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Toward a Geo-Cinematic Hermeneutics: Representations of Los Angeles in Non-Industrial Cinema-- *Killer of Sheep* and *Water and Power*

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[Figures](#)

The cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a culture group. Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape is the result.

--Carl Ortwin Sauer

It is commonly recognized that the loss of authority in the great paradigms of modernist culture was accompanied by a shift from time to space as the more fundamental category for cognition. ¹ John Berger's novel, *G*, for example, both instanced and articulated the sense that the narrative line of the traditional novel was no longer adequate to the complex synchronic patterns that make up contemporary experience. "Prophecy," the narrative voice declared, "now involves a geographical rather than a historical projection; it is space, not time, that hides consequences from us." Foucault reached similar conclusions, arguing that history had been the nineteenth century's "great obsession," so the "present [End Page 23] epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space;" and his proposal that our present experience of the world was one "of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein" inspired a generation of postmodern geographers. ² As a consequence of the *historical* shifts these re-orientations manifest--and among them the closing of all spaces outside the global consolidation of capital must be reckoned as primary--the discipline of geography acquired a new importance, and generated new projects for cultural studies, notably questions about the relations between the local and the national, and then, as the international restructuring of capital transformed the status of the national itself, questions about the local and the global. In film studies, the response has been primarily a re-investment in the national as a fundamental historiographical concept, a somewhat paradoxical development since the world-wide hegemony of the American corporate entertainment industries leaves the concept of any other national cinema with little more than a heuristic value--a fact that is often the very point from which these studies begin. ³

Commonly approaching cinema as essentially representation (rather than material

production, which will be the particular concern of the present essay), projects of this kind have comfortably intersected with both postmodernist assumptions of the collapse of all reality into media spectacle and poststructuralist conceptualizations of reality as textuality. So, for example, the introduction to a recent collection of geographical considerations of cinema takes as its point of departure Baudrillard's conflation of the city and the cinema, a conflation that understands the cityscape as itself a screenscape: "Where is the cinema? It is all around you outside, all over the city, that marvelous, continuous performance of films and scenarios." From such a standpoint, David Harvey's attempt to retain an ontological difference between film and reality, one that obliges him to affirm that film is "in the final analysis, a spectacle projected within an enclosed space on a depthless screen," appears to be a distinctly *uncinematic* foreboding, and therefore to be discredited. ⁴

Whatever the overall status of readings of contemporary social reality as intrinsically cinematic, their claims are nowhere more pressing than in Los Angeles where, for the century of its existence as a major city, cinema has been central to its economic, social, and cultural developments. All have been shaped in **[End Page 24]** the magnetic field of cinema; and cinema, as it has imitated urban growth in metastasizing at points increasingly remote from the original downtown center, in Silver Lake, Hollywood, Culver City, the San Fernando Valley, and (as the mutual imbrication of the electronics and the entertainment industries bridges the north/south division of the state) now in Silicon Valley, has preoccupied the entire region. As Reyner Banham observed, "Hollywood... the movies found Los Angeles a diffuse fruit-growing super-village of some eight hundred thousand souls, and handed it over to the infant television industry in 1950 a world metropolis of over four million." ⁵ More scrupulous historians have recognized the formative role of other industries, though from real-estate through aerospace to crack cocaine, they have exhibited a Hollywood-like combination of spectacle and speculation--they have all been imaginary signifiers. But wherever the industry's actual geographic location, for three quarters of the century "Hollywood" has been recognized nationally and internationally as the *tertium quid* between Los Angeles and the movies, the proper synecdoche for each simultaneously.

More categorical even than Chicago's hegemony in meat-packing, the city's unique appropriation of an entire medium is reciprocated by that medium's similarly unique influence on the city, on its industrial base, its architecture, and its overall cultural tenor. The "Hollywood" sign remains the city's trademark, and stamps its influence on other arts in the city, enriching them or depleting them, financing their experimentation or drawing them into its own aesthetic and entrepreneurial orbits. From the urban facades satirized by thirties' novelists to the more extravagant forms of hyperspace epitomized initially by Disneyland and more recently by the fabricated urban environment of Universal's City Walk, the continually-reconstructed identification has been architecturally embodied, if not in concrete then at least in stucco, with a renewed cross-fertilization evident in the work of Frank Israel and other contemporary architects. In other cultural forms, the incorporation has been no less integral. Until relatively recent innovation by ethnic writers, the Hollywood novel was taken as the Los Angeles novel, while the city's other significant literature has been the screenplay. Local theater is sustained by film actors, and even the most avant-garde forms of music--from the severe atonality of long-time resident Arnold Schoenberg to the similarly severe amelicity of Orange County hardcore or South Central rap--have eventually found themselves recruited to **[End Page 25]** the soundtrack and other modes of incorporation into the now-totalized intermedia entertainment/advertising packages of corporate culture.

The attenuation of any real outside the media in Los Angeles has been reciprocated by a parallel tautological reflexivity in the way the city has been drawn into Hollywood films. Even in those that exploit local topography, its features are essentially mobile and non-specific, with the demand that they be internationally readable prohibiting any comprehensive or accurate mapping of the city's spatiality and social structure.⁶ The topographical variety, abundant light, availability of space, and other local conditions that sustained the industry have been deracinated, displaced from the actual geography of the region to the non-restrictive, diegetic geography of "the movies." Two main processes may be distinguished. First, in eras when location shooting has been common and so the city has represented the narratives of all other places, its own specificity has been concealed. Even films that mobilize a thematic polarization of Los Angeles against some geographical alternative often use the city as the site of both itself and its other. Most of the "Berkeley" scenes in *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967),⁷ for example, were shot at the University of Southern California (USC), while such films as *Godzilla* and the upcoming Arnold Schwarzenegger actioner *End of Days* that trade on the authenticity of their take on New York life were actually shot here. The syndrome is long-standing. As early as 1911, it was recognized that the growth of the film industry in the region was substantially attributable to the topographical and architectural diversity that facilitated location shooting.⁸ And a map of Southern California produced at Paramount Studio in the twenties shows the entire region over-written as other places; the area north of Malibu is designated Coast of Spain; the Palos Verdes peninsula is Wales, Catalina is South Sea Islands; the channel between it and Long Beach is both the Malay Coast and Long Island Sound; the Salton Sea is the Red Sea; and south of it lies the Sahara Desert.⁹ In Foucault's terms, while the Los Angeles area is then effectively a heterotopia, a site "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible,"¹⁰ in any given film, perception of that plurality is sacrificed in the simulation of a single diegesis and a unitary, self-identical space. **[End Page 26]**

On the other hand, when the topography of the area is used to represent narratives supposed actually to take place there--when, to appropriate the title of a film to which we shall return, *L.A. Plays Itself*--the specific spatial conditions are similarly elided. The number of feature films set in Los Angeles is by now so immense that any generalizations are hazardous; but, despite conspicuous exceptions like *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974), Hollywood films set in Los Angeles have rarely explored its real historical and geographical specificity.¹¹ Instead, either the city is replaced by a handful of metonymic images: sunset at the beach, Beverly Hills streets lined with high palm trees, aerial shots of layered freeway intersections, the Hollywood sign itself. Like the picture-cards in a deck, these have a greater resonance than other, nondescript images of the city, and they can appear in various combinations, but they always signify the same, a general sense of Los Angeles, but only as it has been coded in previous media incarnations. Or, when taken as a whole, the city is recruited to the fantasies of the national and global imaginaries and made the site of utopian or dystopian spectacles that may be justified by invoking real Los Angeles events --earthquakes, immigration, race-riots, and life in Hollywood and Beverly Hills are among the most prominent--but which transform these according to the needs of the genre, ideology, or the entertainment function itself.¹² Again heterotopia is replaced by utopia; again Foucault: "Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces."¹³

So in both usages, representations of Los Angeles in mainstream film and television have overlapped with and been overdetermined by the requirements of the media itself. Whether the actual heterotopic diversity of the region that facilitates the media industry is repressed in each film's selection of the one component its particular diegesis requires, or whether the city is presented in an idealized or inverted perfect form, Los Angeles has been an everywhere or a nowhere, but never itself. Media images of Los Angeles refer essentially to the media; in them the city's spatiality becomes the space of the cinema industry. Hollywood's overall inability to map the space of its own operation in any but the broadest and most sensationalized forms is probably no worse than **[End Page 27]** its abrogation of any other social responsibility, and certainly no worse than its misrepresentation of the social geography of other spaces, of the American West, for example, or of Viet Nam. But the failure in respect to Los Angeles is particularly distinctive in that it has concealed the other extraordinary, if not unique property of the city that supplies its postmodern prototypicality--the urban structure itself.

While to the entertainment industry Los Angeles was "fundamentally unreal," it became an all-too real prototype of the postmodern conurbations now developing in many parts of the world, especially the Third World. Reflecting the human development of the topography, climate, and biota of the land and water masses, for the past century spatiality in Los Angeles has been most determined by hydrology, the automobile, and immigration. The first supplied the successive booms of suburban real estate development and the second consolidated the rail and road-car networks into the most extensive freeway system in the world, one that simultaneously linked and segregated the local communities. The resulting voracious peripheral growth, horizontal rather than vertical development, produced a dispersed urban polynucleation, successively the "six suburbs in search of a city" of twenties' witticisms; the "nineteen suburbs in search of a city" of the 1939 WPA guide; and Edward Soja's "Sixty-Mile Circle" of "at least 132 incorporated cities." Through immigration these turned into "the most differentiated of all cities," "a combination of enclaves with high identity, and multiclaves with mixed identity... perhaps the most heterogeneous city in the world." ¹⁴ The successive waves of immigration--Anglos from the mid-west and south, blacks and Mexicans, and most recently East Asians and refugees from U.S. imperial adventures in Meso-America--precipitated not the radial, homogenous modern city, but a cosmopolitan megalopolis, more diverse than any city since Shanghai in the thirties, inhabited by people from all over the world--a microcosm of global diaspora. The unreal places of the Paramount Studio map have all been occupied, and now a corner at a mini-mall, with shop signs in Chinese and Tagalog as well as English, leads from Mexico to Korea.

Together with the long history of anti-labor politics that inhibited trans-ethnic working-class consciousness, this social dispersal precluded full urban integration; but it also had the advantage of allowing minority social groups, especially **[End Page 28]** those that arrived in distinct waves of immigration, to settle in relatively homogenous, relatively autonomous clusters. There, as well as infiltrating into Los Angeles aspects of distant spatialities, they have better sustained their original identity. Historically, these communities have become visible to the hegemony mostly at moments of racial or cultural strife: the anti-Chinese riots of the eighteen-seventies, for example, or zoot-suiters in the forties, and blacks in the sixties and nineties. At other times, within themselves they have nurtured and sustained local colors and traditions. The barrios of East Los Angeles, for example, or the African Americans's preservation of the culture of the rural south, and more recently the "little" Asian cities of Tokyo, Manila, Taipei, Saigon, and so on are distinct cultural formations, some of which have flourished bountifully in relative obscurity, even as components of them were assimilated into the

uniformity of mass media and advertising. These local places are structured between two primary vectors: a centripetal pull towards the downtown area, which has always been and remains the focus of the civic, economic, and transport networks of the basin, and a centrifugal pull generated by the semi-autonomous industrial and residential clusters. [15](#)

The structural tensions that shape the city geographically generate parallel tensions that shape its arts. Minority cultures in Los Angeles are created in the tension between the centrifugal pull of the local communities and their indigenous practices and the centripetal pull of the entertainment industry. As over time and at different rates for different groups the balance between these pulls has shifted, the mediums they have used to sustain themselves culturally have similarly matured and declined. But, reflecting the extent to which film has been the city's medium in dominance, independent filmmaking in Los Angeles has been a crucial site of alternative cultural activity. Either unrepresented or misrepresented by the film industry, the city's local communities have had to develop modes of film production alternative to and counter to the studios' capitalist mode of production; and in the alternative cinemas they have pioneered, both the discursive structures of their films and their visions of the city and of their own relation to it have been quite unlike Hollywood's. These alternative cinemas have been intermittently recurrent since the beginning of the industry. In 1914, for example, Frank E. Wolfe and a Socialist collective produced a feature film, *From Dusk to Dawn* to counter anti-working class propaganda from **[End Page 29]** the Trust films, and in it they rewrote the bungled explosion at the *Los Angeles Times* in 1911 and the subsequent Darrow trial as the beginning of a progressive labor movement in the city that led to the election of a socialist Governor. *Conditions in Los Angeles, Calif.* (1934), the Los Angeles Film and Photo League's twenty-minute documentary on the effects of the depression, was a parallel montage of the rich and poor sections of the city; the out-of-work standing in lines outside employment agencies or sifting through refuse for food contrasted with golfers arriving in Rolls Royces at a resort hotel. *Hollywood Lockout! 1946*, produced by the Conference of Studio Unions (CSU) during that year's strike, showed pickets outside the studios being beaten and arrested by the police who were protecting scabs on behalf of the owners. *The Exiles* (Kent MacKenzie, 1961), a 35mm documentary made by a group of USC students, celebrated the working-class Native Americans around the old Bunker Hill before both the architecture and the community were destroyed in capital restructuring. *Requiem 29* (David Garcia, 1970) documented the 1970 anti-war Chicano Moratorium in East Los Angeles, where police rioted, beating many people and killing *L.A. Times* journalist Rubén Salazar. *L.A. Plays Itself* (Fred Halstead, 1972), a *Songs of Innocence and Experience* of homosexuality in Los Angeles, began with scenes of idyllic sex in the Santa Monica Mountains that, when interrupted by the sprawl of urban development, cut to a second half of ecstatic sado-masochistic sex on Santa Monica Boulevard. *Water Ritual # 1: An Urban Rite of Purification* (Barbara McCullough, 1979), a four-minute film opened on the skeleton of a ruined building in a cityscape so devastated that it looks like an impoverished area in the Third World; a young African American woman enters, sits down on the ground, blows sand through her fist, and then, hitching her skirts round her hips, she urinates. These communities and the Los Angeles they live have no place in the corporate cinema, except in caricature. [16](#)



The dispersed, polynucleated but nevertheless ultimately centered structure of the Los Angeles megalopolis and the broadly homologous conditions determining the alternative minority cinemas it sustains allows the question of the geographical relation of film to the city to be posed in a new and properly materialist way. When the issue is formulated exclusively as a question of representation, revolving on the relations between a given film's iconography and diegetic space to the

architectural and social spaces of the city, the forces and **[End Page 30]** materials that generate the representation are ignored--an idealism akin to post-structuralist assimilations of the city to other forms of sheer textuality. For studio films, the industrial mode of production and the commodity social relations it sustains are relatively uniform, and so only a concern with the overall implications of capitalist production of culture can prompt consideration of its effect on the textual properties of the films it produces and hence consideration of spatial factors affecting production. But for films produced outside the studio system, the geography of production is inscribed in the film itself. ¹⁷ In these cases, a *geo-cinematic hermeneutic* will investigate the relation between a given film's representation of the city and the actual urban resources that supply and govern its manufacture--the cinematic registers of social and material production. The different cities lived by Los Angeles's various local communities provide them with different topographical, architectural, social, and economic resources, and the visions of Los Angeles they produce reflect both the architectural and social appearance of the spatiality they inhabit, and also the resources it allows them: the different formal means of cultural production--different stories, situations, images, rhythms, and points-of-view and the different material **[End Page 31]** means of cultural production. Since any given film is the point at which cultural work transforms a specific set of human and natural resources into a representation of and intervention in life in the city, the particular image of the city it presents will always reflect the resources from which it was made. The cultural means of production mediates between the reality of the city and its appearance in film. In order to develop a hermeneutic that can reveal these relations between cinema and geography, we must take one last detour through the *mediating apparatuses*, the actual institutions that have allowed marginal communities to develop autonomous or quasi-autonomous cinemas.

In Los Angeles, these mediating apparatuses typically grew on the edges of or in the interstices of the industrial cinema itself. They fall into three groups: production (e.g. equipment sales and rental houses, laboratories, and co-operatives that make equipment available to beginning filmmakers, media arts centers, and community-outreach workshops); consumption (e.g. distribution organizations, promotional mechanisms, and screening organizations, including specialty art theaters, and groups formed specifically for this purpose); and suffusing these, ideological apparatuses (e.g. museums, archives, and libraries; journals, magazines, and lectures). Of these mediating apparatuses and performing all these functions, college and university film programs have been especially important, sustaining an interface and intercourse between industrial and independent production in Los Angeles. The city has historically been rich in those resources that also feed directly into the industry, but relatively poor in those independent of it. Hollywood has sustained many para-industrial workshops, personnel marginally or partially employed in the studios, and film schools, while cultural resources oriented toward entirely independent cinemas have been correspondingly sparse. But though facilities for independent distribution and exhibition have been meager and attenuated, especially in comparison to equivalent institutions in New York and San Francisco, Los Angeles *has--*sporadically, but persistently--sustained the institutions of an independent film culture. ¹⁸

Below, rather than considering the relation between the highly specific representations of Los Angeles in the marginal films mentioned above and the specific conditions that allowed them to be produced and the non-commodity **[End Page 32]** functions they sustain, we will consider two films that more directly negotiate with the apparatuses of commercial production and that partially overlap with the industrial cinema. Their tendencies to autonomy and opposition are interwoven with tendencies towards collaboration, and in this, they foreground the combination of centrifugal and centripetal

impulses that characterize the overall cultural situation in the city. To frame this broader project, I will invoke Reyner Banham's similarly broad and provisional answer to the question of whether Los Angeles was one city or 132; he said its architectural originality and multiplicity could be schematized into four "ecologies": the beaches (surfurbia), the foothills, the central flatlands and the freeways.¹⁹ Combining Sauer's term, "cultural landscape" with Banham's ecologies, we can then think of the spatialities in which non-studio film is produced--including the different mediating cinematic apparatuses to which they permit access--as "cultural ecologies," and so propose a geographical allegory; just as every film silently tells the story of the social relations and the material functions it serves, so it tells the story of the cultural ecology in which it was produced. The way the city is figured in a film made outside the studio system reflects the way the city figured in the filmmaking.

The possibilities of such a *geo-cinematic hermeneutic* may be sketched by a comparison of Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977) and Pat O'Neill's *Water and Power* (1988), in which the relation between each film's very different pictures of Los Angeles and the cultural ecology that produced it is especially pointed. Both resemble more traditional avant-gardes in being intensely personal, for though both involved extensive collaboration, they were each conceived, photographed, and edited essentially by one person; and both were undertaken as self-justifying projects with comparatively little attention to the possibilities of financial return, certainly not to the valorization of invested capital. But both are more specifically prototypical of the Los Angeles avant-garde in being alternative to yet in clear negotiation with Hollywood; despite stunning formal originality, both approach industrial norms in that one is a feature-length narrative, while the other is close to feature-length, and shot and distributed in 35mm. Though in these respects they are similar, their styles are so diametrically different as to constitute a virtual case-study in what introductory film aesthetics terms the "Bazin-Eisenstein debate," a textbook contrast between "faith in [End Page 33] reality" and "faith in the image." And while one is overtly "political," the other is overtly "aesthetic." These two film languages and their envisioning of Los Angeles reflect equally different spatialities in terms of both representation and production.

Killer of Sheep

The Los Angeles of *Killer of Sheep* is almost entirely the African American working-class neighborhoods of South-Central. Architecturally, the ghetto differs from its counterparts in other cities in the predominance of single-family dwellings and small apartment buildings. The cityscape is flat, monotonous, dilapidated, of limited imageability, and with no conspicuous internal differentiation. There are no signs of commerce except a single liquor store, or of industry except the slaughterhouse where the hero works (and it is generally seen only from the inside, so that its articulation with the community is unspecified). And there are no signs of connections with other parts of the city except, briefly, the Southern Pacific railroad that appears to share the area's defunct lethargy; its tracks are children's playgrounds and its engines mostly immobile. No trace of any other Los Angeles may be seen; no business districts, no supermarkets, no luxurious high-rise apartment or office buildings, no technicolor sunsets, no homes of the stars--not even the Watts Towers. Most remarkable of all, there are no freeways. Indeed, there are almost no cars; and those few that are not so permanently disabled that they have been re-invented as street-furniture are at best unreliable. And so nothing can happen. Life here is entirely constrained within only one of Banham's ecologies, the central flatlands. The beaches, the hills, and the freeways are all unavailable, and the only narrative event of any substance is the protagonist's attempt to secure a car to take his family outside

the ghetto, if only for a day trip. But hardly is an outside glimpsed, than the car breaks down, forcing a return to a stultifying carcereal stasis. Here, lack of geographic mobility is a figure above all for the lack of social mobility, and in presenting poverty as simultaneously an economic and a spatial condition, the film foregrounds the racial and class apartheid that constitutes the Los Angeles of South Central: that lack of access to work, to communications networks, to self-governance, or to any of the other resources of **[End Page 34]** the city proper, commonly proposed as the immediate cause of the 1965 uprising, and which has only deteriorated since.



The image of African American family life and the quasi-documentary verisimilitude of the representation both categorically differ, not only from mainstream Hollywood (for which the area is essentially unrepresentable and known only as a lair from which emerge the predators who prey on bourgeois society), but also from the two eras of para-studio African American filmmaking that frame it, the early seventies blaxploitation that followed *Sweet Sweetback's Baadass Song* (Melvin Van Peebles, 1971) and its recent revival in films like *Boyz N the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991), *South Central* (Steve Anderson, 1992), and *Menace II Society* (Albert and Allen Hughes 1993). In general contrast to the generic conventions of both eras, in *Killer of Sheep* the family is whole. It consists of Stan, the father, who is present, regularly employed, and proudly independent; and, however precariously, he supports his wife and children. He disdains petty crime and the petty criminals of the community; alongside fellow working-class whites, he continues in back-breaking labor in the **[End Page 35]** slaughter-house; coffee is his drug of choice, and while the grind of his life has its toll, it doesn't provoke promiscuity but rather destroys sexual desire--the "impotence" of "a dream deferred," as Langston Hughes's poem, "Same in Blues" puts it. Since his principle relation remains with his wife, the film's action is mostly the melodrama of domestic space, rather than the violence of exterior, public spaces. And though the film's overall vision is bleak, it ends on a note of humanist optimism as a crippled young woman announces that she is pregnant. The film's portrayal of an African American working-class family stands as a heroic demystification of the industrial-media's combination of neglect and exploitation, not only of black but of all working-class life, and an exemplary premonition of a community-inspired alternative cinema. But its production was not a case of spontaneous community self-expression, so much as a historically and geographically specific negotiation between the community in which Burnett had lived since coming to Los Angeles from Mississippi as a child and the cinematic apparatuses mediating between that community and the film industry. In this case, the principle agency was the film school at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), where Burnett was the leading figure in a generation of young black filmmakers who used its resources to produce industry calling-cards. **[End Page 36]**



One of the only four blacks in the film school proper, ²⁰ Burnett was eventually joined at UCLA in the early seventies by Billy Woodberry, Haile Gerima, and Ben Caldwell; in the same period, Julie Dash was at the American Film Institute, an organization even more thoroughly aligned with Hollywood than UCLA. All of their student projects were realistic narratives, oriented towards the production of populist feature films for mass distribution inside and outside the African American community; and they all worked on each other's projects. Burnett, for example, wrote and photographed Woodberry's *Bless Their Little Hearts* (1983), and photographed Dash's *Illusions* (1982), Gerima's *Bush Mama* (1976), and parts of Larry Clark's *Passing Through* (1977). For these filmmakers, the academy made the combination of three things available: production equipment and a semi-professional filmmaking community; a degree of access to the industry; and models of alternative film languages compatible

with low-budget feature production.

By the early seventies, the international hegemony of the Hollywood film industry had been challenged by two modes of film production alternative to the corporate-controlled film industry, each allowing different mobilizations of political [End Page 37] aspirations: on the one hand, the attempt to create non-or even anti-commodity cinemas, and on the other the commodity production of films by other industrial centers. The most strongly politicized versions of these two productive possibilities were respectively the militant "impoverished" and "imperfect" cinemas of Latin-America and Viet Nam, and the sequence of "New Wave" art cinemas subsequent to Italian Neo-realism that reached a culmination in the work of Jean-Luc Godard and the Groupe Dziga Vertov. In the United States, the former tendency produced the Newsreels, while the latter, the American political art film, was essentially still-born, and would remain so apart from the briefly-conspicuous exception of *Speaking Directly* (1974) and other works by Jon Jost (some of which were made in Los Angeles). Generally in Los Angeles, however--where the blacklist and the HUAC investigations had extirpated virtually all traces of progressive film culture, where the police and judiciary were notoriously racist, and where spatial segregation made any class-based, trans-racial political cooperation extremely difficult--neither was a real possibility. There was, in fact, a L.A. branch of the Newsreel, and it worked very closely with the Black Panther Party on a film intended to clarify the Panthers' class-based analysis of American racism in an attempt to counter the Black Nationalism of Ron Karenga's US organization, also based in the city. But on December 8, 1969, two days after the Illinois police murdered Deputy Chairman Fred Hampton, the LAPD in collaboration with the FBI destroyed the Los Angeles Panther headquarters, effectively ending Panther leadership of the Black community in Los Angeles, and opening the road for the recrudescence of the gangs. And though Los Angeles Newsreel had included well-equipped, experienced filmmakers and sophisticated Marxist intellectuals, it failed to bring a single film of its own to distribution. ²¹ Refracted through Hollywood's insistent presence, the impossibility of an agitational cinema in Los Angeles in the early seventies thus left only the option of populist narratives, made with a view toward dissemination via the festival circuit and liberal public institutions; that is, the art film, and specifically neo-realism, "a revolutionary cinema in a non-revolutionary society."

²²



The determining effect of these specific community and institutional resources is everywhere apparent in *Killer of Sheep*. They produce its thematics, its liberal humanist appeal for sympathy and understanding--if not sheer pity--from the [End Page 38] hegemony, rather than a historical analysis or a militant call to contestation directed to the community itself. As a result, the film has been primarily distributed, not in the black community it depicts, but in the white institutions of liberal humanism, in festivals, schools, and museums. ²³ And they produce its form: the combination of narrative strategies and economic imperatives that prompt the use of deep-focus, long-takes; the non-professional actors playing roles close to themselves; the emphasis on an organic connection between people and the environment; the documentary feel of grainy black and white; and especially the attenuation of narrative, its replacement as a site of meaning by studied takes of human faces permitting the observation of what Rossellini called "the movements of the soul." In these respects, the film is an audaciously ambitious accommodation of impoverishment in resources and an accommodation to the politics of the liberal institutions which, in the absence of a militant black cinema, allowed it to be made. But in one other respect the film is wealthy. Immediately available to it was the most bountiful resource of African-American culture, music, and Burnett uses it to enrich and extend the visual track of *Killer of Sheep*. [End

Page 39]

Used intra-diegetically, recorded songs affirm music's special role as a means of spiritual sustenance and imaginative expression for African American people. But Burnett's use of non-diegetic music in elaboration of that role allows him metonymically to expand early-seventies South Central into the whole history of African-American resistance. His visual mapping of the environment may be constrained by the empiricism of realist photography, as well as by the poverty of the community and by the poverty of the resources for which he, as a UCLA student was only partially able to compensate; but in the soundtrack he loosened the realism and used music to access other times and spaces, and so introduce a historical dimension and a sense of continuity, whose destruction he regarded as primarily responsible for the degradation of the black community. ²⁴

Both framing eras of blaxploitation were fuelled by contemporary black music, soul and gangsta rap respectively, and indeed were essentially attempts to reproduce in cinema the music's cultural intervention and its enormous financial return; in both eras the films' overall ideological postures were derived from and amplified by their soundtracks, which were also marketed as commodities in the way that has typified the integrated entertainment industry, especially since *Saturday Night Fever*. Positioned outside even the compromises of independent commercial feature production, *Killer of Sheep* lost the marketing platform of such corporate-controlled music; but it also escaped determination by commercial priorities. Not obliged to identify with a single, simultaneously-marketed genre, it referenced a much wider library and used music in much more complex ways.

Indeed, if the visuals alone resemble the verisimilitude of neo-realism, the image-music relations create a variety of highly-artificial montage effects, in which classical black music--blues from the thirties and forties--add resonance and counterpoint to themes which the attenuated narrative itself holds suspended: Paul Robeson's singing "Ballad for Americans" ²⁵ as youngsters play on ruined lots, for example, and Dinah Washington singing "This Bitter Earth" as Stan and his wife embrace each other in their misery and slowly dance.

In some instances, the play of song lyrics across the visuals is very complex. The scene where for the first time it becomes clear that Stan's anomie is destroying his relation with his wife, for example, is accompanied by Earth, Wind and Fire's **[End Page 40]** mid-seventies mega-hit, "Reasons." The tension between the timbre of Philip Bailey's ecstatic falsetto that affirms erotic passion and the lyrics that broach the inevitability of its fading over time perfectly encompasses the tensions in the woman's life. But since the sequence begins with their baby daughter singing along to the record, the questioning of love is initially redirected from husband/wife to daughter/ mother, with the child placed as simultaneously the objective correlative of the erotic passion which once existed but has now been drained away by the grind of poverty, and herself already in process of being constituted as a subject by the mass media. "I don't want to feel," the child sings, groping to follow the record, "I'm in the wrong place to be real." Contextualized in this specific narrative, these lyrics suddenly transcend their banality, and the moment becomes a summary index of the history of a people.

Water and Power

If Burnett's Los Angeles appears as an oppressive enclosure that thwarts all attempts to escape, O'Neill's is a shimmering vision through which disembodied figures are

transported by magic. No prison this; rather a plethora of radically dissimilar spatialities that, linked by the restless trajectories of camera movement, all incessantly dissolve one into another. Their multiple-superimposition and constant interpenetration create a composite space, for implicit in any one topography are an unlimited number of others. For Burnett, the ontology of the neighborhood and its boundaries are undeniable; for O'Neill any one place is only a pocket in another, not even a momentary rest in the ceaseless twining of heterotopias. None of these ever stabilizes sufficiently to become normative, but instead a relation among them emerges as a kind of deep structure to most of the film's sequences and its overall theme. This consists of a dissolve from one or more shots of desert scenes into one or more shots of the city, not necessarily authorized by some visual resemblance, with the transition bridged by an interior showing traces of human creativity and craft, a workshop, for example, or an abandoned industrial space turned into an artist's loft.



Fundamentally then the film is an extended parallel montage, and though it is one premised on continuity rather than collision, on Pudovkin rather than **[End Page 41]** Eisenstein, nevertheless it marks a radical development for O'Neill.

His earliest works had been each mobilized around a single formal and thematic principle, but his immediately previous films, such as *Saugus Series* (1974) and *Sidewinder's Delta* (1976) had rather been dossier-like compilations of discrete sections, each mobilizing a different formal procedure in optical printing, and linked to the others by only the loosest thematic continuity--they were generally scenes of everyday events and wilderness landscapes all transformed by art. ²⁶ These were essentially late underground films, even though the theoretical and institutional infrastructure supporting such short films had collapsed by the late seventies under the combined assaults of structural film, the politicization of the avant-garde by feminism and other identity groups, and the catastrophic increase in film costs. The avant-garde's consequent turn to feature-length works designed for commercial distribution was not an inimical direction for O'Neill, except that the compositional principle of his entire oeuvre to date had been montage. *Water and Power* marks the beginning of an extremely tentative engagement with narrative. **[End Page 42]**



In published notes, O'Neill has sketched a narrative underlay to the film. ²⁷ Its main character is Aaron Haskell, who commits suicide by plunging from the bridge in the movie's opening shot, just before the title. (Perhaps the film is what he sees in the moment of his death, parallel to the expanded moment of consciousness of the man in *Incident at Owl Creek* [*La Rivière du hibou*, Robert Enrico, 1962], who also falls from a bridge as he is hanged--or of Stan Brakhage, whose suicide by hanging frames his visionary *Anticipation of the Night* [1958]). At any rate, according to the notes, Jack, a detective investigating Haskell's death visits his wife, who lives in a trailer in the desert near their mine, and her lover, Rudy, who tells stories about corruption in the Russian army. Scenes from various Westerns follow, which in turn lead the story back to The Studio, where shooting is underway on the crowd scenes for *The Biggest Picture of All*; the movie is sponsored by four multinational corporations, lead by Seoul businessman, Kim Chong, who is actually Haskell, "very much alive and... deeply involved in the picture business." ²⁸ Many of these incidents do appear in the film--the corruption in the Russian army, for example, is illustrated by scenes from *The Lost Command* **[End Page 43]** that are floated in over time-lapse photography of a desert lake bed--and others are spoken or presented as text accompanied by black leader, with the visual equivalents appearing elsewhere. But such a narrative substrate is certainly not recoverable from the film, nor does the film imply narrative as a compositional principle, except in so far that subtitles satirize it by generating contradictory continuities

in the manner of the intertitles of *Un chien Andalou*. As remote as the motive of a dream, narrative is dispelled by the immediacy and intricacy of the optical printing, and by the insistence of the montage.

Knitting together a skein of Los Angeles associations, O'Neill's deconstruction of the opposition between city and desert recalls the metaphors of local lore: "The World is a Suburb of Los Angeles," "Los Angeles is a cultural desert," "The World is a Ghetto" and so on. ²⁹ And the visual trope may be read literally in several ways: human industry has turned the desert into a city, or the artist's vision is capable of seeing through the urban fabric to the land-form below. It also has a very specific historical basis in the Owens Valley Project, a visionary undertaking that brought the water that allowed the city's expansion, even as it turned the previously fertile valley into a desert. This was in fact the beginning of the city's Department of Water and Power, and the pipelines bringing the water through the desert to the city are a leitmotif in the film. But O'Neill's historical retrospection is intertwined with a more contemporary attention to the rhetoric that matured in the period of the film's production, proposing the city's historical representativeness. Overnight and from several different directions simultaneously, it was transformed from a more or less hideous anomaly, a kind of late-capitalist Philadelphia, into "a *protopos*, a paradigmatic place... a *mesocosm*, an ordered world in which the micro and the macro, the idiographic and the nomothetic, the concrete and the abstract, can be seen simultaneously in an articulated and interactive combination"--the representative postmodern city invoked above. ³⁰ Within the many different agendas at stake in such promotions, two are especially important: first, the post-Fordist economics of the Pacific Rim, and second, a putatively new mode of subjectivity, usually correlated with the post-structural theory promoted in Orange County by the "Parisian fakirs" ³¹ who flocked to the University of California at Irvine in the seventies and eighties. Traces of the city's role in Pacific Rim finance capital and the massive importation of both third world workers and third world labor relations are glimpsed in **[End Page 44]** *Water and Power*: in the juxtapositions of the different downtown skylines, for example, and in the fragments of a history of capital restructuring stretching from Sir Francis Drake to Kim Chong, the Korean businessman involved in shady corporate transactions in the picture business. But implications of this kind are subordinate to those of second area, postmodern subjectivity, specifically to a formal structure which disassembles the filmic vocabularies of the classic narrative and the humanist subject.



In *Water and Power*, stable narrative subjects are replaced by fragmentary and evanescent protagonists, what Paul Arthur has called "a set of vagabond voices and images connected briefly by theme or proximity" and narrative continuity itself is replaced by the "intricate semicoherence" of the montage. ³² Consequently the medium's unique capacity to redeem reality by simulating unified, continuous space and time is abandoned in the film's two most fundamental strategies, collage superimpositions of multiple registers of the former and time-lapse photography condensations of the latter. These technical effects **[End Page 45]** are persuasive as allegorical figurations of the conditions of postmodernity, of its putative time-space compression and the continued dissolution of one place into another that constitutes the Foucaultian heterotopic space, "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several sites that are in themselves incompatible." ³³ Such resonances may be pushed even further since, in so forcefully making material space and time subject to the medium itself, these filmic techniques lead all-but inevitably to the superimposition of found footage over the landscapes, and so to the discovery that the topographies of Southern California are all already inhabited by old

Hollywood movies. ³⁴ The difference between natural and filmic space is confounded, and diegeses photographed elsewhere and often long-ago for other films are discovered within O'Neill's own photography of the local landscapes--an inverse recapitulation of the process that historically allowed Hollywood to find all other places in its backyard.

In respect to these multiple figurations of media-dependent hyperreality, O'Neill's chief industrial intertext is then the essential Hollywood film, not of the seventies, **[End Page 46]** but of the eighties: not the *Chinatown* (which is usually cited as the correlative to his investigation of the Owens Valley Project), but *Blade Runner*. But rather than choosing between the nostalgic modernist film and the dystopian post-modernist vision that has replaced it as the key representation of the Los Angeles of all our futures, it is probably more fruitful to see *Water and Power* as superimposing these too. For its take on hyperreality and the trappings of postmodernism is deeply ambivalent. Explaining this and so explaining the film's unique visual appearance again involves a geographical detour, for though like *Killer of Sheep*, *Water and Power* occupies an interzone between the industry proper and the disaffiliated avant-garde, its liminality is one of quite different contexts.

In Banham's terms, O'Neill's ecology is that of the foothills, the space where several modes of cultural production intersect and nurture each other. Predominantly it is the social space of Hollywood and para-Hollywood workers; Hollywood Boulevard is its "main street," ³⁵ and its main activity is the manufacture of commodity entertainment. This Hollywood also sustains the host of para-industrial enterprises of the kind that, from the mid-sixties until computer-imaging became the industry norm, allowed O'Neill to make a living and subsidized his independent projects; his special effects work on commercials and features, such as *Return of the Jedi* and *Poltergeist* continues then the tradition of avant-garde interpolations in Hollywood films that began with Slavko Vorkapich's experimental montage interludes in thirties' features. But the foothills also sustains art that is not so oriented to or completely dependent on the interests of capital. For O'Neill himself, its significant institutions were UCLA, where he was formally educated (not in the film school, whose industry orientation was so fruitful for Burnett, but in art and design), and two of Los Angeles's long-standing art theaters, the Coronet and the Cinema Theater, where in the seventies he informally educated himself in the classic European and contemporary U.S. avant-gardes. ³⁶ And they sustain the other institutions of the avant-garde: art galleries, cafés and bars, bookstores, and screening organizations, most notably Oasis Cinema. For a number of years in the late-seventies, Oasis was one of two independent screening organizations in the city. Collectively organized by avant-garde filmmakers, it became the focus of a distinct era in avant-garde production; O'Neill was a founding member, and he premiered the most consummate of his fourteen shorts there. ³⁷ **[End Page 47]**

Located in the middle of this mixed cultural ecology is Lookout Mountain Films, the most recent of the several independent production companies O'Neill has headed. From this aerie on Lookout Mountain Avenue, high in the Hollywood Hills off the Cahuenga pass, O'Neill does indeed look out over some of the chief geographical and historical divides of the city and the industry, all of which structure *Water and Power*. He is midway between Los Angeles proper to the south, and to the north the San Fernando Valley, the area added to the city to meet the terms of the Owens River bond issue. He is also midway between the pre-and post-war locations of the industry, between Hollywood itself and Studio and Universal Cities. Further to the north lies the Owens Valley itself (where most of the desert footage was shot), while closer is the town of Saugus and California

Institute of the Arts, where he taught for the first half of the seventies, with several of his ex-students returning to him to work on *Water and Power* in a team that also included three animators, along with specialists in audio design, mechanical design and construction, and optical printing.

These geographies and the schizophrenic combination of industrial and artisanal potentials in this cultural ecology ubiquitously inform *Water and Power's* production. A home-made film, only partially funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, it nevertheless cost \$90,000; it uses a very sophisticated motion-controlled time-lapse camera, but the images were shot spontaneously; though the image processing is beyond the industrial standards, it was ordered intuitively; it contains fragments from O'Neill's commercial jobs and also from his dreams. This interpenetration of avant-garde and industrial proclivities and the combination of imaginative and arcane manual skills are also historically specific, the former instancing the switch from shorts to feature-length projects that a generation of avant-garde filmmakers made in the eighties, and the latter a not-unconnected tension between technological nostalgia and prolepsis. Occurring on the threshold of a totalized electronic environment and electronic image processing, the implications of the film's elaborate fabrication nevertheless shy away from the aesthetics of postmodernism to reclaim a thick, modernist materiality, and invoke a homespun pride in hands-on craftsmanship and authenticity figured in the images of artisanal environments that bridge the city and the desert in the film. **[End Page 48]**

These tensions trace an individual and a general crisis for avant-garde film. The pull between a modern past and a postmodern future, both of which (though in quite different ways) were in the mid-eighties *not really here*, was a specific historical and geographical moment. For the effects of which O'Neill is a virtuoso master in film were all becoming routinely possible, but as computer-generated using digital technology. At this point the yearnings of avant-garde film to be autonomous practice, independent of the now-international industrial culture, give up the ghost. Antipathy to rationalized, corporate electronic media will be expressed as a radical conservatism that privileges earlier phases of Hollywood itself--a response that has been endemic in the avant-garde at least since Kenneth Anger. To work today, as O'Neill does, photochemically and in film bespeaks a longing for a world of mechanical reproduction, of simple apparatuses like optical printers that can be domestically assembled from WWII cameras (as O'Neill himself did), and so it is a nostalgia for visual precision, for full visual sensuousness, for vision itself. As we are absorbed by television, a medium which makes vision redundant, *Water and Power* appears as an attempt to reclaim Los Angeles for film and to reclaim the medium in which Los Angeles lived. One of the last machine's last master-craftsmen, O'Neill made what inevitably looks more and more like the last Hollywood *film*.

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Notes

1. My thanks to Clark Arnwine and Jesse Lerner for their reading of an earlier draft of this essay. I have silently incorporated a number of their insights.

2. John Berger, *G* (New York; Pantheon, 1972), 40, and Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics*, 16, 1 (Spring 1986), 22. Foucault's essay provided the point of departure for Edward W. Soja's *Postmodern Geographies: The*

Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory (New York; Verso, 1989), a text to which the present essay will return.

3. The scant geographical approaches to cinema include one ambitious attempt to rethink cinema in global terms, a couple of collections of essays, and an earlier issue of this journal, respectively, Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (London; BFI Publishing, 1992); Stuart C. Aitken and Leo E. Zonn, eds., *Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle: A Geography of Film* (Lanham, Md.; Rowman and Littlefield, 1994); David B. Clarke, ed., *The Cinematic City* (New York: Routledge, 1997); and Clark Arnwine and Jesse Lerner, ed.s, "Cityscapes I," *Wide Angle*, 19, 4 (October 1997).

4. David B. Clarke, "Introduction: Previewing the Cinematic City," in Clarke, *The Cinematic City*, 3. The Baudrillard quote is from *America* (London, Verso, 1988), 56; the Harvey quote is from *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford; Blackwell, 1989), 308.

5. Los Angeles: *The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (London; Penguin, 1971), 35.

6. "Spatiality" is Edward Soja's summary term for the "created space of social organization and production," mediating between space as a topographical given and the social relations constructed in it. "The structure of organized space is not a separate structure with its own autonomous laws of construction and transformation, nor is it simply an expression of the class structure emerging from social (and thus aspatial?) relations of production. It represents, instead, a dialectically defined component of the general relations of production which are simultaneously social and spatial." (*Postmodern Geographies*, 78-9).

7. See Robert Carringer's discussion with *The Graduate*'s production designer Richard Sylbert elsewhere in this volume.

8. Richard V. Spencer, "Los Angeles as a Producing Center," *Moving Picture World*, 8 April 1911. Excerpts from the article are reprinted in Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915* (Berkeley; University of California Press, 1990), 160-61.

9. The map was reprinted in a prospectus produced by Halsey, Stuart and Co, "The Motion Picture Industry as a Basis for Bond Financing," dated 27 May 1927; the prospectus including the map was published in Tino Balio, ed., *The American Film Industry*, Revised Edition (Wisconsin; University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 195-217.

10. "Of Other Spaces," 25.

11. Exceptions to this are often the industry's most transparently ideological projects. In his walk from one side of the city to the other, the protagonist of *Falling Down* (Joel Schumacher, 1993), for example, passes through a cross-section of the city's ethnic and class divisions, mostly fairly accurate in their geographical placing, while *Rising Sun* (Philip Kaufman, 1993) can sketch the penetration of Pacific Rim capital into the city, and even envision its relations with the "boyz in the hood," the African-American working-class communities of South Central, which have otherwise been almost entirely unrepresented by Hollywood.

12. See Mike Davis's summary conclusion: "No city, in fiction or film, has been more likely to figure as the icon of a really bad future (or present, for that matter). Post-

apocalyptic Los Angeles, overrun by terminators, androids, and gangs, has become as much a cliché as Marlowe's mean streets or Gidget's beach party. The decay of the city's old glamor has been inverted by the entertainment industry into a new glamor of decay" *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York; Henry Holt, 1998), 278.

[13.](#) "Of Other Spaces," 24.

[14.](#) These are drawn respectively from Kevin Starr, *Material Dreams*, 84); the *WPA Guide to California* (New York; Pantheon Books, 1984), 208; Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, 224; and Charles Jenks, *Heteropolis* (London; Academy Editions, 1993), 17 and 32.

[15.](#) As Kevin Starr points out, it is "simply a myth to state that twentieth-century Los Angeles had no downtown." See *Material Dreams: Southern California Through the 1920s* (New York; Oxford University Press, 1990), 78. Starr's mapping of the emergence of the Los Angeles basin, and indeed Southern California in general, around the focus of downtown recapitulates Soja's geography, which envisages downtown as "a strategic vantage point, an urban panopticon counterpoised to the encirclement of watchful military ramparts and defensive outer cities" (*Postmodern Geographies*, 236).

[16.](#) Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear* (passim), makes a very strong case that the disaster genre that so completely dominates Hollywood films about Los Angeles are allegorical expressions of white, middle-class fear of these working-class, ethnic peoples.

[17.](#) So, the filmic cities of Vertov, Ruttmann, Rossellini, Godard, or Mekas are so extraordinary that the spatialities of their production are foregrounded, and in some of them--Vertov and Mekas, for example--the social relationships constructed in the filmmaking are proposed as propaedeutic to those surrounding it, as a metonymy or even a blueprint for the city's ideal form, a trope of the commonality it might allow.

[18.](#) The University of Southern California (USC) and the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) both have very substantial film schools dating back to the twenties and forties respectively, with more recent programs being instituted at the California Institute of the Arts (Cal Arts) and Occidental College. With the exceptions noted below, the first two are essentially tributary to the industry and dominated by industry values, while the other two have stronger commitments to alternative film. Providing instruction and access to equipment for young artists and employment for independent filmmakers, since WWII film schools have constituted a specific mode of film production in intersection with various avant-garde practices. In Los Angeles the most important of such intersections was USC's Department of Cinema in the late forties, where the presence of Curtis Harrington and Gregory Markopoulos (who became seminally important--though quite antithetical--figures in the evolution of the fifties avant-garde and its position in relation to Hollywood) and of montage and special effects maestro, Slavko Vorkapich (who chaired the department from 1949 to 1951), made it the global center of avant-garde filmmaking of the time. Also important have been the generation of ethnic filmmakers in UCLA's EthnoCommunications Program in the early seventies; and an ongoing experimental tradition at Cal Arts, distinguishable from the Disney orientation of the Character Animation department. Academic/avant-garde filmmaking has been increasingly important since the late sixties; especially when consolidated with tenure, the economic stability of college teaching for filmmakers transformed the avant-garde's social position, producing in the seventies the academic iconography and themes of structural film, and then the identity politics of feminist, ethnic, and queer academic filmmaking. Los Angeles

has also had a string of independent screening organizations that has been virtually continuous since the mid-forties. The independent distribution of avant-garde films also began in Los Angeles with Kenneth Anger and Curtis Harrington's Creative Film Associates in the late forties; it was followed by the Creative Film Society (founded by Robert Pike in 1957, which emphasized locally-produced films, including many UCLA student films), the Los Angeles Filmmakers' Cooperative (which distributed mostly Los Angeles films, 1970-75), and Visual Communications (which distributed Asian American work after the seventies), though USC has also distributed its own student films. But, in contrast to those of other American cities, the major museums have been despicably servile to the industry and unsupportive of alternatives.

[19.](#) Despite its off-the-cuff casualness, Banham's attention to the social discontinuity underneath Los Angeles' architectural heterogeneity should be contrasted with the giddy facility of Charles Jencks's proposal that the pastiche architecture of the Frank Gehry school is "clearly intended to represent the different voices that make up the city" (*Heteropolis*, 75). All the instances of this "hetero-architecture" he cites are from the information industries' elite, privileged sectors (mostly the beaches), and not at all from the aerospace and garment industries of the central flatlands and the San Fernando Valley which, despite huge areas of poverty, still employ more people than Hollywood.

[20.](#) Overall, the chief crucible for the independent black, Latino and Asian American film cultures in Los Angeles of the seventies and since was not UCLA's film school, but an Ethno-Communications Program in the Anthropology department, founded in 1968 in the wake of the 1965 Watts rebellion and the civil rights movements and in immediate response to student complaints about the racial exclusivity of the film school itself.

[21.](#) Bill Nichols's account of what he considered "the most politically advanced Newsreel center" cites the effect of geographical dispersion of the city, the isolation of its people, and the relative weakness of labor unions, all of which combined to "promote a climate of sectarianism and dogmatism, and the worst kinds of unprincipled conflict between various Movement groups." See his *Newsreel: Film and Revolution* (MA Thesis, University of California at Los Angeles, 1972), 241 and 243.

[22.](#) Penelope Houston, *The Contemporary Cinema*. (London: Penguin, 1963), 29. Burnett has described his own disapproval of the Los Angeles Panthers in an interview with Monona Wali, "Life Drawings: Charles Burnett's Realism," *The Independent* (October 1988), 19. Despite this, he did tape L.A. Panther Geronimo Pratt in San Quentin (when he was incarcerated after being framed by law enforcement for murder), but the project never came to fruition; see Lynell George, *No Crystal Stair: African-Americans in the City of Angels* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 140.

[23.](#) *Killer of Sheep* won First Prize at the United States Film Festival and the Critics' Prize at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1981; in 1990, it was selected by the Library of Congress as one of twenty-five films chosen for preservation. Burnett has received a Rockefeller Grant, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and in 1988 he was awarded a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship.

[24.](#) In terms which directly address the narrative of *Killer of Sheep*, Burnett has linked the loss of this historical sense to attacks on African American social structures: "There has always been the attempt to destroy our consciousness of who we were, to deny the past, and to destroy the family structure; and, since for us each day has not a yesterday or a tomorrow, to make the use of experience a lost art"; see his "Inner City Blues" in *Questions of Third Cinema* ed., Jim Pines and Paul Willemsen (London; British Film

Institute, 1989), 225.

[25.](#) Written by Earl Robinson of the Workers Laboratory Theatre, "Ballad for Americans," has, as Michael Denning pointed out, "come to stand for the aesthetic forms and ideologies of the Popular Front," with Robeson's recording of it the "unofficial anthem of the movement." (*The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* [New York; Verso, 1996], 115). It also became a prime target of post-war attacks on Front culture. As well as sustaining a terrible irony in the film, the use of the song signals Burnett's commitment to a non-racist, working-class populism that the combination of corporate postmodernism and Balkanized identity politics has otherwise extinguished as cultural possibility.

[26.](#) P. Adams Sitney observed, "One strains in vain to find a unity to the 'series' aside from the obvious invention of the imagery," and proposed that the systematic disjuncture was linked to Los Angeles, "which is so overwhelmed by fragmentation and gerrybuilt perspectives." See his "Saugus Series," *Millennium Film Journal*, 16-17-18 (Fall/Winter, 1986), 158 and 160.

[27.](#) See O'Neill's own, "Water and Power; A Fragmentary Synopsis," *Motion Picture*, 3, 1-2 (Winter 1989):19-20. A selection of his working notes for the film, "Notes for Water and Power," was published in *Millennium Film Journal*, 25 (1991): 42-9.

[28.](#) "A Fragmentary Synopsis," 20.

[29.](#) Respectively the title of a collection by local poet, Michael Ford; a mass-media cliché; and a best-selling record album by War, a seminal interracial Los Angeles band of the seventies.

[30.](#) Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, 191.

[31.](#) The phrase is Mike Davis's; see his *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London; Verso, 1990), 70.

[32.](#) "In Two Dimensions: Lewis Klahr's *In the Month of Crickets*, Pat O'Neill's *Water and Power*," *Motion Picture*, 3, 1-2 (1989): 23. Paul Arthur has consistently been O'Neill's best commentator, and my reading is indebted to his, even though he rejects the postmodernist associations. I take the phrase, "intricate semicoherence" from Peter Plagens's account of San Francisco collagist, Jess in his *Sunshine Muse: Contemporary Art on the West Coast* (New York; Praeger, 1974), 94.

[33.](#) Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 25.

[34.](#) Arthur lists these interpolations: *Detour*, *The Last Command*, *The Docks of New York*, and *The Ten Commandments*, as well as references to Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* ("In Two Dimensions," 21).

[35.](#) Banham, *Four Ecologies*, 101.

[36.](#) See Pat O'Neill, "Transcript of a Discussion" *Cantrill's Filmnotes* 59/60 (1989): 24-8 for his account of his youth "in the shadow of the Paramount water tower" and for production details for *Water and Power*.

[37.](#) At various times Oasis members also included Paul Arthur, Morgan Fisher, Roberta

Friedman, Amy Halpern, Beverly O'Neill, Susan Rosenfeld, Grahame Weinbren, and David and Diana Wilson. For an account of Oasis, see Terry Cannon, "Through the Sands of Time: A Tribute to the L.A. Independent Film Oasis, 1976-81" in Holly Willis, ed., *Scratching the Belly of the Beast: Cutting-Edge Media in Los Angeles, 1922-94* (Los Angeles, Filmforum, 1994), 60-61.

Muse	Search	Journals	This Journal	Contents	Top
----------------------	------------------------	--------------------------	------------------------------	--------------------------	---------------------