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The Dystopian Cityscape in Postmodern
Literature and Film

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Dystopian Cityscape in Postmodern Literature and Film

by

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By focusing on what I call the urban dystopia, this dissertation uses cultural, social, and economic histories of urban development to identify the ways in which authors and filmmakers have helped to create our understanding of urban space. In particular, I examine how postmodern literature and film have responded to the forces of late capitalism, especially the explosion of urban populations and the geographic expansion of urban areas, and in the process consider not only those who stand to benefit from this ongoing growth but also those who have suffered the effects of poverty and spatial segregation. My research suggests that dystopian authors and filmmakers used their visions of the city in crisis to challenge our conception of urban space and our place within it. “The Dystopian Cityscape in Postmodern Literature and Film” brings together urban, literary, and film theory to assay the dystopian critique found at the heart of many of the postmodern textual and filmic conceptions of the city.

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The Dystopian Cityscape in Postmodern Literature and Film

Introduction

Mike Davis begins his indispensable study of Los Angeles, *City of Quartz*, by surveying the intellectual and literary depiction of the city from its founding to the present. Davis suggests that “Los Angeles...has come to play the double role of utopia *and* dystopia for advanced capitalism” and that “any late twentieth-century intellectual...must eventually come to take a peep and render some opinion on whether ‘Los Angeles Brings it All Together’ (official slogan), or is, rather, the nightmare at the terminus of American history” (19-20). Davis sees the literary (and filmic) conceptions of Los Angeles as either valorizations or condemnations of the city’s place as one of the centers of American and global development during the period of late capitalism. But as Davis’s focus is on the development and construction of the city itself, he uses this cursory survey of L.A.’s literature as a mere introduction to the more complicated social and cultural battles being fought throughout the history of Los Angeles. This dissertation presents the obverse side of Davis’s work. By focusing on the genre of the urban dystopia, this work makes use of the cultural, social, and economic histories of urban development in order to identify the ways in which authors and filmmakers have helped to create our understanding of urban space.

It is my goal to research the spaces where postmodern literature and film have responded to the forces Davis anatomizes: to the explosion of urban populations and the geographic territory of urban areas, considering not only those who suffer the effects of poverty and spatial segregation but also those who stand to benefit from this ongoing growth. From Raymond Chandler’s Los Angeles to Martin Scorsese’s New York, authors and filmmakers have been

helping us to imagine the cities in which we live and the communities of which we are a part. My research extends this idea by suggesting that the cities of film and literature actually work to *define* our conception of urban space and our place within it. More specifically, much of the film and literature of the late twentieth century has turned away from the utopian promise of the Disneyesque Tomorrowland present in so much of the science fiction found in the early twentieth century to present the city as instead a place of poverty, crime, and alienation. In this way, the postmodern literature and film that I am using here belongs to a larger history of authors and filmmakers—from Charles Dickens to Fritz Lang—who have undermined the notion of a utopian cityscape by presenting its darker underside.

In using the term “dystopian,” I mean to indicate the impulse in postmodern depictions of urban areas to mount a sociopolitical critique of their failings and flaws that takes into account the complex economic realities of late capitalism. As Tom Moylan suggests in his critical study of utopian and dystopian fiction: “Crucial to dystopia’s vision in all its manifestations is this ability to register the impact of an unseen and unexamined social system on the everyday lives of everyday people” (*Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* xiii).

Although it might be difficult to argue that urban space in the twentieth century was either “unseen” or “unexamined,” the conscious construction and use of urban space by landowners; city, state, and local governments; and city residents themselves has become progressively more complex, necessitating a more nuanced examination of metropolitan areas. One of the main goals of dystopian literature is to identify social, cultural, and political problems affecting nations, communities, and diverse groups of people and then illuminate those problems in the hopes of effecting positive change. Whether coming from a progressive or conservative point of view, the

crises depicted in dystopian literature almost always involve an examination of the class divide and of racial formation and segregation found at the heart of any productive evaluation of everyday life.

As scholars such as Moylan would most likely point out, dystopian literature is itself an enduring literary genre comprised of its own specific generic qualities, and my project here includes texts that are not usually considered part of that genre. In this dissertation, I am using a more flexible definition of the term dystopia to allow for texts that possess the formal generic conventions of the dystopia, without necessarily being regarded as part of the genre by those working in the field. While Joan Didion's novel *Play it as it Lays* (1970) is generally considered a realist text, it displays the same conscious critique of the alienation and distance felt by the upper classes towards the working poor as that found in John Brunner's overtly dystopian novel *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968). Because this dissertation makes use of a broader definition of dystopia, I am also able to engage in the ongoing theoretical debate about the boundaries of dystopian literature, thus making my work more relevant to the field.

By using the term "cityscape," I am referring not only to the encompassing physical spaces that comprise metropolitan areas, but also to the complex relationships that are forged among living spaces, work spaces, and leisure spaces and the people who inhabit them. In order to pose a more concrete and specific examination of the construction, conceptions, and utilization of space, I deploy Henri Lefebvre's articulation of the three loci of spatial production and use in postmodernity. In Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, he labels these forms: Spatial Practice—the places where space as created and put into practice by urban planners, city governments, and landowners are used by those who live within them; Representations of

Space—space as first conceived of by urban planners and city officials; and, Spaces of Representation—the use of landmarks, city centers, and meeting places as part of the imagination of those who live within urban areas (38-9). Lefebvre suggests that the forces of capital make conscious use of the first two forms to ensure an initial and continuing control of urban space. In other words, landowners, city governments, and the state use their domination of urban space to control the populations of those who live therein. Lefebvre also asserts that it is in the third form—Spaces of Representation—that we can find places of resistance to the seemingly totalizing conception of urban space created by capital and where authors and filmmakers might find a space to affect or alter what I am referring to as the *urban imaginary*.

We can find the impetus behind the urban dystopia within the spaces of representation, and the texts I analyze seek to spend their creative energies helping to (trans)form these spaces in order to affect the urban imaginary. In his examination of the postmodern city, David Harvey deploys Lefebvre's term to suggest that television, film, and the mass media can be used to access, or further distance, the possibilities of human interaction within the spaces of representation (*The Urban Experience* 261-62). The urban dystopia makes use of this form of spatial interaction to present a critique of the conscious attempts by those controlling and creating the representations of space to determine both the spatial practices and the spaces of representation for those who live within the city. In this dissertation, I use the term urban imaginary in place of spaces of representation in order to better describe the conceptions of urban space these authors and filmmakers help to create and to emphasize the impermanent nature of any articulation of urban space. I define the urban dystopia, then, as any text whose purpose is to make an intervention in the constitution of the urban imaginary by emphasizing

what the author sees as problematic to those living within urban space. By connecting the term *dystopia* with the term *urban*, I mean to limit my study of urban literature to only those texts presenting the city as a dystopian—or, dysfunctional—space. Alternatively, if one looks at the literal definition of the term dystopia (from the Greek—bad space), one might say that my dissertation examines only those dystopias that focus on urban space.

Fredric Jameson's work helps to position the texts I'm discussing within the larger concept of postmodernism. As Jameson suggests in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, the term *postmodernism* represents not only an acknowledgement of a fundamental change in the course of economic development but also the need to begin to understand the ways a global or transnational capitalism has begun to create new conceptions of architecture, literature, and the construction of culture itself. Jameson uses the term *cognitive mapping* to suggest a way in which politically-inclined texts might begin to define the "worldspace of multinational capital" and allow us to understand our position within this domain (54). The texts I examine here can be seen as a form of cognitive mapping, allowing the reader/viewer to see herself within one articulation of the urban imaginary in order to urge her to begin to challenge her urban reality. In my use of the term *postmodern*, I am also gesturing towards Brian McHale's work in *Postmodernist Fiction*. McHale suggests that the "postmodern condition" exists as "an anarchic landscape of worlds in the plural" and that one of the functions of postmodernist fiction is the "modeling of our pluralistic landscape" (37-9). For McHale, postmodern literature creates a number of competing worlds or *zones* as a way of "foregrounding the ontological themes and differences" found in our world (39). For the purposes of my work, we can see the multiple texts I examine below as a collection of competing articulations of the

pluralistic nature of urban space. Each text I examine impacts the urban imaginary while adding to the number of possible ways the reader or viewer can imagine her world.

In *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Jameson outlines a Marxian hermeneutic to be used to place both history and an analysis of the contradictions found between the ruling and subject classes at the forefront of literary criticism. Jameson suggests that

[T]he inert givens and materials of a particular text must take place within three concentric frameworks, which mark a widening out of the sense of the social ground of a text through the notions, first, of political history, in the narrow sense of the punctual event and a chroniclelike sequence of happenings in time; then of society, in the now already less diachronic and time-bound sense of a constitutive tension and struggle between social classes; and, ultimately, of history now conceived in its vastest sense of the sequence of the modes of production and the succession and destiny of the various human social formations, from prehistoric life to whatever far future history has in store for us. (75)

While it is beyond the scope of my project to address Jameson's third concern, I find it beneficial to employ his methodology here to study the texts I analyze in terms of both their singular historical moment and the larger social context to which they belong. It is for this reason that my dissertation takes a multi-disciplinary approach, exercising film and literary theory as well as urban theory and social geography. The historical background provided by urban theorists such as Mike Davis, David Harvey, and Manuel Castells establishes the historical context that underlies the urban dystopias I examine so that we might see these texts as interventions in the urban imaginary. Of course, the urban dystopias I use here are not simply mimetic representations of a supposed "real" historical conception of urban space, but by deploying the historic background provided by urban theorists, I am able to highlight the connection between the historical development of these areas and the heterogeneous fictive images of the city in literature and film.

Jameson's Marxian hermeneutic also helps to identify the urban dystopia as an intercession in the understanding of the class relations inherent in the struggle to define and control urban space. Jameson sees the "narrative form" as "an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (*The Political Unconscious* 79). I would argue that the "social contradictions" interrogated in the urban dystopia lie between the conflicting articulations of urban space coming from the dominant and laboring classes. Inasmuch as dystopian literature is a form of sociopolitical critique, the urban dystopia is a critique of ownership and control of urban space. It shows the ways in which city-dwellers' attempts to craft their own meanings out of urban spaces are consistently hemmed in and often resisted by the agents of capital and the state; yet at the same time, it often depicts efforts to subvert these hegemonic forces.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Marxist geographers and urban theorists such as Manuel Castells and David Harvey began to suggest that environmental factors alone were not sufficient to describe and define the formation and use of urban space. David Harvey's *The Urban Experience* outlines the ways in which the production of capital determined residential segmentation, mobility chances, and the conscious replication of housing and land use in the hopes of furthering surplus value and undermining the possibility of proletarian revolt. Harvey shows that rather than having some semblance of choice when determining where to live, the production of capital—in particular the control of mortgage rates, land values, and borrowing possibilities by bankers and landowners—presents a very limited number of habitation options. This limited choice in turn creates a self-perpetuating cycle of residential segmentation. As Harvey suggests: "a white-collar labor force is reproduced in a white-collar neighborhood, a

blue-collar labor force is reproduced in a blue-collar neighborhood” (118). As part of this system, Harvey also suggests that the workers of the lower class are those least able to afford transportation costs, living expenses, and even food—and they are the most likely to experience deprivation, starvation, and need. These elements—deprivation, starvation, and need—were chosen by those urban dystopianists working in the 1960s and ‘70s as the most effective and graphic ways to convince their readers of the need for change in our urban centers, and the critique of class difference inherent in these works can be seen throughout the history of the urban dystopia. As my dissertation works its way forward from the 1960s, an examination of class consciousness in relation to articulations of urban space—whether directly implied by the author of each text or not—will form the connecting arc of my analysis.

Other theoretical and historical works that inform my research include the study of conservative conceptions of urban space related by urban theorist and media studies scholar Steve Macek in his work *Urban Nightmares: The Media, the Right, and the Moral Panic over the City*. Macek agrees with Mike Davis that during the transformation of formerly mixed working-class urban areas into a series of de-industrialized ethnic enclaves, crime has been racialized as a way of mobilizing and marketing “white flight” to suburban areas. In addition to the research conducted by Harvey, my research into the determined hierarchies of urban land use also utilizes the work of Edward Soja, Castells, and Lefebvre to define the mechanics of newly created megacities and the networks of power and control these urban spaces rely on to maintain order; I also employ these critics to discuss the ways in which cities are created ideologically as well as physically. By combining literary criticism and theory from scholars such as Jameson, Moylan, and Brian McHale with critical studies in urban and social theory by authors such as

Soja, Fulton, and Harvey, I aim to foster a diverse, multi-disciplinary understanding of the evolution of the city and of urban space within literature and film in the late twentieth century.

My dissertation is divided into five chapters. The chapters are presented thematically as well as chronologically, but neither distinction will be too strictly enforced as the critical thematic of each chapter can be found—at least in part—throughout the history of the urban dystopia. Using a structure similar to Davis's *City of Quartz*, my dissertation moves forward chronologically while presenting each chapter's focus as the product of a complex history of the production of the urban imaginary. Each chapter utilizes four to five key filmic and literary texts in order to provide both the individual and contextual analysis required by Jameson's Marxian hermeneutic. By limiting the number of texts examined, I am afforded enough space to place each text within a particular historical context and then relate that text and its fellows to a more general social conception of one aspect of the urban imaginary. Although the majority of the texts I examine are set in either New York or Los Angeles, I believe there is a place for works that fall outside of these two metropolitan areas. I understand that the historical development of Los Angeles is far different from that of New York. I treat each of the metropolitan areas depicted in the texts I examine as independent spaces, each with its own rich history of development, but I also identify that there are socioeconomic parallels that can be drawn between these cities. By showing that the formal, generic conventions of the urban dystopia are present in literature and films that represent a plurality of urban spaces, I am able to include the work of authors and filmmakers such as Alex Proyas, J.G. Ballard, and Frank Miller in my dissertation. The work of these dystopianists is far too valuable to my examination of articulations of urban space to exclude them programatically.

My first chapter examines the effects the looming possibility of a population crisis had on urban dystopianists working in the 1960s and 1970s. I begin my dissertation here not merely as a gesture to the theorized beginnings of postmodernism, but instead because of the crisis of the organization and makeup of cities during the period. The growing realization of the effects of increasing suburbanization, white flight, and the pronouncement of the “death of the city” that began shortly before and during this period, make it a natural starting point for my research. I am interested in the ways texts responded to urban de-industrialization and consequent attempts at gentrification during this time, and ultimately how the urban dystopia responded to claims of the unsustainability of the city. As demographers and urban theorists began to suggest that population increases were not likely to cease and that the ensuing increased need for space, food, and water would be impossible to fill, these authors conceived their works as a way of warning readers of the dangers of unchecked population and of the possible consequences that might come from the additional strain placed on city resources. The urban dystopianists of the 1960s and 1970s then used the conception of a future city, bursting to the seams with humanity, to highlight the distance between the upper and lower classes already felt.

This chapter discusses the ways authors in the ‘60s and ‘70s focused on the fear of overpopulation in order to highlight a growing distance between the landowners and those struggling to maintain a home. In John Brunner’s *Stand on Zanzibar* and Harry Harrison’s *Make Room! Make Room!* (1966), the authors show the unwillingness and the inability of those able to rise above street level to see the effects of poverty and limited housing choice in the population below. In Brunner’s work specifically, the novel’s two main protagonists are only able to understand the intense class divide between themselves and those living in poverty after being

swept up into a mass protest on the street level. The shock and subsequent alienation felt by Brunner's characters is only intensified when they realize that the riot is occurring less than ten short blocks from their home.

It's not surprising that in the wake of a number of texts predicting street protest and riots as the inevitable conclusion to the exclusionary forces acting against the working class during periods of overpopulation there would follow a concerted effort to control the depiction of violence within the urban imaginary. My second chapter analyzes the image of the city of menace as propagated by the films of the mid-to-late seventies and early eighties. While more conservative films such as Michael Winner's *Death Wish* (1974) suggested that an increasing population of African American and working class urban dwellers posed a threat to the white middle class, films such as Robert Kelljchian's *Act of Vengeance* (AKA *Rape Squad*, 1974) and Gary Sherman's *Vice Squad* (1982) suggested that—more often than not—the urban poor were the likely victims of a growing surge of urban violence. This chapter analyzes the ways in which the more conservative versions of these films espoused the right-wing messages of fear and condemnation being pushed by political pundits and politicians and the places where a handful of authors and filmmakers attempted to co-opt the image of the violent city to highlight the lives of the urban poor—those often the victims of so-called “urban violence.” This chapter first analyzes two specific film subgenres that made interventions in the depiction of urban violence in the ‘70s and ‘80s: the urban vigilante film, which suggested the need for a sharp, extra-legal response to urban crime; and what I am calling the Lilith film, which depicted both conservative and liberal responses to crimes against sex workers in the city. The chapter concludes with a short introduction to the early films of director Abel Ferrara, who uses the backdrop of New York City

to present what appears to be a more realistic view of both urban violence and of the lives of the working class.

My next chapter shifts gears to focus on the literary and filmic representations of the urban lives of the wealthy and their desperate attempts to isolate themselves from the crime and poverty found right outside the gates of their towers of accumulation. In the fourth chapter of *City of Quartz*, “Fortress L.A.,” Davis outlines the attempts by many of the city’s affluent residents to isolate themselves completely from what they saw as the menace of the outside world. My third chapter explores the novels that attempt to enter this world of isolation and wealth in order to highlight the cruel and shallow existence of those at the top. The texts in this chapter impact the urban imaginary by providing a counter-example to the repeated positive images of wealth and power so often repeated in the mass culture of the time. In J.G. Ballard’s novel *High Rise* (1975) and Robert Silverberg’s *The World Inside* (1971), the authors explore the world of the isolated, self-contained, and highly segregated building of the future. Joan Didion’s *Play It As It Lays* and Bret Easton Ellis’s *Less Than Zero* (1985) highlight the emotionally empty lives of those fortunate enough to drift through the movie sets and exclusive clubs and restaurants of Hollywood without having to see through the city’s thin veneer of glamour. This chapter examines the ability of all of these texts to interrogate the lives of those most able to distance themselves from the violence and privation faced by those discussed in the first two chapters of my dissertation.

My fourth chapter will anatomize the impact of neo-noir films such as Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982) on the urban imaginary of Reagan’s America, and their connection to a history of dystopian imagery found in film noir. In *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*,

Edward Dimendberg describes the tension created in both the viewers and the characters of film noir by the ongoing transformation of urban space in the years following 1939. Dimendberg suggests that film noir heightened the alienation felt by those watching the city centers around them grow and transform into something wholly unfamiliar. My argument in this chapter is that *Blade Runner*—and other films considered as part of the wave of “neo-noir”—re-creates the shock and alienation identified by Dimendberg in the minds of those wishing to reconcile Scott’s vision of the future with the everyday realities of urban life in the 1980s. As numerous scholars have concluded, *Blade Runner* draws on a history of films noir to give its conception of the future a gritty and realistic patina. What I argue in this chapter is that the use of noir tropes by films such as *Blade Runner*, *GATTACA* (1997), and *Dark City* (1998) belies a nostalgic desire to return to a time when the city—and by extension its social and cultural roles—were easier to navigate and understand. This chapter also identifies the sharp critique levied by both the neo-noir films listed above and by the tech-noir *RoboCop* trilogy against a growing subsumption of public space by private companies. In these films, part of the anomie created by changes in the city comes from the transformation of space that was once able to be utilized by all into space strictly controlled by capitalist interests. And finally, this chapter examines the graphic novels of Frank Miller in order to show how his work extended a critique of the conservative abandoning of urban spaces during Reagan’s time in office by revolutionizing the narrative and visual possibilities offered by the comic book. Though the texts in this chapter might seem fairly disparate, each one helps to identify a growing sense of alienation felt by urban dwellers in the ‘80s and ‘90s as they began to lose control of the urban spaces they called home.

The final chapter of my dissertation focuses on urban dystopianists who concentrated on

an almost ever-present threat of gentrification facing working class urban spaces in major metropolitan areas. Rather than moving forward in time, however, this chapter first takes a step back to analyze the post-apocalyptic films of the early 1980s that attempted to defend the poverty-ridden working class communities found at the heart of most American cities of the period. Films such as John Carpenter's *Escape from New York* (1981) and Enzo G. Castellari's *Escape from the Bronx* (1983) suggested that the vibrant subcultures present in even the most neglected areas of the city deserved to be protected against the rampant encroachment of rapacious land developers. The chapter then uses Samuel R. Delany's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999) to provide a history of the obliteration of queer and class-diverse meeting spaces by the wave of gentrification that transformed New York's Times Square. In this way I bridge the earlier protests against gentrification with the mournful contemplation of gentrified space in the more recent work of author Jonathan Lethem. Lethem argues that the city is currently facing the elimination of strong, diverse working-class communities by unbridled gentrification, but as opposed to gentrification efforts in the past, this newest wave of urban transformation isn't facing the same kinds of resistance. I argue that, in post-9/11 America, it has become more difficult to critique the production and use of urban space and that urban dystopianists such as Lethem have begun to focus on the effects of an increased acceptance of the continuing gentrification of urban space in America that has come as a result of a new-found reverence for the city.

Although my primary focus in this dissertation is literary and film criticism, I hope that by employing urban theory in my analysis I will be able to become a part of an ever growing number of scholars who make use of the work of theorists such as Lefebvre and Davis to enrich

their research into urban literature and film. Stanley Corkin's new study of the films of New York, *Starring New York: Filming the Grime and the Glamour of the Long 1970s*, applies Lefebvre's conceptions of urban space to help delineate the social and physical boundaries created in 1970s Blaxploitation film. Corkin also uses David Harvey's work to outline a shift between the national and transnational business models at play in the transformation of New York found in the mid-1970s. Similarly, Edward Dimendberg incorporates Lefebvre's work in his discussion of centripetal and centrifugal space and in his analysis of their relationship to the Spaces of Representation created by film noir. But where scholars such as Corkin and Dimendberg refer only occasionally to urban theory, my research sees the work of Davis, Lefebvre, and Edward Soja as an essential part of any interrogation of the construction of urban space.

As I've mentioned above, Tom Moylan has done extensive research in the field of dystopian literature, both in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* and in his anthology of dystopian research *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (co-edited by Raffaella Baccolini). They are joined by scholars such as Peter Fitting, M. Keith Booker, and Phillip E. Wegner on a short list of those who have critically examined dystopian literature. By moving beyond an attempt to define and circumscribe the term "dystopia" or an attempt to trace its history, my research instead focuses on one particular articulation of dystopian literature and film in the service of advancing our understanding of the urban imaginary. In this way, I hope to further the range and possibility of dystopian studies. My dissertation also builds upon the projects begun by Michael Denning and Lary May in their explorations of literature and film as forms of social and cultural protest. And it builds upon the

symbolic and aesthetic images of urban space analyzed in the collection *The Cinematic City*. My research also narrows and refines the scope of the recent Cambridge Companions to the literatures of Los Angeles and New York. More importantly, my dissertation brings together urban, literary, and film theory to anatomize the creation and articulation of the urban imaginary in a way heretofore unexamined.

Chapter One

Standing Room Only:

Overpopulation and the Urban Imaginary

Introduction

The January 11, 1960 cover of *Time* magazine featured a mosaic of young mothers from around the world cradling young children and a cover that read: “That Population Explosion.” The article inside the magazine dedicated to population states: “Long a hot topic among pundits, whose jargon phrase for it is ‘the population explosion,’ the startling twentieth century surge in humanity’s rate of reproduction may be as fateful to history as the H-bomb and the Sputnik, but it gets less public attention” (“The Numbers Game” 21). The world’s population might not have gotten much public attention at the start of 1960, but by the end of the decade, the “population explosion” would become of far greater concern. Although the idea that global population levels were becoming untenable had been around since before the time of Thomas Malthus, the 1960s and ‘70s saw a marked increase in research publications, literature, and film focused on documenting the perceived population crisis.¹ When the United Nations released their population data in 1965, their Demographic Yearbook noted that in 1900 the Earth’s population was estimated at 1.65 billion. However, by 1950, population numbers had risen to 2.5 billion, and by 1960, there were an estimated 2.98 billion people on Earth. With the world’s population nearly doubling in sixty years and with

¹ For a more complete examination of the legacy of Malthusian thinking, see Linnér.

demographers predicting that by the year 2000 the number would double again, even the most developed nations began to take notice.

Demographers weren't simply seeing a rise in population numbers. Demographers and geographers such as Kingsley Davis and Paul Ehrlich were also seeing a staggering rise in urban density—the calculation of the number of people living within a designated space in urban areas. As demographers were pointing out the increase in urban populations, urban planners also began to adjust their designs to meet a larger populace. In *The Squeeze: Cities Without Space* (1960), Edward Higbee warns: “A better organization of space for residence, for pleasure, and for business is absolutely imperative if the rising tides of population are not to make a shambles of the metropolitan habitat” (qtd. in Rome 143). Higbee suggested that if urban development was not changed drastically, “it will not be long before there is standing room only in the cluttered heart of Metropolis” (qtd. in Rome 143). The conception of “standing room only” had been the subject of countless literary and filmic conceptions of lower class tenements, immigrant ghettos, and cramped urban spaces since the dawn of the industrial revolution, but predictions of a world population of over six billion people by the century's end brought a new sense of danger to the public perception of urban space, and this already-engaged audience helped convince a number of authors to speculate about what the impact of so many people might be on the cities that more and more people were beginning to call home.

As Mary S. Weinkauff suggests in one of the first articles to discuss the treatment of overpopulation in science fiction, “[W]e must admit that the novel cannot offer any

solution to the population problem [...] it is only the science fiction writer who handles this topic fully. He is the only one who can—since ‘realistic’ fiction depends upon experience rather than theory, and thus no novelist can stir us up with a picture of the past, which has not been overly troubled with population” (157). While Weinkauff isn’t entirely correct in her assumptions—there have been novels of “realistic fiction” that have focused on overcrowding and overpopulation—she is right about the speculative nature of population projections. Kingsley Davis notes: “The literature on population is filled with hypothetical reasoning” (*Resources* 12). Davis suggests that future population numbers depend on a variety of factors including technological advancements in agricultural production, increases (or decreases) in birth and death rates, and cultural attitudes towards family size. Any projections of future population growth—or its impact on urban areas—are necessarily speculative, thus making science fiction the more effective choice to explore the possible consequences of overpopulation.

Science fiction began to see the impact of new concerns about overpopulation in the short stories published in the 1950s. Kurt Vonnegut’s “Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow” (1953), Frederick Pohl’s “The Census Takers” (1955), and Cyril Kornbluth’s “Shark Ship” (1958) each present visions of an overpopulated future, but in each of these stories, overpopulation is used more as a convenient plot device than as a commentary on the (un)tenability of maintaining an increasing population. Vonnegut’s story, for instance, is set in a world where an anti-aging drug has effectively given the elderly eternal life, but the story is more closely focused on the internal squabbles of the family than on any true warning of a population explosion. After the initial predictions from worried

demographers began to come forward, however, overpopulation inspired a whole series of novels such as Anthony Burgess's *The Wanting Seed* (1962), Brian W. Aldiss's *Earthworks* (1965), Harry Harrison's *Make Room! Make Room!* (1966), John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968), John Hersey's *My Petition for More Space* (1974), and Thomas Disch's *334* (1974). Short stories such as J.G. Ballard's "Build-Up" (1960) and "Billennium" (1961), Aldiss's "Total Environment" (1968), Kurt Vonnegut's "Welcome to the Monkey House" (1968), Keith Roberts's "Therapy 2000" (1969), James Blish's "Statistician's Day" (1970), Maggie Nadler's "The Secret" (1971), and the stories collected in James Blish and Norman L. Knight's *A Torrent of Faces* (1967), also focused on population growth and its consequences. However, not all of these works treated overpopulation as a dystopian concept—Blish and Knight, for example, chose to depict an overpopulated future as a *utopian* space.² And not all of these works are primarily concerned with urban space. Burgess's *The Wanting Seed* and Nadler's "The Secret" are both focused on the politics of reproduction and neither is primarily set within an urban center.

This chapter focuses instead on only those overpopulation novels, stories, and films that can be seen as urban dystopias. As demographers and urban theorists of the 1960s began to suggest that population increases were not in any danger of stopping and

² Blish and Knight state in the preface to *A Torrent of Faces*: "It is of course likely that world population will continue to double itself each century, though the rate may flatten out toward the end of the second millennium. It is also likely that by that time most of these people will be starving to death, and the rest will be scraping desperately. We chose to examine an alternative. Physically, George is right; given a huge cooperative endeavor, the Earth *could* support such a population. But a human society of this magnitude will never develop if the race does not organize itself into some uniform political and economic unit before the population has expanded much beyond its present numbers. What sort of unit? We concluded that nothing less than a Utopia would do" (9). As the authors note, the idea that overpopulation can or should be compensated for instead of prevented is decidedly *utopian*.

that the ensuing increased need for space, food, and water would be impossible to fill, urban dystopianists used their works as a way of warning readers of the dangers of unchecked populations and of the possible consequences that might come from the additional strain placed on city resources. Novels such as Harry Harrison's *Make Room! Make Room!* (1966) and John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968) focused on the need and deprivation felt by those living in a future city pushed to the breaking point by overcrowding, while John Hersey's novel *My Petition for More Space* (1974) and J.G. Ballard's short stories "Build-Up" (1957) and "Billenium" (1961) focused on the crushing psychological effects of overcrowding and a lack of personal space. This chapter will outline the demographic and geographic research that informed these works and then focus on the two most important impacts these works had on the urban imaginary: their conceptions of the aesthetics of the overcrowded city—the physical, organizational, and psychological impressions of overcrowding—and their focus on the class divide and residential segregation within urban living spaces.

The Population Bomb

In some of his earliest work with population numbers and the growth of urban centers, demographer Kingsley Davis focused on the effects of population growth on the standard of living in developing nations. As early as 1951, Davis was studying the population policies of sites of major population shifts such as India and Pakistan. In one study he outlined the formula whereby increased population plus decreased mortality and increased urban density equaled increased starvation, increased poverty, and a greater

distance between the poorest and the most affluent in society (*The Population of India and Pakistan* 213). In addition to his work with sheer population numbers, Davis also focused on what he saw as the explosive growth of urban areas in terms of population density and concentration of urban space. In his 1954 work with Hilda Hertz Golden, “Urbanization and the Development of Pre-Industrial Areas,” he outlined what he saw as an alarming trend in urban growth. Davis found that between 1800 and 1951 the size of urban populations in the United States had grown from less than two percent of the country’s total population to greater than thirty percent by 1951 (12). In 1950, the world’s population stood at 2.5 Billion, with 71% of the population living in rural areas (Davis *World Urbanization, 1950-1970* 2: 51).

As his work progressed through the late ‘50s and early ‘60s, Davis began to view the projections for population growth as increasingly alarming. As world population numbers began to exceed even the most liberal estimates and thousands of people continued to migrate to urban centers, the poverty, hunger, and overcrowding anticipated by Davis became easier to see. During this period, Davis was responsible for coining the term “population explosion” and worked to help create the demographic transition model of determining the course of population growth and decline in pre-industrial to industrial countries. In his most ambitious work, Davis studied the rate of population growth in urban centers from 1950 to 1970. He found that in both industrial and non-industrial countries throughout the world, urban populations grew considerably faster than had been expected. For example, in 1950, New York’s population stood at 12.3 million people (*World Urbanization, 1950-1970* 1: 169). By 1970, the city’s population had grown to 16

million (*World Urbanization, 1950-1970* 1: 169). Even with a relatively low annual growth rate of 1.4%,³ New York's population had expanded by almost 25% in twenty years. Of course New York's growth rate was nothing compared to the growth rate of cities such as San Francisco or Los Angeles, which grew at 4.1% and 3.8% per year respectively (*World Urbanization, 1950-1970* 1: 169-70). Davis's report gave empirical evidence for what demographers had known for years: the urban populations in the United States were growing at an unsustainable rate. In 1970, the world's population stood at 3.6 Billion, with 39% of the population living in urban areas (*World Urbanization, 1950-1970* 2:51).

While Kingsley Davis produced concrete statistics establishing the existence of the "population explosion," biologist and social scientist Paul Ehrlich focused on dramatizing the effects this explosion might bring. Ehrlich's groundbreaking study of the population explosion, *The Population Bomb* (1968), predicted—among many other things—the lack of food and natural resources that the explosive population growth estimated to take place in the seventies and eighties would cause. In the first chapter of the book, Ehrlich makes it clear, however, that his case won't be made on the basis of statistics. Unlike Davis, Ehrlich sought to persuade the reader through the use of possible scenarios for the future supported by observation, extrapolation, and—sometimes—simple guesswork.

Although Ehrlich provided few actual figures to back up his claims, the figures he does produce are both simple and terrifying. Ehrlich was able to show that the increase in

³ A list of the growth rate of each city is located within Davis *World Urbanization, 1950-1970* Vol. 1.

population was due not just to an increase in birth rates throughout the world but also to a decrease in the “death rate” due to advances in medicine, pesticides, and technology. More importantly, Ehrlich was able to show that by determining the death rate and the birth rate of a population, one could find the rate of increase, and with this information, the amount of time it would take to double a population. For example, at a rate of 1.0 percent increase, a population would double in 70 years. At a rate of 4.0 percent increase it would take only 17 years. It was this formula that allowed demographers to realize that by 2010 the world population would most likely reach 7 billion people (Ehrlich 8-10).

In the remainder of his work, Ehrlich outlined his predictions for what might happen due to such a monumental increase, what was being done about the population explosion at the time, what might be done to lessen its effects, and what the reader could do to help. In the first section of the book “The Problem,” Ehrlich shows the cause and effect relationship between consumption exacerbated by increased need and the depletion of natural resources and destruction of the environment (1-44). Ehrlich suggested that in addition to the increased need for fertilizer and water for the new crops under the so-called “green revolution,” the continuous use of advanced pesticides might breed spray-resistant bugs that would further damage our ability to feed the world. The end result of our damage to the agricultural sites of production on the planet, Ehrlich suggested, would be widespread famine, starvation, and death. Ehrlich also suggested that overcrowding due to population density might allow diseases once thought conquered to make a resurgence and that new, drug-resistant diseases might arise from poor sanitation practices and cramped conditions. He suggested that the only way to prevent the

consequences of overpopulation was to create a concentrated effort by both developed and undeveloped countries to limit birth rates through increased access to abortion, effective birth control, and a shift in ideology that would show sex as an act morally separable from procreation. Unlike some of his more pessimistic colleagues, Ehrlich suggested that by shifting cultural practices to encourage birth control, we might avoid the need for more drastic measures such as mandatory sterilization or the possibility of eugenic legislation that many equated with efforts to encourage birth control in the '70s and '80s.

In the section "The Ends of the Road," Ehrlich creates three fictional scenarios that dramatize what might happen if the world's population remained unchecked (45-77). In the first, the United States is suffering from a catastrophic crop failure brought on by pestilence due to spray-resistant insects (50-61). Failing to heed the UN's demand that the US end their use of a controversial new pesticide, the president plunges the country into a thermonuclear war, and the scenario ends with a group of survivors debating suicide as they begin to experience the effects of radiation poisoning. The second scenario is comprised of news articles from the future that show the spread of an aggressive and fatal form of Lhasa fever that culminates in the deaths of 1.1 billion people (62-72). The third scenario, and the most hopeful, takes the form of a future history textbook detailing the period of famine and death that lasted from the '70s to the late '90s, which was only ended through a combination of international aid and strict adherence to birth limitations (73-77).

Ehrlich relied not solely on population statistics or social science to move his readers but on the pathos of dramatic extrapolation familiar to readers of the SF novels of the same period. He also helped popularize the notion that overpopulation was indeed a problem. By the time of the release of the revised version of *The Population Bomb* in 1971, the book had sold over two million copies, and by 1989 the paperback edition of the book was on its twentieth printing. Ehrlich and Davis's work was joined by William and Paul Paddock's *Famine 1975! America's Decision: Who Will Survive?* (1967), Garrett Hardin's essay, "The Tragedy of the Commons" (1968), and the Club of Rome's report *The Limits to Growth* (1972). These works—along with the work of demographer Georg Borgström—formed the core of a neo-Malthusian push both to understand the damage caused by unchecked population growth and to begin taking the steps necessary to bring that growth to a halt (Linnér 190).

During the 1960s and '70s, a curious collaboration began to form between these social scientists and science fiction authors who were also concerned about the possible effects of overpopulation. This alliance between authors and demographers is clearly evident in a number of science fiction anthologies that focus on overpopulation or urban growth published in the 1970s.⁴ Frederik Pohl's anthology *Nightmare Age* (1970) contains stories by Pohl, Kornbluth, and Fritz Leiber as well as an essay on population growth by Ehrlich. *Voyages: Scenarios for a Ship Called Earth* (1971) was edited by Zero Population Group staffer Rob Sauer and published through a partnership between

⁴ Science fiction author Isaac Asimov appropriated the role of social scientist in his 1974 book *Earth: Our Crowded Spaceship*. In the book, written for young adults and commissioned by UNICEF, Asimov argues for managed population control and issues a number of the same dire predictions made by Ehrlich and Davis. See also Asimov's 1969 essay in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, "The Power of Progression."

ZPG and Ballantine Books. The anthology contains an introduction by Anne and Paul Ehrlich stressing the power of SF to compellingly prophesize the future, and Sauer makes an attempt to connect each of its five sections to one specific effect of overpopulation. Some of the stories in the anthology don't quite fit the theme—see the curious inclusion of Pamela Zoline's "The Heat Death of the Universe" (1967)—but this anthology was one of the strongest endeavors to consciously use SF to provide a convincing reason to fear an increase in human numbers.⁵ *No Room for Man: Population and the Future through Science Fiction* (1979), edited by Ralph Clem, Martin Harry Greenberg, and Joseph Olander, also contains a number of SF stories warning of overpopulation and is perhaps the best organized of the three anthologies mentioned here, but it comes at the end of the decade when overpopulation fears had begun to peter out. And the themes of overpopulation and population growth were not strictly confined to these three anthologies. Clem, Greenberg, and Olander's other SF anthology of the period, *The City 2000 A.D.: Urban Life through Science Fiction* (1976), references Kingsley Davis, and contains stories focused on the impact of overcrowding in urban areas. What is clear from these anthologies and from the novels discussed below is that there existed a number of authors who were just as concerned with overpopulation and urban density as the demographers and social scientists who were sharing their fears with the world.

⁵ One story to note in *Voyages* is Horacio V. Paredes's "Population Control 1986," one of the few overpopulation stories collected that is told from a non-western point of view.

The Aesthetics of Overcrowding

One of the most palpable effects of the urban dystopias dealing with overpopulation in the '60s and '70s was their production of a set of aesthetics that helped define the overcrowded city. The urban dystopias of this period used vivid descriptions of cramped quarters, unending lines, and state-enforced privation to generate an image of the city as a site of deprivation, physical suffering, and mental anguish. Authors J.G. Ballard and John Hersey were chief among those who were able to focus on the effects an increase in population would have on our psychological conceptions of overcrowding. Ballard and Hersey sought to show the horror that comes from finding that you literally have nowhere to move. In "Build-Up" and "Billennium," Ballard depicts future cities in which a lack of space creates both a mental and literal hell. Although "Build-Up" is a satire—mocking those who would see space solely in terms of cost per cubic foot—it nonetheless helped to create the impression (at least for those with Western conceptions of acceptable living conditions) that overcrowding is most easily conceived of as a lack of personal space. In *My Petition for More Space*, Hersey shows the chilling effects of a world so crowded that human relationships are formed solely on the basis of those standing to one's left and right. These two authors were able to apply the very real warnings of social and demographic theorists in their desire to show the mental toll that the restriction of space we might face would have.

Ballard and Hersey's attempts to intervene in what they saw as contemporary urban concerns can also be seen as part of a larger movement within science fiction. In Michael Moorcock's 1965 editorial for *New Worlds* he states: "We need more writers

who reflect the pragmatic mood of today, who use the images apt for today, who employ symbols gathered from the world of today [...] Like all good writing, SF must relate primarily to the time in which it is written; a writer must write primarily for his own generation” (3). As SF theorist Rob Latham and others have suggested, science fiction’s New Wave authors did just that: they produced novels and stories that made free use of the social and political concerns of the sixties in a way novel to the genre.⁶ One of the more pressing concerns for these New Wave authors was the increase in world population that was beginning to be seen in the late 1950s and early 1960s. SF authors associated with the New Wave forecast a future teeming with humanity and suggested that no amount of technology would fully prepare us for this burden.

J.G. Ballard, whose work was one of the catalysts for the New Wave movement in Britain, showed a preoccupation with population, social space, and moral ambiguity that stretched from his earliest stories and his 1975 novel *High Rise* to the frightening worlds of middle-class violence in *Cocaine Nights* (1996) and *Kingdom Come* (2006). In particular, many of Ballard’s works are concerned with the effects of limiting, controlling, and enforcing private space. In one of his earliest published stories, “Build-Up,”⁷ Ballard begins his foray into the overcrowded city by immediately defining the aesthetics of overcrowding through the physical and mathematical measurements of limited personal space.

⁶ For more on the importance of science fiction’s New Wave movement, see: Latham, “The New Wave,” 202-216; and Latham, “New Worlds and the New Wave in Fandom: Fan Culture and the Reshaping of Science Fiction in the Sixties,” 296-315.

⁷ “Build-Up” was first published in *New Worlds*, vol. 19, number 55 in January of 1957, but the name was later changed to “Concentration City” in anthologies of Ballard’s collected work.

“Build-Up” is, on the surface, an exaggerated conception of urbanization gone wild. The world of the story consists of a single city, with never-ending formations of apartment blocks stretching horizontally for thousands of miles and existing vertically on multiple levels. Although there are areas—known as “dead areas” of the “Night Zone”—that seem to be deserted, the remainder of the city is filled to capacity with human life. The protagonist of the story, college student Franz Matheson, begins by searching for a space large enough to test his seemingly crazy theory that practical flight is possible. After facing skeptical colleagues and friends, he successfully shows that a model glider, powered by small rockets, is, indeed, capable of staying aloft. But this display only reveals Matheson’s true desire: to find “free space.” Matheson boards a high speed train with the goal of somehow moving beyond the urban core of the city. But as he moves farther and farther on a heading of 270 degrees West, the city does not seem to end. Finally, after ten days, Matheson is surprised to find that the train has seemingly switched directions and is now moving on a heading of 90 degrees East.⁸ After three weeks Matheson returns home, but after being held by the police for vagrancy, he learns that he has arrived on the same day he began, that time itself has run backward. The reader is left with the feeling that the residents of the city are trapped, both physically and temporally. The last line of the story lets the reader know that no matter how hard you try to leave: “You’re back where you first started from. \$Hell x 10ⁿ” (36).

Despite the simple, unambiguous ending of the story, “Build-Up” is still worth studying here because of its focus on defining space by its physical measurement and

⁸ West 270° is also known as “due west” or the west-most position on a compass, and East 90° is “due east.” The reader can thus assume that this city never ends.

cost. Throughout the story, Matheson and others see space solely in terms of its cost per square foot. One character, concerned with preventing “that sort of element” from entering his neighborhood, exclaims, “That’s right boy. This is a good dollar five neighborhood” (31). Even Matheson, as he travels west, can’t help but define “free space” in terms of its cost: “Dollar five a cubic foot. Free space, he knew, would bring the price down. . . . 97 cents. At an average of a dollar a cubic foot, Franz calculated idly, [free space is] so far worth about $\$4 \times 10^{27}$ ” (33). The emphasis the characters place on the cost of a cubic foot of space is obviously part of the satirical bent of the story, but this obsession with land values also suggests a reality that was quickly becoming commonplace in large metropolitan areas. As cities such as New York and Chicago were struggling to find housing for an ever-growing urban population, public conceptions of space were frequently seen in terms of monetary value. It is telling that the novel uses the scale of a cubic foot, ensuring that value is placed on all three dimensions. The population of the city is never mentioned; all the reader knows is that every cubic foot of space is either owned or available for rent. Overcrowding is pushing Matheson to find “free space,” but—as with his urban counterparts in our world—he can only conceive of space in terms of cost.

Ballard purposefully creates an aesthetics of space that is also defined by physical measurement. The buildings, roads, and living spaces of the story are described almost exclusively in terms of feet or miles. A stadium “was four hundred feet in diameter and had a roof two hundred and fifty feet high” (27). Matheson wishes to find “an area of more or less continuous development. Two or three hundred blocks long” (27). A room is

described only as “twenty feet by fifteen feet by ten” (29). There is hardly a single paragraph that does not contain a measurement of physical space. Although it is conceivable that Matheson, a physics student, would see space in terms of dimension, these descriptions are not limited to his speech and thoughts. The third person narration of the story also privileges measurement over illustration. The city is described by the narrator in terms of “feet,” “miles,” “levels,” and “blocks” (27). Ballard directs his readers to see the city of “Build-Up”—the space of the story—in meters and feet in order to heighten the anxiety associated with reducing our physical world to measurement and cost. The “Hell” found at the end of the story is frightening because it signifies the impossibility of finding free and open space, space not controlled or owned by someone else. This equation of space in terms of dimension and expense is also present in Ballard’s second exploration of overcrowding, “Billennium.”

“Billennium” depicts a future city—perhaps a stand-in for New York—facing the limits of its capacity to house its population. Due to the increasing amount of land needed for agricultural use, 95% of Earth’s population has had to move to the city (271). In “Billennium” the result of this migration is that the complete control of living space, pedestrian movement, and living conditions is placed in the hands of the Housing Authority. The single residents of the city are forced to live within a space no larger than 4 square meters, with the threat of a further restriction of space looming just around the corner (269). Unscrupulous landlords are seen using flexible clapboard walls to project the appearance of more space, and tenants fight tooth and nail in attempts to protect every inch of their living quarters. The hallways and stairwells of “Billennium” are crowded by

those seeking the ability to sit down; lines of pedestrians fill the sidewalks and roadways of the city, making it nearly impossible to move; dining options, workplaces, and entertainment venues must be carefully selected because of increased commute time. The overpopulated city of “Billennium” is a city of decreased mobility (both literally and figuratively), decreased personal space, and decreased incentive for living.

As in “Build-Up,” Ballard uses the physical dimensions of space in “Billennium” to create an aesthetic of overcrowding grounded in cost per square meter. The characters in the story are obsessed with finding more centimeters of space. Measurements are taken constantly so that renters are not cheated by landlords who have several tricks they might use to control the dimensions of a cubicle:

Manipulating the ceiling was a favourite trick of unscrupulous land-lords—most assessments of area were made upon the ceiling, out of convenience, and by tilting back the plywood partitions the rated area of a cubicle could be either increased, for the benefit of a prospective tenant...or decreased temporarily on the visits of the housing inspectors. Ceilings were criss-crossed with pencil marks staking out the rival claims of tenants on opposite sides of a party wall. Someone timid of his rights could be literally squeezed out of existence. (268)

Of course married couples are given an additional two meters of living space, and a five meter “double” can sometimes be found if one has enough money, but the story is marked by the confinement exemplified by renting out a broom closet. This definition of space in terms of measurement is only heightened when the protagonist of the story finds a hidden room “some fifteen feet square” (274). The room is described in terms of “huge cliffs that soared upward,” and “unconfined emptiness” that—for the characters—symbolize “absolute spatial freedom” (274-5). The dimensions of the room are also less clearly defined as those of their previous living spaces. Even after a few more people

move in and “[s]ome fifteen feet square” becomes limited to an open space of “three or four feet,” the connection between the obsession with area that comes with limited space and overcrowding becomes clear. As each new tenant moves into the new room, the size of the room gets better defined and the “absolute spatial freedom” slowly disappears.

In addition to the importance placed on the physical dimensions of space, Ballard adds the characteristics of physical confinement and a lack of personal space to his aesthetics of overcrowding. One of Ballard’s greatest moves in “Billennium” is the depiction of the mental impact of living within the overcrowded city of the future. Instead of relegating his examination of the city to simple deprivation, he expands the scope of the urban dystopian novel by showing the mental toll exacted by living within the crush of humanity. In one of his most vivid depictions of the fear of limited mobility, the protagonist of the story describes the human traffic jam he was a part of as a sporting event let out at the same time as the line for a new event began (268-9). Ward, the protagonist of the story, describes being trapped in a crush of humanity for over 48 hours as those who found themselves unable to continue were trampled underfoot or simply died where they stood: “An entire square mile of the local neighbourhood had been paralysed, and he vividly remembered the nightmare of swaying helplessly on his feet as the jam shifted and heaved, terrified of losing his balance and being trampled underfoot” (269). Here Ballard captures the horrifying fear that comes with a lack of control over personal space.

The descriptions of the lack of privacy and freedom of movement faced by the characters in the story focus on the positioning and proximity of their physical bodies.

Sidewalks are “packed with a shuffling mob of pedestrians ... wrestling past each other on their way to home and office” (268). Even within the home, movement is severely constricted, with residents “having to force their way through the tenants packed together on every landing, loitering around the notice boards or pushing in from the street below” (270). The “ceaseless press of people” takes its toll on the psyches of the characters in the story and stresses that unchecked urban growth necessarily means a further constriction of personal space.

The limitations placed on physical movement and the stress produced from a lack of personal space that are found in “Billennium” are recreated in John Hersey’s novel, *My Petition for More Space*. In *My Petition for More Space*, residents of the future city are given slightly more room than those in Ballard’s story, but the controls enacted by the state are far more intrusive. In Hersey’s novel, the state controls not only the size of a person’s living space, but also the use of water, the time spent eating, the time spent in the shower, and even the time spent on the toilet. The state has also instituted an eligibility test for those wishing to procreate. Incentives are given to those willing to hold off on the creation of a family, even as larger living spaces are given to those who are married or with child. As in “Billennium,” in *My Petition for More Space*, the city’s residents spend most of their time in lines or making decisions about which line to become a part of. In fact, the majority of the novel takes place within the confines of a line.

As the novel’s protagonist, Sam, waits in line to petition the state for an additional one square foot of living space, he spends hours in a row four persons wide and several

hundred persons deep. The line-mates in Hersey's novel are crushed together, moving inch by inch to the government office that will eventually hear their requests. The line is so ubiquitous in Hersey's novel that the state has created a series of rules to ensure that even the accidental arousal of anyone standing in line or the overzealous embrace of the person standing directly behind you is a serious crime: "*It is strictly forbidden for any person, while in accidental or formal proximity with any other person, in waitlines, assemblies, or close passage, to show, offer, signal, or otherwise manifest...*" (5 emphasis and ellipsis in original). Throughout the novel, Hersey creates an entire society based on the daily interactions between people who meet only through the accidental positioning in a line. In this city, social relations and formations are created and caused not by any natural or cultural affinity, but by causal proximity within the line. Romantic relationships are difficult to establish and maintain as the line is the only convenient meeting place and the line is only temporary.

The disquieting press of human bodies that the protagonist of the novel faces while waiting in line is repeatedly stressed in the first person narration of the novel. Sam gives descriptions of crowded living spaces and hallways, but the horrifyingly claustrophobic descriptions of his immobility are what the reader will remember most. Sam makes sense of his world and his surroundings in terms of physical proximity:

I am uncomfortable.... Besides, the girl is not one of the four touching the circuitry printer; the girl is on ahead and to the right of the grandmother. She touches me, and I touch the grandmother, but they do not touch each other. I do not want to be rung in on this second level of touchers. I do not, for example, want to make the acquaintance of the person in front of the grandmother ... he touches her, she touches me; he touches the girl, she touches me. (14)

Names aren't used in his descriptions; they are replaced by terms such as "toucher" or "toucher of my toucher," but this emphasis on physical connection is neither positive nor reassuring. By reducing the identity of others to their immediate proximity, the protagonist is simply creating a way to feel some sense of control. When a character such as the "grandmother" mentioned above violates his rules of personal contact by speaking with someone she is not directly touching, Sam becomes noticeably upset. The conditions of overcrowding and the necessity of sharing space have created the need for a worldview that simultaneously encourages reaching out to those physically touching you and violently rejecting those who do not. Sam clarifies this worldview late in the novel when he states:

With my generation, on which proximity forced early visual intimacies, something strange happened: The eyes hardened. One who too often handles hard things gets calluses on his hands; many of us who too often saw sweet things got scales on our eyes. And with the dulling of sight came a deadening of feeling, both in the fingertips and in the soul. (98)

In *My Petition for More Space*, overcrowding becomes marked by both the overwhelming crush of humanity and the almost complete dissolution of the boundaries between private and public space.

Perhaps the most terrifying effect of overcrowding in Hersey's novel, however, is the advent of "line madness." Halfway through the novel, as Sam fights off challenges by those thinking that his request for more space will do more harm than good, a young man one space behind and one space to the left of him succumbs to "line madness" (110). Hersey shows the prolonged mental effect of limited personal space and decreased mobility in the form of a sudden, unpredictable attack of insanity evidenced by the man's

instant and constant screaming at the top of his lungs: “Handlebars seems never to take a breath; his scream somehow eternally renews itself. His pain, from being crowded too long, is hideous. His is the blatant, penetrating, awry, monotonous rage of a stuck bus horn” (112). No one can help him, no one can get to him, and the worst part is that Hersey describes “line madness” as communicable. Here, a lack of private space is linked to uncontrollable fear. Throughout the novel, it is fairly obvious that Sam is plagued by paranoia, doubt, and anxiety, and it is passages like the one above that create a conception of overcrowding forever linked to that all-encompassing fear.

In a lecture given by Michel Foucault in March 1967 and only published after his death, Foucault suggests that the organization of space—and a fear of a lack of control of personal space—was the concern of the twentieth century:

In a still more concrete manner, the problem of siting or placement arises for mankind in terms of demography. This problem of the human site or living space is not simply that of knowing whether there will be enough space for men in the world—a problem that is certainly quite important—but also that of knowing what relations of propinquity, what type of storage, circulation, marking, and classification of human elements should be adopted in a given situation in order to achieve a given end. Our epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites.... In any case I believe that the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space. (23)

Foucault links the need to control personal space to our larger need to be able to make sense of spaces—or sites—that we must navigate every day. When we can’t meet either need, or when we find it difficult to negotiate the move between private and public space, we feel terror. Ballard’s and Hersey’s narratives capitalize on this anxiety in order to link these fears to our conception of overcrowding and to our perceptions of urban space.

The works of Ballard and Hersey help to extrapolate the possible aesthetics of urban density found in the cities of the future with chilling proficiency, but they also make a statement about the control and uses of urban space. When Henri Lefebvre defines the term Spatial Practice (how space as created and put into practice by urban planners, city governments, and landowners is used by those who live within it) in *The Production of Space*, he also outlines the attempt by the State to control this process:

[I]n addition to being a means of production [space] is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power.... The social and political (state) forces which engendered this space now seek, but fail, to master it completely; the very agency that has forced spatial reality towards a sort of uncontrollable autonomy now strives to run it into the ground, then shackle and enslave it. (26)

As Lefebvre suggests, the control of urban space—however impossible to completely master—is the key to the control and domination of a populace.

Lefebvre's conceptions of the control of urban space and the limited opportunity for workers and inhabitants to share this control are seen in Ballard's use of the Housing Authority and Hersey's use of the state as those agencies responsible for controlling and maintaining a deprivation of mobility and a lack of personal space. The characters in these works are not responsible for the oppressive regulations that have been put into place in order to manage overpopulation, and—as Sam's denied petition in Hersey's novel suggests—they have no power over their establishment or enforcement. This repressive state control of both private and public space allows for very little individual control of space. The urban dystopias focused on overcrowding, then, also direct attention to the constant struggle to control where and how we live.

Overcrowding and Residential Differentiation

Although Ballard and Hersey create an initial exploration of the links between capital and the conscious manipulation of urban space, there are a number of works from the 1960s and 1970s that further the use of overpopulation fears to make clear the connections between class, social status, and housing opportunities. John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968) and Harry Harrison's *Make Room! Make Room!* (1966) use the threat of overpopulation in the future to point out the urban poverty and decreased mobility chances faced by those living in the very real metropolises of the '60s and '70s.

Harrison and Brunner's choice to use novels of overpopulation to highlight the class divide present in residential segmentation is supported by the history of urban sociologists, geographers, and urban planners who have also chosen to focus their examinations of America's largest cities in terms of class, race, and mobility chances. In its work in the 1920s and beyond, the Chicago School of urban sociology suggested that, by examining empirical data taken from those working in and observing urban areas,⁹ it could be determined that environmental factors such as location, education opportunities, and population density played the strongest roles in the formation of residential segregation in the urban center. E.W. Burgess, in his concentric zone model of residential differentiation, suggested that the modern metropolis could be described as existing in a series of discrete zones that were determined by land use and land value ("The Growth of

⁹ Burgess's almost religious belief in the superiority of quantitative research can be seen in his use of telephone records to map social mobility (60-61).

the City: An Introduction to a Research Project” 47-62).¹⁰ In the center of this concentric set of rings lay the industrial center of the city or “The Loop” (50). Surrounding this zone of intense industrial concentration lay the “Zone in Transition,” an area comprised of both businesses and housing for the working poor (50). Beyond the “Zone in Transition” Burgess found a “Zone of Workingmen’s Homes” where second generation immigrants and “workers in industries who have escaped from the area of deterioration” might be found (50). Further still, Burgess identified a “Residential Zone” of “high-class apartment buildings or of ‘restricted’ districts of single family dwellings” and a “Commuters’ Zone” of suburban living spaces for those wealthy enough to escape the realities of the city (50). While the organizational model Burgess identified very closely described the realities of residential patterns in Chicago, the causes he found for this segregation were far more problematic.

Burgess suggested that any major urban area developed naturally and that urban growth could be seen “as a resultant of organization and disorganization analogous to the anabolic and katabolic processes of metabolism in the body” (53). What this meant for Burgess was that each new wave of immigration to the city would naturally find a home within the Zone of Transition and that eventually—after a generation lost to the acclimation to city life—those immigrants would pass on to ever better living areas. Within this system, the squalid living conditions of the working poor could be blamed on the poor themselves and on their failure to adjust to life in the big city. Even while praising the regenerative qualities of the slum, Burgess was careful to highlight the racial

¹⁰ Useful summaries of Burgess’s work and the formation of the Chicago School of urban sociology can be found in Edward Soja’s *Postmetropolis* and David Harvey’s *Social Justice and the City*.

or ethnic qualities of these areas of the city describing “the Latin Quarter, where creative and rebellious spirits resort,” and “the Black Belt, with its free and disorderly life” (56). He also suggested that employment for immigrants to the city was determined more by “racial temperament or circumstance than by old-world economic background” suggesting that “Irish policemen, Greek ice-cream parlors, Chinese laundries, Negro porters, [and] Belgian janitors” were only natural (57). While Burgess admitted that “[i]n the expansion of the city a process of distribution takes place which sifts and sorts and relocates individuals and groups by residence and occupation,” he failed to identify who or what controlled that process, preferring instead to see mobility patterns within the city as naturally occurring (54).

What was missing from the Chicago school models of urban development, however, was a connection between housing opportunities and economic class divisions. In the 1960s and ‘70s, Marxist geographers and urban theorists such as Manuel Castells and David Harvey began to suggest that environmental factors alone were not sufficient to describe and define the formation and use of urban space. David Harvey’s work, *Social Justice and the City* (1973), began to outline what Harvey saw as a revolutionary restructuring of geographic thought. Using Friedrich Engels’s study of Manchester in *The Condition of the English Working Class in England* (1845) as his starting point, Harvey explained that access to transportation and to employment required the poorest members of society to live in the center of the city, but because of a market that used competitive bidding to determine the use of urban land, land rents are always higher in the city’s core (*Social Justice and the City* 134-5). Because land rents are higher, the working poor are

forced to live in smaller spaces, surrounded by larger groups of people. As Harvey suggests: “The logic of the model indicates that poor groups will be concentrated in high rent areas close to the city centre in over-crowded conditions” (*Social Justice and the City* 135). In *The Urban Experience* (2010),¹¹ Harvey further outlines the ways in which the production of capital determines residential segmentation, mobility chances, and the conscious replication of housing and land use by capital in the hopes of furthering surplus value and undermining the possibility of proletarian revolt. Harvey shows that rather than having some semblance of choice when determining housing location, the production of capital—in particular the control of mortgage rates, land values, and borrowing possibilities by bankers and landowners—presents a very limited choice in where to live (*The Urban Experience* 121-2). This limited choice in turn creates a self-perpetuating cycle of residential differentiation. Those with limited housing choices pass these limitations down generation by generation. As Harvey suggests: “a white-collar labor force is reproduced in a white-collar neighborhood, a blue-collar labor force is reproduced in a blue-collar neighborhood, and so on” (118). As part of this system, Harvey also suggests that the workers of the lower class are those least able to afford transportation costs, living expenses, and even food—as “[r]esidential differentiation in the capitalist city means differential access to the scarce resources required to acquire market capacity” (*The Urban Experience* 118-120). The “differential access” to food, transportation, and shelter faced by lower income urban dwellers was chosen by those

¹¹ Harvey’s *The Urban Experience* is an abridged and modified version of *The Urbanization of Capital* (1985) and *Consciousness and the Urban Experience* (1985). The chapter I make use of here “Class Structure and the Theory of Residential Differentiation” is taken in part from *Process in Physical and Human Geography: Bristol Essays* (1975) eds. Robert Peel, Michael Chisholm, and Peter Haggett.

urban dystopianists working in the 1960s and '70s as the most effective and graphic way to convince their readers of the need for change in our urban centers.

In the work of those writing population novels in the '60s and '70s, the problematics of class and racial formation in urban centers were grafted onto the growing concerns about the population explosion and growing population density seen by demographers and urban theorists. These authors used the conception of a future city bursting to the seams with humanity to highlight the distance between the upper and lower classes already felt. In *Stand on Zanzibar*—a novel ostensibly about the possibility of Earth's population growing large enough to fill the island of Zanzibar end to end by the year 2010—John Brunner shows the unwillingness and the inability of those able to rise above street level to see the effects of poverty and limited housing choice in the population below.

Stand on Zanzibar is the first of a trilogy of novels including *The Sheep Look Up* (1972) and *The Shockwave Rider* (1975) that create the picture of a dystopian future Earth facing overpopulation, environmental collapse, and manipulation through the control of personal information. The title, *Stand on Zanzibar*, refers to Richard Whiteing's 1907 novel, *All Moonshine*, which suggested that, at that time, the world's population would fit shoulder to shoulder on England's Isle of Wight. Whiteing's novel was intended to poke fun at the Malthusian warning of overpopulation circulating at the time, but in 1907 the world's population stood at only 1.7 billion. By the time Brunner wrote *Zanzibar*, the world's 3.6 Billion people would need to move to the larger Island of Man. *Stand on Zanzibar*'s premise is that by 2010 the world's population would rise to 7

billion people, a population large enough to create housing and food shortages, birth restrictions, and a drastically changed way of life for most of the world; a population that would also need to move to the African island of Zanzibar to meet Whiteing's challenge. *Stand on Zanzibar* is written in the same style as all three of Brunner's best novels, a style influenced by John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930-36). Dos Passos organized his three novels into four narrative modes: fictional narratives detailing the lives of twelve characters; "Newsreel" chapters containing newspaper headlines and snippets of newspaper articles; "The Camera Eye" chapters presenting stream-of-consciousness-styled, semi-autobiographical stories from the author's life; and, chapters presenting biographies of political figures. Through the use of these four distinct narrative modes, Dos Passos used historical, political, and personal context to provide a more complete understanding of the economic and social divide found in the United States and Europe in the period before, during, and after World War One. Brunner similarly structures the 119 chapters of his novel into four separate narrative rubrics: "Continuity" chapters focused on the linear narratives of the novel's main characters; "Context" chapters focused on imaginary newspaper headlines, paragraphs from a pop psychologist character's series of books, and real news stories from various British newspapers published at the time the novel was being written; "The Happening World" chapters focused on presenting a collage of descriptions meant to capture the background noise of the novel's world; and, "Tracking with Closeups" chapters—similar to Dos Passos's "Camera" sections—focused on the lives of ancillary characters. Collectively, these chapters present a multi-perspectival story of life on Earth in the year 2010. There are literally hundreds of minor

characters, but the novel centers on Donald Hogan, a paid information synthesist for the US government, and Norman Niblock House, an African-American vice-president of General Technics, the largest corporation on Earth. Brunner's main characters are affluent enough to be seemingly removed from the food privation, overcrowding, and lack of opportunity of the economically disadvantaged, but throughout the course of the novel, both men are forced to confront the fact that their positions in society are in sharp contrast to those of the majority of people around the world. Brunner uses House and Hogan's rude awakening to reality and an array of news reports, television commercials, first-hand accounts, and flashes of the lives of secondary characters in order to present the economic disparity faced by the majority of the world's inhabitants in the year 2010.

Although few of the chapters deal directly with overpopulation, the reader can eventually see that every concern raised in the novel is a product of the strain created by too many people. The main consequence of overpopulation in the novel is a eugenics program for limited birth that the United States and most of the world has adopted as a way of tackling the problem. Here, Brunner takes the most dire response that Ehrlich could conceive of and makes it the main strategy to combat population growth in the future. In the novel, potential parents are subjected to strict genetic screening to determine possible defects such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and even color-blindness, as a way of limiting those allowed to procreate. Parents who have been denied permission must rely on over-priced "baby-brokers" or must move to heavily militarized, unrestricted free-zones such as Nevada and South America where birth rates aren't regulated. In one of the main plot threads, the island nation of Yatakang (perhaps an

allusion to Indonesia), which has been at war with the US for several years, announces to the world that its chief scientist has found an affordable way to create genetic super-humans in-vitro in order to insure an equal chance for procreation for its citizens and a way to guarantee a future free from genetic defect. This announcement (although later proven false) leads to riots throughout the world and dramatizes the problems that could come from eugenic legislation.

Although the main characters of the novel are often removed from the effects of overpopulation, the ancillary characters and alternate modes of narration show that Brunner's New York is just as overcrowded as any of the works mentioned in this chapter. Donald and Norman share an apartment, and it's only when Donald wanders outside of his upper-class neighborhood and into a riot that he's able to see just how far his world lies from the world outside. Homelessness and panhandling in the novel are both regulated by the state as a way to limit immigration, and those least able to support themselves are forced to undergo mandatory sterilization. A lack of natural resources sparks both several small wars and numerous alliances that serve to further consolidate wealth and power. And a seemingly endless war between the US and Yatakang is seen by some characters as an artificial means of keeping the death rate rising. However, it's when Brunner steps beyond surface-level descriptions of population control that the novel really gets interesting.

Aside from highlighting the more obvious effects of a population explosion, Brunner's novel is able to show the numerous social and cultural practices that might evolve out of an active pursuit of population limitation. In a move that must have been

influenced by the sexual liberation movements of the 60s, Brunner describes a culture where “codders” (upwardly mobile male professionals akin to Yuppies) experience a series of no-strings-attached sexual relationships with “shiggies” (women seemingly okay with being passed around from man to man for sexual purposes) that are not only accepted, but encouraged. The novel also shows communal child-rearing as a way for childless couples to experience the effect of raising a child. Soporifics such as marijuana and “Yaginol” are legal and distributed widely as a way of discouraging depression. Popular television personalities “Mr. and Mrs. Everywhere” provide the experience of seeing the world without the characters having to leave their homes. *Stand on Zanzibar* shows not only the effects of population moderation, but also the concerted political and corporate effort it would take to pacify a world forced to face these changes. As an advertisement in the novel states: “WHEN THE PRESSURE GETS TO THE BLOWOFF POINT YOU’LL BE GRATEFUL FOR GT’S [General Technics’] KEYS TO EASIER LIVING. TRANKS, PROPHYLACTICS, ARE ONLY THE START OF THE STORY. OUR AIDS TO NORMAL FEMALE BIOLOGICAL FUNCTIONING ARE APPROVED BY ALL STATE CODES” (56). Brunner was able to see beyond the immediate consequences of careless breeding to show what might happen if the world did not heed Ehrlich’s warning. Ehrlich described the steps needed to decrease world populations as “painful,” and he equated the population explosion to a “cancer” that needed to be “cut out” (152). *Stand on Zanzibar* shows just how painful, and how all-encompassing that operation might be if his readers waited too long.¹²

¹² Brunner’s novel is not alone in suggesting that drastic methods might be needed to address

Stand on Zanzibar also works to illustrate the realities of residential segmentation and the lack of mobility chances faced by the poor in a world already burdened by overcrowding. In fact, the turning point of the novel for both protagonists comes as they are caught up in a riot caused by the insensitivity of a single policeman. At one point in the novel, as Donald Hogan slowly walks farther and farther away from his affluent home, he suddenly finds himself surrounded by a neighborhood both unfamiliar and hostile. Even though the inhabitants of the row houses and boarded-up buildings are not confronting him, Hogan tightens his hand around a pistol. Soon, however, his feelings of fear are replaced by indignation as he realizes how different the living conditions are for those who live outside of the 2 or 3 block radius of his home.¹³ Hogan's descriptions of a future New York read like a simplified version of any urban theorist's description of the cyclical patterns of urban decay and renewal found in any major metropolitan city:

By the street signs he had reached the lower East Side, an area presently at the bottom of the cycle of death and renewal that sometimes made the city seem like an organism. At the end of last century there had been a brief moment of glory here; decade by decade the would-be connectors had followed the intellectuals and the pseudos eastwards from the Village into the ruined area close to the river, until by 1990 or so this had been a high-price zone. But the wheel turned further, and the bored and prosperous moved out. Now the grace of the elegant buildings was crumbling again under a bright masking of advertisements.... Across the display slanted the unrelated diagonals of fire-escapes, spotted with piles of garbage like forest fungi. (149-50)

future overcrowding; Thomas Disch's novel *334* also suggests sterilization as a future tool to limit population growth. Frederik Pohl's "The Census Takers," Alice Glaser's "The Tunnel Ahead," and Theodore R. Cogswell's "Consumer's Report" all suggest a possible future need for government sponsored euthanasia in order to limit surplus population.

¹³ Donald Hogan also finds the population living in this area to be predominantly African American: "The yonderboy was Afram and so was the minister. The proportion of Aframs in view was five or six times higher than in the day" (147). The wording of Hogan's observation seems to point not just to a seeming disparity in the relative population size of African Americans in this part of the city but also to the white, urban stereotype of urban minority residents coming out only at night.

Hogan's indignation is soon amplified as he watches a law enforcement officer push a young woman down when she refuses to back away from his vehicle. At first Hogan attempts to help the woman, but as the streets fill with people and a riot begins, he finds himself manhandled by a stranger, and he turns and fires his weapon. Eventually captured by a police net, Hogan falls into an almost catatonic shock as it dawns on him that there does exist a world outside of his sheltered existence (146-155, 166-171).

The revelations that Hogan and House, who is also caught up in the riot, find after witnessing the violent clash on the streets are only one way Brunner shows the gap that exists between the different classes in the novel. Throughout the "Tracking with Closeups" chapters, ancillary characters are shown to bear the brunt of the burden placed on the world due to overpopulation. The poorest characters are unable to rig the system so that they can have children, evade being drafted into the military, find adequate housing or food, or escape the violence found in the overcrowded city. In one narrative thread featuring the ancillary character Gerry Lindt, Lindt chooses not to ignore his recent draft notice, chooses not to follow the example of a friend who chose drug addiction over military service, gets sent to the front line of an active war zone, and is unceremoniously decapitated by an enemy tripwire (135-45, 545-7). Lindt's experiences are contrasted with those of the son of a wealthy urbanite who has no problem ensuring that her Philip does not have to serve his country (176-8). These short chapters—along with the numerous snippets of dialogue, newsprint, and television broadcasts found in the "Happening World" sections—highlight the hardships the working poor are forced to endure as a result of being forced to live in a world that favors the wealthy. The riot that

House and Hogan find themselves in—the outburst of violence in the streets that comes from a frustrated public—is suggested by Brunner as the only sane response to an insane world.

The convergence of the working class in the form of a riot-as-organized-protest is also used in Harry Harrison’s novel, *Make Room! Make Room!* In Harrison’s novel, New York is pushed to the limit of its resources as the city finds itself unable to provide for the millions now inhabiting its borders. Food and water are strictly rationed by city authorities, and electricity has become available only as a luxury item. Those able to afford it can visit local “meat-easys”—criminal operations offering real meat from questionable sources—but the majority of the city’s residents must make due with dreary packets of soybean-infused crackers as their sole form of sustenance. As protagonist Andy Rusch, a police detective often forced to join a city beat due to budget constraints, makes his way through the streets of New York City, the novel makes it obvious that deprivation will always be felt hardest by those least able to escape it.

It is no coincidence that Paul Ehrlich wrote the introduction to the paperback edition of *Make Room! Make Room!*.¹⁴ Harrison’s novel stands as one of the starkest depictions of the effects of overpopulation and overcrowding of the 1960s and is certainly more effective than any of Ehrlich’s scenarios at convincing the reader of the need for action. *Make Room! Make Room!* is set in a New York City right on the cusp of a new century in the year 1999. Harrison uses Rusch; Solomon Khan, his roommate; and

¹⁴ In his introduction to the novel Ehrlich writes: “*Make Room! Make Room!* presents a gripping scenario of where current trends may be leading. Such scenarios are important tools in helping us to think about the future, and in bringing home to people the possible consequences of our collective behaviour. When such a serious goal can be achieved through an engrossing, work of fiction we are doubly rewarded. Thank you, Harry Harrison” (iv).

Billy Chung, the son of Taiwanese refugees, to show the many facets of poverty in the overpopulated city. As Rusch moves through the city in his capacity as a police officer, readers are exposed to food riots, protests by the elderly, and the general inability of the city's public services to function. Khan provides the reader with additional context, often filling Rusch in on political actions taking place in the city and reminding Rusch of better days. But the majority of the novel is concerned with the aftermath of Chung's murder of a high-ranking syndicate member during a robbery attempt. Chung eventually becomes the target of Rusch's police investigation and throughout the novel Rusch has to navigate the complex world of the syndicate and the city's underground in order to eventually find Chung.

But the plot of the novel is almost inconsequential. Harrison's purpose is to use the experiences of Rusch, Khan, and Chung to give the reader an impression of what life might be like in the overcrowded world of the future. Like many of the naturalist novels of the turn of the century, Harrison's work foregoes compelling characters and intricate plot twists in the service of his message. And Harrison's message here is simple: if the world's population continues to increase, life for those living in cities will become a hell-on-Earth. Harrison's New Yorkers face food distributed by ration, water lines and lack of sanitation, single-room apartments sublet to families of seven or more, and a scarcity of goods for even the most affluent citizens. The combination of overcrowding, privation, and ineffectual government remedies lead to several scenes of violence in the novel that further the sense of unending desperation.

As a policeman, Rusch should be guaranteed at least a middle-class existence, but in Harrison's novel, the idea of a middle class has disappeared in the service of further separating the wealthiest citizens from the rest of the city's population. The squalor of Rusch and Khan's neighborhood is described in detail as Rusch makes his way to a water rationing station:

After the damp hallway the heat of Twenty-fifth Street hit him in a musty wave, a stifling miasma compounded of decay, dirt and unwashed humanity. He had to make his way through the women who already filled the steps of the building, walking carefully so that he didn't step on the children who were playing below. The sidewalk was still in shadow but so jammed with people that he walked in the street, well away from the curb to avoid the rubbish and litter banked high there.
(20)

And there is no hope that Rusch and his roommate might somehow find any opportunity for a better life. In Harrison's novel, there no longer exists any possible mechanism for escaping the ever-increasing crush of poverty brought on by overpopulation. In fact, almost every aspect of the characters' lives gets progressively worse as the novel moves forward.

The point where *Make Room! Make Room!* becomes more than simply a grim prediction of the future is when Khan expresses his outrage at the government's failure to pass an emergency bill to deal with overpopulation. In the novel, the emergency bill—which would legalize family planning clinics and would make birth control information mandatory to all mothers—faces opposition from outraged Christian conservatives claiming that birth control equals child-murder. An angered Khan explains to Rusch's girlfriend: "You know well enough that birth control has nothing to do with killing babies. In fact it saves them. Which is the bigger crime—letting kids die of disease and

starvation or seeing that the unwanted ones don't get born in the first place?" (221-222).

In words echoing Ehrlich's, Khan simplifies the cause for and the solution to the problem:

I'll tell you what changed.... Modern medicine arrived.... Death control arrived.... People are still being fed into the world just as fast—they're just not being taken out at the same rate. Three are born for every two that die.... We got a plague of people, a disease of people infesting the world.... We got death control—we got to match it with birth control. (223)

Khan serves as the Ehrlich figure in the novel, and his words are the clearest evidence of what Harrison saw as both the problem of overpopulation and the solution to its burden.

This is the message he wants the reader to take away. As the 1970s came to a close, initial fears of a population explosion began to recede against a backlash from critics suggesting that demographers and social scientists such as Ehrlich and Davis were pushing for a subtle form of eugenic legislation.¹⁵ Science fiction authors and social scientists began to move away from any strict condemnation of population numbers towards a criticism of humanity's effect on the environment.¹⁶ Novels such as those in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Three Californias* (1984-90) and *Mars* (1993-96) trilogies are focused on the depletion of the Earth's resources, the destruction of forests and oceans, and the continued positioning of human beings at the apex of a speciesist evolutionary ladder. But the authors writing about overpopulation in the 1960s and 1970s were able to connect the work of demographers and the fears of a population explosion with an aesthetics of overcrowding that emphasized an existing and growing gap separating the

¹⁵ For more on the criticism of overpopulation fears, see Meek.

¹⁶ See Heise, 1-29 for a fairly complete summary of the trajectory of overpopulation fiction from the 1960s to the 1990s.

lives of the wealthy from those of the urban poor. These works helped to shape the urban imaginary so that readers would see overcrowding not simply as the predictable or preferred living conditions of the working class, but as a systematic attempt by property owners to ensure the decreased ability of renters to find a better way of life. As urban dystopianists moved into the 1970s, however, and as they began to move away from concerns about overpopulation, they would return to a focus on the growing distance felt between the working and middle class residents in the city by responding to the massive increase in urban crime facing major metropolitan areas throughout the decade. In the next chapter I analyze those texts that decided to use urban violence to either demonize the working poor or to suggest that audiences should instead pity those most likely to be the victims of an almost endemic increase in urban violence.

Chapter 2

The Violent City

Introduction

Between 1971 and 1980, crime rates in the United States increased over 40%, with violent crimes rising from occurring to roughly 396 people out of every 100,000 in 1971 to occurring to 581 out of every 100,000 in 1980 (US Department of Justice 41). By the late '60s, television and film in the US began to react to growing crime rates by increasingly depicting America's urban centers as lawless no-go zones, synonymous with violence and crime. In the early 1970s, a number of American films also began to show the influence of what Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner have referred to as a "counterrevolution" against the liberal values of the civil rights era. These films mirrored the conservative ideology that echoed throughout the Nixon and Reagan presidencies, and often ignored the realities of urban crime to focus on over-determined images of white, middle-class urban victims being menaced by black, working class thugs.

Although the 1960s brought a number of films that responded positively to the social movements of the decade and that sought to promote a critique of American institutions and values, the early 1970s brought a growing conservative backlash focused on positioning racial minorities and newly-empowered feminists as threats to the city, strengthening the weakened forces of patriarchy and demonizing the Keynesian fiscal policies that had sought to promote economic parity among urban dwellers. As Ryan and Kellner suggest, the ethos of these films resembled the counterrevolutionary fervor espoused by the Nixon government, and as the administration began to mobilize

“conservative sentiments against young radicals, minorities, and feminists in the 1972 election” by tarring George McGovern with “the three A’s—abortion, acid, and amnesty for draft resisters,” suddenly a “meaner, more cynical discourse began to emerge as the dominant mode of Hollywood film” (39). Peter Lev suggests: “These films feature a lot of action, a lot of anger, and a studied indifference to the rights of minority groups and other social outcasts” (xviii). The conservative films of the 1970s positioned the city as a wild zone menaced by working-class, minority drifters, drug-crazed ex-hippies, and the loose morality of sexually liberated young women. Matching the rhetoric of the conservative social theorists of the times, these films sought to warn the viewer of the menace posed by a recently empowered urban proletariat who wanted nothing less than the destruction of the traditional middle-class family.

This chapter analyzes the image of the city of menace as propagated by the urban dystopias¹⁷ of the mid-to-late seventies and early eighties. In an era when conservative films such as Don Siegel’s *Dirty Harry* (1971) and Michael Winner’s *Death Wish* (1974), solidified the image of the city as an epicenter of heedless violence, it’s important to analyze the specific ways in which these films helped to wed an image of urban violence to an ever-evolving urban imaginary and to analyze what this image signified to viewers. This chapter examines the ways conservative films of urban violence mimicked the conservative rhetoric of racialized crime and the pitfalls of government aid that dominated the political landscape of the ‘70s and ‘80s. This chapter also explores the places where a handful of filmmakers attempted to co-opt the image of

¹⁷ While some might argue that the films I analyze in this chapter aren’t exactly dystopian, the extreme images of violence they present, their myopic focus on urban crime, and their often didactic warnings of middle-class instability fit my expanded definition of the term.

the violent city to highlight the lives of the urban poor—those often the victims of so-called “urban violence.” In Abel Ferrara’s early films *The Driller Killer* (1979), *Ms. 45* (1981), and *Fear City* (1984), the controversial 1974 film *Act of Vengeance* (AKA *Rape Squad*), and Gary Sherman’s *Vice Squad* (1982), the victims of urban violence are the urban poor themselves, and by meeting the audience’s already present expectation of violence, these filmmakers were able to use that fascination to focus the audience’s attention on those unable to escape to the suburbs and those city-dwellers for whom daily existence is often a violent act.

This chapter analyzes two specific types of urban dystopias focused on violence: the urban vigilante films typified by Michael Winner’s *Death Wish* (1974), and what I’m calling the Lilith films, films focused on highlighting violence against sex workers or on promoting a stigma against sex work in the city. While the urban vigilante film focuses primarily on the attempts of average city dwellers to exact revenge on those criminals who prey upon their loved ones, the Lilith film focuses mainly on the victims of crimes against urban women working in the sex trade. And although both film subgenres are strongly represented in the more conservative representations of urban violence in the ‘70s and ‘80s, the Lilith film and the urban vigilante film were also used by filmmakers wanting to present a counter-narrative to the strictly negative portrayals of working class urban life.

After an examination of the conservative urban vigilante film *Death Wish*, this chapter analyzes the ways the controversial film *Act of Vengeance* presents a less ideologically distorted portrayal of urban violence and violence against women. Next, I contrast the moralistic approach to female sexuality and sex work presented by Paul

Schrader's film *Hardcore* (1979), with the more nuanced depictions of prostitution and male violence against female sex workers present in *Vice Squad*. Finally, this chapter ends by suggesting filmmaker Abel Ferrara's first three films—*The Driller Killer*, *Ms. 45*, and *Fear City*—move beyond conservative ideology or sexploitation to provide a far more objective vision of both urban violence and violence against women. By focusing my analysis on the depictions of both the perpetrators and the victims of crime in these films, and by introducing historical and sociological analyses of the causes of the urban crime these films represent, my aim is to show that left-leaning depictions of violence in the films of the '70s and '80s—although frequently bordering on exploitation—were far more in line with the urban realities they sought to represent than the inflammatory images that would come to be associated so strongly with the rise of neo-conservatism during the period.

The Urban Vigilante Film

Perhaps the most popular film subgenre to embody the conservative message of Nixon's America was the urban vigilante film. Although films showcasing a vigilante element were nothing new¹⁸, the 1970s saw a spike in films featuring protagonists eager to exact their vengeance on the largely working class citizens they found a threat. In the majority of the conservative urban vigilante films, it is the middle to upper class family

¹⁸ One of the earliest vigilante films might be the 1921 Wallace Worsley film, *The Ace of Hearts* in which Lon Chaney—among others—is part of a vigilante society concerned with meting out justice to those untouched by the law. While vigilante films such as *The Ace of Hearts* are rare in the decades before the '70s, many westerns were focused on the vigilante efforts of a lone hero, and several of these films suggested that official representatives of the law—and more often than not of the encroaching forces of civilization—were unable to stem crime or to conform to a “code of the west.”

that comes under siege, specifically the women in these families. In these films, a man or group of men—usually African American or Latino and clearly coded as working class or lumpenproletarian—beat, murder, or sexually assault the wife, daughter, or sister of the male protagonist. Often feeling as though their own masculinity has been threatened, these family men take up arms against the criminals of the city, sometimes seeking the specific perpetrators of violence against their families, but oftentimes striking out against anyone who, in their view, doesn't belong in their neighborhoods or their city. In these films, the members of the working class and the immigrant populations of the inner city are positioned as enemies to be kept out of the lives of the prosperous middle class by any means possible.

In the 1970 film, *Joe*, Bill Compton, a wealthy ad executive, murders his daughter's drug-dealing boyfriend after the daughter overdoses on methamphetamines. After the shooting, the ad executive meets a factory worker named Joe Curran at a local bar, and the two commiserate over their shared loathing of "hippies." After Joe mentions that he'd like nothing more than to kill a hippie, Bill accidentally lets Joe know of his secret, and the two begin a tenuous friendship. After Bill's daughter overhears her father talking about the murder, she runs away from home, leading an enraged Bill to enlist Joe to try and find her. Bill and Joe find their way into a hippie orgy, but after sharing sex and drugs with the hippies, the two find their wallets have been stolen. After Joe beats one of the women from the orgy, she lets the men know where they can find the thieves. Taking advantage of Joe's gun collection, Joe and Bill drive to a commune in upstate

New York and proceed to kill all of the commune members. However, in a shocking turn of events, the last girl to fall under Compton's gunfire turns out to be his daughter.

Despite the shock at the end of the film, *Joe* was associated with a conservative espousal of extralegal vengeance against anyone who would threaten the middle class family. *Joe* was fairly popular at the box office, and according to Peter Lev, “[i]t appeals to conservative spectators who fear the social difference of the hippies, the blacks, the drug dealers. It also appeals to more moderate spectators who object to disruption and lawlessness from any side” (24). As the first film in the cycle of urban vigilante pictures made throughout the ‘70s and ‘80s, *Joe* set the tone for the films to follow: minorities and the members of the working class (when not white) need to be destroyed in order to protect a firmly monochromatic version of American life. *Joe* was followed by the 1974 film *Death Wish* (discussed below), *Rolling Thunder* (1977), *The Exterminator* (1980) and *Exterminator 2* (1984), *Fighting Back* (1982), *Vigilante* (1983), *Savage Streets* (1984), and several other films, each more-or-less following the same formula of middle class, white revenge against the racial and cultural Others who would threaten their neighborhoods. Although each of these films is interesting enough on its own, the most popular urban vigilante film—and the one most conforming to a conservative message of self-reliance and brutality—is Michael Winner’s *Death Wish*.

Death Wish

In late 1971, after leaving a party hosted in a Hudson River penthouse apartment, author Brian Garfield found that a vandal had slashed the canvass top to his convertible and stolen a few negligible items. Garfield states:

I knew the vandal had done us no real harm.... Yet my first response to the discovery of this mindless violence was swift and stark.... My boundaries had been violated, my property trespassed upon. He had *no right*. 'I'll kill the son of a bitch!' ... It was a trivial incident, but it stands out in my mind because I caught myself in that unguarded moment.... Picture an incensed citizen: *They've got no right. If I had my way, I'd kill every one of the sons of bitches—get 'em off the streets*. What if someone actually did? I made from this a book called *Death Wish*, about a man who enters that moment of rage and never emerges from it. (qtd. in Talbot 1)

Death Wish—and the film it inspired—might be about rage, but as Garfield's comments clearly show, it's a rage focused on the imagined violation of privacy and space felt by middle class city dwellers facing a collapsing urban core. In *Starring New York: Filming the Grime and the Glamour of the Long 1970s*, Stanley Corkin suggests that Winner's *Death Wish*, as well as Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) and to a lesser extent John Schlesinger's *Marathon Man* (1976) can be seen as "alter[ing] the representation and explanation of urban crime from one that asserts the immanence and inevitability of neoliberal principles to that which asserts the efficacy of neoconservatism" (134). Specifically, Corkin argues that the "three [films], in their emphasis on morality, vigilance, and violence take up the neoconservative argument for maintaining order in urban space as a necessary and moral imperative and as a precondition to their gentrification" (135). Corkin ties the neo-con ethos of individual responsibility and moral determinism to the vigilante's desire to maintain and protect a safe space for mostly white

middle class Manhattanites when the state-sponsored police fail. In James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling's "Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety,"—labeled by Corkin as "the most famous neocon treatise on domestic policy" (136)—the authors argue that the proliferation of petty crime and nuisance—vagrancy, public drunkenness and vandalism—is tied to "a breakdown in the moral structure that took place during the 1960s" in their attempt to replace motives stemming from economic inequality with a hazy definition of immorality, thereby vilifying the urban poor (qtd. in Corkin 136). In identifying the shift from a more compassionate understanding of the link between crime and economic need to the belief that all crime stems from corrupt actors, Corkin makes the connection between the conservative position on crime in the city and the conservative message at the heart of *Death Wish*.

Death Wish opens with a handful of scenes of Paul Kersey and his wife Joanna enjoying a trip to Hawaii. The scenes are certainly idyllic, and as several critics have already mentioned, they express a natural or frontier paradise in stark contrast to the scenes of New York to follow, but their duration—under a minute total—and their insistence on framing Paul and his wife alone can also be seen to more specifically contrast the romantic isolation and safety of the islands (and of the heavily controlled/white spaces of Paul's neighborhood and place of employment in the earlier parts of the film) with the inescapable population density, threat of violent crime, and menace of racial and class-based Others found in the later scenes of the city. The first glimpse of New York in the film is a hazy establishing shot of the city menaced by a blood red sky and a bright white rising sun. Despite the initial menace suggested in that

shot, however, the Kerseys' return to New York is marked more by inconvenience than by any actual danger. A shot of traffic in the city cuts to a shot of the Kerseys waiting uncomfortably in the back seat of a cab stuck in traffic, but aerial shots of the city are benign if not reassuring, and when the cab finally pulls up in front of the Kerseys' Upper West Side apartment building in Manhattan, there's hardly anyone on the streets.

The social realities of the city finally intrude on Paul's world the next day as a co-worker tells Kersey that while he was gone there were 36 murders in the city. The co-worker says, "Decent people are going to have to work here and live somewhere else." To which Kersey replies "By 'decent people' you mean people who can afford to live somewhere else." His co-worker then accuses Kersey of being a "bleeding-heart liberal," thereby setting the stage for Kersey's conservative rejection of liberal responses to crime later in the film. This scene also solidifies the positioning of the white, middle class residents of the city—Paul's co-workers—as the perceived victims of urban crime. Despite there being no indication that Paul's co-worker had any connection to these crimes, the audience is asked to assume that these men are living in a city under siege, a city where, at any moment, they might be murdered.

In the next scene, three random hoodlums—all white—wreak havoc on a supermarket patronized by Joanna and her daughter Carol. These are the men who will later attack Joanna and Carol, but in this early scene they appear more ridiculous than threatening. What is more interesting here are the sharp class and race contrasts presented. The three men, followed by a black security guard, are purchasing three cans

of beer and a can of spray-paint.¹⁹ When the three men approach the cash register, they are framed between the security guard and a black cashier. Neither the guard nor the cashier are shown interacting with any of the other customers who are all white, female, and coded upper middle class by their clothing and appearance. Both before and after the black cashier's interaction with the three men, none of the other women in the store are shown passing through her line. And despite the unruly behavior of the three men, none of the other people in the store even glance in their direction. Thus, the framing of this scene creates a liminal space for the cashier, the security guard, and the three youths that identifies a telling separation of race and class in the film's depiction of the city. The clear division between the middle class white shoppers and the cashier of color shows that for the Anglo residents of the city, the often racialized working class is to be either ignored or feared as Others who would threaten the comfortable stability of the white, affluent women of the city.

The three men follow Kersey's wife and daughter back to their apartment, trailing red lines of spray-paint behind them. Posing as the grocery delivery men, the hoodlums are let into the home by the strangely credulous Carol. After the men find only seven dollars in the women's purses and Joanna tells them they have no more money, one of the men—played by Jeff Goldblum in his first film role—beats Joanna while shouting “Goddamn rich cunt! I hate rich cunts!” These lines—straight out of a reactionary conservative fantasy—make it clear that the film is positioning the criminal class of the city as motivated by a vague jealousy felt towards those at the top. Perhaps the viewer is

¹⁹ For more on the connections between graffiti and conservative images of crime, see Corkin 143.

supposed to think the attackers have made a mistake—that the Kerseys really aren't that wealthy, but the fact that they've just returned from a two week vacation in Hawaii and the fact that they're wealthy enough to afford a grocery delivery service serve to dispel any claims to poverty. Goldblum's character proceeds to violently rape the daughter, and when the mother attempts to make it to the phone, she is kicked in the head by one of the other men. To magnify the hopelessness of her attempts to protect her daughter, the film presents Carol's rape from Joanna's point of view, the camera tilting back and forth to simulate her woozy state before focusing on a mid-shot of one of the men spray-painting a red target on Carol's bottom. After cutting to a close-up of Joanna's anguish, the film then cuts to a point of view shot of Goldblum's pants sliding below his knees. Alarmed at Joanna's immobile state, the men flee, and the last shot of the scene is of Carol crawling to the phone.

This scene emphasizes the film's message that women are not only the victims of the worst kind of violent crime but also that they are completely incapable of defending themselves. Unlike the rape-revenge films analyzed below, *Death Wish* reinforces the role of the patriarch as defender of women and underscores the idea that true justice—and vengeance—is a man's game. As Ryan and Kellner state: "The necessity of male public violence is associated with the hyperbolic elevation of the female private sphere as a locus of empathy. An extreme form of fragility, that sphere must be defended" (90-1). The separation of violence and empathy also serves to separate the roles of men and women in the conservative urban vigilante film. These films suggest it is up to the men to protect the women, and that the only possible form of protection is violent action.

After Joanna dies in the hospital and Carol is left in a semi-catatonic state, Paul responds with anger, but he also decides to take his boss up on an offer to transfer temporarily to Tucson, Arizona in order to oversee a new subdivision being built. After flying to Arizona, Kersey meets with the property developer Ames, who takes Kersey to a mock-western gunfight and to a shooting range. Despite the developer's cringing response to the sight of the old-west façade, he consistently champions a stereotypical view of life in conservative western America, constantly carping on living conditions in New York and repeating the well-worn stories of the freedom of the frontier. At first Kersey resists Ames's charm, but eventually Paul seems to fall under the spell of the west, allowing the mythology to shape his response to the attack on his family. Kersey returns to New York armed, and—exasperated by the inability of the police to find his wife's killer and emboldened by a fictional wild-west take on masculinity—takes the law into his own hands.

Connecting Kersey's efforts to the frontier mythos of the old west aligns Kersey with the lone gunman, willing to take justice into his own hands in order to rid the city's streets of evil (see *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, etc.). Corkin argues—with good reason—that in the case of *Death Wish*, the act of ridding the streets of evil is, in effect, preparing Manhattan for the gentrification that would come in the 1970s and '80s. Corkin states:

But the resonant action and the elaboration of the frontier metaphor has its basis in Manhattan. And, indeed, to employ such a metaphor aligns these films with the very language of gentrification as it took place in the 1970s and 1980s...[T]he aggregated result of these films is a kind of symbolic violence that stands as a warning to all who would visit class resentment on those who prosper and transform central Manhattan. (140)

Death Wish and the urban vigilante films of New York in the 1970s and 1980s present males of privilege taking the law into their own hands in order to not only avenge any wrong committed to members of their family but also protect and enable the gentrification that will help cement their privileged status permanently.²⁰

Each of Paul's victims is marked in their physical appearances by either racial or class differences—or both—as though crime in the city is committed solely by black men and lower-class whites, all career criminals.²¹ And as the film moves forward, Paul moves towards an increasingly conservative viewpoint of both the perpetrators and the appropriate response to urban crime. This move is evidenced by Paul's suggestion to his son-in-law that the choice to move away from the city should be seen as a defeatist move to “cut and run” and that perhaps if “the police don't defend us, maybe we ought to do it ourselves.” Paul asks: “If we're not pioneers, then what have we become? What do you call people who—when they're faced with a condition of fear—don't do anything about it, they just run and hide?” The son answers, “Civilized?” To which Paul responds, “No.”

Paul's response to the threat he perceives in the city is both unambiguous and final. As he murders each of his victims—often after deliberately placing himself in danger—he finds nothing but a grim satisfaction. The racial and class-based segregation

²⁰ For more on the gentrification of New York in the 1970s and '80s, see chapter 5.

²¹ This last point is emphasized through comments made by the police about the first victim's recent incarceration and drug use and through a news reporter's comments that the two black men whom Kersey kills both “had long criminal records.” In both instances, the addition of the victims' criminal history is awkwardly placed at the end of their identification, as if to suggest to any viewers who might feel sympathy towards Kersey's victims that the men were unredeemable or that they deserved death. This acceptance of capital punishment coincides with an upswing of support for reinstating the Death Penalty that occurred during the seventies.

initially seen in the treatment of the black cashier is reproduced in Kersey's treatment of his victims. As Ryan and Kellner point out, Kersey's attitude is one of "ironic cynicism, a pose which demeans others and situates them as distanced subjects. A deflationary stance, it hyperbolically reduces the value of others, transforming them into targets of literal violence" (91). Paul believes his victims exist only as criminals worthy of destruction, and if those criminals happen to be poor, black, or working-class, Winner seems to suggest those qualities are only incidental to their designation as criminal. In a scene that serves as a prime example of this ethos, after one character at a party complains that most of Paul's victims are black, a conservative woman suggests that maybe criminals should institute a system of affirmative action "so that we'll have racial equality among muggers" (Ryan and Kellner 91). Kersey never speaks to his victims, never tries to reason with them, and never tries to understand the motivations behind crime in the city. This attitude is reinforced by the composition of the camera shots covering Paul's murders. Winner almost never places Paul in the same shot as his victims, leading Ryan and Kellner to suggest "The literal distance marked by the editing, is itself a correlate of the objectifying, demeaning attitude that is the public rhetoric of conservative sociality" (91). This choice of framing also allows viewers to more easily put themselves in Paul's shoes, to feel as though they are the ones pulling the trigger.

As mentioned above, the conservative approach to urban crime and to the growing degradation of the urban core began with Nixon's assertion that liberal attempts to provide more opportunities to a racially segregated labor force or to alleviate urban poverty had failed and that what the city really needed was a strengthened police force. In

a speech given in 1968, Nixon stated “The truth is, we will reduce crime and violence when we enforce our laws, and when we make it less profitable, and a lot more risky, to break them” (qtd. in Macek 56). The first part of the conservative strategy was to stress punitive police action as the only solution to urban crime, discrediting the more liberal urban policies of the ‘60s by suggesting they were too lenient. The second part of that strategy was to blame urban crime on a small cadre of morally irredeemable minorities and members of the working class. This strategy was elucidated by a new group of neoconservative urban theorists, social scientists, and so-called experts on poverty who saw the violence of the city caused not by economic disparity or racism but by a lack of morality and middle-class (white) values among the working class.

In Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s controversial 1965 report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, Moynihan argued that an increase in black single-family households and an increase of black children born out of wedlock was “the principal source of most aberrant, inadequate or anti-social behavior, that did not establish but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation” (qtd. in Macek 60). Although Moynihan readily admitted the role that slavery had played in altering the black family structure, he ignored “the powerful influence of private, extralegal, and informal white racism over the life chances of African Americans of all occupations and income levels” (Macek 61). Instead, what Moynihan’s report did was perpetuate the idea of a “culture of poverty²²,” the idea that certain members of the urban community were doomed to fail

²² The term “culture of poverty” was first used in anthropologist Carl Lewis’s *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies and the Culture of Poverty*, and over the next few years, Lewis expanded his definition of the term in other books and a chapter for an anthology of writings on the city edited by Moynihan.

from birth and that their failure rested on a lack of moral and social skills that was endemic in the inner-city. These ideas were expanded by Edward Banfield's 1968 work *The Unheavenly City*, which suggested that "insofar as the nation's cities were beset by crime, poverty, riots, and blight, these problems could be traced in large part to the existence of an incorrigibly pathological lower class whom he defined as essentially beyond help" (qtd. in Macek 61). Banfield moved beyond Moynihan's establishing a persistent culture of poverty to suggest that the criminal poor of the inner-city actually relished being criminals and that there was little to nothing government agencies could do to solve the problem.²³ The reasoning behind Banfield's can easily be traced back to a number of common racist observations levied towards the urban poor, but his work would help strengthen the conservative turn towards seeing the inner-city and its inhabitants as permanently and irreparably damaged.

Banfield suggested that the social reform efforts of the 1960s had done more harm than good and that government aid to the poor should be sharply curtailed. He proposed a draconian form of means testing for government aid that would limit any financial assistance to those suffering from the most extreme forms of poverty. He also suggested that lower class children should be taken from their parents and that the "incompetent poor" should be given "intensive birth control guidance" (qtd. in Macek 65). But beyond

²³ Banfield based his claims on a combination of Chicago School theories of residential differentiation and what he deemed "class culture." What he meant by this term had nothing to do with either Marxist or capitalist ideas of class but instead he meant that poverty and the criminal mindset were caused by an inability to focus on long-term goals. Banfield suggested that the major flaw of those in the inner-city was a tendency to live in the present, to focus only on immediate needs or goals. Of course Banfield also suggested that those needs were largely for sex or "action," and that the focus on living "from moment to moment" takes "precedence over everything else," leading the urban poor to ignore the morality of their actions (Banfield 53). See also Macek 61-67.

the Malthusian call for limiting births or the more common right-wing call for decreased government spending for the poor, Banfield also suggested a tougher standard of justice be levied against urban criminals. Urban theorist Steve Macek points out that “[w]here Banfield’s recommendations departed from rigid insistence on government indifference to the plight of the urban poor, it was in the direction of greater police control over their lives and harsher punishments for their alleged misconduct” (65). Banfield wanted to “intensify police patrol in high-crime areas; permit the police to ‘stop and frisk’ and to make misdemeanor arrests on probable cause” (246). He called on the justice system to “[r]educ[e] drastically the time between arrest, trial, and imposition of punishment [and to] abridge to an appropriate degree the freedom of those who in the opinion of a court are extremely likely to commit violent crimes” (246). By calling for an increased police presence in the inner-city, and by arguing that public safety trumped the constitutional rights of the working poor, Banfield’s research provided fuel for politicians looking for an excuse to pull funding from urban aid programs while increasing police budgets.

Banfield’s arguments were quickly championed by neoconservatives such as James Q. Wilson and Irving Kristol, and they helped to fuel a political attack on the urban poor that would begin in the Nixon administration and then find renewed strength during Reagan’s presidency. In the 1970s and ‘80s, Wilson, Kristol, and later right-wing urban theorists such as Charles Murray and Lawrence Mead began being used as experts in the urban crisis by mainstream media outlets, and there they promoted their message of cultural poverty, hoping to steer the American public towards a less sympathetic view of the inner city. This neoconservative attack also sought to further the distance between

white, middle class city dwellers and the urban poor. By suggesting that the residents of the inner-city were beyond help, conservatives were able to assuage any guilt felt by those voting to slash funding for urban programs, and by demonizing the urban poor, these theorists were able to accelerate the process of white flight while positioning working class city dwellers as the natural enemies of middle class whites still living in the city.

In *Death Wish*, Kersey embodies the conservative embrace of increased punishment against urban crime and the growing distance being felt between middle and working class populations. And it isn't simply the criminals for whom Kersey feels contempt. In one scene towards the middle of the film, Kersey sits drinking coffee in a diner while trying to find his next victims. The establishing shot for this scene follows a police van as it crosses in front of the exterior of the diner. The camera follows the van from the inside of the diner, and after it passes by, the film cuts to a close-up of a garishly dressed woman wearing excessive makeup who remarks: "There goes the pussy posse." The film then cuts to a shot of Kersey who is staring at a transvestite man sitting at the counter picking his nose. The scene returns to Kersey who looks away, disgusted, and to a shot showing Paul hoping to lure two African American men into a crime by openly flashing a large wad of cash in his wallet. The next few shots highlight the two men who will later follow Kersey into the subway, but they also show the other patrons of the diner. These working class men and women, who are predominantly African American, are swept up in the same wave of disdain and disgust that Kersey offers his two future victims and the transvestite man at the counter. Throughout the scene Kersey is stiff and

uncomfortable, compelling the audience to feel as though the two men who follow him outside aren't the only ones who deserve to be eliminated. However, between the shot showing Kersey's initial contempt for the transvestite and the shot of him trying to lure the two men outside, there is a quick 3-4 second shot of the man at the counter that almost threatens to break the conservative diegesis of the film. In this shot, the man at the counter is simply looking forward—presumably at nothing in particular—and taking a quick drag on his cigarette. But in this moment, after Kersey has looked away, the transvestite character is presented from a less subjective point of view, and the extreme close-up of the listless look on his face suggests that he is simply a regular person, not unlike Kersey himself. Of course Winner might have simply felt that the image of a man in drag would be enough to encourage the audience's contempt, but the image of the man's face ironically works to humanize him and to give the audience the space to wonder whether those encroaching on the middle class possession of the city really were the recalcitrant enemies the conservative pundits at the time were painting them to be.

Of course the true causes of the poverty and poor conditions of the city in the '70s and '80s were more complicated and far too pervasive to be simply blamed on an unrepentant working class. As the industrial and manufacturing jobs in America moved overseas or were eliminated by automation, unemployment rose sharply in urban areas. This sharp decline in blue-collar jobs—and the consequences of this decline—cannot be overstated. As William Julius Wilson points out in *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*, “In the twenty year period from 1967 to 1987, Philadelphia lost 64 percent of its manufacturing jobs; Chicago lost 60 percent; New York City, 58 percent;

Detroit, 51 percent. In absolute numbers, these percentages represent the loss of 160,000 jobs in Philadelphia, 326,000 in Chicago, 520,000—over half a million—in New York, and 108,000 in Detroit” (29-30). As more and more working class urbanites faced unemployment and more and more middle class whites fled the cities as part of the “white flight” movement, tax revenues in metropolitan areas began to disappear. At the local level, cities could no longer afford to invest in infrastructure improvements or aid to the poor. At the state and federal level, conservatives pushed for cuts in spending for AFDC, food stamp programs, and subsidized housing benefits, making it difficult for struggling families to survive. As metropolitan centers hemorrhaged jobs, inner city families that had found stability and security in the postwar years now faced chronic unemployment and a weakening of the safety net that was supposed to protect them from disaster.

Throughout the 1970s and ‘80s, African Americans—Kersey’s prime targets and a favorite target for conservatives—were often the hardest hit by unemployment. As Wilson notes: “The decline of the mass production system, the decreasing availability of lower-skilled blue-collar jobs, and the growing importance of training and education in the higher-growth industries adversely affected the employment rates and earnings of low-skilled black workers, many of whom are concentrated in inner-city ghettos” (54). Already suffering from unequal opportunities for education and from racial discrimination in employment, African Americans in urban areas also faced severe residential segregation.²⁴ In *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the*

²⁴ For more on residential differentiation (segregation), see chapter 3.

Underclass, sociologists Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton suggest that the extreme levels of isolation experienced by African Americans in major U.S. cities helped to fuel the growing levels of income inequality they faced. Massey and Denton show that in 1970 the average U.S. city was 89.1% segregated (47). According to these scholars, this segregation—caused by racist housing practices—created dense centers of African American poverty in urban areas, and these neighborhoods were among the hardest hit during the economic restructuring of the ‘70s. The authors suggest: “The net effect of racial segregation is to expose whites and blacks to very different socioeconomic environments and to leave the economic base of urban black communities uniquely vulnerable to any downturn in the group’s economic fortunes” (128). Massey and Denton found that in 1970 “the average level of black poverty concentration [the percentage of families in a particular neighborhood that could be considered poor], 27%, was nearly three times the white level of 11%; and over the ensuing decade this disparity grew with the average black concentration index rising to 33%...while the index for whites increased only moderately to 13%” (130). Although conservatives tended to see African American inner-city poverty as a result of a failure to embrace white, middle class values, in reality African Americans were simply the hardest hit by the decline in manufacturing jobs in the city, a problem made worse by the hyper-segregated nature of African American neighborhoods.

The conservative reaction to the increasing crime rates of the ‘70s was to suggest that African Americans and the working class poverty were more inclined to turn to crime than to look for a job, that somehow criminal activity was inherent in the inner city

poor. However, the reality of urban crime is far more complicated. Recent historians and social theorists have emphasized the roles urban poverty and urban segregation play in increasing rates of violent crime. Wilson mentions a study that found that participation in violent crime peaks for all males between the ages of 11 and 16 and then sharply decreases throughout their twenties (22). And while participation in crime by black adults decreases more slowly than participation by whites, when the study limited its findings to employed black and white males there were “no significant differences in violent behavior patterns among the two groups by age 21” (22). What Wilson suggests is that financial need is the main motivation behind violent crime and that “a major reason for the racial gap in violent behavior after adolescence is joblessness” (22). What this means is that crime isn’t so much a racial problem as it is a poverty problem. Sociologist Lesley Williams Reid supports Wilson’s analysis, stating: “The indirect effects of poverty, ethnic and racial heterogeneity, and residential mobility operate through the intervening variable social disorganization. High rates of poverty in a community lessen the ability of community members to maintain ties to organizations within the community thereby increasing social disorganization and subsequently increasing crime” (29). Because the working class and African Americans living in the inner city were more likely to be unemployed, it makes sense that they would be more likely to participate in violent crime than their middle class counterparts. But that doesn’t mean that these crimes were necessarily perpetrated against middle class whites such as Kersey or his family.

Wilson also argues that increased media coverage of black-on-white crime and on crimes perpetrated by African Americans created a tendency to blame African Americans

for the rising levels of violent crime in the '70s and '80s and that “[a]lthough most murders and other violent crimes involve individuals who are acquainted, the sense that such crimes are being committed without provocation against strangers has heightened anxiety and fear among the general public” (184). While up to 80% of violent crimes are committed against acquaintances, the perception felt by fearful, white, middle class urbanites was that crime could come from nowhere and that it usually came at the hands of African American, Latino, or working class “strangers” (Wilson 184). Karen Parker notes that while “[h]omicide is the leading cause of death among young African Americans...we know that approximately 85% of violent encounters involve victims and offenders of the same race” (2). Throughout the '70s and '80s there was an unequal increase between the rate of violent crimes committed by whites and those committed by African Americans, but the scenario painted by *Death Wish*—that gangs of African American youths prowled the streets of New York, just waiting to ambush a white victim—does not match the reality of urban crime.

However, *Death Wish*'s representation of urban crime and of the perceived urban threat facing white, middle class audiences lingered long past the early '70s. The first film's ending, where Kersey witnesses a young woman being assaulted by a gang of hippies in his new home of Chicago, set up the possibility of future sequels, and over the course of four additional films Kersey brought an ever more hyperbolic cascade of death to the criminal underclass of the city.²⁵ *Death Wish*'s conservative ethos and narrative of

²⁵ The most ridiculous of these sequels, *Death Wish 3*, finds Kersey back in New York to avenge a friend's death by taking on literally dozens of members of a multi-ethnic youth gang with a spectacular array of weapons. At different points in the film, Kersey deploys grenades, a .50 caliber machine gun, and a rocket launcher against the crowds of youths. Ironically, this film is set in a working class neighborhood in

cathartic vengeance was popular enough to be replicated in several films throughout the ‘70s and ‘80s, and as conservative views of the city began to dominate the media landscape, the urban vigilante film continued to help strengthen their message. Yet, films such as *Death Wish* were not the only interpretations of violence in the city.

Act of Vengeance (aka Rape Squad)²⁶

While the protagonists of *Death Wish* and many of the other popular urban vigilante films were motivated by the often brutal crimes of physical assault and rape against the women in their lives, there were a handful of films that suggested women were perfectly capable of exacting their own revenge. Unlike their more patriarchal contemporaries, films featuring female vigilantes performed a far better job of depicting the violence of rape—both during the event and throughout the grueling journey women have to make through a patriarchal justice system. In this way, the rape-revenge film created a more realistic portrayal of violence against women in the city. While a number of these films were originally marketed as “sexploitation,” films such as *Act of Vengeance*, *The Ladies Club* (1986), and *Ms. 45* presented violence against women not to motivate male anger or helplessness, but to empower women as they fought against

Brooklyn—far from Kersey’s original home in Manhattan—and Kersey finds himself allied with the aging denizens of a neighborhood virtually ignored by government officials waiting to gentrify the city. For more on gentrification and filmic representations of youth gangs, see chapter 5.

²⁶ The title *Rape Squad* was used for the film’s release in Australia, but *Rape Squad* was also used for some of the film’s promotional material both during its original release and during its continued run on the drive-in and grindhouse circuit. The provocative alternative title and a number of scenes in the film mark it as sexploitation, but it’s also fairly obvious from the critique the film makes against a male-dominated justice system that titillation wasn’t the film’s only goal.

victimization, and to confront both male and female audiences with the horrifying reality of rape.

In *Act of Vengeance*, five women living in Los Angeles are raped by the same man over a period of a few weeks. Facing a justice system seemingly unwilling and unable to adequately deal with the crimes, the women band together to offer support and assistance to raped and abused women in the city, eventually turning to violent means to punish male aggressors and to finally kill their rapist. One of the greatest differences between *Act of Vengeance* and some of the more conservative films of the era is its portrayal of strong, capable female characters, women able to rise above a male-articulated image of helplessness. Unlike the female victims found in *Death Wish* or later films such as *Hardcore* (1980), the women in *Act of Vengeance* all actively fight back against their attacker. While they fail to prevent their rapes, through the use of self-defense tactics learned through a female karate instructor the women eventually become more than capable of confidently defending themselves.

In one of the first scenes of the film, food truck owner Linda is raped by a man in a hockey mask and an orange jumpsuit. After the man repeatedly commands her to scream, she flees her attacker, but is eventually caught. Linda is no willing victim, however. She repeatedly attempts to escape her rapist by kicking, slapping, and running away. In a further transgression of filmic masculinity, the rapist is portrayed as sexually insecure—telling Linda “All we’re going to do is make love. Now there’s nothing much wrong with that is there? As a matter of fact, this is your lucky day. Do you know why? ‘Cause you are with the best. You are with the ever loving best. Matter of fact, I think

you should say ‘thank you Mr. Rapist, thank you for choosing me.’” Because of Linda’s attempts at resistance, the rapist knocks her momentarily unconscious, and he is only able to commit the act of rape after she is struck down.

But Linda’s ordeal does not end with her assault. The scene that follows presents the viewer with a harsh lesson in the way the victims of rape were treated by an unresponsive legal system in the ‘70s. As the camera follows Linda’s walk through the police station, a prostitute gives Linda a look of pity and resignation, as though she knows both what Linda has gone through and that she will find no justice within the legal system. The police detective who interviews Linda asks her a series of intensely personal questions about the specifics of her attack, while the other male detectives listen in. The tenor of the questions—especially the final few—suggest the detectives aren’t quite convinced that Linda was actually assaulted. Fed up, Linda finally rises from her seat and screams: “I have been raped and I want something done about it!” Linda is then shown in the medical examiner’s office with her legs in stirrups, waiting for a smiling male doctor to perform the post-rape examination. The doctor attempts to make Linda feel comfortable, but his condescending tone and repeated remark of “‘Atta girl!” reinforce the overwhelming sense of patriarchal control that dominates not only the act of rape itself but also every facet of the post-rape experience. The medical examiner lets Linda and the detective know that there was no sperm evident in her sample, and as the detective observes, “Sperm is evidence of rape.” In a final act of indignity, a detective watching Linda leave the station tells his friend “I wish that would happen to me sometime. I’d just lay back and enjoy it.”

The frustration and torture Linda experiences throughout her dealings with the justice system were just beginning to be exposed in a series of works written by second-wave feminists in the early 1970s. Andra Medea and Kathleen Thompson's *Against Rape* (1974) analyzed the causes and the patterns of rape and provided self-defense techniques for women to use against their attackers. The book helped to enable a frank discussion of rape, and it allowed the once taboo subject to be discussed in women's study courses, rape prevention centers, and newspapers across America. Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (1975) furthered this discussion by promoting the idea that rape was not the victim's fault and that men used rape as a way of gaining power over women. Brownmiller writes: "From prehistoric times until the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear" (emphasis in original 15). Medea, Thompson, and Brownmiller's work helped to remove some of the stigma faced by rape victims, and it helped to promote reforms in the ways women were treated by medical professionals, police, and the courts. Linda's story in *Act of Vengeance* mirrors the experience of rape victims that was exposed by feminists in the '70s, and while it might be a stretch to consider the film a crucial part of the campaign to redefine the experience of rape during the decade, it should be seen as part of that fight.

Throughout the film, men are presented as less than sympathetic towards female victims of rape, and even men who should know better end up acting as though the victims were actually at fault. After her rape, Linda's boyfriend initially seems supportive, but he eventually asks her if maybe she was "playing a little grab-ass and he

got rough,” and then he lets her know “that ain’t rape.” Just as with the policemen Linda must deal with at the station, Linda’s own boyfriend seems to connect sexual violence against women with wanted sexual contact. In the scene above, and in later scenes when Linda and the other victims of rape attempt to raise the community’s consciousness, the film contrasts close-up shots of sneering male characters with shots showing anger and contempt on the faces of the women being accused of somehow desiring aggressive male sexual contact. There is no shock in Linda’s face as she confronts her boyfriend’s ignorance, no guilt, and the film uses these scenes to remind the audience that the dominant cultural impression of female complicity in the act of rape is fiction.

In the scene following the one focusing on Linda’s trip to the police station, Karen, a black seamstress, is attacked in her home by the same masked man. The rapist repeats his boasting and his twisted need to have his victim sing “Jingle Bells” while he assaults her. Karen also fights back, but after the rapist takes a pair of scissors away from her, Karen submits. As with Linda’s rape scene, Karen’s rape is shown both from her point of view and seemingly from that of the rapist, but in this scene, it’s more evident from the placement of the rapist’s head in the frame that the camera is focused on Karen’s reaction, and not specifically the rapist’s point of view. *Act of Vengeance* isn’t trying to connect the viewer to Linda and Karen’s attacker; instead, it initiates a redefinition of the way rape was portrayed on film by almost forcing the viewer to identify with the victim of rape.²⁷

²⁷ See Clover, 139 and also my analysis of *Ms. .45* below.

The next scene brings Karen and Linda together with the three other victims of the serial rapist as they are called down to the police department for an attempt at identifying their rapist. A perp is shown to the women in a lineup and asked to read back a few of the rapist's words. Despite Karen's initial identification, the other women are sure that the man doesn't have the same voice. Then three additional suspects are brought in, but they too are not the culprit. As it turns out, the police knew none of the men in the lineup were the rapist, and the detective in charge of the investigation lets the women know that the lineup was just to show them how difficult it will be for him to capture the man. The police knowingly bring the women down to be confronted by men who look like the rapist and who emulate his behavior so that they will come to empathize with the ineffectual efforts of the police. The women leave thinking—as Karen puts it—“What a fucking waste of time.” Outside of the police station, Nancy invites the other women over to her place so that they can formulate a plan to find the rapist without the help of the police. Nancy asks: “How do you feel about forming a rape squad?” The five women then start a women's group dedicated to helping other women who have been raped, promising to “get a 24 hour phone service so that women can call in and report rape or anything else to us first, and then we can go down with them to the precinct to make sure that they do not get hassled.” *Act of Vengeance* is an urban vigilante film, but it's also about the efforts of women to try and end the misogynist violence that was being leveled against them in the city.

The women distribute flyers throughout the city, learn self-defense from a female karate instructor, and provide the kind of peer support that was just beginning to appear

in films such as *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974). The women's first real act as the rape squad, however, isn't to comfort and support a rape victim, but to exact brutal vengeance against a woman whose rapist was set free after her attacker gamed the legal system. The squad finds the woman's rapist at a local nightclub, and after he notices Linda dancing, he invites her up to his apartment on the pretense of showing her a film of him skiing. Once in the apartment, he lets her know there is no film, and as Linda rises to leave, the man grabs her and throws her onto the couch. Linda screams, and the other women of the rape squad break into the apartment. The karate instructor kicks and punches the man as the remaining women destroy his apartment. They then tie him to the bed and remove his pants. Throughout this scene, the camera cuts back and forth between the women's point of view and the would-be rapist's, but because of his position, the women are seen to tower over him in an obvious position of dominance. One of the women shouts "You're being raped, do you like it?" And they dye his penis blue, letting him know that he's now a "marked man" and threatening to "redecorate [his] ass" if he ever rapes again.

In subsequent scenes, the women of the rape squad continue to help women in the city exact their revenge against the unrepentant misogynists in their lives. They help a young reporter confront the man who has been harassing her by phone and force him to strip so that they can disparage his physical appearance at gunpoint. After Karen witnesses a pimp striking one of his prostitutes, the women destroy the pimp's car and then physically beat him after he refuses to stop using violence against the women he has put on the street. Each of these scenes further encourages male viewers to question the

idea of female submission and inferiority, and as in *Death Wish*, viewers become complicit in the acts of revenge taken against the male criminals on screen. In *Act of Vengeance*, of course, the effect of this association with the protagonists is to encourage male viewers to question their own treatment of women, and the humor in these scenes allows them to find satisfaction in seeing men punished for acts they themselves might have committed.

After a young woman named Diane is murdered for refusing to sing “Jingle Bells” for the film’s original rapist, the women are forced to return to the original reason for their creating the rape squad. While the women in the rape squad identify the young woman’s body at the morgue, the police detective—instead of offering his assistance—warns them that they’ll never be able to stop their rapist and that they’re more likely to join Diane on the slab. Eventually, the rapist lures the women in the rape squad to an abandoned zoo, and despite one of the women’s suggestion to turn the matter over to the police, Linda rallies them forward. The women search the zoo together, but one by one they are captured and held by the rapist in one of the zoo’s cages. In the thrilling conclusion of the film, Linda is able to stop the rapist from further brutalizing the other women by criticizing his sexual prowess. The rapist succumbs to Lina’s taunts, and when he comes for her, she’s able to fight him off using the techniques she’s learned in the self-defense class. Grabbing a shovel, Linda then proceeds to beat the rapist to death. All of the humor stemming from the clever punishments dealt to their previous victims is gone here as Linda decides the only form of retribution due the Jingle Bell rapist is death. But the film doesn’t allow viewers to sort through any conflicting emotions about the killing

they might have. The credits roll as Linda releases the other women from their cages, and the screen fades to black before viewers can see what impact the rapist's death has on their lives. The effect of the ending, then, is to leave viewers feeling no real satisfaction, to make them feel—as many victims of rape feel—that even if their attacker is sufficiently punished, there is nothing that can erase the act of rape from their lives.

By focusing on the victims of urban crime and by refusing to provide the audience with a completely satisfactory experience of vigilantism, films such as *Act of Vengeance* helped to offset the more conservative version of the urban vigilante film. Viewers undoubtedly still found pleasure in watching Linda and the other members of the rape squad punish male aggressors, but in doing so they were also forced to question their own complicity in the acts of extreme misogyny presented on screen. In this way viewers are asked to move beyond the simple binary of citizen versus criminal established by *Death Wish* in order to see that urban crime—and crimes perpetrated towards women—aren't solely the domain of a menacing, non-white Other. Although urban vigilante films featuring female protagonists continued to be made throughout the '70s and '80s, films made during the conservative political rise to power began to move away from the idea of an innocent wife or daughter as victim of sexual violence and towards the idea that female sexuality itself was being punished by rapists and predators. As with the urban vigilante film, these new films contained ideologies about gender presented from both the political right and the left, but unlike the vigilante films, this new cinematic genre focused on women explicitly involved in the sex trade. Perhaps as backlash to the feminist movement's attempt to highlight male complicity in rape and sexual assault,

these films didn't question or critique the motivations of the perpetrators of sexual violence, but instead questioned the role prostitution played in urban crime, often showing sex work to be an explicit invitation to sexual assault. In the next section I analyze both conservative and left-wing versions of what I'm calling the Lilith film in order to show how urban dystopias in the late '70s and early '80s presented the world of sex work in the city in order to either demonize female sexuality or to highlight the dangers of a profession that isolated women from the protections offered by middle class society and forced them to find communities within their own subculture of prostitution and vice.

The Lilith Films

Film theorist Carol Clover describes *Act of Vengeance* as a “rape-revenge” film, a film where “women seek their own revenge—usually on their own behalf, but sometimes on behalf of a sister (literal or figurative) who has been murdered or disabled in an act of sexual violence” (138). The term certainly fits *Act of Vengeance* and Ferrara's *Ms. .45* (discussed below), but while these urban vigilante films and several of the urban violence films of the '70s and '80s focused on sexual violence against women or on the act of rape, there also exists a sub-genre of films that focuses on violence against women working in the sex trade. In these films, prostitutes, exotic dancers, and women involved in pornography become the targets of torture, rape, sexual violence, and murder, but while in some of these films the female victims of sex crimes are the ones to stop the cycle of violence—to take their revenge—more often than not, the male aggressor is

subdued thanks to the efforts of a larger network of people living and working in the red-light districts that serve as these films' primary setting. The victim or victims of these films are shown to be part of a community of vice cops, street performers, prostitutes, bartenders, and homeless people who understand their neighborhoods and the symbiotic relationship that exists within them between the purveyors of sexual fantasy and their patrons. Some of the films in this subgenre categorically denounce the sale of sex as a blight on the urban landscape and as a sign of the disintegrating nuclear family; however, a good number of these films seek to redeem the women who choose to participate in the sex trade, suggesting that female sexuality is not inherently wicked and that the women working on the streets should be seen as a result of the failure of urban capitalism instead of as a failure to embrace wholesome middle class values. The clear division between films seeking to demonize women working on the streets and those seeking to present them in a more favorable light creates the need for a term that embraces this Janus-like presentation of urban female sexuality, and I'm choosing here to label the films that focus on crimes against sex workers in the city the Lilith films.

In early Hebrew texts such as the Talmud, Lilith was seen as a demon, as “a wild-haired winged creature with nymphomaniac tendencies and as a mother of demons” (Cantor 17-18). However, in other places, early Jewish mythology suggests that Lilith was the true first woman—created at the same time as Adam, not from one of his ribs, but from the earth. According to feminist scholar Aviva Cantor, these two contradictory images of Lilith were merged in the *Alphabet of Ben Sera* (800-1000A.D.). Cantor writes: “The *Alphabet* relates how after God created both Adam and Lilith from the earth, they

immediately quarreled because she refused to lie beneath him. Lilith told Adam: 'We are both equal because we both come from the earth.' Realizing that it was futile to use logic to argue with him ... Lilith uttered God's secret Name and flew away from Eden" (18). However, after Lilith refused God's request that she return to Adam, "[s]he accepted the punishment that one hundred of her 'demon children' would die every day" (Cantor 18). Throughout the middle ages the demonic aspect of Lilith began to become more developed, and Lilith was often paired with the archangel Samael who was said to be either her husband or her partner. Jewish folklore warned that Lilith would cause miscarriages in women and would seduce men in order to rob them of their sperm while they slept so that she might create a host of demon children. This vision of Lilith as succubus would persist into the twentieth century, superseding any notion of her as a role model for strong women, but there have been attempts to intervene on her behalf.

In the early 1970s, Lilith emerged as a symbol of female empowerment and of positive female sexuality for second wave feminists.²⁸ These scholars looked to the *Alphabet of Ben Sera* in their attempts to rehabilitate Lilith's image. As Cantor notes:

In the Alphabet, Lilith is an independent, courageous woman and a strong character. Her self-esteem is high: she perceives her equality with Adam as part of the natural order of things, a result of their having been created from the same element. She immediately recognizes Adam's tyranny as injustice and immediately and decisively resists it ('I will not lie beneath you.'). She is willing to take risks for her integrity and to relinquish a life of security in the Garden of Eden in order to uphold it, and she accepts uncomplainingly the consequences of her decision. (18)

Cantor suggests that because the *Alphabet* and other Jewish religious texts were written by men, Lilith's role as an equal to man was tempered by her connection to demons in

²⁸ For an examination of the use of the Lilith figure, see Dame and Plaskow.

order to protect Jewish belief in patriarchy. Cantor suggests: “Her refusal to be subservient...and her escape from Adam provoked too much anxiety in the men to allow this behavior to stand” (19). Feminists in the ‘70s identified the patriarchal origins of the more negative depictions of Lilith and showed her to be a model of female independence and strength by valorizing her questioning of Adam and her refusal to submit to his domination.

Today, the image of Lilith is still torn between a sexually depraved seductress and a powerful inspiration for women wishing to escape the controls of patriarchy. This dichotomy is what makes the term the Lilith film so apt at describing the films of the late ‘70s and early ‘80s that sought to document the lives of women working in the sex trade. While conservative versions of the Lilith film such as *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Hardcore* (1979) sought to demonize the women who make their lives on the street, more positive versions of the Lilith film such as *Vice Squad* (1982), *Angel* (1984), and *Fear City* (1984) showed the strength these women possess and that female sexuality is neither evil nor an urban bane. Just as the Lilith of Jewish mythology has been used to both criticize and defend female independence, so the Lilith film has been used to both condemn the sex trade in the city and defend the women who participate in it. In the following sections, I analyze two of the Lilith films in order to illustrate two different visions of urban violence against women. In each of these allegorical depictions of prostitution, the women of the city are presented either as a symptom of the moral decay of urban spaces or as the victims of a social order that would punish women for the expression of their sexuality.

***Hardcore* (1979)**

Paul Schrader's *Hardcore* is the perfect example of the more conservative version of the Lilith film. Its presentation of sex work and of pornography in the city comes from one of the most repressed viewpoints possible, that of the religious, middle class, white, Midwestern father. In their discussion of *Hardcore*, Ryan and Kellner label Schrader "the Cotton Mather of contemporary Hollywood" and suggest that *Hardcore* "does not study the exploitation of women through pornography, and it avoids analyzing the clear link between pornography and violence against women. Instead, it dramatizes the issue of child kidnapping for sexual exploitation, but it uses this more as a plot device than as a social issue to be examined for progressive ends" (166). In refusing to analyze the possible causes of women's roles in sex work—or the feelings or thoughts of the women involved—*Hardcore* recreates John Wayne's quest in *The Searchers* (1956) to find a woman he fears might be tainted by immoral sexual activity. As with *The Searchers*, Schrader's *Hardcore* isn't about the woman in danger, the woman's captors, or any larger questions about female autonomy, but about the attempt of one man to take on all that he finds vile and unacceptable in the world so that he can maintain a personal code of justice and some sense of balance in his life.

Hardcore begins by showcasing an upper-middle class family during Christmas in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The family is headed by Calvinist business owner Jake Van Dorn, played by George C. Scott, and through a series of early shots, the viewer is presented with a happy, white, middle-class life. During this depiction of the holidays with the Van Dorn family, Jake is clearly shown to be the patriarch of even the extended

members of his rather large brood. This charming image of Middle America is soon challenged, however, as Van Dorn's teenaged daughter Kristen goes missing during a church trip to Southern California. After flying immediately to Los Angeles, Van Dorn hires private detective Andy Mast, played by Peter Boyle, and then returns to Grand Rapids. Van Dorn is surprised to see Mast in Michigan a few weeks later, and even more surprised to see his daughter performing in a grainy, 8mm adult film that Mast has brought with him. Mast tells Van Dorn that the film is virtually untraceable, and when Van Dorn suggests that maybe Mast enjoyed showing the film, Mast states that Van Dorn had to see it and that "[t]here's a lot of strange things that happen in this world. Things you don't know about in Grand Rapids. Things you don't want to know about." And then Mast lets him know, "When I find her, you may not want her back."

When Van Dorn comes out to California to check on Mast's progress, he walks in on Mast having sex with a young woman. Van Dorn orders Mast out of his own apartment, complaining about paying for Mast's sexual proclivities. While rifling through Mast's case files—after first smiling approvingly at a number of nude pictures of various porn stars—he finds the information Mast has gathered about his daughter. Taking matters into his own hands, Van Dorn begins driving the streets of Los Angeles, touring the adult bookstores and movie houses, asking about his daughter. While visiting a brothel, the prostitute lets Van Dorn know that the \$20 he paid to get in doesn't go to her and that she only gets \$2 plus the tips she receives for giving sexual favors. But Van Dorn isn't listening. At no point in the film does Van Dorn actually take an interest in the people he meets who actually work in the sex industry. If not for Van Dorn's casual

indifference towards the prostitute, the viewer might be tempted to feel concerned for her safety or to wonder how she became involved in prostitution in the first place, but Schrader shuts down this possibility and the possibility of any real examination of the women in the film.

Frustrated with his lack of progress, Van Dorn eventually poses as an investor wishing to finance an adult film in order to hopefully get a lead on where his daughter might be. But after this plan fizzles, Van Dorn places a casting call in the Free Press for male porn stars, hoping to find one of the two men who starred in his daughter's film. After a parade of the wrong men visits his hotel room, Van Dorn finally looks up to find "Jism Jim," one of the two men he's looking for. Jim tells Van Dorn that the film was made by a director named Tod and that he should talk to one of his daughter's co-stars, Niki. Van Dorn visits Niki, played by Lilith film veteran Season Hubley, at a peep show, and for the rest of the film, Van Dorn relies on Niki's knowledge of the business to guide him through a world completely unknown to him. However, despite how close Van Dorn and Niki seem to get throughout his search, he never completely seems to understand her or her motivations for working in the sex trade. For Van Dorn, Niki exists merely as a means to an end.

The two head to San Diego where Van Dorn's daughter was supposedly last seen. At one point on the trip, Niki finally forces Van Dorn to acknowledge what she does for a living, and she tries to explain to him that she really isn't that different from him: "You think [sex] is so unimportant that you don't even do it. I think it's so unimportant that I don't care who I do it with." But rather than even consider her point of view, Van Dorn

lets her know that “[y]ou’ll never understand someone like me. I’m a mystery to you. A middle-class person, a Midwesterner, goes to church, believes in God, and believes at the end of his life he’ll be redeemed. It doesn’t make any sense to you. Why should I have to justify myself to you? I don’t care about the things you care about. I don’t care about Los Angeles or New York.” As much as it might seem, however, Niki isn’t really as independent as she makes herself out to be, and the film goes to some lengths to suggest that Niki’s nonchalance is only an act. As Russell Campbell suggests: “Niki’s togetherness is just a façade: she is in thrall to a pimp who takes all of her money, she has no personal love life, and she is in danger of reverting to drugs....It is Jake’s perspective...that finally prevails and the upright integrity of Grand Rapids, Michigan...upheld over the sexual degeneracy of California” (283). Although the audience can and should see the obvious connections between Niki and Van Dorn’s daughter, both Schrader and Van Dorn seem to write her off as damaged goods.

Niki and Van Dorn then track his daughter to San Francisco where she’s reported to be with Ratan, a brutal pornographer known to traffic in snuff films. San Francisco’s Tenderloin district is ignored just as easily by Van Dorn as its red-light counterparts in San Diego and Los Angeles, and as the camera follows Van Dorn, Schrader treats the city as merely a static backdrop to Van Dorn’s quest. Schrader’s city lacks depth and definition, and the neon lights and store displays of the adult world Van Dorn wades through seem to blend together with the motels and restaurants that sit alongside them.

As Catherine Zuromskis suggests:

Thus by the time he (Van Dorn), and we, the audience, get our first glimpse of the sleazier side of Los Angeles any possible allure of the pornographic space has

been carefully offset by the assumedly preferable (and at the very least morally superior) space of decent midwestern religious life back home. Both visual and narrative framing have the effect of buffering the pornographic text, at once disallowing a full, uncompromised view by situating it within a space of biased representation and contextualizing it, challenging its authority as a media image with the aesthetic and moral authority of the larger frame. (8)

True, the shots of urban life are quite different from the brightly lit scenes of religious life and industry that Schrader uses to characterize Grand Rapids, but rather than posing any kind of actual threat, Schrader's scenes of the city are positioned as just jarring enough to be seen as the urban Other to "middle-class, Midwesterner[s]" like Van Dorn.

Mast returns to the scene just in time to warn Van Dorn about Ratan: "You know you can buy anything on this Earth. You can buy child whores, slaves. You can have people raped, killed. One of the men who supposedly arrange such things is called Ratan." Mast provides the horror for Van Dorn—and the viewer—without forcing either to confront it directly. Of Niki, Mast tellingly states: "She's the victim. She's just a whore. They're a dime a dozen." In Mast's seasoned understanding of the city, the term "victim" is both synonymous with "whore" and with a situation so commonplace as to be ignored. As Van Dorn grunts his affirmation of Mast's judgment of Niki, he either somehow forgets that his daughter is now just as much a victim as Niki is, or he writes her off as "just a whore."

Van Dorn eventually meets Ratan in an adult bookstore and asks to see Ratan's most recent film, a film supposedly starring his daughter. The film—screened in a filthy backroom with a number of other men—turns out to be a snuff film, and Van Dorn cringes as a woman's throat is slit on-screen. The girl is not his daughter, and when Van Dorn returns to the hotel room and asks Niki where to find Tod, she refuses, worried

that—as Mast told her just moments earlier—Van Dorn will abandon her as soon as he finds his daughter. Rather than reassure Niki, Van Dorn strikes her, pushes her down on the bed, and raises a fist to punch her again. Niki lets him know Tod’s location, and Van Dorn slowly lifts Niki up, kissing her forehead and letting her know: “I won’t forget you.” Despite the unrestrained violence Van Dorn shows towards the only person who has worked to help him, the audience is asked to see his actions as a momentary lapse and to see his parting kiss as a true expression of Van Dorn’s caring. Schrader asks the audience to cast any sympathy they might have towards Van Dorn, positioning the quest for Van Dorn’s daughter as a more than plausible excuse for the violence he levies against Niki. Even as Van Dorn becomes one in a long line of men willing to use physical violence against Niki and prostitutes everywhere, Schrader fails to note the hypocrisy in Van Dorn’s actions, choosing instead to portray violence against women as a sometimes necessary evil.

Van Dorn eventually finds Tod, beats him severely, and locates Ratan and his daughter in a small club where a live sex act is being performed on stage. Ratan runs, but Mast shows up at the last minute and shoots Ratan twice, saving Van Dorn from an eventual murder charge. Van Dorn finds his daughter cowering in a restaurant’s pantry, but instead of rushing towards his grateful arms, she begs “Don’t hurt me.” When Van Dorn tells her that she wasn’t at fault for what she did and that she can come back home as though nothing’s happened, she tells her father that she ran away on purpose, and when Van Dorn reaches down towards her she lashes out: “Don’t touch me you cocksucker! You never gave a fuck about me before! You didn’t. So don’t touch me

now.” In an unexpected move, Van Dorn breaks down and admits that he let his pride get in the way of truly caring about Kristen, and when she asks him to leave he gets up and actually asks her if she really wants him to go. Kristen—of course—shakes her head and follows her father out to a police car. When Van Dorn meets Niki on the street, however, he stumbles over an attempt to offer help. Niki—realizing Mast was exactly right about Van Dorn’s not really caring about her—frowns at him and returns to the streets. Van Dorn seems to feel slightly guilty about breaking his vow to help, but as Mast tells him, “Go home pilgrim. There’s nothing you can do. You don’t belong here.” Van Dorn walks slowly to meet his daughter in the back seat of the police car, and the camera pans up to reveal the bright neon lights of an adult theater while Susan Raye’s country and western song “Precious Memories” plays in the background.

Throughout *Hardcore*, viewers are asked to sympathize with Van Dorn and are shown the world of vice and prostitution through his eyes. No matter how sympathetic he might be towards Niki for helping him find his daughter, Van Dorn still sees sex workers as, at best, broken and, at worst, vile women who deserve what they get for turning away from the conservative Christian values of the small-town family unit. Zuromskis states: “This moral stance, which automatically allies the audience with the moral conflict of the protagonist and marks the pornographer as the violent, one-dimensional other, is central to the function of the film” (8). *Hardcore* isn’t about Niki, Van Dorn’s daughter, or any of the other sex workers in the film; it’s about the damaging effects of prostitution and pornography on the white, middle class households seemingly far enough away from the vice of the big city to be affected by their evil. However, just as in the conservative

vigilante films discussed above, films such as *Hardcore* provided a somewhat skewed vision of the lives of women in the city.

***Vice Squad* (1982)**

Two years after *Hardcore* and two years before Abel Ferrara's *Fear City* (discussed below), Gary A. Sherman's *Vice Squad* (1982) explored the violent world of prostitution found in Hollywood, California. Co-written by Robert Vincent O'Neil, who would go on to write and direct the 1984 schoolgirl hooker film *Angel*, *Vice Squad* is unique in that it presents a somewhat sympathetic view of prostitution by splitting its focus between a seasoned vice cop and a hooker on the run from a sadistic killer. By presenting the sex workers in the film in a more favorable light and by creating a strong female lead who neither regrets her life as a prostitute nor allows her job to get the better of her, *Vice Squad* is a good example of the second type of Lilith film, one in which strong, independent women are attacked for claiming possession of their own bodies. Unlike *Hardcore*, *Vice Squad* presents a more realistic portrayal of the lives of urban prostitutes, one that identifies the problematics of sex work in the city. As Campbell states of the realities of prostitution:

The job takes its toll on psychological well-being, especially on those who engage full-time in the profession for sustained periods; and it is hard on prostitutes, especially heterosexual ones, to maintain affectionate relationships while they are working. . . . Women who engage in mercantile sex are frequently denied civil rights and subjected to laws that curtail their freedom, making them liable for fines and imprisonment for exercising their profession; and their stigmatized condition and marginal legal status make them vulnerable to violence and exploitation by pimps, police, landlords, and clients. (4)

Vice Squad doesn't shy away from the darker side of prostitution, and it certainly doesn't suggest that sex work is a preferred occupation for women in the city, but it also doesn't suggest that sex workers are immoral deviants unworthy of assistance or that the women in these films somehow deserve to be punished for monetizing sex.

Despite the favorable representation of sex workers in the film, however, *Vice Squad* does suggest that prostitution—and other activities usually seen as anathema to urban residents—has become a definitive part of the American city. The title sequence of the film consists of a series of shots juxtaposing images of hookers picking up johns on Hollywood Boulevard with cops arresting random people, homeless men sleeping on the sidewalk, a group of leather-clad bikers, and what appears to be money changing hands over the sale of a young boy. These scenes are framed by the use of the song “Neon Slime” which features a wailing Wings Hauser—who also plays the sadistic villain in the film—singing about the crimes and degradation found in the city. This first scene places the film firmly at the locus of sex work and poverty that marked one of Hollywood's premier tourist destinations in the early 1980s. The rapid transition between a shot highlighting prostitution and one signifying the homeless population plaguing the city further conflates sex work with financial instability, while the song playing over the credits suggests that the entire community of street dwellers are nothing but “slime.” Despite the film's introduction to the streets, however, once *Vice Squad* begins to focus on the actual people who live there, its representations become far more benign.

The film stars Season Hubley as Princess, a career hooker and single mother who serves as a kind of surrogate parent to the other girls working the Boulevard. The film

begins with Princess sending her daughter off with a friend so that she can get back to work on the streets, but rather than treating the separation of Princess and her child as a tragic condemnation of Princess's choice of occupation or seeing the child as a cruel weight tied around Princess's neck, the scene—and Hubley's performance—suggest that prostitution is merely a job for Princess, something she does so that she can spend days with her daughter. The streets don't remain calm for long, however, as minutes after Princess warns fellow prostitute Ginger to stay away from a vicious pimp named Ramrod, the pimp violently murders Ginger.

The scenes in the film that feature Ramrod are exceedingly brutal, and Wings Hauser's performance as the psychotic pimp makes it easy to see *Vice Squad* as pure exploitation, but as in *Act of Vengeance* and *Ms. .45*, the viewer couldn't possibly connect with Ramrod's inhuman treatment of the women he violates. Although Ginger's murder isn't seen on-screen, Ramrod ends the scene with her by twisting a wire hanger into a "pimpstick," and though it's not shown, the hanger lands on Ginger off-screen with an audible thump. Campbell suggests that instead of providing viewers with a more prurient association with attackers such as Ramrod, films featuring violence against prostitutes can work to ease their anxiety about women's sexual independence:

Men have much invested in upholding and sustaining their system of control in society, which means that depictions of prostitution may need to be modified to minimize any damage they might cause to the prestige of the existing social structure. . . . The killing of a prostitute on screen, for example, may serve to assuage male fears: for a time at least the anxieties that the female as sexual being provokes can be stilled. Commission of the act itself, however, may be displaced from the male protagonist onto a surrogate figure, such as a pimp or serial killer, so that murder may be simultaneously enjoyed and disavowed: the existence of violence against women in society is thus acknowledged but attributed to bad elements who will themselves, very likely, be obliterated. (6)

Vice Squad surely walks the line between the sickeningly cathartic representations of male violence that Campbell identifies and the more plausible suggestion that prostitutes should be recognized for the dangers they are exposed to, but the sheer brutality of Ramrod's attacks make it unlikely that viewers would condone Ginger's murder.

The film next cuts to Detective Tom Walsh, a vice cop training a new recruit. The scenes of the police station present a motley crew of pimps, transvestites, prostitutes, and homeless people. Despite the suggested disdain shown to the "criminals" by the police, there's also a feeling of conviviality at the station, suggesting an acceptance of criminal acts and of minimal police enforcement as the status quo of the city. Walsh is then called to the hospital where a severely beaten Ginger dies in front of him. Walsh knows that Ramrod is her attacker, but when he asks her if Ramrod beat her, Ginger only says "He loves me." Walsh then brings Princess to the hospital and forces her to witness Ginger's body. After suggesting that Princess might meet the same fate as Ginger if she fails to help him, Walsh produces a small bag of cocaine from Princess's purse and lets her know that she is facing 3-5 years in prison for a drug possession bust both she and Walsh know is bogus. Knowing Princess is innocent—she was only holding the drugs for Ginger—Walsh forces Princess to help him catch Ramrod so that he can take the pimp off the streets.

Aware that his plan will put Princess in danger, Walsh sets up a sting operation so that he can catch Ramrod working as a pimp. With Walsh and his partner listening in, Princess allows Ramrod to pick her up at a local bar and then take her back to his apartment. As police surround the lobby, stairwell, and parking garage of Ramrod's

building, Ramrod takes Princess up to his place. After Ramrod is caught on tape proposing to Princess that he become her pimp, the police burst into his apartment. But when Princess lets Ramrod know that Ginger is dead and that she's been recording his words, Ramrod momentarily breaks free from the police and repeatedly threatens to kill Princess. After he is restrained, Walsh takes Princess for a hot dog, and while they trade horror stories of life on the street, she lets him know "We both live in the same toilet bowl." Despite Princess's knowledge that she and Walsh are part of the same community of working class urbanites, and despite the comfortable relationship between the police back at that squad room and the criminals they've arrested, Walsh never quite brings himself to admit that he should be fighting to protect her way of life. For the remainder of the film, as Ramrod escapes from police custody and vows to take his revenge against Princess, Princess is basically on her own. Even as Walsh races to find her before Ramrod can, Princess is forced to rely on a community of fellow sex workers, hotel attendants, and street dwellers to help her evade the killer.

While Walsh looks for Princess, she is seen with a number of johns including a nebbish-y looking man with a toe fetish and a disabled man in a wheelchair. Despite her initial sympathy towards her clients, when discussing the night with her friends in a bar, Princess complains about the "freaks" she's been forced to deal with during her shift. Throughout the film, however, Princess remains in control of which johns to entertain and which to refuse. As a renegade (a prostitute without a pimp), Princess serves as both a possible prize to pimps such as Ramrod and as a reproof of their control of women. Campbell suggests that "[t]he real-life prostitute is frequently defiant, contemptuous of

the hypocrisy of a system that attaches the whore stigma to her. Prostitute characters in film, if they are fiercely independent, do not remain so for long and are seldom permitted to remain in their profession at the end: like other independent women in the movies, they are either married off or killed off” (30). In this way, *Vice Squad* is unlike other films focusing on prostitution. As the Lilith character in the film, Princess works for herself and scorns the advances made by pimps who would seek to control her life, but she isn’t killed for it, and even if she is contemplating leaving the life of prostitution, at the end of the film she remains a sex worker.

Ramrod eventually catches up to Princess and takes her to an abandoned loft space on the outskirts of downtown Los Angeles that is strangely outfitted with S&M gear. After Princess scratches Ramrod’s face, kicks him, and then beats him with a rubber baton, Ramrod ties her to a mattress and removes her clothes with a long, sinister-looking switchblade knife. But the real terror comes when Princess turns her head to see Ramrod crafting a new pimpstick. At the last minute, the police rush into the loft, and after Ramrod shoots one of the officers and jumps out the window, he is able to commandeer a van and drive away. Walsh follows after Ramrod, and after an extended chase scene Walsh is able to pin Ramrod against a brick wall with his car and then shoot him in the head. Princess is safe; Ramrod is dead, and Walsh has saved the day. At this point, the viewer would expect Princess to denounce her life of prostitution and vow to leave the streets behind, perhaps as Walsh’s new girlfriend. However, *Vice Squad* doesn’t provide the viewer with such an easy conclusion. Instead, the film ends rather abruptly, with

Princess telling Walsh: “I don’t know why you do it. You’re never going to change the streets Walsh,” and Walsh unable to reply.

Whereas *Hardcore*’s ending presents viewers with Kristen’s salvation and suggests that as soon as Van Dorn gets her back to Michigan she’ll be able to regain a normal life, *Vice Squad* ends pretty close to where it begins. Princess remains a prostitute, and there’s no reason to believe that she will choose to leave her life in sex work. In *Hardcore*, prostitution is a vile crime, leading men to sacrifice their lives to immorality and challenging the patriarchal social order of Van Dorn’s Christian home, but in *Vice Squad*, sex work is a reality of life in the city, and if Princess is exposed to the depredations of violent men, it’s a risk she’s willing to take, even if her own life is in danger. *Vice Squad* isn’t perfect—its somewhat ambivalent treatment of the other prostitutes in the city and its sadistic portrayal of violence against prostitutes unable to fend off Ramrod as Princess does suggests that it might not be wholly sympathetic towards women who pursue sex work—but it does present a strong alternative to Lilith films such as *Hardcore*, and it works with other Lilith films such as *Angel* and *Fear City* to create a more positive image of the women who choose to engage in prostitution and the communities they belong to. Make no mistake, the world of *Vice Squad* and the treatment afforded the prostitutes in all Lilith films make these films dystopian, but the motivation behind a more positive portrayal of sex work isn’t to promote the idea that prostitution is somehow a utopian form of commerce. The purpose behind both forms of the Lilith films I analyze here is to present the overwhelming violence, corruption, and

lack of support faced by most sex workers in order to either condemn their choice of occupation or to rehabilitate their image as fallen women.

Abel Ferrara's New York

Director Abel Ferrara has a long history of celebrating the city of New York in his films. Of his 20-plus films, more than half have been set and filmed in the city, and in several of these films, the city itself serves more as a character than as a backdrop. Like Woody Allen or Martin Scorsese, Ferrara presents the city in a way that is neither strictly realistic nor entirely Hollywood fantasy, as a larger than life version of itself, but with just enough of the real metropolis to ring true to even the most knowledgeable viewer. However, Ferrara's films go where those directors would not, to the gutters, abandoned lots, back-alleys, and crack houses that most New Yorkers have learned to ignore. Ferrara spent the early part of his career living in the same neighborhoods he filmed, staying with friends, and struggling to keep his head above water. His early films are set in a part of the city he was intimately connected with, and this connection to both the positive and negative aspects of the working class neighborhoods he was a part of allowed him to present an image of the city that often contradicts both conservative and liberal expectations.

Ferrara also has a history of walking the sometimes thin line between arthouse and grindhouse filmmaking. The lower budgets, unflinching depictions of violence, and guerilla filmmaking techniques of his early films in particular have led some to see

Ferrara's work as pure exploitation.²⁹ But beneath the shocking scenes of power tool driven homicide and female driven mass murder lies a thoughtful evaluation of the working class areas of New York in the late '70s and early '80s. Falling neither directly in line with the more conservative films of the era nor with the borderline sexploitation films on the left, Ferrara's first three major films present a more nuanced and objective vision of the city. These films—often fueled by Ferrara's personal connection with working class New York—choose to neither valorize nor condemn the men and women struggling to make a living in low paying, low prestige jobs all over the city. While Ferrara does cast a sympathetic eye towards artists, musicians, seamstresses, and sex-workers, he also doesn't shy away from the fact that quite often these same people are capable of some of the most extreme degradation known to humanity. Ferrara's unflinching look at urban violence and the lives of the working poor make his first three films an essential part of this examination of violence and class in the city.

***The Driller Killer* (1979)**

The Driller Killer could easily be seen as simply another slasher film in a long line of films seeking to titillate horror viewers by suggesting the possibility of random acts of gore-strewn violence. With its vivid depictions of power-tool driven homicide and

²⁹ Ferrara's *The Driller Killer* was one of the films banned in Britain as part of the Video Recordings Act of 1984. According to Mike Bor, the once Principal Examiner at the British Board of Film Classification, "*The Driller Killer* was almost single-handedly responsible for the Video Recordings Act of 1984" (Johnstone 13). The film's reputation as one of the "video nasties"—formed mainly from the lurid picture featured on the cover of the VHS tape—helped to cement its reputation among gorehounds and cult film enthusiasts, but few have stopped to analyze the film's depiction of New York or the complexities of the protagonist's actions in the film. Many of the same things can be said about *Ms. 45*, which despite its more positive critical reception, remains a cult film in the minds of many.

liberal use of fake blood, *The Driller Killer* is definitely a lurid spectacle. However, the film also presents a compelling look at the anxiety produced by urban poverty. Rather than succumbing to the more common horror trope of a Freudian motivation for his killer, Ferrara chooses to use economic need and a fear of being crushed under the heel of capitalism to spur his protagonist's murder spree. Ferrara also forgoes using a string of young women as the killer's victims. Instead, the director chooses to use homeless men almost exclusively as the choice of prey. Ferrara's choice isn't coincidental, however, as much of the film was actually taken from footage shot from a hidden camera for a failed documentary project (Stevens 44). While Ferrara most likely focused on the homeless problem in New York in the film because of the money he saved by recycling the documentary footage, it's also clear that at that point in his career, Ferrara was focused on capturing the vagrants who made up a good portion of his neighborhoods population on film. The footage itself—taken without the subjects' consent or knowledge—certainly isn't sympathetic, but the multiple shots of homeless people drinking, sleeping, and vomiting on the streets do force the viewer to recognize the existence of the problem.

The film begins with struggling artist Reno Miller lured to a Catholic church by a man claiming to be his father. In front of a lurid mosaic of Christ's crucifixion, which is lit by a single red spotlight, Reno finds a disheveled older man with a white flowing beard. As Reno cautiously peers at the man and tentatively reaches out his hand, the man suddenly clutches Reno's hand and whispers "Son." Reno turns and flees as the music for this scene shifts to the jarring chords of terror familiar to any horror movie fan, signaling clearly Reno's intense fear of the man. As Reno rushes past a nun, she states in surprise

that the older man had Reno's name and phone number, confirming that he is, in all likelihood, Reno's father. After rushing to the safety of a waiting cab, however, Reno tells his girlfriend Carol that the man was "some fucking degenerate, bum, wino, I don't know." It would be easy to dismiss the shocking scenes of vagricide in *The Driller Killer* as a nod towards a more conservative or uncaring attitude towards the city's homeless population, but this first scene, and Reno's expressions of caged fear as his life spirals out of control, suggest otherwise.

As Reno struggles to finish and then sell his current painting, he begins to take more notice of the several homeless men milling about the street in front of his building. And as the pressure to make a sale, pay his rent, and pay his bills mounts, Reno begins to dream of committing violence against the transients circling outside his door, conflating his fear of homelessness with his desire to use the drill as a weapon of aggression. After seeing an advertisement for a portable power pack on television, Reno realizes he is able to make the power tool mobile, and he begins to murder the homeless people in his neighborhood one by one. The murders begin right as Reno's life starts to spiral out of control and right as he reaches the end of his financial rope. One of his girlfriends leaves him for the punk musician downstairs, and the other returns to her husband, leaving Reno alone. As he fails to sell any of his work and as he runs out of money and friends, Reno seems to suffer a sharp mental break. On the outside he seems fine, lucid, rational, and sane. But he is also possessed by the need to kill that which he does not wish to become, driven by the overwhelming fear of becoming homeless. In this way, Reno's fear

becomes the driving force of the film. The viewer is asked to view the city's transient population not with anger or indignation but with fear.

At the end of the film, after the final credits have rolled, a chilling voice-over reiterates the film's message in a mantra that could very well be applied to all of Ferrara's films. One of the homeless "actors" from the film states: "You're telling me that I'm not a respectable person in this world. Excuse me. Am I a respectable person?" Then, as the man apparently sees a possible donor he asks "Have you got a quarter?" and as he receives his money he replies "God bless you. God bless you. Asshole." Ferrara asks his audience whether any of the protagonists in his films are "respectable," and despite their answer, whether viewers choose to pay any real attention to the working class characters in his films or not, they're all still treated with some level of contempt for not acknowledging those people in the first place. Moving beyond the more simplistic portrayals of crime in the city, Ferrara works as a provocateur, using urban violence to force viewers to confront a side of the city and its inhabitants that would much rather leave unexamined. This insistence on confronting viewers with elements of the city they would usually choose to ignore is a thread that continues to play out in Ferrara's version of the urban vigilante film and the *Lilith* film.

***Ms. .45* (1981)**

Ms. .45, Ferrara's second film, presents the story of Thana, a seamstress working and living in Manhattan. Thana—played by Zöe Tamerlis—is mute, a handicap her boss suggests means that she'll "have to try harder than a normal person." The boss is male,

and his employees are all female, and whereas the female employees try their best to include Thana in a form of camaraderie, her boss is only interested in her sexually (at several points during the movie, Thana's boss, Albert deliberately places his hands on her while his eyes travel up and down her body). On her way home from work one evening, Thana is yanked off the street and raped at gunpoint by a man in a mask. As the rape is happening, the film cuts to shots of a burglar breaking into her apartment, and as Thana gets home she is assaulted a second time by the burglar. As the burglar comes to orgasm, he drops his gun, enabling Thana to first stun him with a paperweight and then bludgeon him to death with an iron. Still in a state of shock, Thana drags him to her bathtub and eventually dismembers the body and places the parts in garbage bags and then into her refrigerator. Over the course of the next few days, Thana distributes her bags of body parts throughout the city, but on one of these forays she is nearly apprehended by a street heckler in a back alley. As the man runs towards her, Thana shoots him with the second rapists' .45 caliber handgun.

At this point in the film, reactive murder turns to proactive murder. The violence visited on Thana has changed her outlook on life and has caused her to be more keenly aware of the men of the city who take every chance they can get to dominate and abuse women. Each of Thana's successive victims is shown either threatening violence towards women or committing violence towards women. As one theorist puts it: "The remainder of the film shows Thana as a kind of ultimate feminist vigilante gunning down men who traffic in women" (Clover 141). The film ends in a violent shootout as Thana murders her boss and a series of obnoxious male characters during a Halloween party. *Ms. .45*—and

its character's unrelenting punishment of male deviants—can be seen as a prototypical urban vigilante movie. Of course, *Ms. .45* does not exactly fit this category. *Ms. .45* is a vigilante film; Thana's victims are either criminals or those seen as willing to commit violence towards women. But Thana is certainly not out to protect some form of middle-class privilege, and beyond her murder of the second rapist, Thana is not overly concerned with enacting revenge for her own crimes. Instead, Thana is closer to *Death Wish*'s Paul Kersey as she switches between luring potential male victimizers to their deaths and murdering targets of opportunity. But unlike in *Death Wish*, in *Ms. .45* the vigilante is not presented as an urban hero to be idolized and imitated, but as a woman who walks the borderline of insanity.

In *Screening Sex*, Linda Williams describes the confusion she felt after viewing Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* (1960) and Vittorio De Sica's *Two Women* (1960) as a teenager. Williams states that she was uncomfortable with the feeling of sexual arousal that the rape scenes in each film instilled in her, and that she found it difficult to reconcile her feelings with the way in which both films sought to align the spectator with the point of view of the rapist. Williams shows that, specifically, each film depicts the rape through the eyes of the rapist by focusing the camera on close-up shots of each young woman's face as she is raped (69-71). Carol Clover argues that in the rape-revenge films of the 1970s and 1980s, the rape scenes are often filmed from the point of view of the victim, enabling the viewer to be more viscerally connected to the desire for revenge. However, as Clover notes, the majority of the viewers of rape-revenge films are males, typically teenaged males. This poses a problem when it comes to the spectator identifying

with the victim. Clover quotes a film review where the critic witnessed a mostly male viewership turn deathly silent as Thana murders the men in the film: “Never has a 42nd Street theater been so quiet and disciplined as when Thana went through her rounds and murdered every offensive male who crossed her path. Had the men in this audience witnessed their own possible fates if they continued to relate to women as they did?” (142). For Clover, the silence during the rape scene in particular is less important than the continued viewing of a film that so obviously jarred its male audience. This leads Clover to a series of unanswered questions:

If the male spectator is able to “identify” with the woman on her revenge quest, then is he not equally able to “identify” with her during the rape sequences—is not, in fact, his identification during the revenge predicated on some “identification” with her as rape victim? If the male spectator can only identify with male characters, he must get some sort of pleasure in being repeatedly ‘killed’ at the hands of a woman. However you cut it, the male spectator of this film is masochistically implicated. (n142)

But Clover’s dichotomy of male-spectator-as-victim of rape or male-spectator-as-victim of revenge doesn’t ring true when we actually view the rape scenes in *Ms. 45*.

In both rape scenes in the film, the camera uses shots from both the rapist’s and Thana’s points of view, but it also presents portions of the attacks from a third person point of view. Ferrara’s choice of camera placement isn’t random or without thought, however, as the use of third person asks the viewer to identify neither with the victim nor with the rapist, but instead to position him(her?)self as a voyeuristic bystander, someone viewing but not participating in the attacks. During the first rape, for instance, the scene alternates between shots of the rapist’s masked face and shots of Thana’s horrified expression as the rapist attacks her from behind. During the assault, the rapist can’t see

Thana's expression, and Thana can't see the rapist; thus, the viewer is presented with neither character's point of view. The scene is short, no longer than 40 seconds even with the intercut of the shot showing the robbery occurring in Thana's apartment, so the viewer hardly has the chance to feel anything other than shock, but it's unlikely that the viewer would be able to identify with either Thana or the rapist. There is no prurient element in this scene, no titillation comes from Thana's violation; there is only shock and horror. The second rape scene is filmed in a similar manner. While the first few shots of the burglar focus on his face as he demands that Thana give him her wallet, the reverse shots are filmed from an angle, not from Thana's point of view. And as he begins to rape her, the camera is not positioned above Thana or looking up at the rapist from her position on the floor. Instead, the camera alternates between shots that focus on Thana's horrified expression, filmed from Thana's position on the floor and close-ups of the rapist's face, filmed not from Thana's point of view but from the space in between her and the rapist. This scene is also short, but it's clear that Ferrara chose not to use the camera to represent either of the characters.

By positioning the camera from the point of view of a third person, Ferrara asks viewers to put themselves directly in the scene, not as victim or victimizer, but as witness to Thana's brutal attack. In this way the viewer is forced to react to these rapes as more of an outsider; the viewer is forced to choose whether to condone or condemn the act of rape—and Thana's choices throughout the rest of the film—based on his own personal morality, just as he would for any other crime in the city. With the shame of bystander apathy that stemmed from the murder of Kitty Genovese still in the minds of most

Americans, Ferrara positions the audience as witnesses to these crimes in order to almost dare them not to react. As with the repeated scenes of homelessness in *The Driller Killer*, the rape scenes in *Ms. 45* compel viewers to confront images of the city that they would most often ignore, to push them to confront the reality of sexual assault in the city.

Ferrara's unflinching depiction of Thana's assault rubs the viewer's face in the act, daring him to do nothing, to feel nothing.

Of course a less problematic explanation for the spectator's engagement in the film is provided by a quote from actress Zöe Tamerlis: "It's truly, in my more elaborate view, about anyone who's been raped or screwed in any way. The real villain is Thana's boss, who wants to keep his women for forty years in his service. He's the one person she sets out to kill" (qtd. in Williams 153). As I mentioned before, Thana is not the middle-class, urban frontiersman that Paul Kersey is in *Death Wish*. Thana can't be working towards gentrification of the city because in some sense, Thana—and her apartment, job as seamstress, and co-workers—is the one who will disappear as the gentrification of the '70s and '80s destroys her way of life. Paul Kersey is disgusted with the unwillingness of the police to pursue his case. Thana knows that she could never even approach the police. She belongs to the working class that the neoconservative urban vigilantes see as part of the problem. *Ms. 45* moves beyond the urban vigilante film just as it moves beyond the simple axis of revenge articulated in Clover's description of rape-revenge films. The spectator—male or female—can identify him or herself with Thana because she represents everyone who has been raped—literally or figuratively—by the injustice of the city.

***Fear City* (1984)**

Abel Ferrara's Lilith film, *Fear City*, begins with an aerial shot of New York at night. Bright red credits reminiscent of a horror film appear on the screen as the film then cuts to street shots of New York's 42nd street intercut with shots of strippers in clubs big and small. Obviously working with a bigger budget than that of either of his two previous films, Ferrara's New York in *Fear City* is more polished and slick. Reflecting the turn towards the more frenetic editing and composition styles fast becoming dominant in the eighties, the shots of the film are shorter in duration, and the images are much more sharply defined. In the film, Tom Berenger and Jack Scalia play Matt Rossi and Nicky Parzeno, two of the city's top talent agents for exotic dancers and co-owners of the Starlite Talent agency. Rossi is an ex-boxer trying to forget the man he killed during a fateful boxing match, and he and Parzeno provide dancers for several of the city's mob-owned strip clubs. Throughout the film, Rossi also tries to reconnect with his estranged lover Loretta, played by Melanie Griffith, who is also a dancer at one of the clubs and has an on-again, off-again drug habit. However, the film is not so much concerned with Rossi's relationship with Loretta or with the everyday lives of the strippers he employs.

Over the course of the film, the world of New York's 42nd street strip clubs is menaced by a psychotic martial arts enthusiast who spends his nights brutally attacking the city's strippers—most of whom work for Rossi and Parzeno. As the pair see their clients systematically hunted down and their profits all but disappear, Rossi is forced to move past his killing of the boxer and deal with the attacker on his own. Opposing Rossi in his quest for vengeance—and serving as the representative of an inept police force—is

local vice detective Al Wheeler, played by Billy Dee Williams. Wheeler initially suspects Rossi of the crimes, but after a rival talent agent's client is attacked, he is forced to change his mind, and after first looking at both Rossi and the strippers in disgust, Wheeler eventually comes to show Rossi a begrudging amount of respect.

Fear City is perhaps the weakest film of the three analyzed here, and by no means is it a perfect representation of the sympathetic Lilith film. The violence against women in the film is no more graphic than the violence that appears in Ferrara's first two films, but these scenes don't create a strong connection between the audience and either the victims or the attacker. The shots of the attacks are short and jarring, and although they don't create the same questions of spectatorship posed by *Ms. 45* or the other films analyzed by Clover, they also reduce the acts to something closer to mindless spectacle. The film also shies away from the more objective views of the city found in *The Driller Killer* and *Ms. 45*, turning instead to a weak binary formed by somewhat sympathetic portrayals of Rossi and his clients on the one hand and the far more caustic view of the city provided by Williams's detective Wheeler. Wheeler's openly contemptuous attitude towards both Rossi and the dancers seems to sum up Ferrara's own attitude towards the characters as at one point Wheeler states: "I'd love to put them all in jail. Nobody's clean."

Ferrara's psychotic killer in the film is also reduced to something more evocative of a maniac from one of the decade's teen-slasher films. There is some novelty in the film's depiction of the killer—such as the scene where the attacker is shown as a face in a crowd of Latinos watching stripper Leila, played by Rae Dawn Chong. Unlike in the

previous club scenes, the men at this club are marked by costume and appearance as working class. The attacker's race sets him apart from the rest of the crowd, but no more than his intense and creepy stare. After the attacker murders Leila, in a scene recreated in a number of serial killer films, the attacker is then shown writing an entry in his diary, detailing the events of the attack through a stylistically creepy voiceover. The attacker's apartment is practically empty save for a single desk and two large posters of the human body. In later scenes, the killer attacks another woman, later labeling her a "criminal," a "whore," and a "worthless life" in his journal, which is revealed to be titled "Fear City." In one particularly over-the-top sequence, the film presents shots of the killer as he practices martial arts moves nude in his apartment that are cross-cut with scenes of the mob's gunmen, the police, and Rossi hunting the killer around Times Square. The promise of these scenes is never met, however, and *Fear City* never quite reaches the levels of personalization of the attacker that are present in *The Driller Killer*.

Despite the lack of characterization of most of the strippers throughout the film, *Fear City* does try to create a more nuanced picture of Rossi's girlfriend, Loretta. As a drug addict, Loretta has a clear reason for choosing life as an exotic dancer, and there are hints that Ferrara sees the influence of drugs as more menacing than the attacker himself. After Loretta walks in on Leila dying at the hospital, she immediately visits her dealer. When her dealer slowly opens the door and sees Loretta, he smiles knowingly and states: "Welcome back." The film doesn't moralize Loretta's choice to relapse into drug use—she is neither killed nor violently punished for turning to drugs in her fear and grief—but it does suggest that drug use is what compels many women to turn to sex work. The film

also presents a sympathetic view of the loose community the strippers form with Rossi and Parzeno. These women look to their bosses for work and for protection, but they just as often depend on themselves for support. As word of the murders makes its way through the city, the strippers know that police like Wheeler only see them as unclean human garbage. As Stevens suggests:

Matt differs from Reno and Thana in that he belongs to a social group: the Starlite agency contains a 'family' of dancers with whom he maintains warm personal relationships.... Matt's problem...is that he is unable to recognize any of this....Matt constantly rejects claims of friendship (he prefers the clear-cut ethics of 'business'), the killer's function being to break down those barriers Matt has built to insulate himself from emotional demands (80-81).

Rossi's eventual acceptance of his role in the dancers' lives eventually leads him to kill their attacker, and as he rescues Loretta, he becomes even more connected to the women who work for him. Unlike in *Vice Squad* or in *Hardcore*, it is a representative of sex work in the city who finally slays the violent sexual predator. *Fear City* ultimately works to strengthen the community created by society's refusal to acknowledge those working on the streets, and if the film doesn't entirely redeem those working in the sex trade, it at least humanizes both the men and women who cater to the males wishing to purchase sex in the city.

Ferrara would return to New York after a brief stint in the '80s writing for *Miami Vice*, and his later films also work to present a more nuanced view of the city and its working class and criminal residents, but *The Driller Killer*, *Ms. 45*, and even *Fear City* work to create a strong counter-narrative to the more conservative depictions of urban violence and violence against women popular in the '70s and '80s. As strong examples of films working to project a more objective view of life in New York city, Ferrara's

versions of the urban vigilante film and the Lilith film also work to provide a clear contrast to the works of urban dystopianists who chose to turn away from the lives of working class men and women and toward those who could avoid any exposure to life in the streets whatsoever. The next chapter examines the surprising amorality and pointed disappointment felt by those wealthy enough to isolate themselves from the realities of the city so that they might create their own microcosm of terror and regret.

Chapter 3

No Room at the Top:

Isolation and Wealth in the Gated City

Introduction

In the last chapter I examined the use of filmic violence by conservative thinkers to castigate the working class residents who were often the victims of urban aggression and those few filmmakers who chose to present a more even-handed view of urban conflict. While that chapter was concerned primarily with the purposeful manipulation of images of violence to reinforce a narrative of working class criminality and female inferiority, this chapter looks toward the spaces of exclusivity and isolation carved out of suburban spaces and urban centers by those responsible for demonizing the urban poor. Although this chapter features narratives that focus on cities that deploy two intrinsically different spatial forms—the densely populated vertical city and the uncontrolled sprawl of Los Angeles—I’m able to show that regardless of an urban area’s size or density, the living spaces of the wealthy are marked by isolation, fear, and strict segregation based on class and social status. The similarities between these two versions of the city are evident in the descriptions used by geographers and urban theorists to describe their form. Marc Gottdiener and George Kephart suggest of Los Angeles that “Because of the massive regional dispersal of population, industry, and commerce, we now have vast urbanized areas for which the concept of urban dominance is becoming obsolete. These areas constitute a settlement-space form that is polynucleated, functionally dispersed, culturally fragmented, yet hierarchically organized, and that extends for tens and even hundreds of

miles” (33-4). And as Jeremiah B. C. Axelrod states of New York’s vertical center: “Although every New Yorker could read the basic marks of the metropolis and veteran urbanites could soon locate themselves within it, many city dwellers—and especially those relegated to the city’s geographical, racial, and social peripheries—could really be sure only that the city did indeed have a clearly identifiable center and they were most certainly not in it” (155). Urban dystopias focusing on the living spaces of the prosperous suggest that at the heart of any enclave built on exclusion lies a complex relationship between segregation by social and economic status and an almost soulless isolation from even those within their own communities.

Urban dystopias rarely focus on the lives of the wealthy, preferring instead to use their proletarian protagonists to illuminate the lives of the victims of the inequities created by those in power. Most of the novels and films mentioned in this dissertation rely on partial or incomplete characterizations of those in the upper classes as either part of a monolithic structure of control or as shadowy, insular figures perfectly willing to build their empires on the littered corpses of the working poor. There are, however, a handful of stories and novels that chose to question the lives of those most able to manipulate urban spaces to their benefit and the vacuity that lies at the heart of the conspicuous consumption and narcissistic excess that such manipulation makes possible. In Frederik Pohl’s “The Midas Plague” (1954), technology has enabled such an excess of production that the term “poor” is now used to designate citizens forced to adhere to overwhelming consumption quotas that make opulence synonymous with obligation.

Charles Platt's *The City Dwellers*³⁰ (1970), shows what happens to the “pleasure palaces” and the gigantic automated shopping centers of the future after the city has died. Mark Adlard's T-City Trilogy, *Interface* (1971), *Volteface* (1972), and *Multiface* (1975), describes a future where a select few technologically modified executives living in luxury control all aspects of life for those living within a giant, overcrowded, domed city.³¹ In all three novels, Adlard suggests that the end of capitalism is far more likely to result in the executive class struggling to maintain their positions of authority and superiority than in any utopian dream of an equal access to enlightenment and prosperity. Each of the works listed here highlights the emptiness of a life dedicated to consumption and power, but— with the exception of Adlard's novels—they don't explicitly critique the complicity of the privileged in perpetuating restrictive land use policies.

Unlike the previous two chapters, this chapter turns away from the urban dystopias that examined the lives of the urban poor to examine, instead, narratives that provide an allegorical view of the ways the very rich sought to create, control, and manage urban space in the hopes of divorcing themselves from the mass of city-dwellers who also called these places home. This chapter begins with an examination of two texts—J.G. Ballard's *High-Rise* (1975) and Robert Silverberg's *The World Inside* (1971)—that interrogate the pervasive replication of the social differentiation found in capitalist society. I then move to Joan Didion's first Los Angeles novel, *Play It As It Lays* (1970), specifically highlighting the main character, Maria Wyeth's use of the freeway

³⁰ Also released as *The Twilight of the City* by Macmillan Pub. in 1977.

³¹ For more on these novels see Hurst 8-10 and Latham 19-24.

system to try and find a sense of security and place that might stabilize some part of her tenuous grip on life. Finally, I end by returning to an L.A. navigated and populated by the very rich. In the narcissistic and nihilistic Los Angeles of Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero* (1985), I examine the intensification of the exclusion and ennui endemic in the privileged during the 1980s. In each of the texts I use in this chapter, it becomes clear that a life built on division and exclusivity almost always leads to a painful isolation.

Madness and Residential Differentiation in the Vertical City

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the vertical development of metropolitan areas such as New York and Chicago became commonplace, and soon the skyscrapers and high-rise buildings characteristic of Chicago's downtown Loop and Manhattan's impressive skyline would dominate modernist cultural representations of the city. As Axelrod suggests, the scale and size of the skyscraper "evoked strong feelings of awe in the (in comparison tiny) observer" and the buildings came to represent a utopian synthesis of "progress and modernity" (133-34). Illustrations by New York booster Moses King, pulp artist Frank R. Paul, and architect Harvey Wiley Corbett suggested towering, austere skyscrapers, linked by elevated walkways and roads, as emblematic of the city of the future. But no one would do more to promote the vertical city than the architect and urban visionary known as Le Corbusier.

Born Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, Le Corbusier would create an austere, monolithic vision of urban architecture that would influence architects and city planners

for over half a century. Le Corbusier's "La Ville Contemporaine" (163-80)³², emphasized the need to decongest city centers by increasing their density and called for a central area dominated by towering office buildings. Believing that little could be done within existing city centers, Le Corbusier argued vehemently for razing downtown blocks entirely so that the urban planner could begin with a clean slate. Within the Contemporary City, residential areas would be strictly segregated by occupation: six-story luxury apartments for industrial scientists and artists; and mass-produced, hive-like apartments for the working classes (Le Corbusier *The City of To-morrow and Its Planning* 163-80). After losing faith in capitalism and embracing the more egalitarian ethos of revolutionary syndicalism, Le Corbusier would expand and reimagine his views of the city in his 1933 work, *La Ville Radieuse* (see Fishman 230-31). The Radiant City attempted to eliminate class division in its housing by creating Unités, giant collective apartment buildings featuring individual living units allocated by family size instead of income and limited to "the minimum space necessary for efficient existence" (Hall 210). The Unité would be much larger than the proposed residential buildings of the Contemporary City, and these high-rise structures would come complete with gymnasiums, pools, primary school, and stores. Although Le Corbusier would never see his plans fully implemented, he was a constant booster for the vertical city, and though his call for centrally controlled egalitarian living spaces would never be taken up, his ideas would influence later planners and architects in two important ways; Le Corbusier's

³² "La Ville contemporaine" or "The Contemporary City" first appeared in Le Corbusier's *Urbanisme* (1925) and was later translated by Frederick Etchells as part of *The City of To-morrow and Its Planning* (1929).

strategy of razing existing city centers would be used in urban renewal efforts to make room for luxury high rise apartments, and his call for mass-produced, cramped, uniform apartment complexes would be replicated in dozens of public housing projects.

By the end of the 1960s, the utopian promise of Le Corbusier's "Ville Radieuse" had begun to come under heavy criticism in the work of science fiction's New Wave authors.³³ The idea that centralized living and work spaces could create a classless, tightly-knit community seemed out of touch with the urban realities of the 1960s and '70s. Specifically, the image of the tall, free-standing apartment complex had become less associated with a community of equals than with the separation of a specific class of residents from the outside world. The remainder of this section examines the connection between the isolated, self-contained living spaces depicted in Ballard's *High-Rise* and Silverberg's *The World Inside* and the residential differentiation and class segregation analyzed by Marxist urban theorists such as Manuel Castells and David Harvey as characteristic of contemporary cities. Deploying Harvey's conceptions of a just distribution of income and apportionment of urban space, as outlined in *Social Justice and the City*, I also examine Ballard's and Silverberg's depiction of how, even under seemingly ideal conditions, a utopian alternative to inequitable living standards as imagined by urban planners such as Le Corbusier simply isn't possible under capitalist social relations.

Ballard's novel anatomizes the callous existence of those at the top by exposing the class division and spatial segregation that persist even in an isolated, affluent, high-

³³ See Latham "The Urban Question in New Wave SF."

rise apartment building. This class segregation is also found in Silverberg's futuristic "Urbmons," vast tower blocks where those with the most socioeconomic power naturally reside in the uppermost floors. Although Silverberg's characters are freed by automation and other advanced technologies from the need to participate in a system of monetary exchange, the Urbmons are, nevertheless, unable to escape from a residential and social segregation based on capitalist social relations. But neither novel relies on a simple binary of haves and have-nots. Instead, both authors focus on the complicity of urban planners and building management in insuring that such class divisions are strictly defined and enforced.

High-Rise

Ballard's novels *Crash* (1973) and *Concrete Island* (1973) began a critique of contemporary urban living that would continue throughout his career. These novels and Ballard's later explorations of upper class luxury resorts and isolated corporate living³⁴ also suggested that the decadent, technologically bound urbanity of the upper classes belied an almost universal dissatisfaction with life that would ultimately manifest itself in savage acts of violence. One of the best examples of Ballard's dystopian cities of decay, *High-Rise*, focuses on a group of wealthy, successful professionals living in the first building of a five-unit complex two miles east of London. The apartment building, a forty-story monument of glass and steel, although still on the borders of the larger city, is part of a recent redevelopment project that includes a medical school, television studios,

³⁴ See Ballard *Super-Cannes* (2000) and *Cocaine Nights* (1998).

and a newly completed concert hall. As many of the residents work in one of these locations, they find little reason to leave the immediate area, content to contain their existence within the radius of a single square mile. Further isolating the residents from the rest of the city is the high rise itself, containing on the tenth floor, “a supermarket, bank and hairdressing salon, a swimming-pool and gymnasium, a well-stocked liquor store and a junior school for the few young children in the block” (9). On the 35th floor, a second swimming pool, a sauna, and a restaurant complete any additional needs the tenants might have. The apartment building in the novel seems to cocoon the residents, insulating them from the outside world and giving them some semblance of providing for their every need. As one tenant puts it:

The high-rise was a huge machine designed to serve, not the collective body of tenants, but the individual resident in isolation. Its staff of air-conditioning conduits, elevators, garbage-disposal chutes and electrical switching systems provided a never-failing supply of care and attention that a century earlier would have needed an army of tireless servants. (10)

Ballard himself said in a 1975 interview that his fiction “is really about one person coming to terms with various forms of isolation” (Pringle 15). Early on in the novel, *High-Rise* identifies the paradox of high-density building construction; tenants are ensured the ability to live individually yet surrounded by hundreds of people intent on maintaining the same level of seclusion. However, while insular living is both encouraged and catered to in the building, *High-Rise* has much more to say about the social and cultural groupings formed in the vertical city.

In Ballard’s apartment of the future, there still exists a need to recreate the social and residential differentiation painfully present in the distribution of land use in greater

London. Echoing Marxist theories of the social cohesion of any urban neighborhood, Dr. Robert Liang, a teaching physician living on the 25th floor, initially believes that the residents of the building are “probably closer to each other than the members of any conceivable social mix, with the same tastes and attitudes, fads and styles” (10). But within the novel this society of equals begins to break down almost immediately. As Wilder, a tenant from the second floor observes, “an apparently homogenous collection of high-income professional people had split into three distinct and hostile camps. The old social subdivisions, based on power, capital and self-interest, had re-asserted themselves here as anywhere else” (53). Despite their ability to afford to live in the high-rise, the residents of the lowest nine floors of the building serve as the lower class, a “proletariat” of “film technicians and air hostesses”; the middle section, or middle class of the building is comprised of “self-centered but basically docile members of the professions—the doctors and lawyers, accountants and tax specialists”; and the top five floors serve as the upper class, the “discreet oligarchy of minor tycoons and entrepreneurs, television actresses and careerist academics” (53). Soon the three groups begin to become obsessed with a series of subtle aggravations, minor events to fixate upon until they begin to fester and burst forth into eruptions of violence. The children of the lower floors are soon blamed for noise and disruptive behavior, and their “disorderly” conduct at the pool soon angers the middle and upper floor residents. The residents on the upper floors are blamed for the noise and music of a series of never-ending parties and for their roaming packs of well-manicured dogs. The building itself then seems to egg on these neighborly squabbles as electrical and waste systems begin to fail. But rather than

find ways of creating a cooperative living space, the tenants of the high-rise only amplify their offensive behavior. Children are encouraged to make noise, dogs are encouraged to bark, and bottles of champagne are carelessly dropped from upper floors. The novel makes it very clear that although each of the tenants possesses the same basic background, there still exists a need to create a set of artificial and imagined boundaries based on social status and residence location—the same set of boundaries that are wedded to the very real class and status barriers found in the residential differentiation of the late capitalist city.

Harvey challenges earlier theories of residential differentiation that suggested simply that “similar people like to, or simply do, live close to each other” (*The Urban Experience* 109) by identifying the role that class relations play in residential decision making. Harvey asserts that social differentiation is caused primarily by “[p]ower relations between capital and labor” but also through:

A variety of secondary forces arising out of the contradictory and evolutionary character of capitalism which encourage social differentiation along lines defined by (a) the division of labor and specialization of function, (b) consumption patterns and life-style, (c) authority relations, (d) manipulated projections of ideological and political consciousness, and (e) barriers to mobility chances. (*The Urban Experience* 117)

These conditions responsible for residential differentiation—especially the active creation of barriers to mobility chances—were often used by those in power to encourage residential segregation patterns that effectively forced the urban poor to concentrate within densely populated pockets of poverty. But the perpetuation of capitalist society requires that the conditions of social differentiation apply to every economic strata of

society, and even within the upper class there exists the need to perpetuate antagonism and division.

As Edward Soja suggests of the “yuppies” who came to dominate urban environments in the late twentieth century: “Never before perhaps have the top percentiles of the income ladder been so heterogeneous, so internally divided, so *déclassé* [...] Such Upper Professionals ... may not constitute a cohesive class and probably do not control the highest peaks of economic and political power in the postmetropolis, but they increasingly influence daily life in the city” (276). Ballard places these “Upper Professionals” together—in a space designed to be perfect—and their internal divisions become eerily similar to those responsible for residential differentiation. While those living in the upper floors seem far more accepting of their positions within the building, Wilder, a resident of the lower floors, becomes filled “with a growing sense of impatience and resentment,” convinced that those on the lower floors had “an inclination to tolerate an undue amount of interference before simply packing up and moving on. In short, their territorial instinct, in its psychological and social senses, had atrophied to the point where they were ripe for exploitation” (54). At the top of the tower, occupying the building’s penthouse and attempting to orchestrate the exploitation of the residents, is Anthony Royal, the building’s architect and principal investor. Before the complete collapse of order and structure in the building, “Royal was certain that a rigid hierarchy of some kind was the key to the elusive success of these huge buildings. As he often pointed out to Anne [his wife], office blocks containing as many as thirty thousand workers functioned smoothly for decades thanks to a social hierarchy as rigid and as

formalized as an anthill's" (70). Even after the high-rise's descent into chaos, Royal is convinced that "he had given these people a means of escaping into a new life, and a pattern of social organization that would become the paradigm of all future high-rise blocks" (70).

Royal's attempt to nurture the same hierarchical structure of social differentiation found in the larger city in his building is similar to what Harvey sees as "the processes whereby residential differentiation is produced by the organization of forces external to the individual or even to the collective will of the particular social grouping" (*The Urban Experience* 121). Harvey further suggests, financial and government institutions "regulate the dynamic of the urbanization process (usually in the interest of accumulation and economic crisis management) and also wield their influence in such a way that certain broad patterns in residential differentiation are produced" (*The Urban Experience* 121). It is no surprise that Ballard assigns the symbolic role of housing coordinator to Royal as his position in the novel as both architect of the building and topmost resident afford him the best possible vantage point for social manipulation. Royal's ego and confidence in an architect's ability to best determine community organization is also similar to those of Le Corbusier, who strongly believed that harmonious living was only possible through the concerted efforts of a master planner.

The isolated apartment structure in *High-Rise* is also an example of what Mike Davis calls the "corporate citadel" that lies in the heart of "Fortress LA" (223). Davis argues in *City of Quartz* that: "we live in 'fortress cities' brutally divided between 'fortified cells' of affluent society and 'places of terror' where the police battle the

criminalized poor” (224). Davis shows that in Los Angeles, as in other major metropolitan cities, middle and upper class demand for “increased spatial and social insulation” has driven municipal policy to concentrate on “corporate-defined redevelopment priorities” that often include a conscious attempt to privatize or otherwise destroy public space (227). In *High-Rise*, as soon as open hostilities break out among the residents, it is the public spaces of the building that are the first to become battlegrounds. Children are discouraged from using the pool and the junior school, and frightened parents soon keep their kids at home or in improvised classrooms in the lower levels of the building. Top floor residents are accused of letting their dogs run free, and it is suggested that the affluent are encouraging their animals to defecate in the hallways and lobbies of the lower floors. Eventually, the elevators themselves become contested spaces as residents forcefully hold them open at certain floors, restricting resident movement and protecting against any violation of their sovereign space. Soon even the stairwells become inaccessible, sealed off by makeshift blockades and protected by club-wielding guards. Food and egress through the building are fought for by raiding parties, and the fatalities slowly begin to mount.

The residents’ behavior also replicates—on a much smaller scale—the distribution and defense of urban space in any major city. The conditions of the apartment building are eerily similar to Davis’s descriptions of the affluent neighborhoods of Los Angeles:

[N]ew luxury developments outside the city limits have often become fortress cities, complete with encompassing walls, restricted entry points with guard posts, overlapping private and public police services, and even privatized roadways.... Meanwhile, traditional luxury enclaves such as

Beverly Hills and San Marino are increasingly restricting public access to their public facilities...even imposing a variant of neighborhood 'passport control' on outsiders. (244-46)

The separation of floors and the extra value given to the apartments closer to the top of the building, the segregation of tenants not just by location but by occupation and class, and the concerted effort by the residents to control public space perfectly mirror Davis's description of the Carceral city and Harvey's analysis of the dynamics of urban land use. Ballard might have had the desire to explore the alienation present in the urban dwellers of the 1970s, but he also created a microcosm of the injustice faced by those unable to live within the walls of any *High-Rise*.

Harvey's *Social Justice and the City* outlines the conditions necessary to eliminate the residential differentiation developed by capital and protected by the state. Harvey argues that before any notion of equitable land use can evolve, there would need to be a "just distribution" of resources (*Social Justice and the City* 96-119). He suggests that by meeting three criteria—need, contribution to the common good, and merit—a more equitable distribution of resources could be deployed, and this would allow "the principles of social justice" to be applied to urban space. Under these principles: "The distribution of income should be such that (a) the needs of the population within each territory are met, (b) resources are so allocated to maximize interterritorial multiplier effects³⁵, and (c) extra resources are allocated to help overcome special difficulties stemming from the physical and social environment" (*Social Justice and the City* 116). Additionally, "The mechanisms (institutional, organizational, political and economic)

³⁵ Harvey describes "interregional multiplier effects" as the effect of an allocation of resources in one territory on another (*Social Justice and the City* 105-6).

should be such that the prospects of the least advantaged territory are as great as they possibly can be” (*Social Justice and the City* 116-17). What this would mean, of course, would be a complete and total elimination of the mechanism guiding the urban land market. Harvey states:

The mechanism in this case is very simple—competitive bidding for the use of land. If we eliminate this mechanism, we will presumably eliminate the result. This is immediately suggestive of a policy for eliminating ghettos, which would presumably supplant competitive bidding with a socially controlled urban land market and socialized control of the housing sector. (*Social Justice and the City* 137)

After understanding the tenacity with which capitalist systems seek to maintain the replication of social differentiation, it is difficult to imagine the circumstances that might possibly bring about such a radical change in urban land use, but that doesn’t mean that Harvey believed a community founded on the principles of social justice was impossible.

In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Harvey mentions the type of community needed to escape what he saw as the constricting grip of modernist urban planning:

The problems of minorities and the underprivileged, or of the diverse counter-cultural elements that so intrigued Jane Jacobs, get swept under the rug unless some very democratic and egalitarian system of community-based planning can be devised that meets the needs of the rich and poor alike. This presupposes, however, a series of well-knit and cohesive urban communities as its starting point in an urban world that is always in flux and transition. (76-77)

Although Harvey might not be so optimistic about the possibilities of these communities existing in our time, we can see how a “democratic and egalitarian system of community-based planning” is the antithesis of the design and the operation of the eponymous building in Ballard’s *High-Rise*. We can also see that although the small communities of isolated tenants found towards the end of the novel seem to be slightly more egalitarian,

they ultimately fail, and their attempts to find even a sort of stasis within the building are thwarted by a violent devolution. In order to see what Harvey's democratic community might look like, we must turn to a more utopian vision of the future. However—as in Huxley's *Brave New World*—even a community initially designed to meet the needs of the many will eventually devolve into a classist hierarchy of those in control and those being controlled. Harvey's vision of social justice, when applied to conceptions of a future city, begins to sound like the socialist utopias of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but in Silverberg's *The World Inside*, the future is a lot less like Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1887), and a lot more like Ballard's *High Rise*.

The World Inside

In *The World Inside*, the population of the Earth has been relocated to a system of hundreds of urban monads—or Urbmons—each housing over 800,000 people. In Silverberg's conception of the year 2381, the population, resource, and housing crises have been solved by concentrating the majority of Earth's inhabitants vertically, leaving the remainder of the planet to be used for agricultural production. By concentrating the housing, production, and living spaces of the Earth's population into as economical a space as possible, the global population has been allowed to reach 75 billion people. Silverberg's novel concentrates on Urbmon 116, a typical building in the Chipitts constellation of fifty buildings existing within the area that now extends between Chicago and Pittsburgh. Urbmon 116 consists of 999 inhabited floors, with every forty floors

considered a separate city; with the exception of relying on the agricultural production found outside of the Urbmon, the building is entirely self-contained.

While many of the cities in the New Wave novels of the '60s and '70s were centers of poverty, crime, and intense privation, Urbmon 116 comes as close to meeting Harvey's conditions for social justice as any utopian construct. There is no monetary system within the Urbmon; food, water, and entertainment are distributed equally. Housing and location within the Urbmon is determined by employment, with industrial classes living closest to their workplace – on the lower levels – and administrators living towards the top. In addition, social conventions such as privacy and monogamy have been dropped altogether to discourage conflict. In the Urbmon, residents—usually male—are encouraged to practice “nightwalking,” where the resident is free to enter any apartment and have sexual relations with any resident therein.

It becomes fairly obvious to the reader, however, that despite any pretense of equality or tranquility, the Urbmons are strictly segregated by a loose construction of superstitions, taboos, and unspoken laws centering on residence level and employment status. While “nightwalking” is encouraged—no one in the Urbmon is permitted to deny anyone sex—“nightwalking” *between* cities is “a violation of accepted custom” (81). And although every resident in the urban monad is supposedly assigned the position that is best suited to her, engineers, laborers, and artists remain stigmatized while administrators and those living near the top of the building are valorized. Dillon Chrimes, a musician in a group that travels freely throughout the building performing, captures the feeling of this subtle prejudice perfectly:

Lately he and the group have been doing the grime stint: Reykjavik, Prague, Warsaw, down among the grubbos. Well, they're entitled to some entertainment too. Dillon lives in San Francisco, not so lofty himself. The 370th floor; the heart of the cultural ghetto.... The liftshaft shoots him 160 levels heavenward. When he gets off, he is in Rome. Crowded halls, tight faces. The people here are mostly minor bureaucrats, a middle echelon of failed functionaries, those who would never get to Louisville except to deliver a report. They are not smart enough to hope for Chicago or Shanghai or Edinburgh. Crippled souls; walking zeroes; better off down the chute. (56)

And it is the threat of the chute—the threat of being sent down to the furnaces to be harvested as energy—that keeps this prejudice from boiling over into outright aggression. While a sort of city consciousness allows the dwellers of the urban monad to feel a sense of pride and identity on the one hand, on the other hand the fear of being sent down the chute discourages any outright hostility or protest.

Throughout the novel, Silverberg introduces characters who seem to question the organization of Urbmon life or who find it difficult to conform to the rigidly enforced norms of the tower. Urbmon historian Jason Quevado believes the acceptance of communal living to be genetic, and his work, *The Urban Monad as Social Evolution: Parameters of the Spirit Defined by Community Structure*, suggests that:

[T]he transition to an urbmon society has brought about a fundamental transformation of the human soul.... A more pliant, more acquiescent mode of response to events, a turning away from the old expansionist-individualist philosophy as marked by territorial ambition ... toward a kind of communal expansion centered in the orderly and unlimited growth of the human race. Definitely a psychic evolution of some sort, a shift toward graceful acceptance of hive-life. (86-87)

Despite the ability of the majority of residents to make the transition to communal living, Silverberg's choice to focus his novel on those who might be headed to the chute seems

to suggest a belief in the improbability of a socialist utopia.³⁶ Ironically, Quevado himself finds it difficult to conform to the spatial restrictions necessary for maintaining stasis within the Urbmon. Quevado frequently breaks the social custom of nightwalking only within one's own city, and instead finds a deviant pleasure in journeying to the lowest levels of the Urbmon to find women to "top." More importantly, Quevado seems to find a specific pleasure in dominating women who appear to be socially beneath him. In one passage, as Quevado ventures to the 59th floor of Warsaw to nightwalk with a random woman, Silverberg describes his ability to convince her to accept him with a decidedly classist tone: "His educated inflections destroy her resistance" (99). And it is not simply Quevado who chooses to violate Urbmon custom. His wife Micaela is consumed by the desire to move upward within the Urbmon, and she uses sex with one of the upper-most professionals in the building to try and make her husband jealous, an emotion thought to be long removed from humanity. At the end of their section of the novel, after a screaming match that threatens to disrupt their position within the building, Quevado and his wife assume that they're both "[t]hrowbacks to an uglier age" and they agree that they will "have to wear better camouflage" in order to escape the chute (119). But the irony of their situation is that almost all of the characters Silverberg introduces to the reader feel much the same way—that they can't survive within the Urbmon.

³⁶ Silverberg's true motivations for writing *The World Inside* are ambiguous at best. At times the novel seems to be both criticizing and valorizing the concentration of contemporary urban life. While he certainly stresses the psychological toll such cramped living space might have on an individual, he also makes it a point to show the dangers of close-minded rural life. The emphasis on "nightwalking" and psychotropic drug use in the novel also points to the possibility that he was merely trying to cater to readers familiar with the countercultural SF novels of Samuel Delany and Brian Aldiss.

In the section following the one focusing on Quevado and his wife, Siegmund Kluver—a rising star in the Urbmon’s hierarchy of administrators—introduces the reader to life at the very top. Discarding even the pretense of spatial equality, the top one hundred or so floors of the Urbmon offer those in power an unheard of level of luxury that serves to motivate eager junior administrators and satiate the need of those at the top to dominate those below. As Kluver suggests, “[t]here’s space to waste in Louisville” (126). Kluver gives no indication of accepting anything other than a position at the top of the Urbmon, foregoing the seemingly classless aspirations of the Urbmon’s creators for a class envy familiar to any young capitalist reading Silverberg’s novel. But Kluver is torn between his overwhelming desire to rise to the top and an unshakable feeling that he doesn’t belong with the elite. As one of the many women he nightwalks with remarks: “It might just happen that your passionate involvement with administrative affairs, Siegmund, represents more of a desire for mere rung-grabbing than it does a strong humanitarian concern, and you feel so guilty about your intense ambitions that you believe others are thinking about you in the same terms that yourself—” (131). Kluver, like a number of other characters in the novel, opts for death rather than the social and spatial constraints of the Urbmon, making the novel read more like a cautionary dystopia than a socialist utopia.

The World Inside certainly points to an inability to escape the social differentiation so clearly outlined by Harvey. Within the novel, the lowest levels of the Urbmon are represented by cities often equated with working-class living conditions. Prague and Warsaw, with their Eastern European connotations, serve as the lowest levels

of the building and are populated mostly by maintenance workers and laborers. San Francisco, as mentioned above, serves as the home for the novel's musician, and the topmost levels—Toledo, Paris, and Louisville³⁷—serve as mimetic avatars of Western power and accumulation. More importantly, location within the Urbmon—and its indication of professional status—has become shorthand for social distinction among the Urbmon's many residents. Those living at the lower levels are frequently labeled “grubbos” by the building's inhabitants, and the “cultural ghetto” of San Francisco is seen by the upper residents as a subcultural novelty—just risqué enough to visit but never good enough to inhabit for longer than the time it takes to purchase a new work of art. Although Silverberg's choice to create his seeming utopia within the confines of a vertical city might seem a little obvious, he uses the all-too-believable reactions of his protagonists to insure the reader has no doubt of the staying power of the very real social stratification that girds the residential differentiation within the Western world. Harvey might have been able to envision a city where every resident was given equal access to land, but, as Silverberg suggests, there will always be some urban spaces that are better than others.

Neither the tower of capitalist accumulation in Ballard's *High-Rise* nor the future utopia of procreation in Silverberg's *The World Inside* is able to escape the need to establish boundaries based on social or employment status. And as Harvey, Soja, and Davis suggest, these buildings—these worlds—are recreations of the urban spaces we

³⁷ While Louisville might seem like somewhat of a stretch here, I would suggest that Silverberg was attempting to connect the city to the almost antebellum descriptions of the Urbmon's de-facto leader, Nissim Shawke. There's something of a “good old boy” network operating within the administrative center of the Urbmon, and Shawke's attempts to groom Kluver might not seem out of place in a satire of Southern gentility.

live and work in. It is no wonder then that *High-Rise* ends as it begins, with a resident tucking in to a nice dinner of barbequed dog, and no surprise that *The World Inside* ends with Urbmon 116's most promising resident leaping to his death from the 1000th floor. As Silverberg states in the final lines of his novel: "Life goes on. God Bless! Here begins another happy day" (233).

Exclusivity and Despair in the Sprawling Megalopolis

While the works in the second half of this chapter move from the vertically organized spaces of London and the future to the far more horizontal spaces of Los Angeles, they share the same focus on the elitism and isolation that permeates the living spaces of the affluent. Just as the residents of Ballard's and Silverberg's towers are separated both socially and psychologically by the buildings' individual floors, so are the residents of the following texts separated by the gates of their protected enclaves and the freeways that helped to provide the city with its disorganized sprawl. However, Didion's *Play it as it Lays* and Ellis's *Less Than Zero* also highlight the dynamic of racial discrimination that so often plays out in the gated communities found in L.A. In these texts, residential exclusion based on class and race difference is marked less by the characters within them than by the absence of the working class and of a single character of color in their narratives. And it is the absence of characters of color that reflects the connection between these texts and the pervasive history of residential segregation in Los Angeles.

Mike Davis outlines a conscious effort on the part of neighborhood associations, property owners, and city legislatures to limit the housing options for non-Anglo residents of Los Angeles as much as possible. Davis shows that, in many cases, even those able to afford better housing or suburban life were forced to live in the narrow confines of a limited area in order to protect “property values” and an Anglo exclusivity desired in the minds of white residents. In Davis’s work, Los Angeles is less a homogenous urban metropolis than it is a set of circumscribed nodal communities, each seeking to carve out its own definite boundaries—boundaries based on exclusion. Of course, the limiting, divisive attempt to control both public and private space has been a part of L.A. from its initial conception. As Jeremiah B.C. Axelrod outlines in *Inventing Autopia: Dreams and Visions of the Modern Metropolis in Jazz Age Los Angeles*, the sprawling city in the Jazz Age was a racially, socially, and economically segregated battleground of competing interests. Axelrod suggests that the racial and economic segregation of the city was not only appreciated, but also part of a coherent organizational scheme as designed by city planners:

Demographics and ideological common sense came together in the array of census data, academic sociological studies, city planning maps and surveys, and the like produced during the period. These documents revealed Los Angeles as a city rigidly divided in alignment with racial categories of identity. Consequently, the city was, in the eyes of its planners, an exceptionally well-ordered, clean, and properly segregated metropolis. (33)

As the city’s planners struggled to maintain some semblance of legibility and structure in an ever-expanding Los Angeles, strict racial segregation became inextricably linked to conceptions of a well-ordered city. In 1930, many of the suburbs that would eventually be absorbed into the greater Los Angeles basin maintained racial barriers so strict that they

ensured an almost total domination by white residents. At that time, Glendale's population was 98.3 percent white; Huntington Park, 98.2; Long Beach, 98.0; Alhambra, 97.7; and Beverly Hills, 96.3 (Axelrod 34).³⁸ These suburbs were also defined by economic segregation. As Axelrod suggests:

The suburbs were attractive precisely because they clearly represented zones of enhanced economic status; their growth came in direct relation to the increasing social segregation and racial congestion of the more central parts of the city. Thus class relationships interwove with racial and gender dichotomies, further distinguishing among already significantly differentiated people and the places with which they were associated. (36)

This segregation by class and race would continue well into the 1960s, and the decades of residential differentiation would help to create an almost pathological adherence to seeing exclusivity as the most important feature of residence choice in the minds of white middle and upper-class inhabitants of the city.

The barriers put in place to limit racially and economically diverse neighborhoods were certainly sanctioned by—at least the white—urban dwellers. In Bessie Averne McClanahan's 1929 survey of white working-class and middle-class Angelinos, she found an overwhelming preference for racial segregation. As one resident stated:

My friends are not my neighbors. I don't have anything to do with any of them. We have lived here for twelve years. I don't like the apartment house [next door]. We are not planning to move but we would sell if we could get our price from white people. We wouldn't be un-Christian enough to sell to 'niggers.' They are not any closer than they used to be but the neighborhood has changed with the building of apartment houses. The woman across the street wants and has tried to sell to Negroes but if she does, she'll regret it! (69)

³⁸ As Axelrod suggests, however, a number of African Americans living in Beverly Hills “were servants and restricted to their own residential segregations” (329).

The unapologetic racism of the respondent also identifies a number of traits common to those living in the city. The woman quoted above specifically states “[t]hey are not any closer than they used to be,” yet she seems to have an overwhelming fear of intrusion by other races into her neighborhood. This fear of residential diversity is connected to her distaste for “apartment houses,” and it seems as though she’s conflating the erection of rental property with the possibility of African American ingress into her enclave of racial purity. McClenahan found that the residents she interviewed were almost universally concerned with the possibility of a drop in housing values, and that this fear often manifested itself in a redoubling of efforts to maintain residential differentiation.

The quote above also highlights a curious tension between the need to belong to racially and economically constructed urban neighborhoods on the one hand (“We wouldn’t be un-Christian enough to sell to ‘niggers’”) and the almost complete separation from those within the neighborhood on the other (“My friends are not my neighbors. I don’t have anything to do with any of them”). Or, as Axelrod suggests, the curious simultaneity of “the structure of the American metropolis as a mosaic of tightly knit ethnically and economically homogenous enclaves” and the thought that “[n]eighborhood no longer implied social connection, and proximity no longer guaranteed contact” (228-229). The schizophrenic desire to be surrounded by people of similar class and ethnic backgrounds while at the same time maintaining a complete disassociation from one’s neighbors is as much a part of the fabric of Los Angeles as it is a number of major conurbations throughout the country, and it is these desires that also come to define the lives of the wealthy in the novels analyzed in this chapter.

Axelrod's and Davis's work also identifies the very limited ability of those working and living within the urban center of Los Angeles to determine—to use Lefebvre's term—the representations of space, or how the use of space was planned. The freeways—and later demarcations of towns, suburbs, communities, and neighborhoods—were designed, mapped, and built to meet the specifications of those in power. Even as the initial designers began to lose control of what they had hoped to be stable spatial boundaries, there remained a defensible, stable ideal of what the city should be in the minds of affluent city dwellers. The seemingly disparate desires for admittance to the exclusivity of wealth and privilege and a complete and total isolation from even those living in the gated community are central to the savage illustration of Hollywood film communities in Didion's *Play It As It Lays*.

Play It As It Lays

In *Play It As It Lays*, Maria Wyeth is a woman searching for a stable identity within a system that offers her a series of disappointing possibilities, each one farther away from her desires than the last. The novel is also about the struggle for an aging actress to find acceptance and possibility in an industry predetermined to work against her. Maria lives in a world surrounded by constant reminders that, at thirty-one years of age and with only a single film released, she must now choose a lesser destiny. The novel is also about the system itself, about the ways in which every friendship, every relationship, every street in the city of Hollywood re-enforces a rigid system of control over the women and men living there. The rigid systems of residential segregation as

outlined by Axelrod and Davis are seen here to force Maria to either conform or be cast out. Maria's husband Carter Lang, her friend Helene, Helene's producer husband BZ, Maria's lover Les Goodwin, and even her agent Freddy Chaikin all work to try and condition Maria to fit within a system she struggles to resist in the hopes of winning something closer to what she really wants.

In "The Hollywood Novel: American Dream, Apocalyptic Vision," K. Eddington suggests that:

[L]iterature about Hollywood has focused on the nightmarish aspects of a highly competitive culture in which career success determines one's sense of self and self-worth, and the pursuit of the dream becomes self-destructive for both individual and society...characters become so enmeshed in pursuit of career success that they lose any sense of their own identities; the dream proves unachievable even for the successful. (64)

Within Didion's novel, Maria struggles to maintain some sense of identity even when confronted with the idea that her dreams are unachievable. Every aspect of the city itself works to stress both the need for career success and the penalties for those who fail to achieve it. In the novel, there are connections between Hollywood, Las Vegas, the desert, and the participants in the Hollywood system, where the spaces themselves become metaphors for the experience of maintaining an identity within that system. As Maria navigates this system of excess, she finds each move already suggested for her, determined by the operations and the metaphors of the spaces she moves through.

Each city, each space, is made up of those who can exist within the metaphor—within his or her assigned role—and those who cannot. As with Hollywood, Las Vegas comes with its own set of preconceptions. In Ken Cooper's essay, "'Zero Pays the House': The Las Vegas Novel and Atomic Roulette" he notes, "Because Las Vegas has

such distinctive connotations for millions of Americans who have never been there, it may be inferred that our apprehension frequently (or even predominantly) occurs in cultural discourse. Not only does the city mean something to us, but we have made that meaning” (529-30). The meaning the reader finds in Didion’s use of Las Vegas is expanded to include its position as both a popular destination for workers within the film industry and a possible space for resurrecting, or maintaining, a struggling film career. For Maria, Las Vegas holds additional meaning. Although she spends the majority of the novel struggling to work within the confines of the Hollywood system, Maria’s early memories of growing up in Silver Wells, Nevada under the tutelage of her gambling father and godfather have shaped her concept of the world. Her childhood in Nevada helped form the paradigms that allow her to conceive of the world in gambling terms, and this gambling paradigm allows her to continue “playing the game.” In the section of the novel dedicated to her first-person point of view and taking place chronologically at the end of the novel, she states: “I was raised to believe that what came in on the next roll would always be better than what went out on the last. I no longer believe that” (5). Even while admitting her loss to the house—now symbolized by Hollywood—her vocabulary remains the language of the gambling hall.

One might argue that by mentioning the city, Hollywood, what I really mean is the Hollywood studio system—the world of filmmakers, actresses, and facilitators. But in *Play It As It Lays* there is no Hollywood outside of this system. The characters introduced in the novel are all playing within their assigned roles, and those who aren’t are so far outside of the system that they only serve to help define who does and does not belong. In

the section of the novel told from Carter's first-person point of view, he notes, "Maria would say that they were not her friends, but Maria has never understood friendship, conversation, the normal amenities of social exchange" (13). Whether or not she understands the social conventions of Hollywood, she does not fit within this system. As an aging actress, she finds herself approaching her agent for work hoping that there might be something for her:

She should not have come here without calling. Only people in trouble came unannounced to see their agents. If Freddy Chaikin thought she carried trouble with her he would avoid her, because trouble was something no one in the city liked to be near. Failure, illness, fear, they were seen as infectious, contagious blights on glossy plants. (22)

At every turn Maria faces the constant pressure to stay young and relevant—to matter. The language of the city is the language of the deal, the language of the business. Later in the novel, at her husband's insistence, Chaikin tries to offer Maria some work, communicating volumes through his choice of words:

"Maybe I could arrange for Morty Landau to see some film, you give me your word you really want to work."

"See some *film*."

"Where's the problem Maria? There's something so unusual about wanting to see some film? I show film on talent getting two, two-fifty a picture."

"Morty Landau makes television." (29; emphasis in original)

Maria knows that the combination of a director needing to see her previous work and the director working in television instead of movies means the death knell for her film career. She knows that it's not unusual for an *unknown* to need to show film. She knows that the moment you need to remind the director who you are and what you can do, your career in Hollywood is over. And Maria is constantly reminded of the price of failure as the characters in the novel do not hesitate to mock and condemn any who can't make the

grade, taking delight in their misfortune. Each new story serves as a cautionary tale for Maria, who lives in a city surrounded by self-consuming youth. Lunch conversation with Helene and BZ turns to an actress' suicide attempt where "the papers said exhaustion, but BZ knew things like that, knew about people, that was why she had called him" (24). And BZ knows where Maria stands in comparison to that actress. BZ knows her position.

Play It As It Lays expands the characteristics identified by Axelrod and Davis as necessary for inclusion in segregated communities to include strong ties to a social group that may or may not be tied to any one specific physical location. As Axelrod suggests of Los Angeles after the 1920s, "Social and physical geographies simply no longer coincided" (231). As increased access to transportation—mainly through the personal use of the automobile—allowed for travel over greater distances, residents of the city were able to belong to social groups and communities no longer bound by proximity—even if it meant neglecting those living within one's own neighborhood. In McClenahan's study, she found that "While participation [in neighboring—McClenahan's term for association or fellowship with one's neighbors] is in evidence today in the area, it is more limited than in former days. There are many contacts and associations outside the area" (62). Although Maria does display a perverse adherence to the geographies of her social group, she finds that the social conventions she is bound to maintain are just as important to uphold.

In Hollywood, Maria exists as an extension of her director husband, Carter Lang. Carter is relevant. Carter might end up being important to the business. Carter is worthy of the city's respect. As Maria's career slowly evaporates, the city only sees her as a part

of him. Even elevator innuendo is meant “not for Maria herself but for Carter Lang’s wife” (23). Carter preys on Maria’s insecurity and in one of the cruelest moments of the novel he confronts her about an apartment she has rented: “You want to be closer to Schwabs? Is that it?” (103). Carter knows full well that Maria is far past the point of being discovered at an ice-cream counter. His connection of her apartment’s location—adjacent to the hundreds of young actresses vying to get noticed in one of the most overdetermined spots in the city—to her desperation is a connection between her position in the city and her position in life. His viciousness—even if enabled by Maria’s overwhelming need to be included in his world—pushes Maria to either conform to his position in the city, his physical location in the city, or die.

Maria’s struggle to maintain her place within the system is further tested by the need to make an appearance at a constant stream of social engagements—to appear in a number of places that exist as shorthand for Hollywood success. Her home in Beverly Hills—Carter’s home—seems to exist at the center of a network of Hollywood industry parties. Each party is nondescript, and each one seems to blend into the next. As BZ casually remarks, “Listen to the music from the Kulik’s. They’re having a party” (26). Names and places are mentioned with the familiarity of those living and working in Hollywood. Carter has to meet his agent at Chasen’s; BZ insinuates that Maria might be meeting her lover at Marmont—no one goes to lunch to eat, they go to be seen (48, 35). Melrose, Sunset, an apartment on Fountain Ave., a doctor’s office on Wilshire—*Play It As It Lays* uses street names and locations that would be familiar to any upper class Angeleno to indicate the overwhelming connection between space and social status. The

city is so much a part of those able to successfully navigate it that they can't see themselves as anything but part of the machine. Place names and film phrases become shorthand for a conversation that never has to be had. And these locations also comprise a particularly circumscribed view of the city, each destination within only a few short miles of the next, and each location chosen for the insular protection it offers Maria. Sticking to a doctor's office on Wilshire or a trendy restaurant on Melrose, Maria never has to come into contact with the thousands of other people who live in the city.

Edward J. Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder's examination of the lived environments of the urban elite, *Fortress America: Gated Communities in the United States* (1997) would define Maria's home (Carter's house) in Beverly Hills as part of a *prestige community*. Blakely and Snyder suggest "The rich and famous communities are the original gated communities in the United States; they have been with us for decades. They are the small compounds of privacy for celebrities and the gated enclaves of the very rich, and they are found from the hills of Hollywood to the coasts of the Northeast" (41). These prestige communities, the authors assert, are designed and created not for security or proximity to amenities and services but for the wealthy to be assured that no one outside of their social strata will be allowed to gain entrance: "Prestige communities feed on exclusion and on the status aspirations of the well-to-do and upwardly mobile" (74-5). Every party Maria misses, every engagement she isn't invited to, is a further distancing from the prestige community she so desperately wants to hold on to.

And every part of the city reminds Maria of a dinner party, a get-together—someone in the business. Within this system the residents either remain connected to the

community or dropped from it entirely based on their level of success. Maria connects the San Vicente area with a television writer and his wife, but as she connects the people with the place she also recalls why Carter had stopped associating with them—the writer’s show had been cancelled. Those who do not belong in Hollywood stand out like the flash from an atomic bomb to Maria:

She walked back to the car and sat for a long while in the parking lot, idling the engine and watching a woman in a muumuu walk out of the Carolina Pines Motel and cross the street to a supermarket. The woman walked in small mincing steps and kept raising her hand to shield her eyes from the vacant sunlight. As if in a trance Maria watched the woman, for it seemed to her then that she was watching the dead still center of the world, the quintessential intersection of nothing. (66-7)

At this point in the novel, Maria has stopped at a random “drive-in at the corner of La Brea” far away from her comfort zone and from the zone of exclusion she usually maintains (65). The more mundane surroundings of La Brea Avenue and the woman’s sun-struck march to the domestic confines of a supermarket are anathema to Maria, and their horror strengthens Maria’s insistence on staying away from such a dreary reality. For Maria, the woman is snake-eyes, seven out, and the end of a game she’s not ready to stop playing.

The difference between Maria’s Los Angeles and that of those outside of her class and social status is also illustrated during Maria’s trip to an abortionist in the San Fernando Valley. After finding that she is pregnant with what appears to be Les Goodwin’s baby, she makes arrangements through a third party and leaves the confines of Hollywood to get an abortion. She drives north, to Encino, and as she enters the Valley, she enters a world sharply contrasting with Hollywood. Encino is dotted with middle-class landmarks such as Taco Bell and “Thriftimart” (76). The facilitator tells

Maria that there are “[n]ice homes here. Nice for kids” (78). Immediately Maria is confronted with the future that she will never have, a future distinctly connected to life within the much more middle class, suburban world of the Valley. Her role is to have the abortion, deny the affair, trade “nice” for luxury, and “kids” for her life in between Carter and Les Goodwin—trade the middle class stability of the Valley for a life in the confines of Beverly Hills.

It’s not for nothing that Maria finds her greatest pleasure, and her greatest ability to escape, while driving with a knowledgeable precision along the freeways that divide the Southern California landscape. After Carter stops living with Maria in their home in Beverly Hills, Maria finds solace on the freeway, maneuvering the wide lanes demarcated only by the names of the cities they enclose: “She drove the San Diego to the Harbor, the Harbor to the Hollywood, the Hollywood to the Golden State, the Santa Monica, the Santa Ana, the Pasadena, the Ventura. She drove it as a riverman runs a river, every day more attuned to its currents, its deceptions” (15-16). Driving the freeway, recklessly moving from lane to lane, Maria is able to lose herself to the road, “the organism which absorbed all her reflexes, all her attention” (17). Here, Maria is able to truly master the cities she finds no place in. Here, she can contain the spaces—control them—and circling them she maneuvers their long stretches of “flawless burning concrete” like a director coordinating and organizing his next shot.

The freeway and the ability of the automobile to provide individualized transportation have often been equated with isolation, and the freeway in particular has a long record of helping to maintain residential exclusivity for the wealthy. Paul Mason

Fotsch's *Watching the Traffic Go By: Transportation and Isolation in Urban America* (2007), outlines the history of the economically restricted access to automobile ownership and the construction of highways and freeways being used to encourage middle and upper-class city dwellers to move to class segregated neighborhoods in the suburbs. Fotsch also credits the automobile with giving its operator the ability to recreate the same class segregation practiced in her residential community. He states:

The narrative of isolation surrounding the urban freeway begins with its connection to the suburban goal of escaping urban populations. As noted, the movement to exclusive suburbs has historically come from a desire to escape not just the crowding and industrial pollution of the central city but also the types of people who were increasingly moving into the city. (160)

While Maria might not be consciously isolating herself from the working class, she is using her extended trips on the freeway to isolate herself from her own social group. Maria relishes her time in the Corvette because she can isolate herself—temporarily—from the world that is slipping away from her: “Sometimes at night the dread would overtake her, bathe her in sweat, flood her mind with sharp flash images of Les Goodwin in New York and Carter out there on the desert with BZ and Helene and the irrevocability of what seemed already to have happened, but she never thought about that on the freeway” (18). By using the freeway to find her freedom, Maria also provides a counter-narrative to the prescribed use of the roadway suggested for women by the Automobile Association, the California Chamber of Commerce, and highway boosters all across Los Angeles. These groups sought to promote the freeway as a way for women to more easily indulge in the stereotypically female activities of shopping or visiting friends, dedicating filmstrips and educational guides to help women indulge in the supposed male realm of

the freeway (Avila 203-4). Maria is able to use the roadways for herself, and while she might be using the road to escape the problems she finds with the men in her life, she is able to drive without restraint, without this part of her life being dictated to her. However, the moment Maria moves beyond the interweaving conformity of the Southern California freeway system—the moment she drives all the way to Baker—the freeway loses its power. The freeway is only a temporary sanctuary, postponing the inevitable need to pull off, to go home, or to stop to call Carter. Maria is only postponing what she will inevitably do.

The freeway in *Play It As It Lays* also serves as a nod to the destruction the modern freeway system brought to African American, Latino, and working class neighborhoods in the 1950s and '60s. The freeway system Maria navigates in order to find freedom from the city was constructed—in part—to destroy huge swaths of neighborhoods seen as “slums” or “ghettoes” by The Urban Land Institute (ULI), “a national organization for real estate developers, entrepreneurs, and builders, [who] advocated urban freeway construction as a means of slum clearance and urban renewal” (Avila 206). After the Interstate Highway Act of 1956 created funding for the immense freeway system that would dominate the Southern California landscape, Los Angeles chose to follow the recommendations of the ULI and route the new roads through the most racially diverse areas of the city. Hardest hit by the massive construction effort were the East Los Angeles neighborhoods that were home to a majority African American and Latino population. The construction tore through the Boyle Heights area especially, as five freeways—the San Bernardino, the Santa Ana, the Golden State, the Long Beach and

the Pomona—were joined in the middle of the community (Avila 210). These new roadways separated businesses from their customers, families from their places of worship, and working families from their places of employment. Worse yet, they destroyed some of the most heterogeneous areas of the city, displacing minority populations to other areas of the city, places where community and opportunity were far more difficult to find.

Maria's ability to create a space outside of the demands of her class and her sex are enabled, ironically, by a freeway system that was designed to destroy the working class and minority neighborhoods that gave those residents the same sense of freedom and safety. And as Chicano Studies Professor Eric Avila suggests, the separation that allows Maria to ignore the history of racial and class-based segregation in the city was reinforced by the design of the freeways themselves:

Simultaneously, however, as freeway construction exacerbated racial tensions within the postwar urban region, the very experience of driving the new freeways diminished the public's awareness of such tensions. The freeway mediated a view of the metropolis... Dense landscaping or concrete walls alongside freeway arteries, for example, obstructed the driver's passing glance at the sights of the city. This kind of visual screening sustained ignorance of, or indifference to, the surrounding built environment and negated the sense of passing through the city's landscapes of work and community. (213)

The freeways allow Maria to elide those outside of her social circle, and they reinforce the total absence of people of color from the novel. Just as the division of floors within *The World Inside* created an almost impassible barrier between the mainly working class floors towards the bottom of the urban and the more professional class floors at the top, *Play It As It Lays* uses the Los Angeles freeway system to protect Maria from ever having to see the ordinary world that lies right outside her gates.

As Maria struggles to find a place where she can still maintain some semblance of her life, she turns to the desert oasis of Las Vegas. By 1970, Las Vegas had established itself as an option for fading, but recognizable, Hollywood Stars to end their days. Elvis began performing at the International Hotel in 1969, and it wasn't unheard of for actors and actresses to find a comfortable niche performing on the main stages and in lounges all along the strip. By the time Maria reaches Vegas, however, she knows that this path too is closed to her. The Vegas that entertains young actors and actresses, the Vegas of second careers, is beyond her reach. While drifting through the city, she is ignored by the directors of the Las Vegas shows, and without even really trying to find a place among the headliners and showgirls of the strip, Maria gives up on the city. As the sleazy Hollywood lawyer Larry Kulik remarks of Maria, "She's not talent" (151).

Las Vegas is surrounded on all sides by the desert. Between Vegas and Baker (the small town where Maria ends her jaunts on the freeway), between Vegas and Tonopah, and between Vegas and Carter's film locations, the dry, heat-baked desert reigns. Throughout the novel the desert exists as a space outside of either the Hollywood or the Las Vegas metaphor systems. The desert exists as its own unspoken metaphor in the novel. The desert is a place outside of the rules, outside of assigned roles. Early in the novel when Maria sees her mother for the last time, Benny Austin suggests that she and her mother open their dream restaurant right along Nevada's Interstate 95—the artery between Las Vegas and Tonopah. "*Not on 95,* ... *'Somewhere else,'*" her mother demands, refusing to even tie her fantasy to the ebb and flow of the city (85; emphasis in

the original). The desert is where Carter films his mistresses, and it is implied that the desert is also a place where anything goes—all bets are off.

Maria is warned several times not to enter the desert, not to enter Carter's world. She knows exactly what she'll find there: "the husbands on perpetual location" (43-44). She knows that only actresses are allowed "on location," and she knows that she no longer qualifies as the type of young actress preferred by Carter Lang. Earlier in the novel, while Carter is on location for a film, Maria understands the need to stay away: "At six-thirty that morning she placed a call to Carter at the motel on the desert but Carter had already left for the location. She interpreted this as a sign and did not try to call the location" (73-74). Of course earlier in the novel, she had more to lose.

For Maria, the desert she turns to at the end of the novel is a place of last resort. Ostensibly coming to Carter's newest shoot at his bequest, Maria turns to the desert for one last chance to remain within some system of meaning. She watches the casual sex, the infighting, and the occasional bouts of domestic violence with detachment. BZ warns her of her dissatisfaction:

"What else are you tired of."
"I don't know."
"You're getting there," BZ said.
"Getting where."
"Where I am." (192)

BZ further cautions her, "If you're pretending that it makes some difference to you, who anybody fucks and where and when and why, you're faking yourself" (195). Even if she doesn't agree with him verbally, she remains in the desert, waiting for something. In between doing nothing, listening to BZ tell her that Carter is screwing Helene, and

talking with a solitary waitress, Maria repeats herself: she wants nothing, she hasn't done anything, and nothing matters. To punctuate her anesthetization, the narrator tells the reader, "An underground nuclear device was detonated where Silver Wells had once been, and Maria got up before dawn to feel the blast. She felt nothing" (204). Didion removes any chance for Maria to escape—even within the memories of her childhood.

However, nothing to Maria is not the nothing of BZ's suicide. Maria stresses the fact that "nothing" doesn't mean oblivion; nothing means an existence within a system of meaning without caring what the outcome of any move might be. She states: "*I know what 'nothing' means, and keep on playing*" (214 emphasis in the original). At the end of *Play It As It Lays*, Didion's heroine continues to refuse the various roles offered her. She isn't the woman in the muumuu shading her eyes from the sun. She isn't the ex-star transitioning herself into either a second career in Vegas or a life of shopping and gossip. She is not a prostitute, she is not dead, and she is not a successful actress. She might be spending her days in an asylum, but we can be sure that she is still playing. This is the fate of those who fail to maintain their place within the strict and stubborn hierarchy of the urban spaces of those rich enough to make sure that anyone violating their highly segregated social boundaries will be immediately banished, never to return.

Less Than Zero

Just as the street names, restaurants, and shopping centers of Didion's novel exist as shorthand for the spaces of the wealthy and privileged of Los Angeles, the shopping malls, dance clubs, and restaurants of Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero* exist for its characters as an

unchanging prison of empty affect, spiritless sex, and stark isolation. It's not surprising that Ellis's first novel has so many times been compared to Didion's *Play It As It Lays* as both texts focus on the desperation and the emptiness of the wealthy and both novels set their tales of desperation within the confines of a half concrete, half imaginary Los Angeles that is defined by areas of exclusion. But while Maria strives to maintain her connection to the world of privilege, *Less Than Zero*'s protagonist, Clay, seems to spend his time fighting the temptation to sink deeper into the world populated by his almost interchangeable set of friends and acquaintances.

Less Than Zero details Clay's struggle to resist submitting to the lure of nothingness as he spends a winter holiday in Los Angeles after his first semester at a small liberal arts college in New Hampshire. The novel follows Clay as he connects with old friends, has negligible interactions with his family, consumes staggering amounts of cocaine and prescription tranquilizers, and witnesses scenes of ever increasing barbarity—but throughout Ellis's work, the reader simply follows Clay along for the ride, accepting the character's monotone descriptions of L.A.'s teen hedonism as commonplace. As Clay struggles to reacclimate himself to the city he left just four months ago, he is confronted by the fact that, while his old life in Los Angeles is comfortable enough to slip into, his friends and those he left behind have become subsumed further into the city than he feels comfortable accepting—yet he can't resist the temptation to watch the people he knows disintegrate into nothingness. Throughout the novel, Clay participates in the various parties, club scenes, drug use, and sex he participated in during his high school years, but somehow in the space of four short months, as his friends have taken their first tentative steps into adulthood, everything has gotten so much worse. Muriel, a spoiled debutante, finds that her cries for attention have spiraled into heroin addiction; Trent, Clay's friend-cum-

wannabe model, introduces Clay to a snuff film featuring the brutal rape and slaying of two young teens; Rip, Clay's drug dealer, invites Clay to avail himself of a semi-conscious twelve-year old girl tied to a bed; and Julian, one of Clay's oldest and dearest friends, has slipped into an addiction so bad that he must sell his body to appease his drug dealer/pimp. But throughout these vignettes of increasing nihilism, Ellis repeatedly reminds the reader that these scenes are so connected to the world of wealth and privilege offered by the more isolated areas of Los Angeles—Century City, Beverly Hills, Bel Air, and Malibu, Laurel, and Topanga canyons—that the city itself exists as an inextricable part of the soulless ethos motivating the characters of the novel.

As in *Play It As It Lays*, the characters of *Less Than Zero* live, for the most part, in a world willfully isolated from the realities of the greater city of Los Angeles. Clay's mother and two sisters live in a gated mansion on Mulholland Drive; Clay's father lives in a luxury apartment in Century City; Clay's friends are scattered throughout the Hollywood Hills; and almost all of the characters in the novel advance through the southland—from summer home to vacation villa—like a small band of rebels moving clandestinely between fortified outposts of temporary safety. These homes and retreats are, of course, purchased and maintained by the teens' mostly absent parents, but despite the post-adolescent ages of the characters, these spaces still exist as zones of safety, isolated enough from the outside world to provide some form of comfort or protection. At one point in the novel, Clay drops in on Muriel unannounced and she reacts in distress, alarmed at the intrusion of her space: “Well, I just...it's okay this once, but I don't like people coming over. Someone is telling people where I live. I don't like it. ... I mean, I used to like people coming over, but now I just can't stand it. I can't take it” (147).

Muriel's reaction isn't simply about a violation of her privacy, however. She is also reacting to the thought of people even being aware of where she lives. Muriel's home—and the homes of many of the novel's characters—functions as what Peter Marcuse describes as a citadel: “[A] spatially concentrated area in which members of a particular population group, defined by its position of superiority, in power, wealth, or status, in relation to its neighbors, congregate as a means of protecting or enhancing that position” (247). Marcuse further notes that: “Citadels, by contrast, are by their nature exclusionary; whatever cultural hegemony they may possess is more of class than of ethnicity or belief. Their relationship with those outside is one of superiority, not simply of difference” (248). As a space of both protection and exclusivity, the citadels of the novel serve to insure its characters' overwhelming feelings of superiority and primacy are never threatened, thereby strengthening their belief in the righteousness of their actions. As Rip remarks after Clay challenges his choice to drug and then rape the twelve year old: “‘What's right? If you want to do something, you have the right to do it’” (189).

As in *Play It As It Lays*, *Less Than Zero* uses the names of streets, shopping centers and malls, exclusive restaurants, and trendy clubs as shorthand for the image of Hollywood and Beverly Hills as the playgrounds of the wealthy. However, *Less Than Zero*—perhaps reflecting the zenith of consumerism felt at the beginning of Reagan's presidency—drops these names on almost every page of the novel. Clay and his family dine at Chasen's and Ma Maison; Clay and his friends frequent clubs with names such as Land's End, Nowhere Club, The Wire, and The Roxy; Clay sips drinks at the Polo Lounge while waiting for friends; and the characters drive through the city on Sunset, Sepulveda, Bellagio, Ventura Boulevard, and Mulholland Drive to get to the isolated citadels that house any evening's party. In the beginning of the novel, Clay

describes a typical family outing:

We have been in Beverly Hills shopping most of the late morning and early afternoon. My mother and my two sisters and me. My mother has spent most of this time probably at Neiman-Marcus, and my sisters have gone to Jerry Magnin and have used our father's charge account to buy him and me something and then to MGA and Camp Beverly Hills and Privilege [surprisingly, a real shoe store in Beverly Hills that is still in existence] to buy themselves something. I sit at the bar at La Sacala for most of this time, bored out of my mind, smoking, drinking red wine. (23)

While Clay might not be enthused to spend his time waiting for his family to finish their shopping, it's obvious that the names he mentions here are as commonplace to him as the names K-Mart or Sears might be to those living outside of his circle. But Clay's ambivalence here also highlights the dull repetition that these spaces of the elite have begun to represent for Clay and his companions.

While each character's parents and homes might be well isolated from the rest of the city, and while they might choose to frequent the playgrounds of the elite, Clay and his friends do spend a great deal of their time interacting with the more middle or working class populations employed in the arcades, diners, and movie theaters found in the more mundane spaces of West L.A. and the San Fernando Valley. But while the teens in the novel find it perfectly acceptable to find their entertainment among those their parents work so hard to ignore, they still embody a sense of entitlement and superiority wherever they go. As Clay sits late at night in a coffee shop in Encino, he witnesses a confrontation between two teens from the city and his waitress:

"Jesus I hate the fucking Valley," and he digs into his pocket and throws a ten on the table.

His friend gets up, belches, and mutters, "Fucking Valleyites," loudly enough for her to hear. "Go spend the rest of it at the Galleria, or wherever the hell you go to," and then they walk out of the restaurant and into the wind.

When the waitress comes to my table to take my order she seems really shaken up. "Pill-popping bastards. I been to other places outside the Valley and they aren't all that great," she tells me. (62)

The condescension the teens show the waitress is repeated later in the novel when Clay, Spin, and Rip visit an arcade in the Westwood shopping mall in West L.A.:

We do some of the coke and then go to an arcade in Westwood and play video games for close to two hours and end up spending something like twenty bucks apiece and we only stop playing because we run out of quarters. Rip only has one-hundred-dollar bills on him and the arcade won't give him change. So Rip stuffs the bills back into his pocket and yells fuck off to the guy working at the change booth and the three of us go back to his car and finish the rest of the coke. (128)

The characters' disdain for those working and living in the Valley and in the more middle class areas of Los Angeles is stronger and more dangerous than Maria's fear of a more bucolic life in *Play It As It Lays*. The differences stressed by the antagonistic rich kids of *Less Than Zero* are not only class based, but also distressing signals of an ideology that automatically posits the wealthy as superior—in every way—to the working class denizens of the city. Just as Anthony Royal and the residents of the topmost floors of Silverberg's urbmons seem to consider those beneath them as, well, beneath them, so do Clay and his friends see themselves as above the rest of the world, but unlike all but the most vicious residents of Ballard's *High Rise*, the teenagers of *Less Than Zero* seem to relish the thought of inflicting violence and pain on those outside of their narrow circle.

The residents of *Less Than Zero*'s Los Angeles are, as in many of the novels about the wealthy, predominantly Caucasian. However, in Ellis's novel, there are a handful of scenes featuring people of color, and in these scenes, the novel's more affluent characters seem to take it for granted that the African Americans and Latinos of the city exist only to facilitate their needs. The maids, valets, and cleaning women of the novel are never directly addressed, and these characters are described by Clay as an interchangeable part of the homes he frequents. Clay's

descriptions also seem to suggest that these servants exist as automatons, currently off-line and waiting for their next instructions: “We walk downstairs. The maid’s sitting in the living room, with this dazed look on her face, watching MTV. Trent tells me that she doesn’t like to clean the house when anybody’s home. ‘She’s always stoned anyway. Mom feels guilty since her family was killed in El Salvador, but I think she’ll fire her sooner or later’” (52). But it’s not just that the teens see these men and women as servants; they also seem to believe that there’s nothing to them outside of their servitude: “Trent walks over to the maid and she looks up nervously and smiles. Trent tries some of his Spanish but can’t communicate with her. She just looks at him blankly and tries to nod and smile. Trent turns around and says, “‘Yep, stoned again’” (52-3). Here class and race differences are posited as insurmountable obstacles as Trent “can’t communicate with her.” But the novel isn’t simply making an omission of the contributions and existence of the millions of people of color inhabiting Los Angeles, it’s also suggesting here that the barriers these people face are both impossible to escape and a natural part of the city’s human ecosystem. The novel’s affluent characters need to see the inhuman status of the city’s African American and Latino populations as natural, as an inherent feature of life in the citadel.

In *Play It As It Lays*, Maria spends a good deal of her time behind the wheel, travelling across the many freeways dividing the city of Los Angeles in order to escape the gendered demands made by the studio system, and in Ellis’s novel, Clay too, finds himself in the seat of an automobile. But while Maria found freedom in the ability to escape the confines of her desires, Clay finds only anxiety while driving the streets and freeways of the city. In *Less Than Zero*, Ellis’s descriptions of the byways of the city appear in a rush, creating a sense of urgency and terror in the reader:

After leaving Blair I drive down Wilshire and there onto Santa Monica and then I drive onto Sunset and take Beverly Glen to Mulholland, and then Mulholland to Sepulveda and then Sepulveda to Ventura and then I drive through Sherman Oaks to Encino and then into Tarzana and then Woodland Hills. I stop at a Sambo's that's open all night and sit alone in a large empty booth and the winds have started and they're blowing so hard that the windows are shaking and the sounds of them trembling, about the break, fill the coffee shop. (61)

There is no freedom in Clay's trip to the Valley. Instead, driving seems to amplify the apprehension he already feels about the city:

I don't like driving down Wilshire during lunch hour. There always seem to be too many cars and old people and maids waiting for buses and I end up looking away and smoking too much and turning the radio up to full volume. Right now, nothing is moving even though the lights are green... As I pull onto Sunset I pass the billboard I saw this morning that read "Disappear Here" and I look away and kind of try to get it out of my head. (41)

Of course, by the '80s the streets of Los Angeles had become far more congested than they were during the '60s of Didion's novel, and this traffic-inspired entropy is miles away from the freedom Maria found on the freeway, but Ellis's traffic jam—and its connection to the billboard's ominous message: "Disappear Here"—seem to suggest the city is working against Clay, using his slowed momentum to lure him into staying in town.

In *Less Than Zero*, the city itself is the antagonist, tempting Clay to abandon his identity, to submit to the rewardingly vacuous lives of his friends and family. The repeated suggestion to "Disappear Here" signifies Clay's ability to easily become like Rip, or Julian, or Muriel—passive participants in a parade of apathy. And for the most part, Clay seems willing to consider abandoning his ability to escape. As Clay follows Julian to a date with a john, he begins to realize that he's okay with seeing what happens next—more than that, that he needs to see what is about to happen to his friend: "I also realize that I'll go with Julian to the Saint Marquis. That I want to see if things like this can actually happen. And as the elevator descends, passing the

second floor, and the first floor, going even farther down, I realize that the money doesn't matter. That all that does is that I want to see the worst" (172). Clay might turn away from the scenes of a snuff film, and he might balk at raping a twelve year old, but he does need to see what the city has done to what might once have been his best friend—to see the worst. While Clay remains somewhat morally ambivalent throughout the novel—deciding ultimately that the violence of the city is too much for him (or too much of a temptation for him)—he does find a voyeuristic desire to witness “the worst” the city has to offer.

The hesitation Clay feels at the end of the novel and the almost overwhelming temptation presented by the city of excess represent the apprehension felt by those fighting to keep some form of identity within an urban environment whose features were almost as interchangeable as its inhabitants. As the nation moved into the '80s, this struggle to retain some sense of stability mirrored the anxieties felt by city dwellers confronted by an urban landscape that was purposefully and willfully creating a sense of anomie in its denizens. In the next chapter, I analyze the effects of the privatization of many of the public spaces of the city and of the increasing unease felt by those who could no longer recognize the urban environments they once called home.

Chapter 4

The City of Yesterday, Tomorrow:

Neo-Noir and the Illegible City

As Clay is repeatedly antagonized by the challenge to “Disappear Here” in *Less Than Zero*, he is also confronted by the ability of contemporary urban environments to erase their inhabitants. The finality of the billboard’s message leaves little possibility of regeneration or of emerging from the depths of the city with a new identity, but it also points to a newfound feeling of anomie in the inhabitants of growing metropolitan areas. As politicians and urban planners began searching for ways to reinvigorate decaying downtown spaces, they increasingly turned to private funding and the efforts of private companies to create and maintain the areas of spatial practice within the city. Urban dystopianists working in the 1980s and 90s chose to analyze the effects of this private/public partnership in order to highlight the growing alienation of urban dwellers from the cities they called home. As private companies began to ruthlessly conscript public space and to transform the once comfortable contours of the modern city, the city’s inhabitants began to find themselves alienated from the areas they called home.

In *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*, Edward Dimendberg describes the tension created in both the viewers and the characters of film noir by the ongoing transformation of urban space in the years following 1939. Dimendberg suggests that film noir heightened the alienation felt by those watching the city centers around them grow and transform into something wholly unfamiliar. What I argue in this chapter is that the use of noir tropes by films such as *Blade Runner* (1982), *GATTACA* (1997), and *Dark City* (1998) epitomizes a nostalgic desire to

return to a time when the city—and by extension its social and cultural roles—was easier to navigate and understand. By returning to the critique of utopian conceptions of urban space posed by film noir, neo-noir is able to create nostalgia both for the earlier films *and* for the outlaw status of the protagonists populating these films. In this way neo-noir makes a more sophisticated intervention in the urban imaginary. In the second half of this chapter, I contend that the tech-noir *RoboCop* trilogy serves as an allegorical vision of the complicated—and often one-sided—partnerships between private land developers and local governments that flourished in the wake of the exodus of blue-collar, manufacturing jobs from America’s Rust Belt. These three films also work to highlight the growing inability of working-class urbanites to effect positive change in their neighborhoods as the private sector used its newfound ties to public power to systematically disenfranchise those living in the inner city. And finally, I turn to comic book scribe and *RoboCop 2* screenwriter Frank Miller’s graphic novel *Give Me Liberty* in order to identify the urban consequences of Reagan’s presidency.

Neo-Noir and the Illegible City

Blade Runner, directed by Ridley Scott, was originally released in June of 1982 to mixed reviews and a poor showing at the box office. Despite its poor initial reception, the film has had an immeasurable impact on science-fictional depictions of urban space. Based in part on the 1968 Philip K. Dick novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, *Blade Runner* blends elements of film noir and science fiction to create a striking visual aesthetic. The plot follows police officer Rick Deckard, known on the street as a “blade runner,” as he tracks four renegade androids—genetically-engineered artificial persons

(called replicants in the film), who are manufactured by a sinister multinational firm, the Tyrell Corporation—through the streets of a sprawling, dismal future Los Angeles. The replicants, led by the flamboyant Roy Batty, are seeking a cure for the genetic coding that limits their lifespan to only four years, and as a complication of the definition of humanity, they are also programmed with artificial memories that give them a fragile ersatz identity. After a lengthy pitched battle with Batty across rainy rooftops, Deckard abandons his job and flees the city with Rachael, another runaway replicant with whom he has fallen in love.

Few films have had a more powerful impact on our visual conceptions of the future city than has *Blade Runner*, which depicts a 2019 Los Angeles with one foot in a future extrapolated from the multinational transformation of urban centers and the other firmly in the film-noir past of Raymond Chandler and Philip Marlowe. Several scholars have examined the film's links to earlier noir films and its interventions in the depiction of postmodern urban space. Janet Staiger and Roswitha Mueller connect the film to a history of portraying the future city as a dystopian space. Peter Brooker deploys perspectives from urban sociologists Mike Davis and Edward W. Soja to suggest a closer relationship between the imagined urban spaces in the film and the reality of the contemporary "postmetropolis." And Scott Bukatman examines its blending of a number of extant urban environments within its imagined "terminal space." But while these texts focus on questioning the verisimilitude of the film's depiction of a future Los Angeles or on identifying various noir tropes in the film, they fail to recognize the similarity of Deckard's inability to read future Los Angeles to the difficulties earlier noir protagonists

had when trying to make sense of postwar urban spaces.

In *Blade Runner*, Los Angeles exists as a strange combination of futuristic architectural forms grafted onto older structures, a melding of technology and concrete. Director Ridley Scott has repeatedly suggested that the set design of the film was supposed to represent a kind of “retrofitting” suggestive of the impossibilities of tearing down decaying urban structures in order to create buildings more in line with the future. However, the multiple aerial views of the city—particularly the shot that opens the film—show that Scott’s Los Angeles is an overbuilt, technological nightmare, filled with images of fire-spewing refineries and stretching as far into the horizon as the viewer can see. The aerial views of the city almost always highlight the more futuristic images of buildings covered in video advertising, towering horizontal forms, and lights, thousands of lights casting their strangely limited illumination across the skyscrapers and towers of the city. But the key feature of this future Los Angeles is the endless repetition of horizontal forms, the image of the city as eternally contiguous, lacking any form of open space.

For Dimendberg, the destruction of older urban forms caused by gentrification is followed by a replacement of more familiar architectures with a succession of similar motels, drug stores, and business districts. He uses the 1957 film noir *Footsteps in the Night* to link this more business friendly use of space to a sense of shock and anomie felt by characters now unable to understand the city:

Most suggestive in *Footsteps in the Night* is the connection posited between an urban environment lacking recognizable landmarks and the individual’s loss of spatial position: a disorientation in centripetal space that leads to murder. Although the film does not depict the global Los Angeles environment (street

plans, landmarks, centers) that [Kevin] Lynch describes, it suggests an architectural homogeneity on the much smaller scale of the neighborhood block. The bungalow motel—a curious hybrid between private residence, apartment, and commercial structure—already signifies the social atomization and separation of its residents. (150)

In *Blade Runner*, this process of eliminating the familiar is taken to ridiculous extremes. While from a street level a number of building features seemingly remain rooted in Los Angeles's art-deco past, from above the city has been completely transformed. Even at the ground level, walls are plastered with flashing lights and video surveillance, rushing pedestrians are harassed by loud, flashing signs telling them to both walk and not to walk, while massive motorized blimps use blaring announcements to try and persuade residents to flee Earth for some off-world colony. What these elements create for Deckard—and for viewers—is a disruption of the conceptions of lived urban space, a disruption that produces the same sense of fear and displacement Dimendberg identified in earlier film noirs.

In the scene that introduces Deckard in the film, he seems perfectly comfortable waiting on a bench for his turn at a noodle counter. This image of Deckard, reading his newspaper in the rain, at ease with a city filled with neon signs and throngs of people would fit any previous conception of the detective figure in film noir. And throughout the film, Deckard does fulfill the traditional role of the noir private investigator—unraveling a mystery whose consequences are almost certainly greater than what appears on the surface. However, even in the scene that establishes Deckard's character, there appear cracks in the façade of the detective's confidence. As Deckard approaches the noodle shop, he asks the older man working the counter for four of something featured in a glass

case. The counterman immediately holds up two fingers, signaling Deckard may have two. Deckard, however, sees this only as a language issue and repeats his order, holding up two fingers on both hands and saying “no, two—two, four.” The counterman refuses, once again holding up two fingers, and after frowning, Deckard sits down and accepts his failure. While the counterman’s refusal might somehow be motivated by strict food rationing or by some unknown motivation, Deckard’s failure to get what he wants, almost immediately after the film establishes his character, foreshadows Deckard’s growing inability to understand the city.

Shortly after the scene at the noodle bar, as Deckard is brought before Bryant, the inspector seemingly in charge of the blade runner program, he reminds Bryant that he has quit, is no longer a blade runner. But after Bryant explains the seriousness of the mission to apprehend Batty and the other three replicants, and after appealing to Deckard’s vanity by suggesting that Deckard is the best, he lets Deckard know “if you’re not a cop, you’re little people,” and Deckard eventually gives in. The viewer doesn’t know why Deckard initially left his position as a blade runner, and although it seems as though Bryant is leveling some vague threat against Deckard, it doesn’t seem enough to warrant Deckard’s giving in. Deckard’s quick acceptance of the case seems to undercut any notion that his later difficulties in apprehending Batty and his fellow replicants lie in a growing empathy he feels for the androids, but this confidence and surety Deckard initially feels does quickly evaporate, and I believe that—in part—Deckard’s growing anxiety and the difficulty he has in actually apprehending the replicants is caused instead by his inability to reconcile the stark differences created by the contrast between the upper and lower

levels of the city.

In later scenes in the film, it becomes much clearer that although Deckard's detective character should be more confident and comfortable working in the streets than in the towers of technology and privilege above, he seems to fit in with neither environment. After learning that Zhora, one of the replicants sought by Deckard, has been working as an exotic dancer, Deckard goes backstage, posing as a member of the "Confidential Committee on Moral Abuses," hoping to catch her off-guard.³⁹ Zhora easily sees through Deckard's ridiculous ruse, however, and is able to flee after physically assaulting the blade runner. Deckard chases her down, but although he should seem more at ease while following Zhora through the streets of the city, instead he appears to be ever more agitated as the chase builds to its conclusion. As Deckard rushes through the throngs of people littering the city's streets, the film cuts several times to shots from Deckard's immediate point of view, highlighting a mass of faces swimming in front of him. The pandemonium of the street scene is also accompanied by blaring sirens, chants from an incongruous group of Hari Krishnas, and various loud conversations seemingly coming from everywhere at once. Throughout this scene, the multiple close-up and medium shots of Deckard's face clearly show that he wavers between annoyance and distress as he tries to make his way through the city. And after Deckard has shot and killed the renegade replicant, his expression is one of shock and sickness rather than satisfaction or even grim acceptance.

The scene where Deckard tracks and kills the replicant Leon is similar enough not

³⁹ This scene is also a clever parody of Humphrey Bogart's imitation of a nerdy rare book collector in the iconic noir film *The Big Sleep* (1946).

to go into detail here, but at the end of this chase, Deckard isn't the one to actually "retire" the android. Instead, as Deckard is being choked to death by the justifiably enraged Leon, Rachael is the one to pull the trigger. Throughout this scene, Deckard is easily subdued and outmatched, and any trace of the detective's swagger is replaced with abject terror. And after the scene, when Deckard takes Rachael up to his apartment on the 97th floor, he continues to be affected, eyes vacant and face quivering as he brings a shot glass up to his mouth. He then looks up at Rachael and states: "Shakes? Me too. I get 'em bad. Part of the business." One might imagine that Deckard's apartment might provide some sense of security, of protection against the city below, but this is not the case as Deckard seems almost more nervous than he was on the street. Throughout this scene, Deckard moves from space to space in his apartment, only stopping to finally collapse in a heap on the couch. This is not the image of Humphrey Bogart's or even Elliot Gould's Phillip Marlowe. Deckard is a man constantly moving between states of heightened wariness and overwhelming anxiety, a product not—as he suggests—of his profession, but of his relationship to the city. Deckard is comfortable neither on the crowded streets of previous films noir nor in the safety of his technologically secure, 97th floor apartment. The tension he feels is the tension between both environments.

As Deckard moves throughout the city, from unfamiliar streets to the uncomfortable confines of the buildings constricting the city, he begins to understand that there is no place for him in this conflation of past and future urban forms. Dimendberg suggests that:

[T]he film noir cycle...presupposes the disruption of older urban forms and the growing significance of the mass media that no less decisively alter the historical

determination of urban memory in post-1939 America. The replacement of narration by information and sensation that [Walter] Benjamin views as a key trait of the growing sway of *Erlebnis*, the mode of experience of short-term memory, entails an eradication of older urban narratives generated by the historical fabric of the city as it is transformed by abstract and centrifugal space. (129)

Here Dimendberg proposes that the massive reconstruction efforts of the '50s and '60s ended the possibility of stable urban forms remaining in our long-term understanding of the city. As new structures replaced the old, the images of the city—and our ability to make sense of these images—are destroyed, leaving us in a condition not unlike Deckard's almost perfect state of anomie. *Blade Runner* expands earlier noir's ability to confront viewers with the destruction of stable urban spaces by suggesting that while there is still no comfort in the architectures of the city yet to come, any hope of returning to a more idyllic version of the city has been forever lost, destroyed by the decades of gentrification that have already happened.

The anxiety produced by Deckard's difficulty to negotiate the city is perhaps best highlighted by the film's use of the Bradbury Building as the home of J.F. Sebastian, one of the creators of the replicants Deckard must find. The Bradbury Building—an impressive structure of glass and steel, supposedly influenced by Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*—had by 1982 served as the principal location in a number of films noir including *Shockproof* (1949), *DOA* (1950), and Joseph Losey's remake of the Fritz Lang film, *M* (1951). Dimendberg suggests that:

The Bradbury Building functions in Losey's *M* as a nonsynchronous remnant, an unexpected fragment of the past that calls the present into question. Transposed from Europe to Los Angeles, its nineteenth-century grandeur and pedestrian-friendly space are as anomalous in 1951 Los Angeles as were the arcades encountered by Benjamin and the Surrealists in Paris during the 1920s. It appears in the film without masses of consumers or pedestrians, an uncomfortable hybrid

between an interior and exterior realm...that is, spatially and temporally displaced, a telling comment on the social predicament of the American city in late modernity that would soon be assailed by the bulldozers of urban redevelopment and had already encountered the automobile. (224)

In *Blade Runner*, the building works the same way as Dimendberg suggests it did in Losey's *M*—as a remnant of a pre-modern Los Angeles—but it also creates a strong sense of nostalgia for viewers conversant with its use in previous noir films. Although the city's Bunker Hill district had undergone its most drastic transformation in the years following the designation of the space as an official urban renewal area by the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency in 1951, the 1980s were represented by a new period of urban renewal. Motivated by foreign investment and an increased push for additional commercial real estate, most of the area's skyscrapers were constructed during the '80s. In *Blade Runner*'s amplified future Los Angeles, the building serves as an even starker reminder of a bygone era, and positioned against Syd Mead's designs for a future Los Angeles, it serves to confront viewers with the reality of urban erasure brought by gentrification efforts in the city.

It seems fitting that the final confrontation between Deckard and the replicant Roy Batty should take place in the Bradbury Building. In one of the final scenes of the film, while a stunned Deckard is reeling after barely managing to kill the replicant Pris, Batty arrives to ensure that Deckard receives neither redemption nor an easy victory. As Deckard flees from an obviously superior Batty, the two make their way through the more dilapidated parts of the building, with Batty taunting Deckard almost every step of the way. Rather than providing a place of security or of comfort, the decaying, abandoned rooms of the once elegant building become more of a prison for Deckard, walls and

fixtures crumbling at his touch. Faced with certain death, Deckard continues to run, eventually making his way up the exterior of the building, terror writ large across his features. And when Batty eventually has Deckard literally in his grasp, he instead pulls the blade runner to safety and asks: “Quite an experience to live in fear, isn’t it? That’s what it is to be a slave.” While Batty might be suggesting that Deckard is a slave to his profession or to his humanity, it’s more appropriate here to suggest that Deckard is instead a slave to the city. The building turns on him, just as the city earlier prevented him from performing his duty as a blade runner, and Deckard’s fear comes from the fact that there is no safe environment available to him, no place that exists as home. It makes sense that Deckard would take Rachael and leave the city at the end of the film, for with or without the original film’s suggestion of a rural paradise awaiting the couple, Deckard knows that he can no longer make sense of the spaces of the city.

Dark City and GATTACA

Alex Proyas’s 1998 film *Dark City*—and other films considered as part of the wave of neo-noir that appeared in the years after *Blade Runner*—re-creates the shock and alienation identified by Dimendberg in the minds of those wishing to reconcile filmic visions of the future with the everyday realities of urban life in the 1990s. At the same time multinational developers were beginning to purchase and transform many of the iconic urban spaces of Los Angeles and New York, viewers were looking for guideposts to help them reconcile the decades’ worth of white-flight inducing propaganda put forth by suburban boosters with the attempts to gentrify and reclaim city centers. The shifting

realities of the postmetropolis called for a return to film noir. As Peter Brooker has suggested, the urban spaces of neo-noir possess a much closer relationship to the contemporary postmetropolis than their intended future settings would suggest. This section examines the urban spaces of *Dark City* and Andrew Niccols's *GATTACA*, to show the inability of the postmodern urban dweller to make logical sense of the postmetropolis and the toll this illegibility takes on his sense of individuality and independence.

The urban spaces of both *Dark City* and *GATTACA* are representative of Dimendberg's use of the term centripetal space—a highly concentrated built environment focused on massing building efforts around an empty or illusory city center. Moreover, Dimendberg sees the urban centers connected to centripetal space as fueled by a continual boom and bust cycle of urban decay and urban renewal projects. He believes early film noir “reveals a key characteristic of the post-1939 American centripetal metropolis: the psychic hazards of dwelling in an urban space whose historical mutation yields real spatial gaps and temporal voids between the modern as ‘yet to come’ and the urban past as ‘yet to be destroyed’” (91). Rather than existing as a temporary phenomenon, the cycle of urban reconstruction Dimendberg notes continued on into the last decades of the twentieth century. Plagued by years of manufactured white flight and declining industry, decaying urban centers in the ‘80s and ‘90s became prime targets for gentrification projects that, aided by lax planning regulations and funded partially by local and state governments, once again began to remake the centripetal city. Dean MacCannell notes that “During the 1980s, US cities lost more than half of their low-cost

housing via condemnation, removal or gentrification, processes driven by changes in tax and building codes aimed precisely at remaking the American urban environment. As the proletarian areas of the city [the same places made familiar by so many films noir] are renovated and removed, they are not replaced by quality (or any) housing for the poor” (281). The same urban manipulations exposed in earlier films noir are present in neo-noir, and I argue that the latter films perform a double duty: they heighten the anxieties produced by urban restructuring in the late twentieth century while reminding viewers of the comforting, fictive representations of pre-war urban centers found in earlier noir. Fredric Jameson suggests that postmodern nostalgia in neo-noir arises from the purity, the suffocating totality of “some eternal thirties, beyond real historical time” (*Postmodernism* 21). Neo-noir allows viewers confronted by the upscale gentrification projects of New York’s Times Square district and L.A.’s reconstructed downtown to remember not the blighted *Escape from New York* style city centers of the ‘70s and ‘80s, but the always already nostalgic images of pre-modern urbanity present in half-remembered scenes of classic films noir.

In *Dark City*, John Murdoch (played by Rufus Sewell) awakens in a hotel bathtub, seemingly suffering from amnesia. After regaining his senses, he notices the brutalized corpse of a young woman on the floor of the bathroom next to a blood-stained knife. Murdoch then receives a phone call from a man—later revealed as Dr. Daniel Schreber (played by Kiefer Sutherland)—urging him to leave the hotel as there is a group of men after him. Murdoch manages to escape the hotel just as a group of men dressed in long black overcoats (later revealed as the Strangers) enter his room. While on the run,

Murdoch eventually learns his real name and finds he is part of a life he can't remember. He also finds that he is being sought by police inspector Frank Bumstead (William Hurt) for a series of murders alarmingly similar to that of the woman in the hotel room, but Murdoch can't remember killing anybody. Murdoch questions the reality of the dark urban environment, and discovers—through clues and interviews with his family—that he was originally from a coastal town called Shell Beach. Throughout the film, Murdoch attempts to return to Shell Beach, but efforts at finding a way out of the city to the town of his childhood are hindered by lack of reliable information from everyone he meets. Murdoch eventually finds and confronts Dr. Schreber, who explains that the Strangers are alien parasites whose race is slowly dying out. The Strangers have selected the humans of Dark City for a series of experiments in order to try and use humanity's ability to possess individual thought to cure their reliance on a collective consciousness. Each night, as the clock strikes midnight, the Strangers gather underneath the city to use their collective psychokinetic power to reshape the city in a process described as "tuning." During this process, Strangers located above-ground are shown using that same power to manipulate smaller spaces and to position residents of the city at new jobs, in new homes, and, in one scene, a higher social status. Schreber reveals Murdoch as an anomaly who inadvertently awoke during one midnight process when Schreber was in the middle of fashioning his identity as a murderer. The film also shows that Murdoch is able to "tune"—to manipulate the people and spaces of the city through psychokinetic powers.

Murdoch inadvertently tears through a wall at the edge of the metropolis, producing a hole in the Strangers' façade and revealing the city as an enormous space

sanctuary. The Strangers then bring Murdoch to their home in the lower sections of the spacecraft and force Dr. Schreber to imprint Murdoch with their collective memory, using Murdoch as a last-ditch effort to end their race's extinction. Schreber uses this opportunity to insert a series of false memories into Murdoch's mind that represent decades' worth of psychic training and a more complete understanding of the Strangers and their technology. When Murdoch awakens, he is able to use his newfound abilities to free himself and defeat the Strangers. Murdoch then utilizes his powers through the Strangers' machine to create an actual Shell Beach. Murdoch opens the door leading out of the city and steps out to view a sunrise that he created, suggesting that at the very least, this new world is closer to the one that existed only in his memories.

Viewers can instantly recognize the exterior and interior scenes of *Dark City* as the neon wilderness or the asphalt jungle of classic film noir. As viewers accustomed to this look, they can respond affirmatively to *Dark City*'s consistency with other noir settings. The "different eras" of the past have no existence other than in the unreliable memories of those, whether they are viewers or inhabitants of *Dark City*, for whom cinematic conventions already mingle freely with reality anyway. In this sense, Proyas and his collaborators make explicit Jameson's contention that postmodernism embraces a "pseudohistorical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces 'real' history" (20). The cityspace in *Dark City* is represented as an almost unbroken string of mid-size, non-descript high-rise buildings and apartments reminiscent of the modern architectural style of the '30s and '40s. Production designer on the film Patrick Tatopoulos states:

The movie takes place everywhere, and it takes place nowhere. It's a city built of pieces of cities. A corner from one place, another from someplace else. So, you

don't really know where you are. A piece will look like a street in London, but a portion of the architecture looks like New York, but the bottom of the architecture looks again like a European city. You're there, but you don't know where you are. It's like every time you travel, you'll be lost. (qtd. in Wagner 65)

As Murdoch travels through a city described by Susan Higley as a “murky, nightmarish German expressionist film noir depiction of urban repression and mechanism” (9), he finds nothing that can help him in his quest to remember his past. Unlike in several of the amnesia-themed films noirs, in *Dark City* there are no familiar urban spaces; there is nowhere where Murdoch feels comfortable.

Dimendberg—as well as urban planners from the 1920s forward—sees horizontal structures as representative of civic or public purposes and vertical structures as representative of the power of corporate capitalism (96). Furthermore, Dimendberg characterizes the transformation of urban space in the '40s and '50s as a move towards “an urban space designed with less regard for the corporeal and aesthetic experience of those who navigate it than for the realization of specific economic ends, social policies, or technological function” (104). The towering buildings and skyscrapers of *Dark City* are realizations of this trend in urban transformation, and the constantly shifting architectural forms of the city help to represent the postmodern shift from discernable urban spaces to a series of self-replicating, faceless corporate structures. The underlying fear felt by the characters in the film—and by viewers—comes in part from the realization that the control and understanding of urban space is being transferred from a public to a corporate interest. The domination of horizontal structures in the film help to connect the anxieties posed by a loss of spatial control with the terror created by the smothering urban density of so many urban renewal projects.

In *Dark City*, it isn't simply that the physical lived spaces of Murdoch and the inhabitants of the city are constantly being changed and manipulated by the strangers; their families, social statuses, and places of employment are also shifted. Several of the characters in the film are shown being physically positioned by the strangers in new jobs, and while Murdoch's revelation that the front desk clerk at a hotel is now running a newspaper stand helps him understand the actions of the Strangers, this conscious manipulation of the city's inhabitants also demonstrates a nightly dissolution of any sense of community the characters might find in their daily lives. And while the constantly shifting skyline disrupts each character's physical perception of the city, the constantly shifting social, familial, and workplace conditions eradicate any possibility of the city inhabitants finding solace or protection in a stable community. In this way, Proyas highlights the connection between the alienation produced by the elimination of familiar city spaces in the '80s and '90s with the wholesale destruction of the desperately needed communities gentrification brought with it.

When Murdoch awakens in the hotel room, he quickly finds his clothes—and the corpse of a ritualistically murdered woman—but there's nothing to help establish his identity. Dr. Schreber's cryptic phone call does nothing to fill the gaps in his memory, only heightening the tension Murdoch already feels. The desk clerk at the hotel provides him with a last name and first initial and establishes that he's been residing there for the last three weeks, but there's no sense of any personal connection or history between the two. The desk clerk—who in the following scene is replaced with another of the interchangeable city residents—is far removed from the motley cast of characters that

form the community of contacts, snitches, and informants that make up the detective's world in earlier films noir. Murdoch must establish his identity on his own, and as he walks the city's streets testing out possible first names, there is no epiphany: none of his choices seem right. Over the course of the next few scenes, Murdoch recovers his wallet, finds his "wife" and his apartment, and slowly recovers the basic structure of his life. But none of this information seems to provide Murdoch satisfaction. Even after being apprehended by Inspector Bumstead and charged with the murder of the woman in his hotel room—the point where one might expect Murdoch to fight to prove his innocence—Sewell's character seems relatively unimpressed, uninterested in the conventional noir murder mystery. But that's because Murdoch's quest to recover his surface identity, or to prove his innocence, is merely secondary to the far more important question of who he really is.

It is this move, the move from the earlier noir trope of the detective solving a crime—even if he himself is implicated—to the detective uncovering his own identity that marks one of the significant innovations provided by neo-noir. Jerold J. Abrams suggests: "Whereas ... the Philip Marlowe character's first-person narrative [is] driven towards finding a lone villain, ... the detective of neo noir films [is] looking for himself; he's looking for himself as an other" (10). As Dr. Schreber says to Murdoch's wife, Emma, "Wherever your husband is...he is searching, for himself." This meta-subjective search for self-identity is heightened in *Dark City* by the knowledge that Murdoch's lives have been consciously manipulated by the Strangers, but because the memory manipulations of the Strangers have been going on for decades, there is no bottom or core

to his identity for Murdoch to find. Similar to the almost complete sense of anomie found in dwellers of the postmodern metropolis, Murdoch is forced to make sense out of what others have provided for him with no hope of discovering any sense of permanence.

Earlier films noir created a sense of nostalgia for a feeling of pre-modern urban stability, and Richard Gilmore states: “From the Greek, *nostos*, nostalgia is the sense that something important that one once possessed is now lost. The ‘thing’ in the idea of *nostos* is home, or more accurately for film noir, some romanticized idea of what would constitute a sense of finally being home” (121). In *Dark City*—as in many neo-noir films—not only can the sense of home not be found by its characters, but there is an intimation that the idea of “home” no longer exists. Despite the film’s seemingly happy ending, with Murdoch and his wife Emma standing on a pier overlooking the newly constructed Shell Beach, *Dark City* emphasizes the idea that any form of urban permanence is impossible and that any happiness or sense of place felt by its characters is only temporary. Shell Beach never existed; from the beginning it was created by Schreber and the Strangers to serve as the setting for Murdoch’s fictive childhood. As Murdoch and Emma stand in the bright sunlight, gazing on the hazy, undefined promise of Shell Beach, the viewer can’t help but remember that, moments earlier, the film had presented a wide shot of the entire city, hurtling through space, resting on a complex structure of alien machinery. The film doesn’t want you to think that Murdoch is home; the film insists that Murdoch’s search for Shell Beach, for an alternative to the urban environment he’s been forced to inhabit, is impossible.

At first glance, Andrew Niccol’s *GATTACA* is concerned far more with issues of

genetic possibility and discrimination, police-state surveillance, and body paranoia than with issues of urban space. But the connections the film makes between the main character's desire to pass freely into the walls of privilege and the structural design and image of the film's use of urban space make it worth studying here. *GATTACA* is set in an undisclosed near-future where advances in genetic testing and manipulation have created a eugenic hierarchy of social status and personal identity privileging those who have been selected to receive—and certified to have—superior genetic traits. Ethan Hawke plays the film's protagonist, Vincent, who is conceived the old-fashioned way and thus prone to a number of genetic maladies. After his parents turn to science to conceive his younger brother, Anton, Vincent leaves home, only to discover a world of prejudice and scorn leveled at those who fail to meet society's high genetic standards. Forced to work as a janitor for the GATTACA Aerospace company he longs to be a part of, Vincent eventually turns to Jerome Eugene Morrow (played by Jude Law), a once famous Olympic swimming star, whose paralysis makes him willing to sell his services as a “borrowed ladder”—someone with quality DNA willing to sell hair, urine, and skin cell samples to those wishing to pass as genetically superior. This arrangement allows Vincent to infiltrate GATTACA and realize his dream of becoming an astronaut. One week before finally leaving Earth on a manned voyage to Titan, however, Jerome's actual DNA is tied to the murder of one of GATTACA's administrators, and for the rest of the film, Jerome must elude police detection, navigate the perils of a new relationship with a co-worker, and manage the complex web of lies that have become his identity.

It is Jerome's constructed artificial identity that connects this film to *Dark City*

and to a series of neo-noir films that seek to highlight the tenuous connection the urban dweller has with the postmodern city. Despite the film's repeated use of brightly lit exterior scenes and lack of a fully realized centripetal urban space, the aesthetics of *GATTACA* are clearly a nod to earlier films noir. The classic black business attire worn by the workers at *GATTACA*, the black trenchcoats and fedoras worn by the police, the dark interiors of the *GATTACA* building, the '50s and '60s automobile designs superimposed on the film's turbine powered cars, and the general mood of paranoia and surveillance are commonly found in film noir, and despite the addition of anachronistic elements such as the technologically advanced genetic screening devices, the film retains a definite noir sensibility. One of the strongest connections to the earlier films, however, is *GATTACA*'s conscious use of striking modern and early postmodern buildings around Los Angeles for its exterior shots. Frank Lloyd Wright's Marin County Civic Center, used for the *GATTACA* company's headquarters and also used for some interior shots, Cal Poly's CLA building, used for Vincent/Jerome's house, and L.A.'s paved basins and KJC solar farm provide the film with a visual aesthetic that has one foot planted firmly in the past and the other ambling forward towards an uncertain future.

As in earlier films noir, the buildings that make up Vincent's life are shown first from sweeping establishing shots and then from the vantage point of those standing at the bottom. Throughout the film, viewers are connected to the cityspace of *GATTACA* through Vincent's point of view. Constantly gazing upwards, Vincent scans the buildings of privilege, the spaces inaccessible to the genetically inferior, and even the skies themselves always from below. Vincent is often dwarfed by towering buildings, and the

film constantly reinforces his position at the bottom of a genetic-based hierarchy through repeated shots of winding spiral staircases, never-ending escalators, and rocket contrails. It could easily be argued that these images of verticality might solely represent Vincent's dream of space travel or of social mobility, Jerome's physical limitations, or even a strand of DNA itself, but I argue that the vertical structures in the film—and Vincent's relative position at the bottom—are representative of his inability to connect to or find comfort in the lived spaces of those born to genetic privilege. Rather than helping him embrace or even enjoy his painfully gained place at the top of the ladder, the city spaces in *GATTACA* only work to heighten his sense of social and biological anxiety and to remind him that he will never truly fit in.

The glittering headquarters of the GATTACA corporation and the citadel-like position of Vincent and Jerome's home also signify a disturbing trend that accompanied the gentrification that neo-noir poses as a threat to characters' understanding of the city. In his discussion of Don DeLillo's novel *Underworld*, Thomas Heise writes:

The decades-long trend toward greater urban sprawl has been complemented by a new movement toward urban recentralization and reconsolidation, a rebirth of urban centers for high-wage workers clustered in law, finance, marketing, and advanced-technology sectors. In terms of sheer numbers, the job growth in these areas has been far outpaced by another trend, a surge in low-wage employment.... The postmodern city is a fractal of global social and geographic unevenness.... The swirling transformations in work, technology, and urban space at the end of the twentieth century has been like a gyre turning in two directions simultaneously, a centripetal vortex drawing the rich and the poor into the city and a centrifugal whirlwind scattering money and labor across the globe. (226)

GATTACA takes this schism between skilled and unskilled labor and couples it to the film's larger discussion of genetic manipulation. Early in the film, Vincent is forced to take menial positions—"I must have cleaned half the toilets in the state"—because of his

genetic inferiority. The film suggests that those labeled “in-valid” are rejected by companies worried about an employee’s productivity and by those wishing to keep their insurance costs low. However, although Vincent mentions that he “belonged to a new underclass, no longer determined by social status or the color of your skin,” the viewer can easily recognize the effects of urban renewal on today’s working class and minority populations in the film’s use of genetic screening. Thus, the film connects the lack of opportunity chances offered to the working class that I’ve identified in previous chapters to the lack of social mobility offered to those city residents still trying to survive in the inner-city as gentrification efforts seemed to raise everyone’s standard of living but their own.

By creating a condition where employment is tentative at best (when describing his early life as an in-valid, Vincent states: “Like many others in my situation, I moved around a lot, getting work where I could.”), the economic insecurity posed by increasing service sector jobs helps to heighten the palpable sense of estrangement present in urban dwellers at the end of the twentieth century. Despite the economic upswing that followed the tech boom in America, much of the urban poor were left unaffected by this newfound wealth. In *GATTACA*, Vincent lives his life knowing that at any time he might once more be reduced to making a living forced to perform jobs that no one else will do. This fear leads to his constant feelings of unease and doubt when trying to fit in with the rest of the privileged—“valid”—city residents. Vincent’s future city is just as alienating as *Blade Runner*’s Los Angeles and *Dark City*’s alien metropolis, and its economic uncertainties work in tandem with its imposing vertical structures to challenge Vincent’s—and the

viewer's—understanding of the postmetropolis. Although Vincent eventually escapes the eugenic nightmare presented in the film, to finally find a sense of belonging he has to go to the extreme of leaving the Earth itself. As with Deckard's choice to go north in *Blade Runner*, Vincent must leave the city—and the planet—entirely to find any sense of relief.

The neo-noir films of the late '90s worked to confront viewers with the shifting realities of their own illegible cities by embracing the cinematic techniques of the noir films that had the same goals for the urban dwellers of the '40s and '50s. But neo-noirs such as *Dark City* and *GATTACA* do something more. By relying on the nostalgia produced by nods to the earlier films, neo-noir suggests that any hopes of viewers to escape present urban realities through film are based on a Hollywood constructed fiction that never was and never will be. In the next section of this chapter, I turn to the increased public-private partnerships that further helped to transform urban spaces in the '80s and '90s by turning control of both public and private space over to corporate interests. By wresting any and all control of the postmetropolis away from the public, these privatization efforts further increased the inability of city inhabitants to make sense of the sites of their spatial practice.

The *RoboCop* Trilogy

In the summer of 2014, Detroit will unveil a ten-foot statue commemorating one of the city's greatest heroes: RoboCop. This crowd-funded venture comes as Detroit's population has fallen to fewer than 700,000 people (down from a high of 1.8 million in the 1950s) and its unemployment rate has risen to eleven percent. Yet there is less irony

in the statue than the state of the city might suggest as Paul Verhoeven's 1987 film *RoboCop*, Irvin Kershner's sequel *RoboCop 2* (1990), and even Fred Dekker's uneven *RoboCop 3* (1993) were early predictors of the city's fall from grace. This section argues that these three films provide an allegorical look at the drastic transformations cities in America's Rust Belt made as the auto industry relocated and retooled, leaving thousands of workers unemployed. I suggest that each film's use of the fictional OCP corporation as the enemy of the city and of the working class residents of Old Detroit mirrors the very real actions of corporate America as it sought to get as much out of the dying city as it could. *RoboCop*'s intervention in the city's further development symbolizes the inability of the average citizen—or even an entire police force—to fight against the corporate menace and make some kind of stand against the global corporate takeover of the city. In this way, these films become more than an exploration of posthumanity; they provide an eerily accurate prediction about the future of the post-Fordist city.

Throughout this section I'll be identifying the strong connections between the films' criticisms of urban development and the real-world consequences of urban planning under the pall of late capitalism. Peter Hall suggests in *The Cities of Tomorrow* that during the late '70s and through the '80s, American cities in the Rust Belt began to encourage complex partnerships between city governments and the private sector. Hall suggests that although these partnerships almost always benefitted the private contractors and land developers, they often destroyed historic neighborhoods and cost the city millions of dollars. David Harvey's latest work, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* identifies the complicity of capitalism in the creation of Detroit's

post-industrial slums and suggests the ways in which more egalitarian control might give life back to the city. And Manuel Castells shows Detroit's slow transformation from an automobile manufacturing hub to a city driven by technological research, a transition that fails to include the city's thousands of under-educated laborers. As Hollywood presents its remake of the original *RoboCop* film—one that conveniently elides any emphasis on the city of Detroit—we can look back at the original three films as prescient extrapolations taken from a city that was already beginning to die.

Although several scholars have analyzed the posthuman implications of *RoboCop* and its sequels, none have responded to the film's overwhelming critique of the privatization of cities such as Detroit in the wake of post-industrial collapse. Of those who have analyzed the films' ties to urban space, Rob Wilson provides a typical argument: "If such a sublime cyborg would insinuate the future as post-Fordist subject, his palpably masochistic locations as ecstatic agent of the sublime superstate need to be decoded as the 'now-all-but-unreadable DNA' of a fast deindustrializing Detroit, just as his RoboCop-like strategy of carceral negotiation of street control remains the tirelessly American one of inflicting regeneration through violence upon the racially heteroglossic wilds and others of the inner-city" (290). But such emphasis on the films' violent qualities and the insinuation that RoboCop works solely to further the designs of his corporate masters, miss not only the limited agency RoboCop recovers throughout the trilogy, but also the pointed critique the films make against the increased privatization of public space.

RoboCop is the story of a plucky young police officer, Alex Murphy, who is

tragically dismembered in his first week working a new beat in Old Detroit. Rather than let him pass on in peace, the corporation Omni Consumer Products or OCP, resurrects Murphy as the cyborg killing machine, RoboCop. After murdering the vicious gang responsible for his “death” and defying the corporate executives who attempt to use him solely for their nefarious ends, Murphy regains something of his humanity and re-enters the Detroit police force a (somewhat) free (somewhat) man. But instead of focusing on Murphy’s struggle to find his humanity or to come to grips with his newfound posthuman status, I want to look at the film’s representations of the city’s true protagonist: Detroit itself.

The film is set in the near future, and although by 1987, Detroit was already in decline, the filmic representations of Detroit’s inner city are fairly bleak. Throughout the film, news segments repeatedly mention massive unemployment rates in the city as well as a wave of violent criminal activity in order to make the tacit connection between economic instability and increased crime. The interstitial newscasts provide much of the film’s satiric glee, and the images of urban crime appear—like so many other scenes of violence in the film—comically exaggerated. But Detroit’s problems with unemployment and with crime were common knowledge to anyone who had been paying attention to the state of the city throughout the 1980s. As I mentioned in chapter two, Detroit was one of the hardest-hit cities during the wave of blue-collar job migration that wildly increased urban poverty and urban crime. As a one-time lynchpin of the country’s auto industry, Detroit seemed impervious to financial ruin, even as GM began shuttering its last remaining factories. But as hundreds of thousands of jobs left the city and the state,

Detroit fell into financial ruin, bringing with it a reputation for being one of the most dangerous cities in America.

In the film, the erosion of the country's manufacturing and industrial jobs—the cause of Detroit's tragic devolution into rust-belt wasteland—is shown most clearly in the scenes filmed in the abandoned steel mill that serves as the headquarters for Clarence Boddiker and the gang who violently dismember Murphy at the beginning of the film. Although these scenes weren't filmed directly in Detroit, they were shot at Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel's Monessen works in the Pittsburgh suburb of Monessen Pennsylvania, another victim of the deindustrialization of America. The scenes are bleak, stark, and clearly meant to evoke a sense of decay and ruin in the viewer. Several of the shots at this location are low angle establishing shots, meant to increase the enormity of the structure while diminishing the relative size of the human protagonists. As Murphy and his partner Anne Lewis first come upon the mill as they're chasing Boddiker and his gang, their patrol car makes its way along a narrow path, winding its way through partially destroyed buildings that block out the sky. When Murphy and Lewis exit their car, the camera pulls back and then pans up to contrast their unprotected human bodies with the rusting, hulking remnants of urban manufacturing.

The dying city is also shown in the establishing shots of the precinct that serves as Murphy's home. In the film's first image of Detroit's Metro West police precinct, the viewer can see the sharp contrast between the gleaming lo-rise business center in the background and the soot-stained, turn-of-the-century brick building of the precinct. The precinct seems almost anachronistic, the last remnants of a city soon to be torn down and

replaced with something new. Although in later scenes the precinct appears to be more a part of the actual city, in this first scene, it stands apart from the buildings surrounding it, bounded by a dirt parking lot that separates it physically and psychically from the centers of prosperity shown in the background. In fact, many of the scenes representing Old Detroit are shot in the shadow of a gleaming—and seemingly prosperous—southside business district, suggesting that the widespread urban poverty affecting the majority of the city’s residents hasn’t touched those most able to afford to ignore it. But the violent crime and decaying buildings plaguing Old Detroit are a problem (and an opportunity) for OCP, for as long as the streets are marred by violence, the company’s dream of leveling Old Detroit and replacing it with their utopian Delta City can never come to fruition.

In *RoboCop*, the dream of OCP’s CEO, “the old man,” is Delta City, a shining example of corporate-sponsored gentrification right in the heart of old Detroit. The company’s goal—throughout all three of the films—is to tear down the decaying ruins of “Old Detroit” to make way for the city of the future. Under the schizophrenic logic of capitalism, the violence and deterioration of the city are both the reasons for constructing Delta City and the excuse necessary to get the project constructed. The poverty and crime created by capital’s elimination of blue-collar jobs serve to justify the violent destruction of Old Detroit in order to create a new cycle of urban growth and deterioration. In his speech introducing the idea of Delta City to the OCP board of directors, the CEO sums up the capitalist view of the inner city fairly succinctly:

Old Detroit has a cancer. The cancer is crime, and it must be burned out before we employ the two million workers who will breathe new life into the city again.

Although shifts in the tech structure have created an economy ideal for corporate growth, community services—in this case law enforcement—have suffered. I think it's time we gave something back.

OCP touts RoboCop as the high-tech solution to Detroit's crime problem, but while viewers—and the city's residents—are blinded by their new hero, OCP quietly makes plans for destroying the neighborhoods of the working poor.

David Harvey describes the process by which capitalism cyclically transforms urban space by manipulating the working class as “dispossession.” Harvey states:

Capital necessarily creates a physical landscape in its own image at one point in time only to have to destroy it at some later point in time as it pursues geographical expansions and temporal displacements as solutions to the crises of overaccumulation to which it is regularly prone. Thus is the history of creative destruction (with all manner of deleterious social and environmental consequences) written into the evolution of the physical and social landscape of capitalism. (*Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* 66)

Harvey's view of the city paints gentrification as both a necessary and constant force for capitalist constructions of urban space. And throughout this cycle of dispossession and gentrification, capital often works in concert with city and state governments to displace those living in the soon to be improved residential areas and to make it financially beneficial for those corporations willing to invest in the city. This cooperation between private interests and politicians supposedly representing public welfare almost always benefits the interests of capital at the expense of the public, and OCP's efforts to gentrify Detroit illustrate this point flawlessly.

OCP's Delta City seems like a product of paranoid anti-capitalist fears—a fully privatized city with all services provided by OCP and all existing regulation and legal protections either superseded or eliminated by company directives. But here the film is

actually presenting an allegorical look at the Urban Enterprise Zones enacted in Britain and the United States in the late '70s and '80s. In 1977, urban theorist Peter Hall suggested that one possible way of ending urban decline would be to create Urban or Free Enterprise Zones where capital would have free rein to (hopefully) find creative ways to revitalize inner-city neighborhoods. These zones would be under little to no direct state control, but would be subsidized by direct state investment and by generous tax incentives, and they would be, as Hall put it, "based on fairly shameless free enterprise" (387). Hall didn't mean for this plan to actually be put into action or to be championed in Britain and abroad, though; he saw the Free Enterprise Zone as a kind of last possible solution. However, in 1980, the new conservative government in Britain introduced provision for Enterprise Zones, and soon areas such the London Docklands became irreparably transformed.

In America, "The Kemp-Garcia Urban Jobs and Enterprise Zone Act" became Reagan's urban policy, and soon dozens of these pro-business initiatives swept across the nation. The Kemp-Garcia Act eliminated capital gains taxes associated with new investments and sheltered half of all income earned by enterprises and half of all interest income earned on loans from taxes. It provided additional tax credits for employers who hired (mostly) low-wage and unskilled labor, and eliminated existing building codes and environmental regulations. In some areas, state governments went so far as to try to eliminate state minimum wage laws in the zones. Of course almost all of these Free Enterprise Zones failed. Tenuous bank funding, shaky business plans, and an overall disregard for the eventual conditions of these urban areas created huge swaths of unfilled

office buildings, empty hotels, and shuttered windows. And the worst part was that many of these Free Enterprise Zones were enabled by the destruction of long-standing working class neighborhoods (Bluestone and Harrison 226-29). Just as the urban renewal projects of the '60s and '70s had targeted lower-class and minority neighborhoods in the name of “ghetto removal,” the Free Enterprise Zones also targeted working class communities that were in decline, even though—ironically—the source of that decline was, more often than not, corporate restructuring or job migration.

But the dream of OCP, to move into a depressed neighborhood, use political power to seize property at a severely discounted cost, and then create a business-friendly zone of little to no regulation or interference from the state *had already happened in Detroit*. In 1981, after closing its two remaining automobile plants in the city, General Motors proposed a new auto plant to be located right in the middle of Detroit, near the Polish community of Hamtramck. As Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison describe it:

In this highly unequal poker game, the city had a poor hand and GM held the aces. Everyone from the mayor to the most progressive members of the city council knew it, and therefore the city met the company's demands almost totally. Over four hundred acres were cleared, 3,200 people were forced from their homes in what had been one of Detroit's most socially integrated communities, churches were torn down, and 160 community businesses were closed. The city used its power of eminent domain to clear out families and small-town entrepreneurs ... and finally gave in on a twelve-year tax abatement that cost the city over \$240 million dollars in revenues. (184)

Despite protests by the residents of Poletown—including some whose families had lived in the area for over one hundred years—the city council sided with General Motors. Over the course of a single year, GM and the city of Detroit displaced over 4000 people in the name of business. For the 4000 residents of Poletown—and for the victims of economic

opportunity zones across the nation—the privatization of public space meant the destruction of their homes. An entire residential neighborhood was destroyed, leaving those who used to live and work in the area with no control of the public—and supposedly private—spaces of the city. Replace GM with OCP, and *RoboCop* isn't so much a glimpse of the future, but a look at the recent past.

However, *RoboCop* isn't solely concerned with the effect of corporate privatization of public space. The film also shows what happens when corporate interests take over public services. In one of the early news segments in the film, a telegenic newscaster announces the deaths of three Detroit police officers and the police union's blame for their deaths on the recent privatization of Detroit's police force. Instead of cutting to a clip of a union official, the newscast turns to a spokesperson from OCP who callously suggests that death is always a possibility for any officer and warns that, "if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen." Here the film clearly suggests that public workers—especially those working to protect the public such as police officers and firemen—deserve to be treated better than an average corporate drone. By literally suggesting that a police officer's duty is to die, the OCP mouthpiece reinforces the image of callous corporate treatment of workers for audiences who were beginning to be confronted by threats of privatization in their own backyards. This image of OCP's treatment of personnel as capital is reinforced several times throughout *RoboCop* and its sequels, as Murphy is repeatedly treated as property rather than an autonomous subject.

RoboCop 2, although perhaps lacking the character development of the first film, makes a far more pointed critique of the increasing corporate power to encourage

gentrification efforts by any means necessary. The ultimate effects of Detroit's contract with OCP become apparent in the sequel when after the city fails to pay OCP the \$37 million it is owed for the maintenance of the police force, one of OCP's corporate goons reminds the city's mayor of a clause buried in its contract: "In the event of default, OCP shall have the uncontested right of foreclosure on all city assets." As the company's "old man" suggests, OCP wants to "privatize Detroit." Despite the mayor's furious accusation—"You want Detroit to tear itself apart just so you can raid it like any other corporation?"—it's clear that OCP has simultaneously restricted the city's access to credit and engineered its lingering police strike in order to force the city to leverage an Old Detroit whose property values have plummeted due to the ensuing increased criminal activity.

As OCP attempts to wrest control of the city away from even its elected officials, the residents of Detroit are left to face an urban wasteland spiraling out of control. *RoboCop 2* increases the violence of the original, and in repeated scenes of random urban destruction, the film suggests that living in Old Detroit has become almost completely untenable. The prolonged police strike has left the streets of the city unprotected, and in the first few minutes of the film, viewers are shown a series of shots of drug use, thefts, and beatings that culminate in a rocket attack in the middle of the street. None of the criminals in this scene have any fear of being caught. As one criminal states to his partner: "Cops are on strike, stupid." What this atmosphere of constant violence creates for the residents of Old Detroit is an atmosphere of almost complete isolation from the relatively crime-free greater Detroit. As RoboCop patrols the streets, residents of the city

are shown as either completely in shock or as participating in the crimes themselves. In a scene towards the middle of the film, a coach takes his little league team to rob an electronics store in broad daylight. The hyperbolic scenes of violence in the film are unrealistic at best, but they do serve to highlight the complete lack of control the city's residents have due to the machinations of OCP. The company's manipulations of the police and of urban crime—all in the name of creating a safer, more prosperous Detroit—leave no doubt in viewers' minds of the effects of the privatization of urban space.

Despite its obvious lack of quality, *RoboCop 3* also deserves to be mentioned here. Written in part by comic book artist and writer Frank Miller, *RoboCop 3* is, for the most part, bleak and uninspired. In this second film penned (in part) by Miller, the ever-hopeful OCP corporation begins employing a private, quasi-military brigade to force Detroit's poorest citizens out of their homes to make room for the newest version of Delta City. In scenes surely taken from a fascist's dream diary, OCP's "Urban Rehabilitators" sweep through the unprotected neighborhoods of the urban poor, brandishing high-powered automatic weapons and murdering those who would stand in their way. As the Urban Rehabilitators—or Rehabs as the film's characters refer to them—begin to clear the neighborhood of Cadillac Heights, RoboCop and the rest of Detroit's police force stand with the community's residents to turn back the forces of OCP and reclaim their neighborhood for themselves.

Despite the ridiculous nature of the film's plot, *RoboCop 3* makes perhaps the strongest stand against corporate interests. Sure, a subplot involving the Japanese takeover of OCP creates a jingoistic feel to the resistance efforts of the working poor, but

by reducing the stakes of OCP's corporate takeover of the city to such simplistic terms, *RoboCop 3* also makes the boldest statement against the privatization of urban areas. In the film's climax, as the chief of Murphy's department prepares the mostly African American residents of Cadillac Heights to defend against the Rehabs and a gang of vicious criminals OCP has let out of jail, viewers can feel empathy for those working to protect their homes. By using multiple shots of the beleaguered residents' faces, by presenting a number of sympathetic working class children, and by allying RoboCop with the resistance movement, the film does everything it can to humanize urban poverty.

While the third film in the trilogy might be seen as a disappointment, it works in tandem with the first two to warn viewers of the dangers of corporate control of private space. The *RoboCop* trilogy reflects the failure of American Enterprise Zones, and the irresponsible futility of trusting private interests to protect the welfare of the public. It also reflects the transformation of urban spaces attempted by gentrification efforts and the effects of spatial reconfiguration on the inner city's mostly working class residents. Despite the use of a fiscally (and morally) bankrupt Detroit city government in the second film, the three films don't really identify the role of local, state, and federal authorities in the increased abdication of the rights to the most vulnerable parts of the city. For that discussion I turn to Frank Miller's scathing critique of the Reagan administration's failed urban policies regarding public housing and the treatment of the nation's mentally ill. In the next section I analyze two of Frank Miller's comic series to identify the government's role in displacing the urban poor from their homes and in further reducing the legibility of the city for those least able to fight back.

A Dark Liberty: The Re-Visioning of America in Frank Miller's Graphic Work

Author Frank Miller has long been recognized for his groundbreaking deconstruction of the superhero in his comic book miniseries *The Dark Knight Returns*. Scholars have repeatedly used this work to explain the turning point in comic history that came with his 1986 masterpiece, creating an acceptance of, and demand for, the dark, epic storytelling that has come to define the modern age of comics. However, in this final section I aim to show that Miller was also presenting us with a dystopian American landscape in order to highlight the ineptitude of Reagan's urban policy, the plight of those living in American housing projects, and the hubris of urban planners who believed that urban poverty could be solved in the cheapest, easiest way possible.

In 1986's *The Dark Knight Returns* and 1990's *Give Me Liberty*, Miller tackles issues such as race, corporate greed, and political corruption as he presents readers with a sinister, dystopian version of future America. In Miller's America, police use automatic weapons, the president is both war-hungry and incompetent, and whole minority communities are forced into militarized ghettos. Miller's work in the mid-eighties and early nineties constitutes one of the most open criticisms of the socio-political landscape of conservative America, and taken together, these two comic book series constitute one of the more pointed dystopian interventions in the urban imaginary.

Arguably one of the most revolutionary comic stories of all time, *The Dark Knight Returns* set the pattern for Frank Miller's use of the comic book form to highlight and criticize the problems he found with America in the 1980s. *The Dark Knight Returns* is ostensibly the story of an aged Bruce Wayne picking up the mantle of Batman one last

time in order to bring order to a Gotham City thrown into chaos by an ever-increasing gang presence, but the comic is also about the use of power and the idea that a government sponsored police-state—working to protect the interests of criminal capitalists such as Superman’s arch-nemesis Lex Luthor—has created the need for a hyper-vigilant or vigilante style of urban justice. Although, at times, Miller’s Batman exhibits shades of the author’s more recent embracing of Ayn-Randite libertarianism, the comic’s depiction of a growing working class insurgency identifies the need for urban revolution and the possibility that such a revolution might actually succeed.

Perhaps the most telling way in which *The Dark Knight Returns* shows us Miller’s take on America in the ‘80s is his use of a Reagan-like avatar as a stand-in for the American presidency. In early panels, conversations between the president and Superman are shown by word balloons only, with the American flag representing the president, and a cropped image of Superman’s iconic “S” standing in for the hero. Using Reaganesque phrases such as “I learned everything I know about running this country on my ranch” and “just between you and me and the fence post,” Miller’s president warns Superman that Batman can’t be allowed to operate in Gotham City, as heroism without control will make his government look bad (84). By setting Superman up to be a tool of the government, Miller attempts to posit Batman as an ordinary citizen, attempting to heal his community without government involvement. Despite Batman’s resorting to the same kind of vigilante justice used by Paul Kersey in the *Death Wish* films, *The Dark Knight Returns* isn’t positioning the hero as someone motivated by either racist visions of urban violence or by a misguided desire to protect the spaces of the city’s middle class.

Instead, the character works to protect Gotham City from a president who is too busy manipulating large-scale capitalist concerns to take any interest in America's urban cores. While Miller's take on Batman critiques Reagan's commitment to corporate interests, it doesn't spend too much time on the lives of the ordinary citizens of Gotham. For an analysis of Miller's more thorough look at urban poverty, we must turn towards the first work Miller published for the independent comic publisher Dark Horse, *Give Me Liberty*.

Written by Miller in 1990, the four issue mini-series *Give Me Liberty* presents one of the most realistic portraits of urban poverty ever to reach the pages of a graphic novel. *Give Me Liberty* depicts the story of Martha Washington, a young African-American girl born into an America under the totalitarian rule of a president serving his thirteenth year in office. Steering away from traditional comic book plots, characters, and scenarios, Miller's *Give Me Liberty* is meant instead to challenge the way readers view America, and to define the housing projects of the inner cities as places in desperate need of reform.

Rather than setting his story in Gotham, Metropolis, or even New York City, Miller chose instead to use Chicago's Cabrini-Green housing projects as the environment where Martha grows up. Constructed between the late '50s and early '60s, the high rise buildings of the Cabrini-Green housing projects were conceived as modern marvels, but created as cheap, poorly-constructed hovels (Popkin 13). Within ten years the living spaces, consisting of "cinderblock walls, bare light bulbs, and black linoleum floors" became almost completely unlivable—infested with vermin and plagued by electrical failures, broken water and sewage pipes, and disabled heating and air conditioning

(Popkin 11; Hunt 140). These projects were constructed in isolated, primarily African-American neighborhoods so that their residents were virtually cut off from the rest of the city. In *Blueprint for Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing*, D. Bradford Hunt describes the purpose and the effect of the separation of the Cabrini-Green, ABLA group, and Wells group housing projects from the rest of the city:

In 1986, the *Chicago Tribune* ran an eleven-part series on the [State Street] Corridor entitled “The Chicago Wall,” which outlined the “physical and psychological barriers” erected by “city officials to keep poor blacks isolated from the rest of Chicago.” More than any other visible symbol, the wall demonstrated the divide between the city’s African American poor and the commuters who zoomed by daily on their way downtown. (67-8)

Cabrini-Green followed the practice of similar housing projects across the nation of concentrating and isolating urban poverty as far as possible from the city’s more affluent residents. By following the recommendations of Chicago’s Housing Authority, the city chose to begin its “slum clearance” efforts in the city’s African American neighborhoods, hoping to alleviate the source of much of the city’s poverty. But in doing so, the city made sure that the African American urban poor would remain trapped in the prison-like fortresses that were part of Chicago’s housing projects. This played into the hands of racist factions of the city’s planning board who desired a policy of “containment” that would “keep African Americans out of white neighborhoods” (Hunt 68).

The isolation and neglect of Chicago’s housing projects, coupled with staggering poverty, encouraged an exponential increase in crime throughout the next few decades. By the 1980s, Chicago street gangs such as the Gangster Disciples, Traveling Vice Lords, and 4 Corner Hustlers controlled almost every aspect of the Green, creating a no-go zone for Chicago police (Popkin 51, 76). Hunt reports that “[t]he earliest project-specific

report on crime showed that at Cabrini-Green's four largest high-rises in 1972, residents were five times more likely to be raped, three times more likely to be robbed, four times more likely to be victims of aggravated assault, and six times more likely to be murdered" (173). The combination of the mismanagement of millions of dollars in public housing funds, reluctance and outright failure on the part of the city of Chicago when dealing with crime, and the sheer concentration of decades of misery led Cabrini-Green to be a beacon of suffering into the 21st century.

This is where Miller chose to begin the story of Martha Washington. This is the America Miller chooses to show us. Indeed, Miller goes even further as he sets up his Cabrini-Green as a war-zone, surrounded by government troops who are instructed to kill any residents trying to leave. Surrounded by barbed-wire fences and controlled by soldiers armed with automatic weapons on the outside of the complex, Martha and her family are forced to stay inside, under the thumb of the Ice Man, head of the Green's controlling gang. Eventually, at the age of thirteen, Martha is compelled to kill the Ice Man after she finds he has murdered her favorite teacher, the only person to ever show Martha any trace of compassion, any hope of someday escaping the green (12-15). Strong enough to protect herself against a man three times her size, but unable to deal mentally with the fact that she has killed, Martha finds herself unable to speak. By the time Martha regains her faculties, she has been moved to a padded room within the Green where authorities are talking about moving her to an asylum. Even as she recovers from her trauma, she chooses to fake insanity in order to be removed from the Green. She thinks to herself, "It breaks my mom's heart to see me acting like I'm stupid and crazy—

but there's no way to tell her—no way to tell her [...] Whatever they feed me, I'll get out. I'll get out" (16). Miller's Cabrini-Green, while strongly emulating its real-world counterpart, is so horrible that living anywhere else is preferable. As Martha's personality seems to slip away while in the institution, we can also see that she has allowed herself to believe that the chaos, the screaming, and the madness of the mental hospital are all still better than life in the Green. Eventually, Martha is forced out of the hospital as we learn that President Rexall—Miller's Reagan substitute in this comic—enjoying his third term as commander in chief, has signed an order forcing 200,000 patients out of the institutions and into the streets as a result of "budget cuts" (22). We see Martha, still dressed in her hospital gown, clawing at what is left of the demolished hospital while repeating, "Just want to die. Just want to die" (23).

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter signed the Mental Health Systems Act, which was designed to address fundamental flaws in the care for the mentally ill in America (Thomas 8). This new policy included an increase in funding for mental health facilities at the local level and provided for continued federal support for mental health programs (Thomas 8). On August 13, 1981 the law was rescinded by President Reagan (Thomas 9). By eliminating the largest reform of the mental health system in America's history, Reagan would create an environment where the mentally ill, most without private insurance, would not be treated. Compounding the problem was the fact that up to a third of America's 250 to 500 thousand homeless were mentally ill. With the number of beds available for the mentally ill dropping by over forty percent between 1970 and 1984, the context for Miller's portrayal of president Rexall's mental health policies become

abundantly clear.

But Reagan didn't stop at releasing thousands of mentally ill patients out into the inner cities of America. As local mismanagement began to seriously take its toll on housing projects like Chicago's Cabrini Green, Reagan's policies concerning public housing offered little help to the slowly dying epicenters of urban poverty. Although Congress and affordable housing advocates were able to stop Reagan from cutting the most essential funds from HUD, he was responsible for slashing funding for additional housing for the poor, and he cut funding for the Community Development Block Grant while forcing tenants to pay five percent more of their annual income for rent (Hunt 265). Critics also claim that housing projects further suffered as Reagan fought to scale back Great Society programs, reducing funding wherever possible to any aid to the poor. To link Reagan's urban failures to his text, Miller uses repeated images of president Rexall alongside some of the worst moments in Martha's life. An image of a smiling Rexall riding in a ticker-tape parade on the day of his first inauguration is quickly contrasted by images of Martha's father being beaten to death by police later that same year (1-2). Images of Rexall's 2001 Christmas television broadcast—where he suggests that every family has been given a Christmas turkey—are sandwiched between scenes of Martha trying to sleep while circling helicopters menace the Green and scenes of her family spending the holiday in her mother's cramped living quarters, trying to choke down the frozen turkey TV dinner Rexall provided (5-6). And Rexall's 2009 inaugural parade seems to move right by the State Correctional Facility for the Criminally Insane that serves as Martha's home after she murders the Ice Man (17). The repetition of

images conflating Martha's repeated agonies with the actions of the president help to strengthen his suggestion to readers that Reagan's conservative urban policies helped to amplify urban poverty. While Reagan's name is never mentioned, the comic series seems to equate the failure of public housing projects with the federal government's failure to provide any meaningful aid to the poor. What these allusions also do is to provide the suggestion that increased control of public spaces by government agencies (as in the Cabrini-Green housing projects) and a concurrent disregard for those suffering in the inner city (also in Cabrini-Green) further rob urban dwellers of any agency within the spaces they call home. Torn between being forced by the government to live within the confined spaces of the Green and the possibility that there is no viable alternative for the urban poor, Martha loses any ability she might have to affect or control her spatial practice. In this way, Miller's *Give Me Liberty* provides the obverse side of the arguments made by the *RoboCop* trilogy analyzed above; Miller's comic series suggests that neither public nor private interests in the '80s and early '90s work to assist those who need their help the most.

In *Give Me Liberty*, Miller creates a strong African-American heroine forced to deal with extreme versions of the plight of the poor and the underprivileged in Reagan's America. Today this might not seem remarkable, but at the time, this type of character was non-existent. Some of the situations within the book might seem comical or out of place, but these elements only emphasize how unbelievable it is that the most powerful nation in the world would turn its back on its most helpless citizens. And through all of this, Martha Washington never gives up. Her character is stabbed, shot at, blinded,

institutionalized, and still she does not surrender. In one of the most powerful images of the book, Martha has collapsed in front of a huge tree in the rainforest, weeping, but as she wipes the tears and the chemical weapon out of her eyes, she states, “This won’t kill me. I won’t die here. This won’t kill me” (41).

In *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Give Me Liberty*, Frank Miller creates new versions of America to both teach us the consequences of the failure of Reagan’s public policy efforts and to give us hope that his vision doesn’t have to be our reality. In this way, Miller’s comic book series matches the proactive attempts of the neo-noir films and the *RoboCop* trilogy to warn viewers of the effects of gentrification and privatization by suggesting that public officials offered no palpable assistance to working class urban residents. Together, these three seemingly separate sections present an image of urban space in the ‘80s and ‘90s that precludes any attempts by urban residents to make sense of the spaces they called home.

Chapter 5

Coda:

Post-Apocalyptic New York, 9/11, and the Case against Gentrification

Of course, there has been a critique of urban gentrification efforts running throughout this entire dissertation. The overcrowding and overpopulation fears mentioned by authors in the first chapter worked to stimulate new building projects focused on both housing density and improved security. The conservative fears of violence and crime showcased in the films mentioned in chapter two helped to justify gentrification projects in the '80s and '90s. The towers of the wealthy analyzed in chapter three were often built as part of urban renewal projects, and as those of privilege sought to “reclaim” their cities and abolish sites of troubling poverty or architectural decrepitude, they often chose the more racially integrated, well-established neighborhoods as targets. And in the last chapter I identified spaces where filmmakers sought to warn viewers of the devastating mental and material effects of public/private redevelopment projects. Although gentrification has been a part of this entire text, I'm choosing to end this dissertation with a closer look at the ways the representation of urban renewal projects in film and literature has worked to transform our understanding of the city and our understanding of the various subcultures that are too often erased as capital moves to reclaim communities that have fallen into neglect.

In this final section, I begin by examining the ways that post-apocalyptic films in the '70s and early '80s sought to use the terror and the exaggerated possibilities of the

end of late capitalism to highlight the destruction of neighborhoods and subsections of outsiders in New York at the dawn of a wave of gentrification that would transform the city forever. Then, I utilize Samuel Delany's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999) to present readers with the destruction of New York's iconic 42nd Street as seen through the author's personal experience of the sorrowful elimination of one of the city's longest surviving queer neighborhoods. Finally, I turn to Jonathan Lethem's writing about the city in order to suggest that even as earlier critiques of gentrification efforts in New York have either tapered off or become far more cautious in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, there are still those who would stand against careless redevelopment. Although the themes and concepts presented in this chapter might easily be applied to any of the gentrification efforts that have affected the country, I'm choosing here to focus on the microcosm of urban renewal activity in New York because it was both so pervasive and so devastating.

In his review of Rem Koolhaas's *Project on the City*, Fredric Jameson states: "Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world" ("Future City" 76). From *A Boy and His Dog* (1975) to the more recent *Doomsday* (2008), post-apocalyptic films have a history of using the spectacle of destruction and violence to mount a critique of the city as a locus of consumption. While a number of these films utilized the city-versus-frontier, civilized-versus-savage binary of the frontier Westerns, the late seventies and early eighties were marked by a handful of films set entirely within a single urban center. These urban post-

apocalyptic films were often characterized by the same violence and slum-like conditions that were being used by property developers, ambitious city planners, and local governments to try to encourage increased gentrification efforts in neglected city centers. However, I contend that rather than support the efforts of capital to tear down and replace the living and working environments of the urban poor, a handful of urban science fiction films instead used the wild costumes and diverse characters of their motion pictures to argue for the rescue and protection of the numerous small communities being destroyed by urban rehabilitation projects.

Walter Hill's *The Warriors* (1979), John Carpenter's *Escape from New York* (1981), and Enzo G. Castellari's *1990: Bronx Warriors* (1982) and *Escape from the Bronx* (1983) use the backdrop of urban violence to highlight the importance of protecting New York's subcultural communities in the wake of increasing redevelopment efforts of the late seventies and early eighties. In each of these films, the audience is immersed in a vicious, future version of New York but asked to sympathize not with a representative of some white, middle-class utopia, but with a member or members of the urban communities linked with urban violence. The spectacle of violence and decay found in urban post-apocalyptic films is used to direct viewers towards their critique of a very real history of the conscious manipulation, control, and destruction of urban communities by those most interested in protecting the interests of late capitalism.

By the end of the 1970s, large portions of Manhattan and the Bronx had fallen into massive disrepair. Buildings that had been constructed in the 1920s and '30s lay in partially deconstructed ruins, and once prosperous neighborhoods existed as abandoned

shells, victims of massive waves of white flight. As New York's tax base fled to the suburbs, the city could no longer afford to support the many social services, schools, and aid programs that might have kept large populations of the city afloat. At the same time, as mentioned in chapter two, the city was suffering one of the worst increases in violent crime New Yorkers had ever seen. The physical decline of the city and the sudden increase in criminal activity made New York the perfect location for filmmakers wishing to simulate the end of the world. Capitalizing on the city's troubles, the directors of post-apocalyptic films in the '70s and '80s extrapolated a future New York plagued by roving gangs of heavily armed thugs, lawless streets ruled by violence, and an inescapable lack of any of the markers of civilization. In these films, conditions in the city were so bad that the metropolis had become completely irredeemable, fit only to sputter and die.

While it was easy to suggest that the crime and unemployment in New York was both the fault of the city's residents and likely to get worse, the truth behind the economic decline of New York and its effect on urban violence and urban poverty is far more complicated. In chapter two I indicated that the trend towards increased crime in the city was much more likely a result of the sharp rise in unemployment specifically felt by those living in the city's center. Regarding New York, specifically, historian Max Page states:

Even in the glory days of New York's economic might, problems had loomed. As in most other older cities, manufacturing jobs fell rapidly: in New York, the number of manufacturing jobs had been decreasing since the Great Depression and continued to do so through the 1970s. This decline—due to plant closings and relocation to the South and West, overseas, and to the suburbs—accelerated from the mid-1950s onward, bringing a massive loss of manufacturing jobs, a decline in the city's tax base, and a consequently rapid rise in its debt. By 1966, a

majority of the region's manufacturing jobs were located outside the city proper. (152)

At the same time, municipal leaders in the city were engaged in an ongoing attempt to lure corporate business operations into the area by easing building code restrictions and offering massive tax breaks. However, as Page explains, the city's efforts did nothing to help the struggling working class:

In the massive effort to remake lower Manhattan as an office and financial center, the city government subsidized huge building projects such as the World Trade Center while at the same time destroying manufacturing enterprises. Indeed, one of the great historical ironies is that on the site of the World Trade Center was a bustling district of thirty thousand jobs, centered on the emerging radio and television industries....It was all leveled....By 1975 the result of these structural and public policy choices was a city of widespread poverty, unemployment, racial segregation, and fury, combined with a physical landscape of ruin, the result of disinvestment, urban renewal and arson. It was a film set waiting for the director's call for "Action!" (153).

Without the good-paying industrial and manufacturing jobs, the city's middle class began to dissolve, and with this lack of income came a marked rise in urban crime rates. At the same time, the city's leaders began to label the neighborhoods that had once housed proud, middle class New Yorkers, "urban renewal areas," using the increase in malefaction to push for gentrification projects that would erase decades—and in some cases centuries—of the city's history to make way for housing that would be unaffordable for the majority of the previous residents. And it was this unreasonable forfeiture of working class neighborhoods that would spur filmmakers to imagine the worst possible future for the city while defending the rights of its residents to remain in the places they called home—no matter how bad things got.

In Carpenter's *Escape from New York*, after a "400% increase in crime," the island of Manhattan is transformed into a maximum security prison. Cut off from the rest of the country by 50-foot walls and monitored by the armed forces of the federal government, the prison allows no means for escape, and inmates are forced to make do with whatever resources were left when the city was abandoned. After Air Force One is taken hostage and the President's escape pod crash-lands inside the prison, the President is seized by locals, and the authorities must rely on "Snake" Plisken—a convict and ex-soldier—to enter Manhattan and rescue the President, or at least rescue a cassette tape necessary for securing peace with Russia and China. At first glance, *Escape from New York* seems to be simply maintaining the narrative of a city of fear. In "Killing Space: The Dialectic in John Carpenter's Films," Robert E. Ziegler states: "The ubiquity of danger requires that the city, the habitat of outlaws, be turned into the place of their incarceration. Society's inability to capture and detain the criminal results in a feeling of entrapment by the perpetrator's likely victims. But paradoxically, as more criminals are locked away, the remaining civilians feel less at ease" (779). However, the film's take on these "outlaws" isn't so clear-cut. True, many of the felons inside the prison are brutal killers, but characters such as Ernest Borgnine's Cabbie and Adrienne Barbeau's Maggie can't be seen simply as immoral monsters. Snake is the hero of the film, but if not for the President's kidnapping, he would simply be another prisoner. Even Isaac Hayes's motives as the "Duke of New York" aren't entirely selfish as he fights so that all of the prisoners can be freed.

Walter Hill's 1979 film *The Warriors*—based partially on the Sol Yurik novel of the same name—makes an even stronger stand against the shallow conservative characterizations of urban dwellers. In *The Warriors*, nine delegates from each of the 100 biggest street gangs in New York meet in the Bronx to see what Cyrus—the leader of the largest gang in the city, the Riffs—has to offer. Cyrus suggests that instead of fighting each other, the gangs should create a permanent, citywide truce that would allow them to control the city. Most of the gangs seem to get behind Cyrus's plan, but Luther, leader of the Rogues, shoots Cyrus and frames a rival gang from Coney Island, the Warriors, for the murder. The remaining ninety-nine gangs turn on the Warriors, and believing them to have killed Cyrus, pursue the Warriors throughout their frantic drive to return to their home turf.

The New York of *The Warriors* is specifically designed to provide viewers with a more realistic view of the city than that provided by *Escape from New York*, but even within Hill's subway stations, parks, and city streets, there exists an almost otherworldly view of New York. As one reviewer put it:

Hill [brings to his film an] unfailing sense of beauty. From the opening shot of a pink-lighted Ferris wheel revolving in the dusk, followed by a rhythmically cut sequence of the several gangs converging, *The Warriors* is a marvel of fluid composition, of—you might even say—choreography. Grills, girders, turnstiles, tracks and ramps form an interlocking labyrinth, more dangerous than drab; even the normally dismal graffiti with which the trains are camouflaged becomes an invention of film decor. Pools of indigo bathe the station exits; signal lights flare into suffusions of blood-red and in one blinding closeup, as Swan and the girl throttle-kiss on a side-track, an express-train barrels through, flashing window-cubes an explosive semaphore of white-heat pulsations. (Young 415)

Despite the gritty, working class setting of the film, Hill's New York is alive with vibrant color and energy, turning typical depictions of proletarian New York in the '70s on their

heads and suggesting that whatever trials the city's neighborhoods might have been going through, they remained alive. But what makes Hill's New York truly stand out is the almost complete lack of non-gang characters. Despite a trip that spans almost the entire length of the city, aside from the police, the Warriors encounter only other gangs. Unlike in films such as *Death Wish*, in *The Warriors* all of the violence (again, with the exception of that provided by the police) is both perpetrated and received by gangs. This is partly because the film asks viewers to see urban youth as both the victims and the perpetrators of the violence created by their world. Cyrus's goal—to take over the city—isn't simply to wreak havoc on unsuspecting middle-class citizens, but to assert their existence and their right to exist in the city. He states: "The turf is ours by right, because it's our turf...because it's all our turf." As Terrence Rafferty suggests, "America, in Hill's films, seems a wholly illusory concept—less a nation than a collection of groups, of self-contained social systems that refuse to be integrated into any larger system[....]We understand the responses of these embattled groups—what they're protecting and what they're protecting themselves against—so we can't wholly condemn them" (27). While viewers might not condone the actions of the Warriors outright, by the end of the film, they should at least question the logic behind condemning the gang as unredeemable.

In 1982 Enzo G. Castellari blended elements of both *Escape from New York* and *The Warriors* in his futuristic take on the Bronx in *1990: The Bronx Warriors*. The film opens with a title card that reads: "1990. The Bronx is officially declared 'No Man's Land.' The authorities give up all attempts to restore law and order. From then on, the

area is ruled by the Riders.” Immediately after this seemingly dire warning, a gang of roller hockey players, the Zombies—dressed in heavily padded suits, white helmets, and rainbow-ringed socks—threaten a lone female until the Riders arrive on the scene. In jeans, leather jackets and vests, spiked elbow pads, and various other specimens of punkwear, the Riders proceed to beat the Zombies half to death. The girl says she is from Manhattan, and after offering to take her back, the leader of the Riders, Trash, lets her know: “You know this is the Bronx. ...Nuthin’ is worse than this hellhole.” The girl, Ann, turns out to be the heir to the Manhattan Corporation, a company that controls over 60% of the world’s arms production. Trash takes Ann in, and soon must team with rival gang leader Ogre (played by Fred Williamson) to protect Ann and the other gangs of the Bronx from both the Manhattan police and the private army of the Manhattan Corporation.

The film is B grade science fiction at best, but at one point in the early ‘80s it was everywhere, landing at the top of the box-office charts for three weeks in 1982 and playing throughout Europe and the US. In addition to its presentation of urban violence and its focus on the more rundown areas of New York, however, *1990: The Bronx Warriors* is worth studying for its use of the South Bronx⁴⁰—and specifically the use of

⁴⁰ By the end of the ‘70s, redlining efforts and Robert Moses’s South Bronx Expressway had turned the South Bronx into the de facto home for many of the borough’s poorest residents. Generally considered one of the worst parts of the city, the South Bronx was also plagued by a wave of arson. Faced with the inability to recoup their investments, property owners took to burning their own apartment buildings for the insurance money instead of waiting for the city to eventually condemn their properties (see Gonzalez 109-129).

the devastated area of the borough centered around the infamous Charlotte Street—for many of its location shots.⁴¹ As Page notes:

The focus of [several accounts of urban crime in the '60s and '70s] returned repeatedly to one place: the South Bronx. Indeed, it was often one street—Charlotte Street—that bore the weight of the entire urban crisis. It was not simply that the neighborhood exhibited the new pathologies of the big cities, but rather that those pathologies were leading to the abandonment of the city....The area came to be the symbol not only of New York's despair, but of the decline in America's cities more generally. (156)

1990: The Bronx Warriors makes conspicuous use of the empty and abandoned spaces of the Bronx to dramatize the real-life conditions of the area, and the picture it paints is fairly grim. One of the early scenes of the film begins by pulling away from a sweeping establishing shot of the twin towers and Manhattan's skyline to a corpse sitting half in and half out of the water near a rundown collection of burned-out buildings and abandoned industrial warehouses. In a later scene, an armed member of the Official Vigilantes of the Bronx—a private police force—surveys the city below stating: "If it were up to me, I'd clear the whole borough out with napalm, just sizzle them out of existence." As the film cuts to aerial shots of the Bronx that focus on urban decay, partially demolished or abandoned buildings, and open, empty lots, the hired thug continues: "Jesus, look at them. Scum of the earth. Lousy cockroaches think they own the whole fucking borough. Look at 'em. Enough to make you want to vomit."

However, the film doesn't ask viewers to share the officer's somewhat limited point of view. Instead, *1990: The Bronx Warriors* depicts the violence and devastation of the Bronx not merely in an exploitative way but instead to suggest the need for a less

⁴¹ While the majority of the interior shots of the film—and a few of the exterior scenes—were filmed in Rome, the production used aerial shots of the Bronx and of New York's skyline to establish the setting.

destructive form of rehabilitation than the renewal efforts that would eventually claim the entire area. Trash and the rest of the gangs of the Bronx stand against the view of the city that would condemn him and his peers to destruction, and these outcasts stand against the armed response of the Manhattan Corporation. In *1990: The Bronx Warriors*, this solidarity is represented in the gang members themselves: all of the gangs are interracial and intergenerational. Young kids fight alongside bikers pushing middle age; Latinos, whites, and blacks fight together. There is a sense of solidarity among the various gangs, even amidst the violence. In one scene, Ogre is shown divvying up food, gasoline, and electrical supplies to be distributed to the neighborhood. Rather than hoarding the precious commodities, Ogre proclaims: “These goods are for the people of the Bronx.”

But despite the seeming promise of a better future, the film does not end on an optimistic note. As the film cuts between the Manhattan PD preparing to storm Ogre’s headquarters, Ogre says to Trash: “Just think, you can become a member of the board of the world’s largest corporation. You, the baddest, dumbest, and poorest mother in the Bronx.” Ogre then presents Trash with a large cake in the shape of Manhattan, complete with twin towers and Empire State Building. Just as Ogre and Trash begin celebrating the possibility of cooperation, the Manhattan PD swoops down, riddling the scene with gunfire. The Ogre is shot by a policeman, several of the gang members are killed, and Ann gives up her life protecting Trash from a policeman’s bullet. In one of the final shots of the film, Ann states: “We, in the Bronx, live with death.”

In spite of the bleak outlook presented by the film, *1990: The Bronx Warriors* works to engage the viewer’s sympathies with an otherwise completely unsympathetic

group of individuals. Unlike the urban vigilante films discussed in chapter 2, which attempted to present urban gangs as a threat to middle class stability, *1990: The Bronx Warriors* suggests that the gang members are the ones to be pitied, that the viewer should mourn the loss of their homes. The film might not operate in the most sophisticated manner, but the repeated image of the officers of the Manhattan Corporation as uncaring, unthinking, hyper-violent thugs and Ann's Patty-Hearst-like embrace of Trash and his friends compels the viewer to side with Riders over any force seeking their removal. The film acts as a reminder that behind every decaying building lies someone who would fight to the death to defend his home—even if there isn't much there to defend.

Eager to capitalize on the success of *1990: The Bronx Warriors*, Castellari followed the film the next year with *Escape from the Bronx*. In this film, Trash leads the “survivors of the gang war” against a new threat from the outside, a redevelopment plan that would raze the city to make room for new luxury apartment complexes. The film begins by focusing on a sign propped up against a burned-out building that reads: “LEAVE THE BRONX. Sign up for a new house in enchanting New Mexico.” The threat in this sequel comes from the General Construction Corporation's scheme to cleanse the Bronx of Trash and the borough's other inhabitants so that it might begin to gentrify the neighborhood. In the film, the GCC offer the residents new housing in New Mexico, but in practice, they simply commit genocide against the neighborhood. In this way, *Escape from the Bronx* makes a more direct statement against urban redevelopment, and in doing so it creates a far more over-the-top antagonist to serve as the thorn in Trash's side.

In an early scene in the film, during a press conference held to unveil GCC's new housing project, the president of GCC characterizes the urban redevelopment effort as "A perfect, ordered, civilized metropolis...A future city for future man, serviced by the most modern technology available. A city in which there are no social blots. Areas of poverty, illiteracy, and crime—like the Bronx—will have been totally eliminated." To which one of the gathered reporters replies: "It should go; the crime rate's horrendous," and another reporter states: "The Bronx is a plague." But at the same time the corporation's president assures reporters that the residents of the Bronx have been financially compensated and are moving willingly to New Mexico, the film cuts to a shot of armed Exterminators of the Disinfestation Annihilation Squad forcing residents out of their homes, warning that the buildings are about to be demolished, whether the inhabitants like it or not. As one GCC crony states: "It's easy to make those who don't officially exist...disappear."

But Trash and the other residents of the Bronx were fighting a losing battle against the forces of urban rehabilitation. By the end of the '80s, both the Bronx and New York's iconic 42nd Street had been almost completely transformed. The punks, gang members, and working class residents and patrons of these areas had been either completely removed or pushed so far to the margins that the more middle class residents of the city no longer had to fear their presence. Although the process took a little longer for the Bronx, New York's "slums" or "problem" areas had faced the full force of Mayor "Ed" Koch's efforts to push New York past its industrial and manufacturing roots into its more banking and finance driven future. Through the massive transformation and eventual "Disneyfication" of the city's iconic Times Square neighborhood, Koch—and

later mayors Dinkins and Giuliani—successfully turned New York into the sterile, tourist-friendly, monolithic testament to global capital that it is today. The city that had both enchanted and terrified America in the ‘70s and ‘80s no longer exists.

Perhaps no other author has been able to capture the true magnitude of the loss the city suffered in its eradication of its strong subcultural communities than Samuel Delany in his exploration of the porno theaters, sex clubs, and mom-and-pop small businesses of New York’s 42nd Street, *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue*. In 1974, Delany had published *Dhalgren*, a textually complex novel detailing the madness and decay of the fictional city of Bellona. Filled with cryptic descriptions of the city filtered through the mind of the novel’s possibly schizophrenic narrator, the Kid, *Dhalgren* can be seen to provide an allegorical reading of the violence and poverty facing several cities across the U.S. in the 1970s, with the Kid and Bellona’s residents filling in for the urban working class. *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue* presents a somewhat similar tableau of characters, but Delany’s autobiographical work of nonfiction focuses on the real inhabitants of one of New York’s most iconic areas. Throughout Delany’s careful descriptions of the men and women who frequented one of the more sexually liberated areas of the nation, readers are able to see the community that Times Square encouraged and the tragedy of that community’s passing.

42nd Street and other areas of New York known for their strong subcultural presence provided opportunities for what Delany called “contact,” a process by which people of different classes could meet and interact in a (mostly) safe environment, where class difference and a more egalitarian ideal of the city might be examined or even

accepted by the residents of the city. For Delany, contact is ordinary, banal, day-to-day—“Contact is the conversation that starts in the line at the grocery counter with the person behind you while the clerk is changing the paper roll in the cash register. It is the pleasantries exchanged with a neighbor who has brought her chair out to take some air on the stoop” (123)—but it can also be found in unexpected places—“As well, it can be two men watching each other masturbating together in adjacent urinals of a public john—an encounter that, later, may or may not become a conversation” (123). And it is this last type of contact that Delany found so often in the theaters screening pornography along 42nd Street. In the first part of the book, Delany describes his personal experiences touring iconic 42nd Street locales such as The Eros I and II, The Adonis, and The Venus, detailing both the sexual and non-sexual points of contact he made there. In these descriptions he is able to demonstrate to the reader the very tight-knit community that existed between the ‘70s and the early ‘90s. In the second half of the book, Delany focuses more on the social and economic impacts of the destruction of “the Deuce,” and here he more clearly creates a theory of its ability to create moments of contact:

Very importantly, contact is also the intercourse—physical and conversational—that blooms in and as “casual sex” in public rest rooms, sex movies, public parks, singles bars, and sex clubs, on street corners with heavy hustling traffic, and in the adjoining motels or the apartments of one or another participant, from which nonsexual friendships and/or acquaintances lasting for decades or a lifetime may spring, not to mention the conversation of a john with a prostitute or hustler encountered on one or another street corner or in a bar. (123)

These are the relationships that were destroyed when the theaters were shuttered, and for Delany, the cause of this urban destruction is far more dangerous than the hustlers or johns ever were.

As reporters began to proclaim “The Last Days of New York,” or “The Destruction of Lower Manhattan,” during the ‘70s and ‘80s and the apocalyptic rhetoric used to describe the city began to solidify its image as a no-go zone in the minds of many Americans, city officials began to fear the damage the city’s reputation might bring to tourist traffic. As Delany suggests: “A salient stabilizing factor that has helped create the psychological smoke screen behind which developers of Times Square and of every other underpopulated urban center in the country have been able to pursue their machinations in spite of public good and private desire is the small-town fear of urban violence” (153). The threat of violence—often more perceived than real on 42nd Street—allowed the massive gentrification efforts that defined New York in the ‘80s and ‘90s to remove the multi-ethnic, queer, and working class residents from the area, making New York “safe” for small-town minds. Delany describes the destruction fairly plainly here:

The Times Square problem I perceive entails the economic “redevelopment” of a highly diversified neighborhood with working-class residences and small human services (groceries, drugstores, liquor stores, dry cleaners, diners...interlarding a series of theaters, film and stage, rehearsal spaces, retailers of theatrical equipment, from lights to makeup, inexpensive hotels, furnished rooms, and restaurants at every level, as well as bars and the sexually oriented businesses that, in one form or another, have thrived in the neighborhood since the 1880s) into what will soon be a ring of upper-middle-class luxury apartments around a ring of tourist hotels clustering about a series of theaters and restaurants, in the center of which a large mall and a cluster of office towers are slowly but inexorably coming into being. (148-9)

Gentrification often chooses profit and upper middle class values over the working class, but rarely had New York seen such a wholesale transformation as the one to strike Times Square. In choosing Disney over punks and pornography, fat and happy Midwestern

tourists over the working class, New York had, by the turn of the century, sanitized 42nd Street, the Bronx, and several other locations that had given the city life.

By 2001, almost all of the troubling areas of New York featured in post-apocalyptic films had been completely transformed by the forces of gentrification. However, throughout the late '80s and early '90s post-apocalyptic visions of the city had already begun to taper off. As the city began to return to prosperity after the massive influx of businesses opened in the city's financial districts, viewers seemed less interested in hypothesizing the decline of the city. And then, of course, the unthinkable happened. It's not surprising that in the wake of the events of 9/11, a newfound support of New York and its possibilities became irrevocably bound up in the wave of nationalism that swept the country. As Americans mourned the loss of life and the destruction of two of the most iconic buildings of the city, filmmakers and authors became loathe to levy any criticism against rebuilding efforts or, for that matter, against any aspect of the city's government. As Giuliani rode to absurd levels of popularity, the fallout from the urban renewal projects of the '90s was quietly swept under the rug. Criticizing New York became off limits. As Max Page suggests: "Suddenly, everyone loved New York. The near-universal view was that New York was a blameless victim. This generated a sense of sympathy and compassion that New York had rarely if ever seen. At least briefly, the ongoing trope of New York as a city of murder and mayhem...had been washed away" (203). The image of the city throughout the decade would remain essentially positive, slowly erasing the more negative images of New York created by both the urban vigilante films and the post-apocalyptic films of the '70s and '80s.

In the literature about the city produced after 9/11, several authors chose to follow suit, creating texts that either worked to dolefully eulogize the innocence of middle class New Yorkers or to pine for some nonexistent glory days of the city. However, there were a handful of authors who questioned the direction of the city as it moved into the 21st century. Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003), for example, analyzed the soulless world of global capitalism against the backdrop of urban protest. Among this small subset of authors willing to present a more dystopian vision of the city, Jonathan Lethem stands out as one of the few to bravely question the seemingly unstoppable urban renewal efforts being made in the city. While Lethem's early novels were undoubtedly science fiction, as his writing has developed Lethem has followed the lead of authors such as Michael Chabon and adapted a more slipstream approach, deploying elements of fantasy and SF within more realist narratives. Several of his novels about New York can be considered dystopian, and at the heart of his criticisms of the city lies a sharp condemnation of the destruction of New York's historic working class neighborhoods and of the lack of community this destruction creates.

A lack of true community and the resulting loss of empathy and what Delany would label *contact*, resonates throughout several of Lethem's early novels. In the author's second novel, *Amnesia Moon* (1995), the reader is introduced to a post-apocalyptic world in which portions of America are suffering not from a single catastrophe but instead from a series of discrete zones of chaos, each one seemingly the result of the mental effort of a select few personalities. These subjective dystopias, created and shaped by one or two strong minds per zone, form organized systems of

alienation and fear, shattering any sense of community that might be found by the survivors. Indeed, each of Lethem's characters in this novel is searching for some group that they might belong to, some place to call home. In *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999), Lethem presents a detective story featuring Lionel Essrog, an orphan with Tourette's syndrome who must avenge the sudden death of his mobster employer. As Essrog's life begins to fall apart, he learns that in present-day Brooklyn, relationships are often skin deep and that as the city continues to transform itself to meet the 21st century, even its more interesting residents are left to try and survive on their own. And in the quasi-autobiographical novel *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003), Lethem explores his own childhood in Brooklyn through the eyes of Dylan Ebdus, a white child of parents still firmly planted in the counterculture of the '60s who decide to move into North Gowanus, a majority African American neighborhood, in the early '70s. The novel follows Dylan and his only real friend, Mingus Rude, as both boys grow up in a community slowly slipping into decay. At the end of the novel, after Dylan has escaped his perceived status as an outsider in his own home, Dylan returns to find the newly gentrified Boerum Hill standing in place of his old neighborhood. Dylan finds, of course, that very little remains of the city of his youth, and even as Dylan seems to gather the courage to finally let go of the past, the novel suggests that even if he actually wanted to return to North Gowanus, to truly confront his racial insecurity and somewhat shallow ipseity, he never can, as that place no longer exists. As Matt Godbey suggests, "Dylan, faced with what Lethem describes as gentrification's erasure of his childhood home, begins to mourn the passing of a place that remains integral to his identity even as an adult. More specifically, the loss

of Gowanus forces Dylan to admit the neighborhood's central role in what has been his lifelong search for an authentic identity" (132).

In *Chronic City* (2009), Lethem presents his most conscious critique of New York's post-9/11 wave of urban gentrification projects. Despite the book's title, the plot of the novel has less to do with an eclectic collection of New Yorkers enjoying the fruits of a particular drug dealer than it does with the extreme effects of income inequality in a city beginning to prize its ability to cater to middle to upper middle class residents. The novel's protagonist, Chase Insteadman, flounders throughout the city, making a living from the royalties from his many years working as a child actor on a beloved family sitcom. As Chase looks for some kind of meaning in his life, he falls under the spell of aging music critic Perkus Tooth and the eclectic group of characters that seem to gravitate around Tooth's personal charisma and his wild conspiracies about the city. Finding himself eventually bound to Tooth's life, Chase begins to wade deeper and deeper into the shadowy world of New York politics, and after Tooth's rent-protected East 84th Street apartment falls victim to a building-demolishing entity known to New Yorkers as the "tiger," Chase begins to see the futility of working against a system hell-bent on making sure outsiders such as Perkus Tooth disappear.

Despite his connections to Manhattan's elite, and in spite of his ability to mingle with the city's upper crust, Chase declares his lack of affiliation with wealth fairly early in the novel. Chase's narration states:

I live in capital's capital, but I root against the Dow. I feel an instinctive lizard-thrill on those days when it collapses. I know I'm meant to feel we're all in something together, especially after the gray fog stretched out to cover the lower reaches of the island. I ought to feel sympathy for the moneymen, ashen and dim

in aspect, forgetful, sleepy, never quite themselves anymore. . . . Yet if I'm honest with myself, I'd like to see them stripped even of their fog-gray suits, reduced to suspenders and barrels, put out of their misery at last. Sometimes this Dow-enmity of mine seems like the worst secret I could disclose. I don't. (65)

Chase's inability to empathize with "the moneymen" even after 9/11 makes it seem as though he, in some way, is willing to fight for the proletariat, to protect the powerless from the might of capitalism. But Chase's feelings towards Wall Street are almost immediately shown to be mere posturing as soon after this statement he describes his affinity for the security offered by his East Side apartment:

The secret of this place is its quarantine from the boom-and-bust of Manhattan's trends and fashions. . . . For now, what's here is entrenched and immutable. The shopping-cart ladies and the fur ladies and the black-cocktail-dress girls, the preying, tie-loosened twenty-three-year-old junior partners, the reverse-slumming off-duty policemen, none has to glance at the others and wonder whether this place rightly belongs to them or anyone. The resonances and layers here are mysterious without being unduly impressed with themselves. . . . Money has been here so long it's a little decrepit. (65)

This is the Manhattan of those who don't have to worry about the disruption of bulldozers or wrecking balls. The novel uses Chase to suggest the ease with which those with the actual means to effect change allow the city to be shaped around them, and Chase's complacency seems to suggest—throughout the novel—that the forces of gentrification, those that would remake the entire city, are essentially unstoppable.

What Chase's reluctance to challenge the status quo also does, however, is to shift the reader's allegiance, in part, to Perkus Tooth. As Tooth battles against the city's monolithic wall of power, he eventually loses everything, but as his life slides downhill, the novel positions him as the representative of those crushed by the city's enthrallment

to affluence. Perkus's apartment turns out to be right down the block from Chase's, but Tooth's building suggests a much different piece of the East Side:

His apartment was on East Eighty-fourth Street, six blocks from mine, in one of those anonymous warrens tucked behind innocuous storefronts, buildings without lobbies, let alone doormen. . . . To live in Manhattan is to be persistently amazed at the worlds squirreled inside one another, the chaotic intricacy with which realms interleave, like those lines of television cable and fresh water and steam heat and outgoing sewage and telephone wire and whatever else which cohabit in the same intestinal holes that pavement-demolishing workmen periodically wrench open to the daylight and to our passing, disturbed glances. (8)

Seen through Chase's eyes, Perkus's home—although in Chase's own neighborhood—exists as a secret maze of disorganization to be hidden away so that the neighborhood's true residents do not have to look at it. However, through Perkus's own eyes, and through Chase's more objective descriptions of the living space, the reader can recognize a space that challenges the world of lobbies and doormen just as much as the fictional gangs on Charlotte Street challenged the forces of urban redevelopment in the '80s. As Rivka Galchen explains, "Let's call Bohemianism a belief in there being an 'outside' of the market, a belief in the existence of, and habitability of, spaces not colonized by Capital. (It's easy to imagine a Lethem soon-to-be fallen admired older man character saying such a thing.) Perkus's apartment, then, is one of the last places of worship for this old and perhaps untenable faith" (168). Of course, Tooth's bastion of resistance doesn't last long as, soon after Chase begins visiting the odd man, the city's runaway tiger strikes.

Throughout the novel, a wave of limited destruction makes its way through the city as a reported runaway tiger moves through the abandoned tunnels underneath Manhattan. Occasionally, the tiger surfaces, and as one resident states after Chase is forced to wait during a subway closure: "They claim it's tearing up the track. But then an

hour later the train goes right through. A convenient excuse, that's all. So let it devour a small-businessman's livelihood now and again. People like distraction. They live on it, gobble it up" (113). The theory that the "tiger" is somehow being manipulated by the city is reinforced as it surfaces in Perkus's neighborhood and destroys his favorite diner, killing the waitress he had been attracted to and making his apartment permanently untenable. As Perkus's friends accompany him back to the scene of destruction, the man seems defeated, crushed under the weight of the building: "We four watched him go, his shoulders rounded with the burden of acquiescence to the larger forces, the alteration of his street into dystopian tableau, his personality made tiny by his dealings with the cop. What else he carried on that gaunt-slumped frame, what sway the tiger's close strike might have over his free associations...I feared presuming" (246). Lethem presents no possibility of regeneration here, and even though the city will most assuredly rebuild, whatever replaces Perkus's corner of the neighborhood will never return.

At the end of the novel, after moving into an apartment built to house homeless dogs, Perkus's life slowly begins to dissolve: "His old life might have rearranged itself around his absence, his building re-opened, his places waiting for him to reinhabit them—but he doubted it. Equally plausible to him, if also unlikely, the tiger might have razed everything he'd ever known. The creature...might have been on a Perkus-eradication course to begin with" (321). And to drive matters home, Chase and Perkus's mutual friend, Richard Abneg, lets Chase know that there was no way Perkus would ever have been allowed to live in that neighborhood indefinitely:

"Perkus was just playing out the string in that place to begin with," he said, his tone hard-boiled. "He was on borrowed time."

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“Look, nobody’s entitled to live in a rent-controlled apartment forever. I protected him as long as I could. He was past his time, that’s all.”

Past his time? The era of Mailer and Brando? I tried to grasp Richard’s implications. “Protected him exactly how?”

“Protected literally. You don’t think he’d have been able to afford that apartment if he’d lost his sixty-year-old rent control, do you? Did you imagine Perkus was actually the legitimate holder?” (303)

Despite Chase’s incredulity, by this point in the novel, readers should not be shocked to learn that outsiders very rarely last long in the areas of privilege. And in a final act of indignity, Perkus dies from an acute attack of the hiccups, ceding his tenancy in the apartment for dogs to no one.

In spite of the impression the reader gets at the end of the novel that Chase is going to be just fine, the book ends in tragedy. Lethem seems to be suggesting that, although we can mourn the destruction of the working class areas of the city we used to celebrate, there’s very little we can do to prevent their destruction. But perhaps his warning might be enough to spur a new generation to rally against the destruction of our cities.

Throughout this dissertation, I’ve argued that the dystopian authors and filmmakers here have worked to warn readers and viewers of the dangers of segregating and destroying the working class of the city. Most of the works I’ve analyzed present grim pictures of our urban future. But then, that’s their point. The purpose of any dystopia is to try and motivate its audience to become proactive, to fight so that its future doesn’t become their future. It seems only right that the most recent works of dystopian fiction should appear more bleak than those of the past as we look to the abandonment of inner-city Detroit and the expansion of the ranks of the permanently unemployed across

the country. But as urban gardens and co-op schools begin to appear in some of the worst neighborhoods of our cities, and as inner-city residents of both Los Angeles and New York begin to fight against those wishing to tear down low-income housing that has been a fixture in those metropolitan areas for decades, we have to believe that something will change that the dystopian futures presented here will never come to pass.

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