 1937 “Hooray for Hollywood” as sung by Rosemary Clooney, indicating again the layering of Los Angeles and Hollywood. While the song—which to this day constitutes a staple in the Academy Awards ceremonies—recalls the glorious past, the streets signs attest to its historization in the contemporary LA. Or rather, the music in the scene introduces “history ...into the fluctuating, atemporal regime of memory... admitting the past to the present, and allowing us to trace in its echoes other dreams, further futures.”³²⁶ Furthermore, through the evocation of the old in a new Hollywood, Varda preserves the memory of the past while documenting the present. Street signs, stars on the walk of fame, Hollywood Blvd., references to Harlow and Billy the Kid,

³²⁴ In contrast, John Boorman was able to establish himself as a commercial-filmmaker, even if his films after *Point Blank* were neither critically praised nor, in most cases, successful at the box office.

³²⁵ Whitehall, “Agnes Varda’s ‘Lions Love,’ 38.

³²⁶ Ian Chambers, “Maps, Movies, Music and Memory,” in: *The Cinematic City*, ed. David B. Clarke (New York: Routledge, 1997), 234f.

“Hooray for Hollywood” substantiate Ian Chambers’ assertion that “memory does not exist in an autonomous realm; it is sustained and guarded by language, in the records of images, words and sounds.”³²⁷ By intercutting shots of Clarke’s drive with shots of street names and stars on the walk of fame Varda highlights that Los Angeles as a city has become a space congruent with and defined by Hollywood. As Mark Shiel observes, no other city has the same symbiotic relationship with its main industry in that it uses its products to promote and sell “Hollywood” as a brand name in film scripts and titles while also constructing an image of an imaginary city space through its filmic representations.³²⁸ Varda offers a play on “the spectacularization of Hollywood—and, by extension, of Los Angeles—as a landscape of make-believe,” which Mark Shiel defines as one of the two tropes of films set in Los Angeles.³²⁹ Thus, according to Curt Gentry’s assessment of Los Angeles in *The Last Days of the Late, Great State of California*, “it was more than suitable that the place which most personified it [Hollywood] was a municipal fiction, a spot legally nonexistent,” which was still “the most real part of California for millions of people around the world.”³³⁰ But, as Marc Norman in *Bike Riding in Los Angeles* (first published in 1970) describes, Hollywood—the actual neighborhood—has very little to do with the mythical place, because “the only link between this Hollywood Boulevard and the Hollywood of American Myth are some concrete stars with famous personalities’ names on them.”³³¹

³²⁷ Chambers, “Maps, Movies, Music and Memory,” 234.

³²⁸ Cf. Shiel, “The Southland,” 147.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

³³⁰ Gentry, *The Last Days*, 259.

³³¹ Marc Norman, *Bike Riding in Los Angeles. A Novel* (New York: Dutton & Co., 1972), 74.

The scene at the beginning of the film—in addition to the one on Hollywood Blvd.—establish the geographical location—Hollywood, more so than Los Angeles—but Varda does not attempt to present a comprehensible, ‘legible’ space. Rather the scenes depicting L.A. function as a commentary on the city itself. There is a pointed difference between the shots of Clarke being chauffeured from LAX to the Hollywood Hills, to the protagonists’ later excursion to Hollywood Blvd. While the former invokes hope for a career and artistic fulfilment—Clarke working in Hollywood on her own terms—the latter foregrounds the illusion that both desires might be achievable in a centripetal space. Other than the above scenes, the majority of *Lions Love* takes place inside the protagonists’ house on St. Ives just above the Sunset Strip. It is this house that functions as a symbol for Varda’s Los Angeles. The containment—or might we say entrapment—of the protagonists to their immediate surrounding mirrors Gentry’s assessment that “in reaction to the impossible urban sprawl, larger-than-life problems, constant change, many residents drew their worlds in tighter about them, attempting to shut out everything unpleasant.”³³² Their house displays features typical of L.A. homes—as it is removed from any centripetal area. Thus, it reflects the influence of the Arts and Crafts and Garden movement which “often placed more

My personal experience, when I first traveled to Los Angeles at the age of 16, resembled Norman’s assessment. Expecting to encounter the Hollywood immortalized in studio era films, both as a brand name and mythical place of movie stars and film studios, I was disappointed in the touristy gimmicks sold at stores lining Hollywood Blvd. While the bric-a-brac objects—posters, shot glasses, clothing items—displayed past and present movie stars, Hollywood’s importance in the popular imaginary was reduced to material goods that could be sold to tourists—but accelerated a myth of Hollywood all the same!

See also: Lurie, *Nowhere City*

Above all, they were looking, with the intensity of castaways on a desert island, for the beautiful and famous - looking for stars. Whom, of course, they never found - except for their footsteps in cement in front of Grauman’s Chinese Theater (307-8).

³³² Gentry, *The Last Days*, 186.

emphasis on the space around it than on the building itself” and is “predicated on a perpetual mistrust of urban modernity and a strongly retrospective and privatizing mood especially strong in Southern California.”³³³ According to David M. Fine L.A. fiction juxtaposes house and highway as metaphors for domesticity and mobility.³³⁴ Varda’s depiction of the house though does not serve as a metaphor for domestic life. Rather Varda questions the alignment of the house—as a symbol—with domesticity, family, and motherhood, because as Naome Gilbert observes, Viva’s dialog about not having kids subverts woman’s role as “‘simply reproductive’ and procreative and ‘man’s work’ as productive and creative.”³³⁵ In addition, Halpern Martineau asserts that Viva “saunters through *Lion’s Love* ... dealing death blows to bourgeois illusions about reality by being those illusions and enacting bourgeois motherhood.”³³⁶

If as Fine asserts “the architectural landscape functions as a metonymy for pervasive masquerade and performative behavior,” what is the protagonists’ self-image?³³⁷ It might be plastic, as in the house, the material that stands out the most, the “essentially alchemical

³³³ Mark Shiel, *Hollywood Cinema and the Real Los Angeles* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 99.

³³⁴ Cf. Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles*, 96f.

³³⁵ Naome Gilbert, “To Be Our Own Muse: The Dialectic Of A Cultural Heroine,” in: *Notes on Women’s Cinema*, ed. Claire Johnston (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1975), 5.

Rado and Ragni suggest having children, and after Viva proclaims that the gestation period would be unbearable, they “kidnap” a group of children. While she seems worried about not being able to entertain them after they all smoke and drink together she seems less concerned about their entertainment.

³³⁶ Halpern Martineau, “Subjecting her Objectification,” 40.

³³⁷ Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles*, 135.

substance”³³⁸ that dominates the space, is plastic. According to Roland Barthes, plastic could achieve the takeover of the world by being “wholly swallowed up in the fact of being used; a single one replaces them all: the whole world can be plasticized, and even life itself...”³³⁹ Varda even provides an inventory of all things plastic, as a list of plastic items is sung to “Twelve days of Christmas.” Plastic, according to Gilbert-Rolfe, can be seen as a symbol for a techno-sublime, as it provides something beyond or outside the colors/objects/surfaces of the world. For Gilbert-Rolfe, “the arrival of plastic’s own brightness ... replace[d] the brightness of the world with a greater brightness...this is a brightness that is primarily understood as technological.”³⁴⁰ In addition, he concluded that “plastic objects are, as often as not, things that didn’t exist before plastic itself.”³⁴¹ In her cinematic portrayal of interior spaces, Varda juxtaposes reflective plastic surfaces with the flatness of the image, thereby changing depth perception and pictorial space. Concerning the aesthetic of plastic, Plagens asserts, while “visually deep, plastic objects are ...making it difficult to ‘place’ color in a painterly depth.”³⁴²

As Benjamin asserts the interior functions as a cypher of modern subjectivity and social reality, so the plastic furniture, plastic color aesthetic, and plastic nature speak to the individuals’ ‘universe.’³⁴³ Plastic as a material functions as a metaphor for L.A. living, the city of transience

³³⁸ Roland Barthes, “Plastic,” in: *Mythologies*, selected and trans. Annette Livers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 99.

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, 29.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Plagens, *Sunshine Muse*, 97.

³⁴³ Cf. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 9.

where no one would invest in lasting things of any kind, because as Joanna Barnes observed, “nobody stayed in one spot long enough to acquire a proprietary interest. It was a city which existed only in the present tense.”³⁴⁴ Gavin Lambert similarly noted of 1960s Los Angeles that the city is like a “rented universe.”³⁴⁵ The idea of a space outside of the bounds of measurement, while not literally acknowledging the concept of the sublime, still relates the city’s structure to what could be described as such, by referring to an area of satellite contents surrounded by other satellite entities. The impression of unboundedness of this particular SoCal universe is supported by Varda’s decision to frame her protagonists--while they are at their abode—in long shots depicting the panoramic cityscape from an elevated vantage point, while tying the ‘lions’—and aspiring STARS—to the “actual” city space. In the few other outside shots, the threesome is walking down Hollywood Blvd which ties their existence to their perceived self-image as “stars.” Recalling Allison Lurie’s description of Hollywood Blvd. as a space where “people anxiously search[ing] for something: for success, for adventure, for love,” Varda’s Hollywood is a space fueled by unfulfilled dreams, visions of grandeur, as well as hope.³⁴⁶ And might then, in the way that Varda presents the indoors, private space function as a “fortification against the meaninglessness of the external world”?³⁴⁷

Varda’s use of the Hollywood Hills house where most of the film takes place, principally recalls Anthony Vidler’s discussion of the architectural uncanny more so than Richard A. Etlin’s

³⁴⁴ Joanna Barnes, *Who is Carla Hart?* (New York: Arbor House, 1973), 101.

³⁴⁵ Lambert, *The Goodbye People*, 38.

³⁴⁶ Lurie, *Nowhere City*, 307.

³⁴⁷ Miwon Kwan, “Flânerie d’interieur,” in: *Negotiations in the Contact Zone*, ed. Renée Green (Lisabon: Asisirio & Alvim, 2003), 128.

description of architectural sublime. For Etlin, “the architectural sublime combines in various manners the spatial sublime ...with the cosmological sublime,” while also displaying “three primary spatial qualities...height, breadth and depth.”³⁴⁸ While Etlin’s definition does not lend itself to an analysis of the narrative space in *Lions Love*, Vidler conceptualizes the experiential quality of the architectural uncanny in terms similar to the emotions brought about by sublime spaces/places. While I disagree with Vidler’s conflation of the two terms, his interrelation of the uncanny and the sublime is provocative as it highlights the particular sited-ness of both concepts. For Vidler, the uncanny is site-specific and foremost attributed to interior (private) spaces that possess place-like qualities. Conversely, characteristics of the sublime are ascribed to public space, architecture; so, whereas a place can be uncanny, space is sublime.³⁴⁹ Even though Vidler references the description of Rat Krespel’s house in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s short story of the same title as an example substantiating his definition of “uncanny homes,” Varda’s use of the built environment is more akin to the one put forward by Hoffmann’s “Des Vettters Eckfester” [The Cousin’s Corner Window]. In the story, the narrator’s cousin who is unable to walk finds diversion by looking through the window and witnessing the daily hustle and bustle occurring on the market place below. Though conversely for the cousin, the panorama window is his Trost [...], the narrator proclaims, “dass der Anblick zwar recht artig, aber auf die Dauer ermüdend sei [that the view was pleasant, but after a while rather trying/tiring].”³⁵⁰ Only after the cousin proceeds to teach the

³⁴⁸ Richard A. Etlin, “Architecture and the Sublime,” in: *The Sublime from Antiquity to Present*, ed. Timothy M. Costelloe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 232f.

³⁴⁹ Cf. Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny. Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 18ff.

³⁵⁰ E.T.A. Hoffmann, “Des Vettters Eckfenster,” in: *Erzählungen*, ed. Martin Hürlimann (Zürich: Atlantis Verlag, 1982), 380.

narrator the “Primizien der Kunst zu schauen” [the principles of the art to see], is he able to understand the pleasure that the window provides his ailing relative, in that it allows him quasi-participation as he sits before the window in the comfortable position of his armchair.³⁵¹ Furthermore, his ability to observe the whole market place in its panorama provides him with an omniscient view that would otherwise not be available to him.

The analogy to the cinema is obvious here; though in addition, the cousin’s gaze can also be likened to the characters’ self-inflicted isolation in the confinements of their home. While “the camera is roaming...the protagonists are confined,” and their self-imposed confinement in the house allows only for a partial comprehension of the socio-political context.³⁵² They observe what is going on in the outside world through the news, so that their TV set functions as a window. However, as with the cousin’s gaze in Hoffmann’s short story, their comprehension of actual events (Bobby Kennedy’s and Andy Warhol’s shooting) is not “total,” as it is mediated, and characterized by a selection process (the filmmaker’s, newscaster’s, TV channel’s and so on).³⁵³ But while TV allows the viewer to access events, he/she does not have any control over them so that “television pre-conceptualizes [...] the uncontrollability of techno-capitalism.”³⁵⁴ As Gilbert-

³⁵¹ Hoffmann, “Des Veters Eckfenster,” 381.

³⁵² Yvette Biró, Catherine Portuges [translated by], “Caryatids of Time: Temporality in the Cinema of Agnès Varda,” *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (September, 1997): 8.

³⁵³ See also: Gore Vidal’s description of television in *Myra Breckinridge*.
...any evidence that there could be a real world outside Southern California tends to demoralize the students. Of course they can observe other worlds on television but then that is show business and familiar. Even the Martian landscape of Southeast Asia loses all strangeness when framed by the homey plastic of a television set, while the people involved in the war are quite plainly extras lucky enough to be called upon to fill in prime airtime with the appearance of people dying and living. Vidal, *Myra Breckinridge* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1968), 40f.

³⁵⁴ Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, 7.

Rolfe points out, TV serves as a symbol for “the banal, historical context of capitalism as a techno-sublime whose uncontrollability is seen in its conversion of the world into its own image.”³⁵⁵

Furthermore, by foregrounding the TV in her composition, Varda comments doubly on the mediation of reality and the layering of different realities. As the protagonists lounge in front of the TV and comment on what they see before them, both the news and *Lost Horizon* (Frank Capra, 1937), Varda inserts herself into the image. While filming Clarke we see her reflection in the mirror so that “all these realities are in one frame.”³⁵⁶ There are Varda’s and her casts’ realities, those of the protagonists’ of *Lost Horizon*, those of the people depicted on the news, and all of these are placed consequently along the same temporal continuum. Thus, in *Lions Love* Varda depicts “time itself-not just its passage,” but “its fertile construction- destruction, ... its many facets, its metamorphoses and burdens.”³⁵⁷ While the telephone serves as a more immediate intrusion of the outside world into the home—as witness when Viva hears about Warhol being shot—both TV and telephone distance them from the outside world. As the sublime experience is predicated on the notion of spectatorship, the question arises as to what type of pleasure can be derived from observing catastrophes, shootings, and violence in the media. Taking a recourse to Joseph Addison’s “Essay on the Pleasures of the Imagination,” why do we “take delight in being terrified or dejected by a Description, when we find so much Uneasiness in the Fear or Grief which we receive from any other Occasion?” As he concludes:

When we look on such hideous Objects, we are not a little pleased to think we are in no Danger of them. We consider them at the same time, as Dreadful and Harmless; so that the more frightful Appearance they make, the greater is the Pleasure we receive from the sense of our own Safety...In the like manner, when we read of

³⁵⁵ Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, 6f.

³⁵⁶ Halpern Martineau, “Subjecting her Objectification,” 40.

³⁵⁷ Bíró, “Caryatids of Time,” 1.

Torments, Wounds, Deaths, and the like dismal Accidents, our Pleasure does not flow so properly from the Grief which such melancholy Descriptions give us, as from the secret Comparison which we make between our selves and the Person who suffers.³⁵⁸

Thus both TV and telephone allow the film's protagonists to witness the "hideous" and "frightful" and simultaneously provide them with a safe space/place—one that is mediated and thus removed from the actual events. Varda's sculptural installation as part of LACMA's 2014 exhibition, titled "Agnès Varda in Californialand," adds another layer to her analysis of the media, because here the TV functions not as a window into real events, but merely as a window into her film, and thus, her depiction of the late 60s counterculture. The actual historical reality is thereby twice removed for the viewer, firstly because we are watching scenes from *Lions Love*, and secondly because, while depicting current events, the news clips she included in the scenes are as mediated and biased as her own.

Conclusion

With *Lion's Love* [sic] we come to the destruction of subject-matter or rather the total absorption of subject-matter which makes it more difficult to fall into the decoding trap...*Lion's Love* is certainly productive of meanings, all the meanings anyone can think of. They [meanings] seem to cancel each other out while generating new meanings, which in turn..."³⁵⁹

What are "the meanings" Varda's film is generating? The most important one might be, that there is not one meaning she privileges. Rather *Lions Love* offers a myriad of possible meanings, points to a variety of discourses, concepts, and theories. As Susan Sontag concludes, 20th century art " [is] not that of creating harmonies ... but of introducing ... the unresolvable

³⁵⁸ Joseph Addison, "Essay on the Pleasures of the Imagination," in: *The Spectator*, ed. G. Gregory Smith (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981), 82f.

³⁵⁹ Halpern Martineau, "Subjecting her Objectification," 39.

subject-matter,” thus “only fragments are possible.”³⁶⁰ But also, this sense of “unboundedness” of something outside of classification defines what Barbara Freeman sees as an expression of the “feminine sublime.” In her assessment, the “feminine sublime does not refer to a particular representation of either femininity or sublimity, which would domesticate sublime excess through a conceptual elaboration of its very incommensurability,” but rather calls both categories into question.³⁶¹ Varda’s sublime is characterized by a refusal of binaries, categories, and classifications. Her Los Angeles is predicated on an incommensurability of lived and imagined realities, as well as past, present, and future subjectivities. Antonioni’s sublime, as I discuss in the next chapter, is characterized by a different trajectory, one that associates the concept with notions of (political) freedom, determinacy, and possibility.

³⁶⁰ Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in: *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982), 115.

³⁶¹ Freeman, *Feminine Sublime*, 5.

**CHAPTER 6: TOWARD A REVOLUTIONARY SUBLIME -
COUNTER-AESTHETIC AND COUNTER-CULTURE IN
MICHELANGELO ANTONIONI'S *ZABRISKIE POINT***



Figure 6.1: Antonioni depicts Los Angeles as a threatening asphalt jungle that confines subjects within built structures in *Zabriskie Point* (1970).

This subject is simply an idea in a landscape.
And it is an idea which will find its expression only through images. This is a film of images... One need only think of the effectiveness of colour in the revolt and the desert sequences... I should like to give America a personal image of my own. That will stop people from saying: this is America, or else this is not America. The America of this film will be the America of the story I am telling, its right background, as is fitting for all stories which aim well beyond having a mere documentary value, to a wider more universal connotation.³⁶²

³⁶² Michelangelo Antonioni, *Zabriskie Point* (dated August, 1967), 2a. Margaret Herrick Library: Special Collections, MGM/Turner Scripts.

Derided at the time of its initial release, Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970) has now, as Matthew Gandy observes, "acquired something of a cult status in its guise as existential desert drama rather than in its originally intended role as counter-culture representation of impending social and political revolution."³⁶³ Gandy hints here at the two possible interpretative frameworks that the film could be and has been subjected to. While Antonioni scholars such as Seymour Chatman and Sam Rohdie criticize the film as flawed because of its alleged misrepresentation of the American "scene," Murray Pomerance, Angelo Restivo or Steven Jacobs in more recent texts have tried to rehabilitate and reinstall *Zabriskie Point* as worthy entry into the director's oeuvre.³⁶⁴ While both positions are of value, I am focusing on Antonioni's depiction of America—and in extension Los Angeles—which he defined as "the real protagonist of the story."³⁶⁵ His America is both sublime and political, but how do these categories signify?

The concept of the sublime has been associated with a multitude of political practices, some of which—as in the case of Burke—have been aligned with the conservative side.³⁶⁶ While, as Freeman asserts, "the sublime has no inherent politics," that "does not mean that its effects are not

³⁶³ Matthew Gandy, "The Cinematic Void: Desert Iconographies in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point*," in *Landscape and Film*, ed. Martin Lefebvre (New York: Routledge, 2006), 316.

³⁶⁴ see Seymour Chatman, *Antonioni Or, The Surface of the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Sam Rohdie, *Antonioni* (London: BFI Publications, 1990); Murray Pomerance, *Michelangelo Red Antonioni Blue: Eight Reflections on Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Angelo Restivo, "Revisiting *Zabriskie Point*," in: *Antonioni. Centenary Essays*, ed. Laura Rascaroli, John David Rhodes (London: BFI, 2011); Steven Jacobs, "Between E.U.R. and L.A. Townscapes in the Work of Michelangelo Antonioni."

³⁶⁵ Alberto Moravia, "Il deserto America. Moravia interroga Antonioni sul film che e regista sta girando negli Stati Uniti," in: *Michelangelo Antonioni*, ed. by Carlo di Carlo (Rome: Selegrafica 80, 2005), 122.

³⁶⁶ Cf. Freeman, *Feminine Sublime*, 10.

inevitably and necessarily political.”³⁶⁷ As Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni assert, every film is political because it is part of the economic and ideological system.³⁶⁸ Therefore, if we define both film and the concept of the sublime as inscribed with ideology, we have to investigate the way in which Antonioni positions himself (via the film) to the dominant (capitalist) ideology. Given Antonioni’s political investment, as well as the film’s production history and content it seems peculiar that Antonioni scholars such as William Arrowsmith often emphasize the film’s “nonrevolutionary meaning.”³⁶⁹ Providing a contextual reading of *Zabriskie Point* I focus on three elements—the depiction of the revolutionary act, the consumerist landscape, and the desertscape—to highlight how Antonioni employs the discourse of the sublime for an ideological critique of American consumerism and capitalist culture.

“Aim for the point of no return”³⁷⁰ - The Virtual and the Actual Revolutionary Act

While Antonioni initially intended to make a film dealing with the Watts race riots in South-Central LA, he changed his plan after his arrival in the US. Influenced by discussions with his assistant director, Bob Rubin, he decided instead to focus on the political involvement of the white middle-class.³⁷¹ But right from the start Antonioni conceived the film as a treatise on the political violence against students that he had observed firsthand in the aggressive proceedings of

³⁶⁷ Freeman, *Feminine Sublime*, 11.

³⁶⁸ Cf. Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean Narboni, “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism,” in: *Cahiers du Cinema. Volume 3. 1969-1972 The Politics of Representation*, ed. Nick Browne, Jim Hillier (London: Routledge, 1990), 88.

³⁶⁹ William Arrowsmith, *Antonioni: The Poet of Images* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 137.

³⁷⁰ Baudrillard, *America*, 10.

³⁷¹ Cf. Pomerance, *Michelangelo Red*, 175f.

the National Guard at the Democratic Convention in Chicago.³⁷² While his intention is clearly exhibited in the first draft of the screenplay, which he wrote in 1967, the opening he envisioned for his film had to be changed considerably. The first draft opens with scenes situated in black neighborhoods all over the country in which violent riots rage. Antonioni even prefaces his story with the disclaimer: “the story touches upon a very serious theme: negroes [sic]...the spectacle of violence...the film which follows is brutal and unpleasant...”³⁷³ In fact the story that follows actually turns quickly away from these “scenes of the most extraordinary violence,” and instead focuses on a young white couple that drives to the desert.³⁷⁴ Antonioni’s treatment is not a standardized shooting script, but rather a mere fourteen-page short story which explores two people’s personal and—to a lesser degree—political convictions. Similar to a road movie, the plot focuses principally on their constant movement through the American desert; their growing bond is of secondary import. While the story in his first draft takes place almost exclusively in Death Valley—a landscape which, as he described in various interviews, had left an indelible impression on him—in the two following versions of the script, Antonioni added additional scenes taking place in Los Angeles. While the locales mentioned in the third screenplay, dated August 1968, are still only cursorily specified as “downtown” or “negro [sic] district,” in the last version of the script

³⁷² Cf. Pomerance, *Michelangelo Red*, 169.

³⁷³ Michelangelo Antonioni, *Zabriskie Point* (dated August, 1967), 2a. Margaret Herrick Library: Special Collections, MGM/Turner Scripts.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

the actual street names are included.³⁷⁵ Interestingly Antonioni picked a variety of downtown as well as Boyle Heights locations, which were not tourist locations.³⁷⁶

While the locations play an important role in the film, Antonioni's metonymic concentration on the symbiotic relationship between his characters' social milieu and their environment allowed him to present them as social types in order to "reveal the generic beneath the individual."³⁷⁷ In addition, Antonioni employs a quasi-Brechtian alienation effect as he disrupts the spectator's identification with the characters and forces the viewer from a passive toward a more critically aware position. The blank facial expression and wooden acting—Antonioni selected Daria Halprin and Mark Frechette after holding numerous castings in American cities—construct the protagonists as specific "types," general stand-ins for the white, middle-class youth in general.³⁷⁸ His interest in the leftist student movement, whose members he had been introduced

³⁷⁵ Michelangelo Antonioni, and Tonino Guerra et al, *Zabriskie Point* (dated August, 1968), 24. Margaret Herrick Library: Special Collections, MGM/Turner Scripts.

³⁷⁶ Michelangelo Antonioni, and Tonino Guerra et al, *Zabriskie Point* (dated April, 1969), 22. Margaret Herrick Library: Special Collections, MGM/Turner Scripts.

Mark and Bill drive through industrial area
(Soto left, Leonis-Downey left, past Bandini)
(Soto-Vernon right - left at Santa Fe, left at Pacific: shot Pacific and Fruitland,
right on Downey - right on Slauson - right on Soto)
(Downey - left Washington)
East and West on Pico - between La Cienega and La Brea, Laundromat - Rimpau St.)
East on Pico - between Alvarado and Union — see purple building with Yorty sign
Olympic (West) between Alvarado & 4th
Olympic and Fairfax
Farmer John: Vernon to Soto
North on Vernon, right on Adams, right on Figueroa — south, right on Exposition)

³⁷⁷ Ted Perry, and Rene Prieto, *Michelangelo Antonioni. A Guide to References and Resources*. (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1986), 11.

³⁷⁸ Cf. Marsha Kinder, "Zabriskie Point," in: *Michelangelo Antonioni. Interviews*, ed. Bert Cardullo (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 72.

to through the screenwriter and political activist Fred Gardner (who helped him with his research) is particularly apparent in the beginning of the finished film. Antonioni's cinematographer Alfino Contini's mobile movement of a large format Panavision camera is reminiscent of smaller handheld cameras such as a 16mm or Super 8.³⁷⁹ The mobile camera allowed the director to film in a quasi-documentary style and present "a mosaic of many things."³⁸⁰ The opening highlights the director's employment of cinema vérité techniques but does not adhere to the "fly on the wall" aesthetic of documentary film. Through the use of out-of-focus close-ups and constantly shifting camera positions contrasting the individual face with the abstract blur of the mass, the beginning of *Zabriskie Point* draws the spectator into a leftist students' meeting. The juxtaposition of interiority and exteriority is translated onto the auditory level as well. The students' discussion is barely audible, thus constituting background noise, while the non-diegetic soundtrack of a drum-like percussion beat takes center stage. The opening seems to announce "a kind of limit to 'documentary' filming insofar as the link between word and act is fundamentally unclear."³⁸¹ This violation of the realist Hollywood convention, in which dialog and action are linked, is a strategy that Antonioni employs throughout the film, as can be seen in the not synchronized dialog between Daria (Daria Halprin) and Mark (Mark Frechette) in the desert. While at the time of its release, Antonioni's strategy was clearly misunderstood and taken as a sign of the director's lack of attention to production details, the mismatch points to his larger occupation with the cinematic form itself.³⁸² Disrupting the identification of the spectator with an action that is deemed 'realistic'

³⁷⁹ Cf. George Porcari, "Antonioni's Orgy," *Cineaction* (April 2011): 66.

³⁸⁰ Marsha Kinder, "*Zabriskie Point*," 70.

³⁸¹ Restivo, "Revisiting *Zabriskie Point*," 87.

³⁸² Cf. John Burks, "Fourteen Points to *Zabriskie Point*," *Rolling Stone* 53 (1970).

allows for a position of critical detachment from which it becomes possible to ‘judge’ the position of the students.³⁸³

Furthermore, the subordination of the spoken word already points to Antonioni’s pessimistic assessment of the “American situation.” The “battle seems lost to begin with,” not so much because the pressures of the capitalist apparatus are too strong, but because the movement is shown as fragmented and lacking of a common cause.³⁸⁴ As Antonioni assessed in an interview with Marsha Kinder:

You know this country is so big, so contradictory, that it is more difficult here for them [the students] to do anything important... When something happens in Rome, it is happening in Italy... When something happens in Los Angeles, it doesn’t matter for New York - it has nothing to do with New York.³⁸⁵

The fragmentation of the counterculture is not only caused by this geographical dispersion, but also by the impossibility to combine their political agendas. As illustrated in the opening sequence, the gap between the white middle-class students and the radicalized African American activists cannot be bridged by discussions. The students’ and activists’ politics of “difference” cannot be utilized to fight the establishment. The emphasis on close-ups during the discussion highlights this dissonance of interests as well. Instead of framing them as a unified group, Antonioni uses extreme close-ups of individual faces, mostly of white students. The white students want to “become” revolutionaries, but they are still stuck in their bourgeois notions of non-violent resistance. Calling the white radicals “a mixture of bullshit and jive,” the members of the Black Panthers (such as Kathleen Cleaver) have already understood that the liberation can only be achieved by violent means. As the discussion shows, being revolutionary has different

³⁸³ Cf. Jacobs, “Between E.U.R. and L.A.,” 330.

³⁸⁴ Restivo, “Revisiting *Zabriskie Point*,” 93.

³⁸⁵ Antonioni, *The Architecture of Vision*, 304f.

connotations. While for the white students the consumption of drugs oftentimes constitutes a “revolutionary” act, the black radicals, faced with constant police violence, call for a less individualized and hedonistic form of political engagement. As Antonioni even more poignantly underscores later in the film, the countercultural movement is to a certain extent impotent because it focuses too much on individual strategies of resistance (as the actions of Daria and Mark illustrate) that cannot be translated into a more all-encompassing project of liberation.³⁸⁶ The focus, as is clear from the beginning, is not on the black radical struggle, but on the questions, “what makes white people revolutionaries,” posed by a young white woman in the discussion. Shortly after, the camera introduces the main protagonist through a rather unconventional assemblage of close-ups. We see Mark isolated in the frame, while the close-ups of the other students always highlight the crowdedness of the room. Then the camera moves screen right, and returns from the opposite direction to Mark’s face now seen in profile and even closer than before. The camera movement startles the viewer because it does not follow the 180-degree rule and, thus, disorients the spectator within the cinematic space. Further along, when the students discuss their willingness to die for the cause, Mark says he is willing to die “but not out of boredom.” Mark’s statement is worth mentioning as it introduces the main character as a bored loner, alienated from the activist students, and the *American way of life*.

As a product of the time and the society in which he lives, Mark’s boredom becomes a defense strategy against an “inauthentic” culture that only provides “empty, indifferent things, pseudo things, dummy life.”³⁸⁷ As noted by the psychologist Erich Fromm, boredom can be seen

³⁸⁶ Cf. Arrowsmith, *Antonioni*, 135.

³⁸⁷ Rainer Maria Rilke cited in Sean Desmond Healy, *Boredom, Self, and Culture* (Cranbury: Fairleigh University Press, 1984), 68.

as a reaction to the material affluence in capitalist societies (*überflüssiger Überfluss* leads to *Überdruss*) and it manifests itself in a nihilistic rejection of the world, which is experienced as insufficient to meet the needs of the subject.³⁸⁸ In contrast, the depressed person experiences him/herself as incapable of meeting the requirements of his/her surroundings.³⁸⁹ In one of the few existing studies on the behavioral manifestations of pathological boredom Otto Fenichel delineates the “nagging desire for something, the true nature of which is forever hidden” as the cause for the affliction.³⁹⁰ While the bored person has the *Triebspannung* [desire], he lacks a *Triebziel* [aim] to pursue.³⁹¹ Fenichel, like Fromm, sees the bored individual torn between the wish to act and the inability to escape his/her state of passivity. Read through the lens of this discourse on boredom, Mark’s apathetic behavior seems to relate back to Antonioni’s larger critique of the American consumerist culture that produces, as Fromm suggests, passive humans.³⁹² As Kierkegaard observes, “everyone who feels bored cries out for change,” for activity, for a liberation from an environment that is experienced as oppressive.³⁹³ Mark’s emotional release at the meeting functions as a catalyst for the narrative development. The need for liberation, according to Fenichel, often finds its expression in violent behavior, either destruction of the self or of others. *Zabriskie Point* thus illustrates the destructive quality of boredom vis-à-vis Mark’s suicidal

³⁸⁸ Erich Fromm, “Affluence and Ennui in Our Society,” in: *For the Love of Life*, by Erich Fromm (Ann Harbor: Free Press, 1986), 2.

³⁸⁹ Cf. Healy, *Boredom*, 60.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

³⁹¹ Otto Fenichel, “Zur Psychologie der Langeweile,” *Imago* 20 (1934): 270.

³⁹² Cf. Fromm, “Affluence and Ennui in Our Society,” 7.

³⁹³ Søren Kierkegaard cited in Healy, *Boredom*, 26.

journey. The main events that mark this journey—the alleged shooting of the policeman, the orgy scene, the explosion of Allen’s house—are “united by the thread of virtuality, which endows them with a subversive potential.”³⁹⁴ These three scenes are linked to the characters’ desires, but an important difference lies between the first one and those that follow: the orgy and the explosion, although distinctly separated from the rest of the film through their extended length and surreal quality, are embedded in the logic of the narrative. However, Mark’s reaction to the shooting of the policeman is harder to unravel. Following Fabio Vighi’s argument, this scene displays “the vertiginous openness of the revolutionary act.”³⁹⁵ Mark, although he has not committed the murder, takes responsibility for the action, because the subject of the murder does not exist (or rather is not known to us). According to Vighi, “anyone who desires to accomplish it can assume its consequences.”³⁹⁶ As one of the students remarked after Mark has left the discussion, his “bourgeois individualism is going to get him killed.” His decision to take the blame for the murder and to return to the city are rooted in his adaption to “the mystique of the heroic middle-class individual.”³⁹⁷ Mark is unable to see any realizable life path; although he despises the society in which he grew up, he is ultimately unable to detach himself from it. He “remains prisoner of unadapted values that no one believes in anymore.”³⁹⁸ As in *The Passenger* (1975) Antonioni links the protagonist’s death-drive to the possibility of achieving freedom, even if “freedom” here “only

³⁹⁴ Fabio Vighi, *Traumatic Encounters in Italian Film: Locating the Cinematic Unconscious* (Portland: Intellect Books, 2006), 72.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁷ Arrowsmith, *Antonioni*, 133.

³⁹⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 204.

means to choose death,” thus to refuse to become part of the capitalist system.³⁹⁹ Mark’s actions cannot be mistaken for a “revolutionary” act because they are individual gestures, detached from any form of political attachment or engagement. Mark symbolizes the reason for the failure of the student movement: “Above all they are aggregates of individuals who cannot, precisely because they are individuals, bond themselves together long enough to accomplish a common purpose, which in any case they do not share.”⁴⁰⁰ The question therefore is not so much “what makes white people revolutionaries,” but how to unite them for long enough to achieve a common goal. Far from assuming an uncritical stance on the political movement by clinging to a romanticized “youth as savior” metaphor, Antonioni pinpoints the underlying conditions that caused the failure of the revolutionary project: the narcissistic dimension to the discourse of the counter-culture, the focus on individual strategies of refusal often times linked to the recreational use of drugs (“turn on, tune in, drop out”), and ultimately the impossibility to connect the politics of experience to a broader engagement with the means of production.⁴⁰¹

The orgy scene and explosion at the end illustrate the same predicament, but what precludes these scenes from gaining “revolutionary” status is their clear demarcation as fantasies. Both seem to align with Daria’s point of view—at least that is what the narrative progression and the close-ups on her face suggest. The orgy scene is introduced as a drug induced fantasy after Daria has smoked a joint, while her fantasy of the explosion is a reaction to Mark’s death. But the camera never returns to Daria’s gaze, and therefore seems to suggest another gaze, that of the omniscient camera eye. This becomes especially foregrounded in the explosion scene, which is repeated over

³⁹⁹ Pier Paolo Pasolini quoted in Vighi, *Traumatic Encounters in Italian Film*, 19.

⁴⁰⁰ Arrowsmith, *Antonioni*, 133.

⁴⁰¹ Cf. Restivo, “Revisiting *Zabriskie Point*,” 94f.

and over from thirteen different angles. The scene illustrates that “Daria’s rage is not enough, it is powerless in itself”—her gaze has to be accompanied and amended by the camera’s.⁴⁰²

The Void between - The Sublime Consumerscape

It is true instead, that more is consumed in America, more than one can imagine. I think they must teach it at school - how to consume. And when you grow up, it gets worse, you consume that much more.⁴⁰³

How can anyone claim transcendence (self-transport) in a commodity-glutted American landscape without measures of self-irony? American culture reaches towards the *big* and the *super* in everything from comic book heroes to Hamburgers to skyscrapers to shopping malls, as if bigness could itself compensate for a missing greatness of style...⁴⁰⁴

As Seymour Chatman asserts, “Antonioni’s vision of America is quite beautiful,” though it is certainly not uncritical.⁴⁰⁵ By foregrounding the photogenic beauty of the image he attacks the empty kernel of consumerism itself. Antonioni’s America is all surfaces, flattened by a telephoto lens and lacking of depth, comparable to the abstract paintings of Jackson Pollock or Mark Rothko.⁴⁰⁶ Instead of creating three-dimensionality—which would be more in keeping with the realist tradition of mainstream cinema—the flatness here functions to rigorously limit the pictorial illusion.⁴⁰⁷ Antonioni’s employment of a pop aesthetic was certainly not lost on contemporary

⁴⁰² Vighi, *Traumatic Encounters in Italian Film*, 72.

⁴⁰³ Antonioni, *The Architecture of Vision*, 102.

⁴⁰⁴ Wilson, *The American Sublime*, 174.

⁴⁰⁵ Chatman, *Antonioni*, 167.

Antonioni had to defend his vision against American critics, as for example in the New York Times interview with Guy Flatley on February 22, 1970, aptly entitled “Antonioni Defends ‘Zabriskie Point’: ‘I Love this Country.’”

⁴⁰⁶ Cf. Jacobs, “Between E.U.R. and L.A.,” 331.

⁴⁰⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*

critics, despite the broad differences in their assessments. Most reviewers criticized the “visual clichés.”⁴⁰⁸ For example, Hollis Alpert who in his 1970 review asserted that the “camera is employed with a painter’s sense, but a good deal of the time he comes up with little more than Pop art,” reminiscent of “a stale Warhol and Rauschenberg.”⁴⁰⁹ *New York Times* writer Richard Goldstein suggests that both Edward Kienholz, Pollock, and Edward Hopper might have served as inspiration for the director, and compares Antonioni’s depiction of America to “a bouquet of shapes and colors, eagerly grotesque, plosive or sedately unreal.”⁴¹⁰ Deac Rossell, in his review of the film for *Boston After Dark*, offered the most in-depth discussion of Antonioni’s reference to American pop art, asserting that:

His basic debt is to all forms of pop art, especially the overstuffed figures of James Rosenquist, which proliferate on dozens of billboards Antonioni had built as background for most scenes. But the film also breathes with the West Coast pop art images of apartment buildings, gas stations, and swimming pools as exemplified in the small books of Ed Roche [sic]. Long traveling shots made with extremely long-focal-length lenses often start on Frechette, then pass to a sheet of rich blue, and cross into a full-screen brilliant red before ending on Halprin, in obscure homage to Mark Rothko or Kenneth Noland.⁴¹¹

While most reviewers at the time focused on the pop aesthetic of the billboards, Emily Genauer, in her review of Antonioni’s film for the *Newsprint Channel*, highlighted that the early sequences of board-room meetings in towering skyscrapers, of city streets

⁴⁰⁸ unknown author, “The Void Between,” *Time*, February 23, 1970, 47.

⁴⁰⁹ Hollis Alpert, “SR Goes to the Movies: By the Time She Got to Phoenix,” *Saturday Review*, February 21, 1970.

⁴¹⁰ Richard Goldstein, “A Writer Knocks ‘Zabriskie Point’: Did Antonioni Miss the ‘Point’?” *New York Times*, February 22, 1970.

⁴¹¹ Deac Rossell, “‘Zabriskie Point’ - Antonioni: Painting the Desert,” *Boston After Dark*, August 11, 1970.

lined with billboards and other images of incredible vulgarity, are like paintings and constructions of pop-artists like Roy Lichtenstein and Claes Oldenburg.⁴¹²

Antonioni's visual display of the surface quality of billboards is rendered in the scene shortly after Daria has met her boss, Allen (Rod Taylor). Their talk ends abruptly with Daria declaring that she only works when she needs money. Then the camera cuts to the moving surface of a truck on which a cow is painted. After the truck has driven off screen left, another painted surface—this time of a farmer feeding pigs—is revealed. The camera continues to move, this time screen right, until Mark's car comes in sight, and quickly the direction switches again. A close-up on a farmer catching one of the pigs—accompanied by jarring, dissonant sounds—already foreshadows the imprisonment of the striking students. Furthermore, the scene highlights how Antonioni employs a flattened-out two-dimensional aesthetic to comment on the unique features of LA, “where images jump out at you with every step.”⁴¹³ The billboards and advertisement signs with which LA—as the director described it—is obsessed, are explicitly foregrounded again, shortly before Mark steals the plane.⁴¹⁴ When he gets off the bus, he passes by advertisements of a mortuary, Bank of America, and huge billboards—one of a happy family, the other depicting the statue of liberty ironically proclaiming “Let's get away from it all”—that convey preconceived notions of the ‘perfect’ lifestyle according to capitalist ideology. These are perhaps also used as commentary on the life paths open to Mark. However, the montage of the billboards is not linked

⁴¹² Emily Genauer, Newsprint Channel 13/WNDT, air date: 2/11/70. Margaret Herrick Library: Core Collection, Production Files.

⁴¹³ Giorgio Tinazzi, “The Gaze and the Story,” in: *The Architecture of a Vision. Writings and Interviews on Cinema*, ed. Carlo Di Carlo, Giorgio Tinazzi, and Marga Cottino-Jones (New York: Marsilio Publishers), XVII.

⁴¹⁴ Cf. Antonioni, *The Architecture of Vision*, 307.

to Mark's point of view, and rather is presented from the detached perspective of the "other," the omnipotent camera eye that reveals more of the characters than the dialog does—so that "the settings may say and do more than the people do."⁴¹⁵ Antonioni's focus on the billboard culture functions as a redemption of physical reality—as Kracauer defines cinema's potential—in that he makes "visible the often over-looked features of the city."⁴¹⁶ Because, as Chatman polemically asks, "what native would ever look at them?"⁴¹⁷ But his foregrounding of these mundane objects permeating the vernacular landscape is less than accidental. Rather, the director had the billboards constructed according to his specifications, as can be evidenced in the comments on one of the film's production stills.⁴¹⁸ Thus, Antonioni invests the banality of everyday objects with a sublime quality which lies "along the shaded fringe of the vignette of human life."⁴¹⁹

Just like the billboards, Antonioni carefully constructed "the offices on the roof of the Mobil Oil Company building with oversized slabs of glass provided by Pittsburgh Plate Glass,"⁴²⁰ as the comments on one of the production stills and the press material indicate. The construction of two office sets that offer an "unobstructed view of the Civic Center" is also duly noted in various

⁴¹⁵ Ted Perry, "Introduction," in: *Antonioni: The Poet of Images*, ed. William Arrowsmith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 11.

⁴¹⁶ Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir*, 121.

⁴¹⁷ Chatman, *Antonioni*, 161.

⁴¹⁸ Billboards in background were special choices of the director and were constructed on the front lawns of local residents just for this brief scene. Turner/MGM scripts, ZP (1970), Z-8.

⁴¹⁹ Lap-Chuen, *The Sublime*, 75.

⁴²⁰ Comment on Production still. Margaret Herrick Library: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer/UA Photographs.

articles that came out during the film's production.⁴²¹ In a *Hollywood Reporter* article from October 15, 1968 the author mentions the director's "insistence on realism" as the reason for such an elaborate set.⁴²² This is ironic because instead of utilizing the vernacular architecture he found, Antonioni constructed the spaces according to his vision of the US while also offering a unique meditation on the American landscape as shaped by capitalist hegemony. In the film, Los Angeles' unique structure is presented as a symbol for the dilemma of modern city planning. Through the use of panorama shots, Antonioni illustrates the vastness of the urban space and the lack of a "centripetal" city structure. Los Angeles is portrayed as the embodiment of restricting alienating city space wherein "abstract" space takes precedence over "concrete" space, "reproducibility, repetition, and reproduction of social relations" over lived, subjective experience.⁴²³ In *Zabriskie Point* the "built space enters into a tense, even hostile relationship with the body."⁴²⁴ The constant framing of the characters with structures of buildings or billboards highlights their entrapment within the 'asphalt jungle.' This recurring confinement of the characters within fence-like structures—walls, window sills, billboards, maps of the housing development, charts of calculations or advertisement signs—becomes a literal entrapment when the students are physically imprisoned. Furthermore, the characters' alienation within the urban space is shown through the focus on their placelessness. Mark's room is void of personal objects and does not appear to offer the comforts of a home. Daria's living situation is just as impersonal as she lives

⁴²¹ unknown author, "'Zabriskie Point,'" *Hollywood Reporter*, October 15, 1968.

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 120.

⁴²⁴ David Forgacs, "Antonioni, Space, Sexuality," in: *Spaces in European Cinema*, ed. Myrto Konstantarakos (Exeter: Intellect Books, 2000), 108.

with friends and does not really have a “place” either. Both Daria and Mark are constantly on the move using various means of transportation (driving and flying), because they are trying to “experience” America by experiencing and interacting with space.

In the depiction of billboards, locations, and built sets, Antonioni uses saturated colors and thereby recreates the same advertising aesthetic that one would find in commercials and billboards of the time. Compared to the washed out and monochrome colors in *Blow up* (1965), the polychromatic opulence in *Zabriskie Point* stands out as quite artificial, which, given the subject matter, is very fitting. The Sunny Dunes commercial foregrounds this “hyperreality”—in which the “simulations” of culture industry have erased the “real thing,” so that the image only links back to the image. The name “Sunny Dunes” is rather ironic in that it evokes the common attempt of developers to come up with an enticing name for their projects. In his 1964 novel *A Single Man* Christopher Isherwood describes this aspirational naming in regard to a new housing project being built:

Tract upon tract of low-roofed dormitory-dwellings (invariably called “homes” and described as “a new concept of living”) are being opened up as fast as they can be connected with the sewers and the power lines. It is a slander to say that they are identical; some have brown roofs, some green, and the tiles in their bathrooms come in several different colors. The tracts have their individuality, too. Each one has a different name, of the kind that realtors can always be relied on to invent: Sky Acres, Vista Grande, Grovenor Heights.⁴²⁵

The female protagonist in Alison Lurie’s 1965 novel *The Nowhere City* is similarly disenchanted with the “fake” names of neighborhoods.

“Everything has a wrong name, I mean the name of everything, you see, it’s always a lie, like an advertisement. For instance, this is Mar Vista, which is supposed to be Spanish for ‘view of the sea’. That’s because it has no view of the sea; it’s all flat, it has no view of

⁴²⁵ Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 41f.

anything. Mar Vista!” she repeated scornfully. “Spoil-the-View, I call it; Spoil-the-View, California.”⁴²⁶

In the Sunny Dunes commercial mannequin stand-ins are shown in various activities—lounging at the pool, quail-hunting, playing golf—that one could enjoy if one would own a Sunny Dunes house in the desert. The commercial’s focus on “consumption, synthetic individuality—buy a Sunny Dunes lot, become an instant frontiersman—the merchandized appliance paradise”⁴²⁷ is reminiscent of Herbert Marcuse’s critique of capitalism. According to Marcuse, in capitalist societies consumer goods have become part of people’s understanding of self, even though increased consumption—and the products themselves—can only offer “repressive satisfaction.”⁴²⁸ Isherwood comes to a similar conclusion about American consumerist culture, pointing out that advertising sells the consumer on ideas that the products themselves are unable to deliver. The protagonist of the book, the British expatriate George, observes the gluttony of products in a local supermarket, noting that:

Every article on the shelves cries out to you, Take me, take me; and the mere competition of their appeals can make you imagine yourself wanted, even loved. But beware – when you get back to your empty room, you’ll find that the false flattering elf of the advertisements has eluded you; what remains is only cardboard, cellophane and food. And you have lost the heart to be hungry.⁴²⁹

The “outdoor living” that the voice-over narrator in the Sunny Dunes commercial promises is just as artificial as its plastic inhabitants’ houses in the desert. Thus, “by plasticizing the depiction of ‘success,’ ‘leisure,’ ‘luxury,’” Antonioni points to the commodification and

⁴²⁶ Lurie, *Nowhere City*, 47.

⁴²⁷ Arrowsmith, *Antonioni*, 136.

⁴²⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 9.

⁴²⁹ Isherwood, *A Single Man*, 112f.

manufacturing of these concepts so that they neatly fit the parameters of capitalist ideology.⁴³⁰ But not only does the commercial for the desert community perpetuate the idea of happiness through consumer goods, it also enshrines shockingly conservative gender dynamics. The happy, suburban housewife cooking dinner for her “man of the house”; the husband taking his son quail hunting; the artificiality of the whole constructed oasis in the desert represents the model American life, a life completely dedicated to an anti-intellectual and conformist attitude.

Antonioni’s critique of the “American scene” is flanked by a formal style that values the “rapport between image and image.”⁴³¹ In *Zabriskie Point* America is depicted as “a world where things have become more important than people,” a conclusion that is emphasized by its ending as well.⁴³² Offering a synthesis of Antonioni’s ideological and aesthetic strategies, the close-ups of exploding consumer goods draw attention to the superfluous detail and create “pure optical situations.”⁴³³ While the director originally intended a much bleaker ending, in which bombs were falling all over America, he had to settle for the explosion of a single house.⁴³⁴ But his focus on consumer products was more fitting to the film’s overall preoccupation with the consumer culture. At this point all narrative attachments (including Daria’s fate) have become irrelevant, “the investment is in the image per se.”⁴³⁵ This emphasis on repetition and similarity, can not only be seen in alignment with the pop aesthetic of the likes of Andy Warhol or Robert Rauschenberg but

⁴³⁰ Pomerance, *Michelangelo Red*, 183.

⁴³¹ Antonioni, *The Architecture of Vision*, 100.

⁴³² Perry and Prieto, *Michelangelo Antonioni*, 8.

⁴³³ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 17.

⁴³⁴ Cf. Pomerance, *Michelangelo Red*, 196.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*

also serves as an example of Kant's mathematical sublime, which as Mark C. Taylor points out, "arise[s] from an infinite proliferation of form."⁴³⁶ In contrast to the mathematical sublime, Taylor classifies the dynamic sublime as involving "the experience of a pure form that is finally formless," as can be witnessed in Antonioni's depiction of the desertscape.⁴³⁷

The Sublime Void - The Desertscape

In the first half of the film, in particular in the scenes depicting the student meeting and Mark's decision to get involved with countercultural activists a more conventional cause and effect structure is utilized. But after Daria and Mark leave the city, Antonioni drops almost any pretense of narrative progression. According to Deac Rossell, "in *Zabriskie Point* the director's longueurs are not shaped around a distinct theme; instead they are long empty passages between fragments of content."⁴³⁸ Antonioni's narrative illustrates Gilles Deleuze's assertion that modernist cinema stages "the very breakdown of the sensory-motor schema: [leading to] the rise of situations to which one can no longer react, of environments of which there are only chance relations, of empty or disconnected any-space-whatsoevers replacing qualified extended space."⁴³⁹ In the film, we see this breakdown of spatial mastery when Daria throws away the map after leaving the city. For Andrew V. Uroski, "the map is ineluctably bound to the purposeful subject."⁴⁴⁰ Thus, Daria gets

⁴³⁶ Mark C. Taylor, "Reframing Postmodernism," in: *Shadow of Spirit. Postmodernism and Religion*, ed. Philippa Berry and Andrew Wernick (London: Routledge, 1992), 17.

⁴³⁷ Ibid.

⁴³⁸ Rossell, "'Zabriskie Point.'"

⁴³⁹ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 272.

⁴⁴⁰ Andrew V. Uroski, "La Jetée en Spirale: Robert Smithson's Stratigraphic Cinema," *Grey Room* (Spring 2005): 57.

rid of the map when she aimlessly drives through the desert. She states as much, calling Allen, her lover and employer, and telling him that she will get to Arizona later than expected as she is trying to find “a little town that sounds like Glenville or Bellyville or something like that, something with a -ville in it,” where one of her friends runs a rehabilitation home for juvenile delinquents.

Mark and Daria’s escape from the “spatial segmentation within the modern metropolis” to the open space of the desert presents the hope for a new beginning, a different life.⁴⁴¹ This vision is closely connected to Ted Perry’s idea that a “desire to go someplace else is really a desire to be someone else.”⁴⁴² The desert erases their former lives; Daria’s restricting work environment as a part-time secretary, Mark’s failed existence as an ex-student, part-time revolutionary and potential murderer. Additionally, Daria and Mark’s retreat to the desert seems to invert the direction of the westward expansion, which had reached its logical ending point on the shore of the Pacific Ocean.⁴⁴³ While as David Fine asserts, “the California highway becomes a cul-de-sac carrying one back to the past, to beginnings, or downward to exhaustion and death,” the eastward movement seems the only possible escape route.⁴⁴⁴ The desert, in contrast to the city space, seems to suggest Henri Lefebvre’s concept of the absolute space, the “primitive other to artificial modern culture.”⁴⁴⁵ A certain eroticization of the desert itself can also be detected in the visual composition of the scenes, which are dominated by monochrome sandy beige colors reminiscent of the color of

⁴⁴¹ Dimendberg, *Film Noir*, 27.

⁴⁴² Arrowsmith, *Antonioni*, 14.

⁴⁴³ Cf. David M. Fine, “Introduction,” in: *Los Angeles In Fiction. A Collection of Original Essays*, ed. David M. Fine (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 17.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁴⁵ Gandy, “The Cinematic Void,” 323.

human flesh, while the formations of the dunes suggest the human body. But the foremost function of the monochrome color scheme is to offer a visual counterpoint to the overflowing, overpowering red and green tones dominating the presentation of the city space. Furthermore, the depiction of the desert landscape is reflective of Kant's definition of the dynamic sublime, which he describes in terms of the subject's realization of her/his vulnerability towards the overwhelming presence of nature. As examples for the dynamic sublime, Kant lists overhanging cliffs, thunderclouds with lightning, volcanoes, hurricanes, the heaving ocean, and high waterfalls. One could easily add deserts to that list as, "compared to the might of any of these, our ability to resist becomes an insignificant trifle."⁴⁴⁶ The same sense of the overpowering presence of a natural space in which the human figure is dwarfed is expressed in visual terms. Through the use of panorama shots, Antonioni not only foregrounds "the potentiality of off-screen space," but also indicates that the landscape extends "in all directions beyond edges of the screen."⁴⁴⁷ The aerial shot, which reflects Mark's point of view from the airplane, serves a similar function, in that it locates Daria within the vast desertscape, diminishing her stature while still establishing her presence in the space and indicating that she is indeed part of it.⁴⁴⁸ The relationship between the protagonists and the space is further visualized through their costumes. Daria's green dress and Mark's washed out t-shirt and jeans only vaguely visually separate them from the beige sand formations; and after the ascent into the erosional landscape and roll in the sand, they completely blend into the scenery. The "dance" performance that follows is particularly important because it translates Daria's quasi-Buddhist conviction into visuals. In the scene, Mark and Daria are joined by countless couples who re-enact

⁴⁴⁶ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 185, 120.

⁴⁴⁷ Sitney, "Landscape in the Cinema," 107.

⁴⁴⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, 109.

the never-ending cycle of death and life, through a modernist dance performance. According to George Pocari, Antonioni rehearsed the dance with the members of the Open Theater in order to create a moving tableau of bodies, even though he was not able to create his initial concept—calling for a cast of thousands—in the film. But even while he had to make due with two dozen performers, the scene visualizes a sort of primordial engagement between humans in which “physical intimacy [is shown] as a form of pre-verbal communication.”⁴⁴⁹

Even though all the scenes in the desert seem to offer the characters the promise of an escape from the woes of city life, the existence of an escape as well as an absolute space is an illusion. According to Edward Casey, mathematical or abstract space becomes place when it is reorganized as social space. Space, as defined by Casey, is characterized by absence of humans, but spatiotemporal voids—such as the desert in *Zabriskie Point*—can be place-like if humans are “interacting” with the space.⁴⁵⁰ Therefore, there is, strictly speaking, no absolute—either in Lefebvre’s or Casey’s sense—space in *Zabriskie Point* because the desert is already marked by human presence. The desert, as illustrated by the portable toilets at Zabriskie Point, Allen’s house in the desert, as well as the roads that run through it, slowly “becomes” a non-place inscribed with the dominant capitalist ideology. In particular Allen’s housing development plans represent this shaping of public space by burgeoning capitalist interests. He and his colleagues put corporate interests above environmental awareness, clinical, sterile artificiality over given geographical formations, and thus ignore how their project might permanently alter the landscape. Antonioni’s presentation of the Sunny Dunes housing developers connects to a larger critique of the American

⁴⁴⁹ George Porcari, “Antonioni’s Orgy,” *Cineaction*, no. 84 (Spring 2011): 68.

⁴⁵⁰ Cf. Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place. Toward a renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1993), 13.

way of taming nature. As exemplified by cities such as LA, they have nothing in common with the geographical characteristics of the landscape that surrounds them. Thus, for Antonioni the conquering of landscapes as implied by the term “Go West” and the frontier myth have no positive implications. For Antonioni, transforming wilderness into a garden only leads to the construction of planned communities for the affluent white middle-class, in which the “space” is used in order to exert their interests.⁴⁵¹ Antonioni’s depiction of Allen and his colleagues, as the representatives of the establishment, is equally negative. Mostly interested in their capitalist ventures, they are rather dull, colorless—in the literal sense as indicated in the office scenes. *Zabriskie Point* portrays the developers as implicit in the perpetuation of the capitalist ideology, as one-dimensional men (to use Marcuse’s term). But they are only part of a broader critique of American capitalism. Antonioni’s focus is first of all the commodification of the everyday experience—highlighted by the pervasion of public space with billboards—and the use of media to create the “synthesized” consumer, as parodied in the commercial of the Sunny Dunes corporation. Furthermore, he presents Los Angeles and the desert as two sides of the same coin—landscapes shaped by the humans that inhabit them. The desert in *Zabriskie Point* is only an imaginary rather than an actual “space,” because it stands for the discourse of escape, freedom and individual refusal. Just as the name – Death Valley – the desert is defined by the human presence and functions as “empty” space on which meaning is superimposed.

Antonioni’s depiction of the desertscape has to be seen in a larger aesthetic discourse on deserts, in particular in the works of members of the Land Art movement such as Michael Heizer. As the art historian Julian Myers outlines, the discourse on the desertscape can be traced back to the exploration and settlement of the West during the mid-19th century. While the preservationist

⁴⁵¹ Cf. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 26.

movement tried to retain the desert as “untouched” space, the desert was brought into modernity by the large-scale expansion of the railroad lines as well as dam projects. Michael Heizer’s *Double Negative* (1970), or Nancy Holt’s *Sun Tunnels* (1976), as well as to a lesser degree Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (1969), engage with this intrusion of “civilization” into the wilderness of the desert, and implicates the artists themselves within this process. Thus, their works romanticize the desert as “space of refusal, ...where the influence of the cultural apparatus was still partial,” and also present the space as “staging grounds for its deepest myths of independence, wilderness, freedom.”⁴⁵² Furthermore, *Earthworks*, as Robert Morris asserts, “recapitulated the conquest of the West as an aesthetic allegory,” therefore fulfilling “the task of producing cultural icons befitting a world empire.”⁴⁵³ Thus, Antonioni renders the American landscape in a similar manner, framing it as “aggressively large-scale,” while highlighting a feature that also runs as a current through what Morris calls “ambitious American art,” mainly its “grand spatial occupation” and “the buzz of spectacle.”⁴⁵⁴ *Earthworks*—as aesthetic rendering of natural space—should be seen as an extension of the aforementioned landscape painting. The landscape, as W. J. T. Mitchell asserts, is “a representation of something that is already a representation,” so that it is, already artifice in the moment of its beholding.⁴⁵⁵ In *Zabriskie Point* Antonioni comes to a similar conclusion by emphasizing that the desert has already become a marked tourist attraction, not only

⁴⁵² Julian Myers, “Earth Beneath Detroit,” in: *Ends of the Earth. Land Art to 1974*, ed. Philipp Kaiser and Miwon Kwon (Los Angeles: Prestel Publishing, 2012), 142f.

⁴⁵³ Robert Morris, “From a Chomskian Couch: The Imperialistic Unconscious,” *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 29, No. 4 (Summer 2003): 678, 683.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 684.

⁴⁵⁵ W. J. T. Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape,” in: *Landscape and Power*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 14.

offering a plate explaining the natural monument but also providing modern comfort for the weary traveler in the form of public bathrooms. Of course the comfort level could be improved further, as the paterfamilias observes, if someone would open a drive-in there, because “they would make a mint.” The director’s rendering of this typical American family, while rather comical, is also accurate. First of all, Antonioni underscores the opposition between the American youth and the establishment, by following the orgy scene with medium close-ups and long shots of a blue RV approaching the sign. Secondly, his depiction of the tourists also highlights that natural spaces are “sewn into economies of control... and capitalist production that played out in city and desert alike.”⁴⁵⁶ While the overweight, middle-aged couple gets out of the car just long enough to take a couple of pictures, their adolescent son remains in the car. The camera frames his face through the backseat window, which is covered in stickers of other states the family must have visited on earlier trips, as well as one proclaiming “Discover America.” On the stickers these places are represented through drawings of women in skimpy clothing (Oklahoma and Colorado), a cactus (Arizona), a bull (Texas), and the Grand Canyon, therefore reducing the natural and cultural specificities of these states to stereotypical stickers. It is in these small situations that Antonioni formulates his critique of the American way of life, turning the touristic gaze upon itself. In the scene Antonioni—the foreign director—frames tourists, that, while American, are estranged from their own environment/landscape. Part of his strategy was clearly misunderstood by American critics, as can be seen in the comments of Pauline Kael, for example, who proclaimed that Antonioni “doesn’t offer an outsider’s view that illuminates what we had never seen for

⁴⁵⁶ Myers, “Earth Beneath Detroit,” 143.

ourselves.”⁴⁵⁷ In addition, Stanley Kauffmann noted that *Zabriskie Point* “does not seem to me even as a good tourist’s notebook.”⁴⁵⁸ Even though the critics had hoped for a more positive depiction of the US, Antonioni was more interested in uncovering the fetishization of the American landscape as a touristic site. As Ellen Strain asserts in *Public Places, Private Journeys* (2003), the tourist gaze is “a largely invisible, transformative process replacing that which is seen with a touristic vision,” which in turn is “constructed by way of an oscillating series of objectifying strategies.”⁴⁵⁹ Strain outlines these strategies as:

reduction to surface spectacle; mystification; assimilation to Western structures of aesthetics, narrative, or scientific explanation; reduction to a simplistic surface/depth model demanding unveiling; totalization; essentialization; and synecdochic consumption, accumulation, and representation.⁴⁶⁰

Antonioni’s rendering of the family visiting Zabriskie Point as part of a larger road trip through various states speaks to this construction of cultural or geographical landmarks as tourist sites. The ideal vantage point to look at (and thus, experience) Zabriskie Point is not only marked by a designating sign but also fenced off by a vista terrace allowing tourists to park and take pictures. Thereby, the natural space is constructed as object to be consumed and possessed (in the form of a photograph or other forms of representation). According to Johannes Fabian the interrelation between vision and knowledge is the defining feature of the touristic enterprise, in that it presupposes that “the ability to ‘visualize’ a culture or society [is] almost synonymous for

⁴⁵⁷ Pauline Kael, “The Current Cinema: The Beauty of Destruction,” *New Yorker*, February 21, 1970.

⁴⁵⁸ Stanley Kauffmann, “Zabriskie Point,” *The New Republic*, March 14, 1970.

⁴⁵⁹ Ellen Strain, *Public Places, Private Journeys. Ethnography, Entertainment, and the Tourist Gaze* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 18.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

understanding it.”⁴⁶¹ The photograph or picture postcard then is the ultimate symbol of what Martin Heidegger calls “the conquest of the world,” in that it supports the illusion of mastery of natural (and urban) spaces through the production of aesthetic depictions.⁴⁶² To a certain degree we could say that Antonioni is guilty of that himself, but he seems to construct his position as participant-observer, in a way similar to the anthropologist, “going native” to uncover something about a culture’s “hidden interiority or ... deep structure.”⁴⁶³ Thus, in interviews at the time, he underlines his extended stay in the US, which, according to him, was punctuated by research trips that brought him in contact with the “real” America, the America of political protests, unrest, dissatisfied youths, consumerist culture and police brutality. Antonioni’s positioning as participant, “susceptible to the powers of exposure,” as well as observer who “inserts distance in order to maintain the larger picture,” is evident in his statements.⁴⁶⁴ Antonioni notes that:

My basic reason for making a film in America was that I love this country...It’s very easy for an American to say to me, “You’re an Italian; you don’t know this country. How dare you talk about it!” But I wasn’t trying to explain the country - a film is not a social analysis, after all. I was just trying to feel something about America, to gain some intuition. If I were an American, they would say I was taking artistic license, but because I’m a foreigner, they say I am wrong. But in some ways a foreigner’s judgement may be...not better, necessarily, but more objective, illuminating precisely because it is a little different.⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶¹ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 106.

⁴⁶² Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” in: *The Question Concerning Technology*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 130.

⁴⁶³ Strain, *Public Places*, 32.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 31f.

⁴⁶⁵ Guy Flatley, “Antonioni Defends ‘Zabriskie Point’: ‘I Love this Country,’” *New York Times*, February 22, 1970.

But instead of the “conceptual tools” of an anthropologist Antonioni relies on cinematic tools—in particular panoramic and aerial photography—to reveal American culture’s “patterns and relationships [which would] not [be] visible from a localized perspective.”⁴⁶⁶

Conclusion

It was a beautiful landscape, in its way, but inhuman, like some artist’s vision of the future for the cover of *Galaxy Science Fiction*. People looked out of place here: they seemed much too small for the roads and buildings, and by contrast rather scrawpily constructed, all small awkward limbs and shreds of clothes.

However, very few people were visible. The automobiles outnumbered them ten to one. ...Freedom and opportunity; he smiled ironically. It was his old dream about Los Angeles, which he had given up, but still half believed. It wasn’t even his own; it had come to him straight out of American history: “Go West, Young Man.”⁴⁶⁷

As with the feminine sublime, can we define the revolutionary sublime? If both are predisposed on their “unpresentability” is that not a definitive feature of the political sublime? Antonioni’s sublime involves an encounter of consumer/city- and desertscapes, both of which might be familiar but defamiliarized in his portrayals. His depiction as well as the documented context of the film’s production invoke the chiasmic relationship of *ergon* [ἔργον]—work—and *parergon* [πάρεργον]—frame, addition, remainder. While for Kant, the latter—such as picture frames—does not possess an intrinsic purpose, according to Jacques Derrida, the *parergon* “is not simply... a surplus;” rather it constitutes “the internal structural link” which “rivets [the parergon] to the lack in the interior of the ergon.”⁴⁶⁸ Thus, Derrida points to the interrelation between and mutual dependency of the work of art and its context, the “framed” and the “frame/framing.” He emphasizes the significance of the artwork, as well as its placement within its institutional and

⁴⁶⁶ Strain, *Public Places*, 33

⁴⁶⁷ Lurie, *Nowhere City*, 286.

⁴⁶⁸ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 59f.

socio-political context. In Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* the "framed" is as important as the "frame," the topic of the film is as important as the way it is depicted, the content is as important as the form.

Some Remarks at the End

Anything that would make a pretty picture makes a bad picture. The picturesque things have all been done. You have to do something new.⁴⁶⁹

The sublime is that through which the beautiful *touches* us and not through which it pleases us. It is joy and not enjoyment [*la joie, non la jouissance*]... To be touched is sublime because it is to be exposed and to be offered... The sublime is in the contact of the work, not in its form. This contact is beyond the work, at its limit, in a sense beyond art: but without art, it would not take place. The sublime is—that art should be [*soit*] exposed and offered.⁴⁷⁰

At this point, I would like to return to the initial questions underlying my project. Firstly: why is it constructive to group the films of these four very different filmmakers together? For me these films reflect a cultural *Zeitgeist* that is manifest in these works of art. Speaking to the interrelation between *Zeitgeist* and aesthetic products, Virginia Woolf asserts in her essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929): “Masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice.”⁴⁷¹ These films act as exemplar artifacts distinct from other social semantic formations, what Raymond Williams has called social experiences in solution; a time’s structure of feeling—that is a distributed manifestation of a period’s *Zeitgeist*.⁴⁷² While Boorman, Demy, Varda, and Antonioni do not present a unified version of or vision for Los Angeles, they share a mode of expression. They utilize similar aesthetic strategies, are concerned

⁴⁶⁹ Ross Macdonald, *Instant Enemy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), 161.

⁴⁷⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Sublime Offering,” in: *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 50.

⁴⁷¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, 1957), 68-69.

⁴⁷² Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 134.

with complementary concepts, and their cinematic language is one shaped by their institutional and cultural contexts.

Secondly: what do these cinematic depictions of Los Angeles offer the viewer? On the one hand, *Point Blank*, *Model Shop*, *Lions' Love*, and *Zabriskie Point* go beyond the industry's construction of spatial realities at the time, by offering "a revision of the city's cinematic vision."⁴⁷³ All films use actual locations that, before the mid-1960s, were most commonly found in film noirs, generally depicting places not accessible to the casual tourist. On the other hand, cinematic images allow for the layering and conservation of spatial realities. According to Crowther:

Our sense of spatial presence at the present moment must be explicitly informed by a sense of presences and presents which have passed beyond our immediate grasp or recall, and by an anticipation of the unknown number of future presences and presents still to be experienced.⁴⁷⁴

To that end, films function as documents of that which remains usually unseen, redeeming through and containing in the cinematic images of past spatial presences, as well as pointing to future spatial presences still to be experienced. By revisiting Boorman's, Demy's, Varda's, and Antonioni's films, we see both of these spatial-temporal presences side-by-side.

Thirdly: which tropes of the discourse on the sublime do the films reflect? While the four films demonstrate a family resemblance—mainly by their focus on Los Angeles, vernacular spaces and architecture, and modes of transportation—there are differences in the degree to which they manifest the sublime. In *Point Blank*, Boorman's rendering of Los Angeles is predisposed on the viewers knowledge of, or understanding of, centripetal urban structures such as San Francisco. And it is because of the latter's picturesqueness, that the former is "read" as an unknowable, threatening, incommensurable, sublime space. Demy's *Model Shop*, while also highlighting the

⁴⁷³ Shiel, "The Southland on Screen," 149.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 168f.

infinite extension of the urban fabric, presents the viewer with a protagonist beholding the sublime spectacle of vernacular Los Angeles. In Varda's *Lions Love*, Los Angeles in general, and Hollywood in particular serve as an intertextual site—a staging ground for the director's reflection on stardom, success, filmmaking, SoCal lifestyle, and the late 1960s counterculture. It is not so much what she shows of Los Angeles but more so *how* she shows the city that renders it sublime. Finally, Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* provides the most politically informed analysis of the city, one that Mike Davis would probably confirm. His Los Angeles is one of consumerism, capitalism, counterculture, commodification, and conformity; it is sublime rather than beautiful.

In interrogating Los Angeles as a site for these cinematic texts I have shown how European auteurs brought their unique cinematic vision to the American film industry, even though their works were not fully appreciated by contemporary audiences or critics. Their films show America through a foreign lens, one both tied to their creators' national context and prior cinematic works. But it would be reductive to dismiss them as touristic encounters with an American “other.” Rather, they mark a particular time in the history of film in which studios were—at the outset, at least—interested in financing art cinema. While the history of the American film industry is also the history of exiles during the studio era, European filmmakers in America were often previously confined to work within the parameters of genres. However, as the end of World War II brought about an increase in film imports from Europe, and the film festivals circuit made independently produced films more accessible, US film studios imported directors to make “their” films, and not to emulate proven formulas dictated by the mainstream film industry. European art cinema became a marketable category, as did the directors that made art films. Due the dwindling box office results as well as the dissatisfaction of younger audiences with the films that were being made, the mid-1960s constituted the right environment for novel approaches as well as a more critical engagement

with US society and the American land-/cityscape. I have demonstrated that many of these films by both European and American filmmakers used Los Angeles as a staging ground for the challenges as well as opportunities of that particular time in history. They depict urban decay and renewal, counterculture and the establishment, affluence and poverty, as well as racial tensions and protest movements.

This dissertation provides a starting point for further discussions of the cinematic output of the time, but also of the ways they depict landscapes. While theorizations of the sublime have found a home in a variety of discourses, the notion of cinematic sublimity and filmmakers' employment of sublime tropes is one that invites further investigation. My analyses of four films by European directors from three cultural contexts outside the United States has engaged extensively with the sublime. Still, it is only one point of departure that gestures at greater analytical projects to be undertaken striving for a better understanding of the many relevances of filmic representations of space.

For example, the differentiation between what Rob Wilson calls the “native” versus the European sublime is one I hope to explore in future publications. While Wilson suggests that American art began to “generate new structures of elevation,” the question remains as to the ways in which European and American artists’ accounts of their encounter with the United States landscape as a site of sublime experience differ.⁴⁷⁵ Not stopping there, there is work to be done exploring American filmmakers’ depictions of the sublime cityscape. Is there something to be learned from potential differences between Angeleno and non-Angeleno artists—by which I mean the ones brought up on the American East Coast, Midwest, or the South? Do the latter co-opt the tropes while transforming them, or mimetically depict similar concerns as the ones found in

⁴⁷⁵ Wilson, *American Sublime*, 192.

artworks by “native” producers? While Wilson assumes a generalized North American subject, in his definition, the American sublime “entails a confrontation between locality and otherness,” which negates the very idea of a general affective response to the sublime.⁴⁷⁶ By providing a clearer distinction between the “local” and the “other,” one might be able to regionalize as well as apply his notions specifically to works of art produced in or about Los Angeles.

By creating poetic or cinematic imagery to cover up empty spaces—spaces which lack a historical inscription other than the one attached to it in the now—*Point Blank*, *Model Shop*, *Lions’ Love*, and *Zabriskie Point* reconfigure the cityscape as *generis loci* of the sublime experience in postmodernity. These films mirror Rob Wilson’s assessment of Los Angeles as one of the “sublime heroes of the future,” a space characterized by “commodity-infinitude” and “simulacrous immensity,” a city permeated by a “kind of vast nothingness.”⁴⁷⁷ The potential of art then can be seen in its ability to generate new meaning by offering not only an engagement with the sense of dissatisfaction caused by the structure of urban spaces, but by also helping to create a frame of reference by which to comprehend and read the form of the city.

⁴⁷⁶ Wilson, *American Sublime*, 62.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 215.

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