Memory, Media and the City in Multimedia Docufiction

Notes and Layers from 2001 to 2021

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2001

In Amsterdam, along its canals, many eighteenth-century buildings look freshly awakened. But in fact, these artifacts were recently leveled. Then, their bricks were stacked neatly, and mortared back together as façade. Next, the façade was laid on a wooden flat like a movie set, or a dead gunslinger ready for a daguerreotype. Anything behind that flat can be erased. Even the patina left by centuries of weather could be erased, to leave a building impermeable to all forms of moisture and greenhouse gases. Only the picturesque eighteenth-century façade is needed, what the camera will see. Beyond that first millimeter of brick, any kind of ahistorical white cube is fine.

2001

Hollywood noir by 1950 was as much an invention of German émigrés as by Americans. In fact, Hollywood is in strange ways a German imaginary. I often lecture on Independence Day as the great German blockbuster of the 1990s, a film reenacting the bombing of Stuttgart in 1945 – as invasion by Martians, as the Gulf War, as wars of the worlds. With that in mind, I led a workshop in Stuttgart. Five German college students spent a bleary week watching forty American films set in Los Angeles. But whose L.A. was that? As with most Hollywood films, each VHS had to be dubbed in German. From those in German, the students selected poignant moments, sound bites of less than thirty seconds. These were then transferred to black and white keys – like a piano for forgetting – by sound engineer Otto Kränzler. Next, Kränzler scored the noise into an eerie sonata, with leaks and breaks. He manipulated the gasps of German-remembered L.A.: the plaintive voices, gunshots, roars of anomie, the whiny theme music (»Well-come to LAAAA.«). Sometimes he let a phrase of legible dialogue

crawl out from the roar; then made it disappear again. His eight minute »sound pavilion« premiered in an empty room at the Künstlerhaus.[1] As I explained to the audience, this was »all that actually exists« of Los Angeles. Global L.A. is another greenhouse gas, turned into Mozartian amnesia, into very organized, very white noise.

2001

A scripted space is designed to be navigated as a »fun« pilgrimage – a story about free will where the viewer is a central character. En route, »players« engage in a »mock« struggle with the program, a lucid wrestling with the angels. I often call it a case of the patient and doctor faking their surgery together. The player already knows that the risks are a fake, a simulacrum, even a cheat. But pretending to cheat them back makes for sim-citizenship.

With these issues in mind, I tried another angle for a workshop in Rotterdam, which led to a group installation at the former Witte de With in Rotterdam (2000).[2] There, a team of young architects and installation artists converted two rooms into an imaginary Dutch landfill. The windows were underlined in black tape, to highlight where the Nazis had bombed the street (1945), only a trace after the 1960s recovery. The elevator leading to the second floor was hyperbolized into a machine about circulation, like roads pointing vertically, too, in an endless loop. Subways transmogrified into the elevator, in an arc of perpetual motion. The exhibition itself used sound walls and rebus puzzles, to suggest archaeologists coming back five hundred years later, trying to figure out what happened to Holland. We talked about how to design an ethnography of the indeterminate.

As in a labyrinth, indeterminacy was supposed to suggest the overlapping and self-distracting impact of war and postwar together, as well as tourism. The point was that globalization shrinks urban identity, into only two rooms for Global Rotterdam. Much of Holland – and most noticeably, Amsterdam – has been refashioned into a walkable tourist museum, a lowlands pop-up book. It has been shrunken back, like water when land is added to the shoreline. The group in the workshop also decided that Global Los Angeles is very much like imaginary landfill in Holland, theoretical but very solid, expanding into a blank sea.

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1 | *Scripted Spaces: The Global L.A. Pavilion*, June 25 to July 25, 1999. For generations, German theaters tended to exhibit Hollywood films dubbed in German. The same voice does John Wayne, Jack Nicholson and Robert De Niro. Dialogues on film that I recommended sounded utterly flat in German, more sexist, macho, shrill, blunt.

2 | »As part of the exhibition [›Scripted Spaces‹], Norman Klein has given a workshop titled *imaginary.nl*, in which [six] artists, architects and (media) designers explored [the notion of] the social *imaginary* of Holland.« See online www.fkawdw.nl/en/our_program/exhibitions/scripted_spaces.

Clearly, this was another updated variation of cognitive mapping. Meanings for cognitive mapping have evolved considerably since the 1980s, when it was championed by Jameson (1988; see 1991, chap. 4, etc.), borrowing from the method for mapping a city set up by Kevin Lynch (1960). It migrated in the nineties to applications for education, e-business design, architectural modeling (Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis, London [www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/casa], etc.); and even museum design, notably Daniel Libeskind's extraordinary Jewish Museum in Berlin. The term usually refers to mapping the unfindable, like the Situationist psychogeography (and Bakhtin's chronotope), in new spatial metaphors for alienation: mapping the state of mind, the memories that erase as we walk.

This has extraordinary applications to docufable. But can we apply it as well to an ethnography of digital culture, to transnational neighborhoods today? How has the referent for cognitive mapping changed since the late eighties? Certainly, we can remove its apocalyptic quality; the gloom of late capitalism. I am convinced, as McLuhan indicated – the world as mosaic – that cognitive mapping has turned into a visual pleasure as research. We like the noir edge. So, we update by going backward a few centuries. The map is navigable as scholarly picaresque. Consider Renaissance maps of terra incognita, of the unfindable: why in the blank corners did they need to add Patagonian giants, natives with eyes in their stomach, rhino-dragons, zebroid unicorns? (One among many, see Zerubavel 1992) What has that to do with mariners sailing the Atlantic? These chimeras were more than just icons on an interface. They were interface as fable.

Thus, mapping has always been a kind of docufable, about paramnesia, mis-rememberings, imaginaries, about slipping off the path. In that frame of mind, why is Professor Martin Dodge trying to map the Internet, to do a »killer« map? When I met Dodge in 2000, he said that the unfindability of the map was its pleasure. Maps were precise, but clinically accurate hoaxes; they were quixotic, like a mad physicist looking for donuts at the birth of the universe. So as a subset of docufable, we quickly review maps as »forgetting.« Maps are elisions; inductive journeys. We mentally »walk through« the spaces left out.

2001

Over the past year, I have been videotaped on three different occasions while walking through the Belmont Tunnel in Los Angeles. For L.A., this tunnel is fast becoming the wild wall for collective anxiety. It has been abandoned since 1958, when the subway was canceled. It runs over a mile but has been blocked more than halfway across. The Belmont Tunnel is haunted by vast and highly skilled graffiti, like cabalistic instructions inside a long grotto. On the floor, I found red filter paper from old film crews. Movie crews have shot dozens of music videos, and crime/horror films there. It is now a social imaginary for

paranoia, like a murderous panel in a graphic novel about cyber-ethnicity. But after the videos are done, the final editing of the Belmont Tunnel takes place in the wall-to-wall carpeting of a digital editing bay, the last suburb, a ludic version of white flight.

2001
Three Months Before Beginning Work on *Bleeding Through*

With Professor Stephen Mamber, I designed a three-tiered space for Los Angeles, similar to the tiers in *Metropolis* or *Blade Runner*. The highest tier shows the city grid at night from overhead, diamonds on black velvet, as it is called. The middle tier reveals places in the city where cinematic death has been featured, zones of death. The bottom tier is the netherworld, the infrastructure of sewers, concrete riverbanks. Even freeways are usually shot as if below ground, an asphalt gulch. As the key film for this code, Professor Mamber selected *He Walked by Night* (1948), about a pharmacist and serial killer played by Richard Basehart, who outwits the police by escaping through the sewers of L.A. Finally, he is trapped like a rat, like Harry Lime running through the sewers of Vienna in *The Third Man* (1949).

[Explanatory note from 2021: a kind of deep mapping was going to be used for all three, similar to Joachim Sauter's *The Invisible Shapes of Things Past* (2005; interactive layers through Berlin's history; see Sauter's webside). The L. A. mapping project was never completed. It was supposed »to resemble space as scholarly paramnesia.« That year, I went ahead with the first stages of *Bleeding Through* instead.]

2001

What lies beyond the »silent echoes,« as film historian John Bengtson calls Keaton's film locations?[3] Can the computer docufable help track echoes like that, from film to neighborhood memories, with all the neo-noir baggage avoided? Or does the computer virtualize the problem even more? In a space made more diaphanous by the global economy, forgetting a poor neighborhood feels even more natural.

3 | Movie locations in L. A. are still never sited with plaques, etc. After a movie set is torn down, it is forgotten, like the plowing after a harvest.

2020

In the nineties, Berlin was transformed for a while into a globalist hub for epic memories of the lost century. For years, the Mitte felt like a prairie. You were not sure which part of the epic story you were looking at, before 1870 or after 1945. Theories on what to do went in every possible direction; what traces to keep, which to reinscribe. There was even talk of installing huge architectural screens, to sustain and enshrine the Mitte – either as Checkpoint Charlieland or as a neoliberal petting zoo. Berlin remained the epic city of the twentieth century. There were still mortar holes in Museum Square, and a centrifuge of scars across East Berlin.

Libeskind finally gets the commission to build a museum to the memory and erasures of the Holocaust. Inside the chambers of the museum were so-called voids, to suggest the generations of Jews who never survived or were not even born. They are shafts of Piranesian light; the site of death itself. One room apparently symbolizes being dead, which, architecturally speaking, means cold and nearly blind.

November 2019
The KWI Symposium

An imaginary noir Los Angeles is combined with an imaginary Weimar Berlin, for the exhibition that accompanies the symposium on »Media, Memory and the City« at the KWI in Essen. This is set inside a vocabulary that allows the viewer to migrate from image to text to cinema, and finally to an installation space. All this together is a mode of expanded literature, more than simply of »interactivity.«

The exhibition is entitled »Urban Memory in Database Narratives: *Bleeding Through* and *The Imaginary 20th Century*.« The exhibit has four parts. One is the media novel *Bleeding Through*, from 2002/03, installed on a computer and projected onto a bare wall, to be interactively explored by visitor-users. The form was also called a database narrative, because the interfaces were so elaborated, rhythmic. It contains 1000 images, films, videos and texts. They tell a story, through archive, about Molly, an old woman living in Los Angeles, who, many decades earlier, may have murdered her second husband. The source is a docufable entitled *The Unreliable Narrator* – from my book on Los Angeles, *The History of Forgetting* (1997).

This media novel – or database narrative – is set up in layers. Each layer tells you more of the truth behind Molly's life. However, at the end, you can see that photos and cinema distract and hide the facts surrounding her story, as much as they reveal them; perhaps they distract more than they reveal, since the photos and documents are so convincing somehow.

Next to *Bleeding Through*, there is a wall of movie and production stills, with texts connected to a noir classic, *Criss Cross* (1949) that I featured in *The History of Forgetting*. I also – in my mind's eye – mentally modelled some of *Bleeding Through* on how the film came across to me, as a social realist noir fable. It was shot mostly in the downtown L. A. neighborhood of Bunker Hill, which was erased in 1961, bulldozed entirely. So it would seem to be a social document, but an unreliable narrator, in an essential way. The same question applies to *Bleeding Through*.

We look at the three men most responsible for *Criss Cross*: first, the screenwriter, Daniel Fuchs, who all but hated Los Angeles. He would not even encourage his children to play there. Instead, he would drive them to movie sets at Twentieth Century Fox on the west side, anything but the streets of this boring midwestern city, as he saw it. Fuchs wrote a famous trilogy of novels on Brooklyn. In fact, his dialogue is straight out of Brooklyn. Luckily, Burt Lancaster was from East Harlem, Dan Duryea (Slim the gangster) from White Plains in Westchester County. Only Anna – Yvonne De Carlo – Duryea's cute but evil wife, had spent much time in L. A. and somehow looked like a neighborhood girl. The director, Robert Siodmak, brilliantly evolved the UFA-style that he had developed in the late twenties. His films from the mid-forties are magnificent, like *The Killers* (1946), for example; but they are mythic German realism as much as American. In all, Siodmak directed twelve classic American film noirs, helped define the look of American noir, but returned to Germany in 1953, after a bad experience directing a comedy swashbuckler, *The Crimson Pirate* (1952). Mike Davis writes: »As Ava Gardner's biographer Lee Server pointed out, Siodmak liked to joke that he ›got out of Germany just ahead of Hitler – and out of Hollywood just ahead of CinemaScope.‹« He also recruited the cinematographer Franz Planer to ensure »a Berlin touch.« Planer was originally from Vienna, shot 130 films, mostly in the US after 1937. He also developed his technique at UFA: I have always felt that his nightclub scenography in this film could easily have been set in Berlin.

Now to the next: *The Imaginary 20th Century* is on the second screen. The production is co-directed and curated by historian Margo Bistis. This media novel or database narrative has 2,200 images, films and voice-overs. Its story covers the years 1893 to 1925. Its archive was developed by Harry Brown, who for over fifty years was hired by the oligarchs of Los Angeles to erase crimes that were embarrassing. The rhythm of the interface is as close as we can get to what Harry Brown set up, from 1917 to perhaps 1930, about his beloved niece Carrie, a woman with a checkered history. As an update of Benjamin's theories on the city[4], *Bleeding Through* also plays with what lies hidden behind mid-twentieth century modernism, as well as film locations: first, cinema and photography as forgetting – the vehicle of social imaginaries. This is shown visually through displacement, apertures chosen, as a kind of editing against the narrator. But much of the story

4 | For a reading of *Bleeding Through* and layered urban memory in the light of Walter Benjamin, see Gurr 2021, 62–78.

is hidden, perhaps by Molly herself. Also, displacement layer by layer, lapse dissolve by lapse dissolve (replacing time). Second, layers: the horizontality of culture and power in our era. Also, about displacement, erasure, alternative to montage strategies, or a montage that is sedimented, rather than segmented. Third, *The Imaginary 20th Century* (2005–2016; and again 2021, as a novel that never ends): the tale is set historically in 1893–1925 (interactive website with a print novel, and a short film in production).

Since much of this story deals with espionage set against urban realities, we are shown what lies hidden behind the global industrial take-off after 1880. Progress blows off course between 1898–1950: Harry Brown's being hired to erase crimes embarrassing to the oligarchs of Los Angeles also draws him steadily into capitalist politics in Latin America, the Philippines, New York, and both world wars. But a comic picaresque is all that Harry left us, in the form of a vast, secretive archive. He stored it in a building on his estate and mechanized its hundreds of files like a vast dry-cleaning shop. As its most crucial layer, Harry centers the many documents and illustrations around his lifelong obsessions about his splendid, erratic niece. All these layers and doubles are meant to hide his espionage (always available, in case his enemies try to get him). In this archival »docufable,« fact and fiction split off and return. First, Harry often says that espionage is a kind of seduction. And considering the misadventures of his niece, surely seduction was a form of espionage. Second, the picaresque: much of Harry's archive traces the comic mistakes in the American struggle to match the imperialist hegemony of Europe. As in all picaresque tales, rogues and swindlers operate at the center (as in *Bleeding Through*). Harry liked to keep track, week by week, how the world was getting systematically worse; despite the myth of progress after 1900. His Gilded Age picaresque matches the noir caricature in Molly's version of Los Angeles, from 1920 to 1965. Third, clearly, the espionage/seduction formula applies to the Internet, like hacking and phishing in 2015 (when some of *The Imaginary 20th Century* was written); and like the weaponizing of social networks and digital analytics today. All historical fiction is an allegory of the present. Fourth, these two media novels are both double objects, with books and interfaces as companions telling different versions of the same tale. *The Imaginary 20th Century* is very elaborate in that respect. You would have to take the double journey through Carrie's archive and the print novel, and scholarly essays. But a new edition of *Bleeding Through* may be underway, which considerably widens its crossovers as well. As Margo says, the double object generates »gaps as well as trails and threads.« We wrote this together: »Readers and viewers make the transit from text to image and back again, from narrative hooks in the story, to the spaces between fiction and non-fiction, collective memory and incomplete versions of the modern.« Finally, this incompleteness is very much how computer-driven storytelling often works (as I have discovered after many experiments over the years). Artists and writers have not quite figured out how best to use story interfaces, beyond games.

Another point to be made here: computer programming resembles parasites at work, like pirates, rogues, liars, from 1910 and 2019; and like pirates in the age of mercantilism, i. e. the early eighteenth century. A feudo-mercantilist condition has taken over the world economy, for now (in 2021, the pattern reversed, after the pandemic). We find parallels between the risk economy of 1700 (especially in trade across Asia), the risk economy after 1870 (Western imperialism), and finally, the risk economy identified with globalization after 1973.

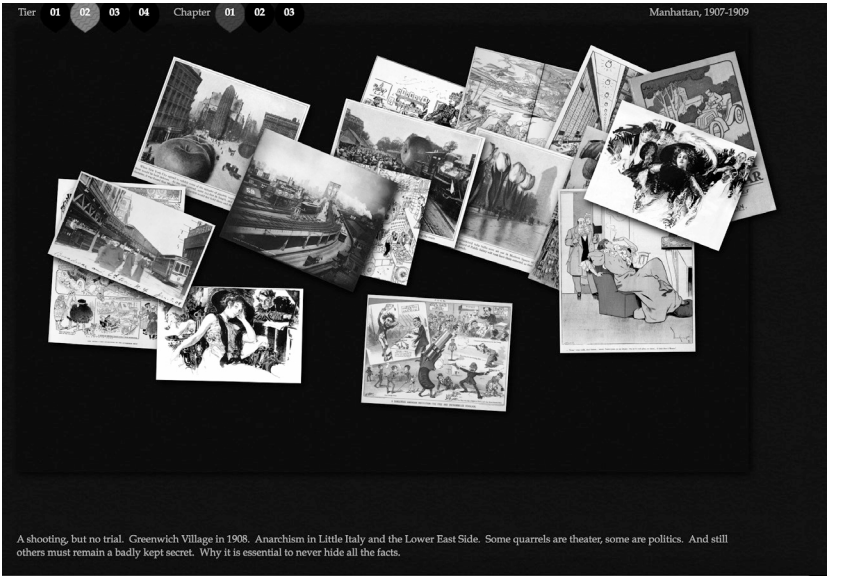
For example, in *The Imaginary 20th Century*, there are multiple narrators to widen the slender line between fact and fiction. Never before has speed – as a medium – made us so slow to respond; in spite of dramatic events (soon to be the end of Trump, the arrival of the pandemic, then constitutional struggles afterward). Each of the two novels is designed to excavate what we refuse to see in the present. (As I explain in my next book: we live in the moment, but almost never in the present. Novels pretend that this is possible.) In 1920 in New York, caricaturists sometimes called this phenomenon »the worm's-eye view.« What an interactive archive leaves out conspicuously makes a mental picture. This picture is like the aperture of a camera, either wider or narrower, etc. The computer adds a kind of entropy to the engine, despite the speed. How then to capture the same irony, where the archive seems to be random but still contains a hidden unbreachable story; like money stores in a tax haven. Or like the contours of fiction that we love. However, computer-driven characters tend to be flatter than in print novels; yet the »digital« world they inhabit is so layered; as if the worlds were the character. For example: bleeds of time.

Fig. 1

Bleeding Through, in particular, uses layers, as in photo bleeds, where an old photograph morphs into a more recent image taken of the same site and from the same angle, sometimes with entirely new buildings (cf. Fig. 1); in tiers as

chapter groupings; curated image assemblages can also be photos *versus* illustration, *versus* cinema, *versus* literary texts, and cut-out articles. The sum of these is closer to collage, even montage (certainly closer to what Benjamin meant). But today, the layers are more granulated, like data itself. *The Imaginary 20th Century* is more like a comic travel novel, with many evaporated spaces between, images that cross many continents and »lost worlds.« It was invented as an inversion of *Bleeding Through*, which stays within three square miles in Los Angeles. Both tales are like crime novels that lose interest in the crime itself, because the immersion, the scholarly world-building, hides so much more. First, the experience is viewer enhanced, highlighting how the »read« feels to the viewer: in effect, there are two narrators: one is unreliable, as in picaresque – on behalf of the reader.

Fig. 2



The other is a multiple narrator speaking for the characters, which is often at war with their facts. Telling any version of the whole truth is unmistakably against the illogic of the world itself. Second, since we are mostly witnesses after the crime takes place, the future can only be told in reverse. What is more, this future tends to age faster than the present. The viewer finds it impossible to live thoroughly inside Molly's present, or Harry/Carrie's. A contrapuntal present appears, but we only experience it partially. The artifacts within the archive, as another layer, are contrapuntal in that sense (in ironic, strangely parallel collision). They were specifically chosen to feel »everyday,« like clippings in someone's drawer. Harry wanted

his archive to conceal, and yet seem quite open. He felt, particularly due to his strange profession, that underlying causes of events reach the public only in flashes. The public senses them as foreboding. The public wants unreliable narrators to deliver this foreboding, to be a comfort more than a jeremiad. The unreliable narrator has a dark sense of humor. We need that quasi-fictive voice, Huck Finn's, to »unguide« us through the clouds of unknowing. They must remind us how ordinary the drama of our lives may be, even while the roof caves in.

This mode of literature is universal. It is really how all fiction must be told. But our two examples exist in crossover, as the digital overlapping print (cf. Fig. 2). This offers new grammatical options, as far as unreliable narrators go, and, spaces between the layers of the present. The print version operates in counterpoint to the media narrative. The print novella for *Bleeding Through* exists as an aporia – that which can never begin. *The Imaginary 20th Century* is a *wunderroman*, a story like a river that never has to end. The new digital capitalist world of commodities plays those kinds of narrative tricks on us. So we may as well invent forms in revenge.

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