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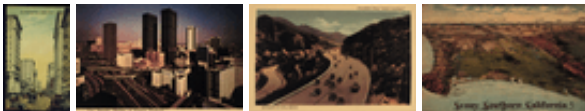
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Cityscapes II: Introduction *

[Jesse Lerner](#) and [Clark Arnwine](#)

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The twentieth century has seen an eruption of different forms of urban formation, with consequent changes in human subjectivity.

Cinematic representation has evolved with emergent urbanism in this century, portraying these shifts in topography and human constitution, and to some measure affecting both of these poles (especially with contemporary discussions of "virtual" experience mediated by screen technologies, less explicitly in an earlier era through contributions to shifts in leisure patterns.) "Cityscapes II" further elaborates upon an exploration of film and video in relation to architecture and urban space, a project initiated in our previous collaboration, "Cityscapes I," *Wide Angle* (vol. 19, no. 4). The contributors to that volume illuminated a variety of issues through a range of historical and theoretical approaches to the film (and photographic) representation of the metropolis as it matured in the twentieth century. Those essays centered especially around the topographic changes of the dense modern metropolis and concomitant changes wrought upon both the inhabitants' subjectivities and the new forms of filmic expression, for which Giuliana Bruno articulated a stimulating theoretical overview. Using the early feature film *Traffic in Souls* (1915) as a fulcrum, Tom Gunning provided an analysis of **[End Page 1]** incipient surveillance technology and the place of the individual in the crowd. Scott MacDonald focused on the persistence of the city symphony as a form of avant-garde production considered especially through an often overlooked San Francisco practice. Edward Dimendberg examined particularities of urban development and implications for cinema through a close look at the transformations of the film *M* as it was set in the particular urban milieu of Berlin and Los Angeles in a thoughtful, widely-researched article. *Cityscapes I* was rounded out by a contextualization of Weegee's sensationalist urban photography within his Jewish identity as expounded by David Serlin and Jesse Lerner.

In contrast to that prior volume's emphasis on the kind of urban landscape typical of cities maturing in the first half of this century, this issue takes Southern California as a

paradigm for a different kind of urbanism. Our regional interest is neither arbitrary nor a reflection of the editors' parochial vision, but rather stems from the conviction that what is happening here in Los Angeles is emblematic of a new form of urbanism. Los Angeles was once seen by critics and urbanists (such as Reyner Banham) as exceptional and unprecedented. Now it is commonplace to state that those North American cities that are growing are doing so on the Southern California model--increasingly dependent on the automobile, sprawling, and decentered. The subjectivity of the urban spectator is by implication radically different from that of the unhurried *flâneur* of the great European cities. Thus Los Angeles may have gained the oxymoronic status of a postmodern archetype for urban development, taking the place once occupied by Baron Haussmann's remaking of Paris, the vertical extrusion of New York's Flatiron Building, or the concentric circles of Chicago. It was, after all, at John Portman's Bonaventure Hotel that Frederic Jameson began his much-debated analysis of postmodernism.

Los Angeles was shaped by freeways following (often literally) in the tracks of railroads, by booms (and busts) in agriculture, oil, real estate, defense, and the movie industry, by the open shop and tourism. The city was further transformed by both internal migration and, after the immigration reforms of the sixties, newcomers from Asia, Latin America, and (following the collapse of the U.S.S.R.) Eastern Europe. L.A. is a far cry from the beautiful winding highways through pastel-colored flower beds promised in early twentieth-century postcards. **[End Page 2]** Once the cool modernism of Richard Neutra and Rudolf Schindler, or the fantasy movie-set-as-architecture of the Chinese and Egyptian Theaters seemed archetypal, but today a grimmer urbanism is exemplary, one which Mike Davis has characterized as "fortress L.A." in his landmark *City of Quartz* (1990). That book represents an on-ramp into a lively critical debate that goes around and through Los Angeles, to which the writings of Michael Sorkin, Ed Soja, Norman Klein, Dolores Hayden, Margaret Crawford, Michael Dear, and Allen Scott, among others, contribute. ¹ Though the use of Los Angeles as a new paradigm (albeit largely a negative one) may, in Davis's words, "collapse history into teleology and glamorize the very reality they would deconstruct," ² there is little question that the emergence of the so-called "L.A. School" of planners and geographers are preparing the tool kit needed to begin to understand this complex urban landscape and its ramifications.

Furthermore, Los Angeles is both a global center for media industries that increasingly shape contemporary life, and the home of vigorous--though critically neglected--"underground" film and video communities. This diversity of **[End Page 3]** media practices is reflected in the texts we have gathered here, which include conversations with practitioners, historical inquiries, theoretical, and critical reflections. The differing tactics and perspectives gathered in these works also reflect various approaches to the constructed concept of "Los Angeles" (a term that we allow to stand in elastically for a greater Southern California that may at times reach as far as Santa Barbara and Tijuana, though centered on the city and county of Los Angeles). The theoretical essays included here take up concerns including the cinematic use of constructed environments, the historically situated reading of cinematic (mis)representations of regions or neighborhoods, and the intertwined existence of distinct modes of filmic production in the region. They approach "Los Angeles" variously as a problem of representation, as a site of film production, as a tradition within the American avant-garde, and as a type of urban

development under the influence of filmic representations. We also include interviews with or statements from media practitioners, both commercial and staunchly independent, which offer personal perspectives on the art of representing Los Angeles.

Today's automobile driver might be a contemporary descendant of Baudelaire's *flâneur*, mobilizing the gaze through observant movement, but now mediated via **[End Page 4]** the automobile windshield that transforms stationary objects into a constantly changing screen display. Such an approach to contemporary subjectivity seems highly appropriate to Angelenos, who routinely traverse by car neighborhoods that they would never think of stopping in. As commentator Reyner Banham has noted, "the language of design, architecture and urbanism in L.A. is the language of movement."³ This *Cityscapes II* issue opens with an essay by Paul Virilio that characterizes the new consciousness transformed by the speed of automobile travel, "Dromoscopy, or the Ecstasy of Enormities." Originally published in France in 1978, but offered here in English for the first time, translator Edward R. O'Neill has taken on a difficult text marked by a sophisticated use of puns which playfully attempts to reproduce the rapid-fire visual onslaught of the driving experience through a cascading and hyperstimulating use of language. The contemporary automobile driver engages in a haptic experience through a nexus of movement represented through the changing perspective of images on a mediating screen. (This condition of perceived mobility while the body is inactive somewhat resembles the early cinema simulation of travel in Hale's Tours, where films shot from a moving train were shown in a train car given the illusion of movement -- though the driver exerts a good deal more control over the experience.) **[End Page 5]**

David James follows with a provocative theoretical model of the Los Angeles film avant-garde, focusing on two exemplary cases: Pat O'Neill's *Water and Power* and Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*. Here Los Angeles is taken not as a problem of representation, but rather as a site for diverse but interconnected film practices. Unlike the modernist characterization of the avant-garde as primarily concerned with formal or material properties of the medium itself, in isolation from both its social and political context and commercial equivalent, James examines these two instances and finds a very different dynamic at work. All three suggest a relationship to industrial filmmaking much more complex than the autonomous "radical otherness" championed by the likes of P. Adams Sitney. James argues that independent film practice, especially in L.A., has been very much shaped by negotiation with the studios, as well as by social movements and by experimentation in other media. The Hollywood studios are not diametrically opposed to the marginalized experimental practice, but rather, in Marx's felicitous phrasing, provides the "general illumination which bathes" these alternative modes of filmic production.

The conceptual high-jinks of ASCO are characterized by the linguistic provocations of Harry Gamboa, a videomaker, photographer, writer and pop semiotician whose poetry, No-Movies, performance texts and other writings have been gathered in the recently published (and much-anticipated) collection *Urban Exiles* (University of Minnesota Press, 1998). In conversation with Ondine Chavoya, Gamboa speaks of violent childhood experiences, extravagant Chicana hair styles, a typography of Los Angeles landscapes and Vietnam Era protests that helped influence his aesthetic sensibility. Ondine Chavoya then returns in collaboration with artists and writers Ramon García and Rita González,

co-authors of the ¡ALARMA! Manifesto, a 33-point plan celebrating kitsch in the phantom culture of Chicano Los Angeles.

Norman Klein offers a meditation on themes developed more extensively in his book, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (Verso 1997). Here he reflects on the relationship of historical, "real" locations and how they are transformed for the purposes of movies, contending that "films fictionalize any location where they are shot." Film, at least as presently constituted as a medium, cannot hope to convey rich, sedimented, specific information about [End Page 6] historical urbanscapes; the location details are instead subordinated to narrative concerns. Also interested in the transformation of "real" locations into their "reel" projections, Robert Carringer, as part of a larger research project investigating the cinematic depiction of Los Angeles since the sixties, interviews one of the more influential fabricators of the Los Angeles seen in film, the production designer (and one-time head of Paramount Studios) Richard Sylbert. Sylbert's credits include many of the most successful films to depict Los Angeles to the public at large, including *The Graduate*, *Shampoo*, and the now-canonical *Chinatown*. This interview offers an inside look at aspects of the production process, of industry considerations as opposed to a purely critical point of view. Carringer elicits from Sylbert details of the process behind conveying the experience of a city through careful planning of the film's look.

A different sort of "Hollywood Mogul" is reflected in the personal videography of the artist Susan Mogul, who constructs an alternative perspective of life in Los Angeles. James Moran frames an insightful look at this transplanted New Yorker's thought-provoking, subjective takes on community in L.A. as represented in her videos *I Stare At You And Dream* and *Everyday Echo Street*. Along similar lines, elsewhere in this volume independent media practitioners Michael Cho and William Jones offer their perspectives on framing L.A.

In "Replacing L.A.: *Mi Familia*, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, and *Screening the Other Los Angeles*," Karen Voss investigates the relationship of L.A. history to the history as propounded in a recent spate of 'historical' films that explain specifics of Los Angeles history through their narrative, focusing especially on films that seek to evaluate aspects of minority communities that typically receive limited cinematic attention. Within an analysis grounded in a geographic understanding, Voss details some lesser known aspects of regional history, such as the restricted covenants and labor patterns that help shape ethnic communities, and follows strategies in the films to acknowledge local specificities, while also operating within larger received myths about community formation. The two films operate within mainstream cultural formations that often work at cross-purposes to specific historical and geographical sensibilities within the narrative strategies of the films. This area of contradiction and yet interrelatedness is full of implications for issues of collective memory, community [End Page 7] identity, and local politics, as well as for an understanding of how film negotiates these.

Anthropologist Elana Zilberg also uses a Gregory Nava film, *El Norte* (1983), to elucidate issues of geography, history, and identity, though with a more global perspective. She conflates this Guatemalan immigration story with the "angry white man's" dystopic vision of *Falling Down* (1992) in the essay "*Falling Down* in *El Norte*: A Cultural Politics &

Spatial Poetics of the ReLatinization of Los Angeles." She suggests that given the global nature of the Southern Californian economy, including regional defense downsizing due to changing world political conditions, and the massive immigration of Central Americans fleeing civil war and poverty, the fault lines on which L.A. rests may spread beyond well beyond the city itself, and run through Tijuana, San Ysidro, San Salvador, and Washington D.C. Her provocative interworking of the laid-off defense industry employee and the Guatemalan refugee calls attention to the city's global context, but at the same time cautions us against facile truisms about the transnational age, such as those proposed in Wim Wender's *End of Violence* (1997). In that spirit, geographer Michael Dear and architect Gustavo Leclerc locate the U.S.-Mexico border in silent-era "greaser films" and along Venice Beach's arcaded boardwalks that stand in for Tijuana in Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958). These filmic representations of Tijuana parallel the development of this urban center from cattle town to world city, fueled by immigration, tourism, and the growth of *maquiladoras*. Tijuana's precarious position, closer to Southern California's economic magnet than to Mexico's centers of political power, creates a unique "thirdspace," a space full of anxieties reflected in innumerable films, both Mexican and North American. Taken together, these texts form a mosaic portrait of contradictory and conflicted city of Los Angeles, and leave us pondering what sort of form will the city and its representations through moving images take in the future.

[Jesse Lerner](#) is a documentary film and video maker based in Los Angeles. His short film *Natives* (1991, with Scott Sterling) and feature-length *Frontierland/Fronterilandia* (1995, with Rubén Ortiz Torres) have both won numerous prizes at film festivals in the United States, Latin America and Japan. In 1999, he completed his latest film, *Ruins*. In addition to his work as a filmmaker, his critical essays on photography, film, and video have appeared in *Afterimage*, *History of Photography*, and other media arts journals.

[Clark Arnwine](#) is a doctoral candidate in the School of Cinema-Television at the University of Southern California, writing about film and the representation of urban space. He has worked for the Getty Research Institute on several projects regarding the relationship of cinema and urbanism.

Notes

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1. The essential reading on the city might include titles such as Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future of Los Angeles* (London and New York: Verso, 1990); Mike Davis, *The Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998); Norman M. Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the*

Erasure of Memory (London and New York: Verso, 1997); Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1995); Gustavo Leclerc, Raul Villa, and Michael Dear, eds., *Urban Latino Cultures: La Vida Latina* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, forthcoming); Marco Cenzatti, *Los Angeles and the L.A. School: Postmodernism and Urban Studies* (West Hollywood: Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Urban Design, 1993); Richard Longstreth, *City Center to Regional Mall: Architecture, the Automobile, and Retailing in Los Angeles, 1920-1950* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1997); Scott Bottles, *Los Angeles and the Automobile: The Making of a Modern City* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987); Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Theory* (London and New York: Verso, 1989); Rob Kline et. al., eds., *Postsuburban California: The Transformation of Orange County since World War II* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1991); Michael J. Dear, H. Eric Schockman, and Gregg Hise, eds., *Rethinking Los Angeles* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996).

[2.](#) Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London, New York: Verso Press, 1990), 86.

[3.](#) Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (London, New York: Penguin Books, 1971), 23.

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