8. Absences, Scripted Spaces and the Urban Imaginary: Unlikely Models for the City in the Twenty-First Century

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In Los Angeles, one can drive two hundred years a day. The slums remain – and will remain – in the perverse post-1960 twentieth century, like a misspent youth, a misspent modernism. The dingbat, stucco box, circa 1965, does not turn to slum gracefully, not like the brownstones and Victorians did; it simply erodes past the stucco down to the chicken wire. In the downtown area, the twentieth century is easy to find; it is a cordon in-sanitaire, like the death zone between the walls of eighties Berlin. The Growth Coalition [1961–85], a failed downtown plan for the most part, has left a ring of no growth around downtown itself. There is barely housing left standing on many streets west of downtown, and a prairie of neglect and confusion around the Belmont Learning Center, the ruin of a $200 million high school that cannot be completed, simply gathers dust.

In South Central, which is now increasingly Latino, much more multi-racial, the downward spiral continues. Erosion has not stopped [it accelerated with de-industrialisation after 1975]. In the storefronts, evangelical churches, the pawn shops, the lack of 'globalised amenities', there is a sense that de-industrialisation has left an absence from the last century. As a classic example, the Goodyear plant was turned into a flea market. Also, in the east and central San Fernando Valley, above Victory Boulevard, the decay left by 1970 is worsening.

Even LA as the city of circulation is grinding to a halt. Each year, on average, each freeway adds a minute of travel, particularly when it

passes the wealthy districts [the twenty-first century]. Crawling along at ten miles an hour leaves more free time to witness what remains of impoverished LA, so little improved since 1970. In fact, I often advise drivers to avoid traffic by driving through poverty. Traffic runs faster through the twentieth century. Along streets like Santa Monica Boulevard or Melrose, you can see the line between the centuries: the overdressed northern Italian restaurants, and the Starbucks, sure signs of traffic crawl ahead. The infrastructure of the twenty-first century is too fragile to handle globalised commerce.

At the same time, the nostalgia for twentieth-century LA increases, for a misremembering of its modernism. In the very expensive hills north of the basin, below the San Fernando Valley, a few well-placed real estate agents specialise in selling houses by Neutra, Soriano, Lautner, Koenig, by the Case Study architects [now very, very pricey and momentous]. Wealthy house hunters even arrive fore-armed, with pictures. They carry the twentieth century under their arms, photos by Julius Shulman circa 1950. They ask for a list of houses where they can live inside those photographs, inside the stylised lighting and ironic poses.

Much of the twentieth century may be in trouble, but it flourishes as a photo-literal memory. Certainly, the noir memory of 1950s poverty is flourishing. Dozens of film companies have turned downtown LA into a back lot of sorts. Buildings on Broadway, on Spring have for-lease signs on the second floor: "available for movies". The twentieth century as fetish, popularized by *Blade Runner* in the eighties [and perhaps fifty other films], has now become the standard memory of the city of the future as slum. Thus, the noir twentieth century is now an architecture of paranoia, a neo-gothic revival.

But now, after September 11, the next century finally has revealed itself. Its ironies suggest a future that is much more fragile, vulnerable, certainly to Americans. It will not be camouflaged by Prada stores and Vegasised and Disneyfied shopping cities. Beyond the 'visible' twenty-first century, in the citadels of power and poverty alike, the future looks much more feudalised, more balkanised and paranoic than many had imagined. We can now begin to excavate beyond the visible. Or should I say: layers from below have become much more visible indeed. They

make one fact unmistakable – that the post-1989 world abandoned the twentieth century from both ends. It returned to a neo-Victorianism, even a late fundamentalist, paranoic medievalism. It slipped into a culture that precedes the Enlightenment, an Electronic Baroque, a new flamboyant [and repressive] catholicity dominated by corrupt media giants like News Corp [Rupert Murdoch], AOL Time-Warner, GE/NBC, Vivendi, Bertelsmann, Microsoft.

So we face a reasonably grim moment, compared with the glamour of the consumerati during the nineties. Clearly, that glamour will continue, but more in the spirit of Catholic fortifications in Moorish Spain in the fourteenth century. A vast ethnographic divide will continue to separate the centuries. And yet, without media, Osama bin Laden would not be widely known at all. He only exists on tape essentially, just as George W. Bush does, carefully edited moments, for global media.

In short, the global civilisation has begun to settle in. We see its monuments more clearly, its glitter, its brutality. Thus, we as critics, architects, scholars, urban specialists, can outline its features more inventively, more playfully. We have to humanise the furtive idiocy of it, speak honestly. This is a world that has more than lost its way. It is the best and the worst of all possible worlds, dominated by scripted spaces and social imaginaries inside a level of surveillance, top-heavy economic fragility and media feudalism that rivals the medieval papacy and the great caliphates. And yet, its possibilities are extraordinary. The next decade promises to be crucial. The challenges are breathtaking. Let me outline a few of our options, give a sense of how I imagine we can humanise them. Since I write so often about collective memory, erasures, and now also on simulation, I will concentrate on the city as imaginary, where two centuries are only a few stoplights away from each other:

Mature Suburbs and the Flaneur

Despite the lingering importance of the great metropolis, like New York, Berlin, London, Tokyo, Mexico City, LA, even what seems like a return to

the urban core in these cities, the next century will not be dominated by urban centres – and yet it may visibly appear to be. Instead, the post-war suburbs have matured, and are now colonising the urban core. And tourism essentially suburbanises as well. Thus, residents are not necessarily returning to the buzz of the twentieth-century inner city. They are bringing the suburbs back downtown.

Thus, we are asked to become tourists in our own city. It is the victory of the *boulevards* over the *quartiers*. The boulevards were always about circulation and in-migration, like suburbs before the fact. The neighbourhoods off the boulevards were essential for urban life; and those will be very difficult to restore, certainly not essential to a suburb. I am not convinced that we, as an urban civilisation, even remember clearly what Paris in 1910, Vienna in 1900, Berlin in 1925, New York in 1950 were actually like, from day to day, in a quotidian sense, not simply along the boulevards.

Once again, we may remember more by way of photography. The photo memory concentrates more on crowds jammed at an intersection, at rush hour, at the theatre hour, crowds of children opening the hydrants for the Fourth of July, crowds stuffed into sweatshops, then jamming the street when the factory closed for the day. Something that 'looks' like these crowds can be reinvented, as a walk through an outdoor mall. But if you look more carefully at the photos, there is a difference. The mass of people on a Parisian street, or on Michigan Avenue in Chicago – circa 1900 – are not following a duck-imprinted path. They are milling. They are trying to get off the crowded boulevard as quickly as possible, to enter the part of the city they know more intimately, the cluster of streets where they spend 90% of their free time, the microclimates that are the heart of urban life. When they die, the boulevards fail.

We should remember that flaneurs were dawdlers on the boulevards – no direction, no plan. Flaneur was a derogatory term in nineteenth-century Paris. In illustrations, flaneurs are idlers in a daze; they are not deeply aware of what spins around them. They are walking as if in a state of hibernation – thus Baudelaire's ironic, decadent praise for the flaneur. We would do well to not recreate our fantasy misrememberings of the

flaneur. Their world was reinvented as 'ruin' by Walter Benjamin. Now the flaneur is a consumer hibernating between purchases, an aesthete drifting through the streets. But is this another symptom of our malaise more than Baudelaire's ennui?

In a hundred other ways, cinema, television, the Internet reinforce that sense of walking in our sleep; or is it the sleep of reason, as we pretend that cities were simply about drift and shopping. On the other hand, the advanced, metropolitanised suburb clearly has matured considerably. I have watched the Media Centre area of Burbank evolve since it was first overhauled in 1989, around the time that Old Pasadena emerged, as well as the newly remodelled Santa Monica Promenade. These are now essentially the downtown centres, not only for suburban areas but for hundreds of thousands of people. Burbank calls itself "the Media Centre of the World", and it may be at that: home to Disney, Warner Brothers, NBC and over 700 media companies, the heartland for over $2 billion of media business annually in the eastern end of the San Fernando Boulevard. Burbank now hires far more than its population [100,316]. It is considerably beyond the bedroom community. I can see businesses chains from centres like Burbank and Old Pasadena filter through the Basin urban core.

Now let us translate this into social imaginaries, places that never existed but are remembered anyway:

Mediated Cities

As if at a studio in Burbank, an imaginary city is assembled by a team of movie researchers to identify how a 'mediated' city looks in 2002. The facts of 2002 have little relevance here, nothing of the mature suburb in the myth. Only the industrial city can serve as legend. The team studies hundreds of films, made from 1926 onwards, beginning with Lang's *Metropolis* and Vidor's *The Crowd*. In the first four hundred examples, two imaginary urban plans [topologies] reappear the most often:

1. the metropolis as vertical, like a layer cake, or sedimentary rock, more suitable for epic stories, for allegories like *Blade Runner*, *Fifth Element*, *Akira*;

2. the city as horizontal, like the circulation of the crowd, or the chase to murder – more deep focus tracking, like concentric rings running sideways. This is clearly more suitable for films noirs.

During the noir film era, from about 1944 to 1958, the horizontal imaginary city evolves into a complex grammar. That grammar owes a lot to the way New York is misremembered in Los Angeles [just as Lang's Metropolis is New York misremembered in Berlin]. During the twenties, LA/NY appears on New York streets at LA movie-studio lots. By the sixties, it has been twisted into hundreds of Expressionist variations. The central twist are its 'zones of death', locations where poverty and crime coexist under low key lighting, grim tracking shots and low ceilings. As the other side of the coin, wealthy and ruthless people hover above these zones of death, on hill sides, like predators.

By 2002, this contrast between zones of death and hillside views [the predators, what I call "grasshoppers hovering, about to attack"] is the skyline at night. To murder someone properly on film, you should have at least one shot of the grasshopper from the west of downtown. You also should descend like Dante from the hillside ["diamonds on black velvet"] to the circles of hell, as in the film *Mulholland Drive*.

Noir Broadcast News as Urban Planning

This noir grammar has become the standard way for broadcast media to dis-report the news, to generate a highly conservative, fundamentally reactionary vision of the world that finally covered up key information about the presidential election of 2000, the Enron scandal, the War on Terrorism, the anthrax attacks, Homeland Rule. But underneath the radar – that nasty phrase – we peek into another kind of madness: the city and the public space as it really is. What we see is outside the frame of the cinematic city. Outside the frame is the fact itself, from the real

sociology of cities like Los Angeles or Berlin, to the price that Americans are about to pay fiscally and politically for this new kind of war.

Of course, noir reportage has always been a mode of distraction. Lately, I have been researching movie clippings of murders in 1959, about amnesiacs screaming for help, and a trend toward decapitated women victims – very much like hard-boiled fiction, or Film Noir. Now that distraction has become national presidential policy, and CNN, Fox, CNBC policy as well, on behalf of global media. Blind faith is our new credo.

So 2002 shows us a noir scenography as our national vision. We have extended this noir staging into national obsession with surveillance as well, evident earlier on survival shows, on the Web, on talk shows of all sorts. But now it is the credo at airports and office towers.

One wonders how this architecture of paranoia will be reflected in the scripted spaces of the future. Will themed streets be monitored like warehouses? Clearly, the borderless, globalised heroic era of unrestricted capitalism simply will not work, even for global corporations. We are witnessing the end of the comfort zone, certainly in the United States. And of course, it is not the fear of terrorism that frightens me the most; it is the emergence of American feudalism.

After all, the cinematic city often has suggested a dissolving identity, particularly in films like *The Matrix* or *Dark City*, about cyborgs and cybots without any unconscious at all, the post-Freudian, even post-Lacanian, and post-Deleuzian world, where no form of dialectical experience can survive. It is like a mental and emotional nuclear winter, so aptly expressed by directors like Lynch, but so desperately limited, so vacated, simply atmospheric nightmare without redemption, or even self-discovery. You struggle in the cinematic imaginary of the global city where you have no memory of your own, have no identity worth considering, have no inner thoughts that come from you directly.

That is the point of absence for us, where studies on alienation in the suburbanised and touristed urban core should respond. This non-dialectical cinematic city [very much the model that urban planning wants to redeem, and recover in many ways] has lost its connections to political and sociological 'realities'. It is mostly news as distraction, reality TV as

reality talk shows, the recap endlessly repeating, like an airplane unable to land.

Bleeding Through: Layers of Los Angeles

I am currently in the midst of trying to engage these issues inside a cinematic novel/archive entitled *Bleeding Through: Layers of Los Angeles, 1920–86*. It will premier as a DVD-ROM and book at Future Cinema, a show curated by Jeffrey Shaw at Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie [ZKM] in autumn 2002. A team of very gifted designers are deeply immersed in the project with me, led by Rosemary Comella at the USC/Annenberg Labyrinth project [who are co-producing *Bleeding Through*], and by Andreas Kratky [ZKM]. We are trying to imagine how to take this 'mediafied' city into a novelistic practice reminiscent of Balzac, but utterly consistent with the computer, with how collective forgetting takes place in cities as of 2002, with database as cinema, with the search function as a picaresque, covering 66 years of a fictional woman's life; and the possible murder of her second husband.

At the same time, this woman [Molly] lived inside the most famous 'zone of death' for noir cinematic murder – without ever seeing any of the movies. A researcher attached to our team has located dozens, if not hundreds of murders on film, all of them taking place on locations within the narrow three square miles where Molly spent her life. We are going through hundreds of photographs of the streets where Molly walked, interviewing many people who might have passed her in the street [including photographer Julius Shulman, who spent his boyhood nearby].

I want the erasures, the absences made by film to be self-evident. The cine-city that has grown in LA since the twenties, as if in a film lab, has now become the model for many urban plans: for the new promenade planned downtown, south of the Gehry Disney Symphony Hall, for the Hollywood and Highland project where the Oscars will show, for most of the metro [subway] stations that have been built, like movie sets, for the ambience of Old Pasadena, for West Hollywood's latest facelift, for the new 'artist' district on the industrial bowery near Main Street in LA.

This is strange for a city that absolutely isolated the movies and media from urban planning for eighty years [1912–1992]. There is practically no evidence that the freeways, or any aspect of urban planning or policy, took the movies into account all that much, or at all. There is even more evidence of deep resentment toward an industry filled with outsiders, 'wild' women, New York money as Jews – not a formula that Protestant leaders in LA felt comfortable with. But now, the movie industry is the model [even a brand] for an urban imaginary in LA planning that links news, cinema, the Internet and the scripted space of the entertainment economy. Indeed, the era of burbankising Los Angeles has arrived, with the integration of the media city with the mediafied space, as literally, as totally as industrial cities were once linked to factories.

Certainly until September 11, 2001, this mediafied city seemed magical. Its scripted [or themed] spaces were cathedral monuments to the 'new, improved' class structure brought on by de-industrialisation, post-colonial mis-investments, transnational economic blocs, and digital, cybernetic controls, along with overfed NASDAQ [e-business] monsters, and mega-merger super corporations. They were the realisation of all that NATO had promised before the wall went down, more like *arc de triomphes* than pharaonic pyramids.

Now that glow is gone [though the monuments are still there, and many more on the way, up to a hundred more museums in construction or retrofit, as I write this]. Will the easy-listening mood of these ergonomic, themed mega-structures continue? The myths of uncontrolled global capitalism have been challenged. A new wave of government controls are about to be added in the US, mostly at airports and at the borders, but also at oil drilling sites, for 401K pension plans [at companies like Enron], for the mail, for social security and so on. Even the Bush administration, so committed to no oversight at all by government on business, has to respond, particularly since the Vice President in particular may be compromised by talks he held with Enron.

The instantaneous, anonymous experience – whistling through airports, freeways, the Internet – is indeed over. And with that, these monuments, and the imaginary cities they respond to, take on a more ferocious aspect. They are more clearly honouring the separation of the

classes. They look even more like the twenty-first century walking backward like a crab, to fortified cities of the seventeenth century. We finally realise as a civilisation that the barbarian, noir city – where poverty is isolated, outside the themed urban/suburban space – is not at all another century. It is the true face of our own decay and confusion, our economic fragility, our new modes of alienation.

Is it true that the global economy has widened the gulf between rich and poor to levels that resemble the fifteenth century? Have we truly slipped to centuries before the Enlightenment? Certainly we have in Afghanistan. The new lessons are clear enough: The transparencies of the nineties – that globalised fetish for 'smart' design – looks flat suddenly, compared to the alienated paradoxes of our civilisation in 2002. The last few years have shifted the socio-cultural agenda, despite all the controls exercised by global media and WTO and Bushist manipulation. Despite how conservative the moment looks, new modes of engagement are inevitable, in urban planning, and hopefully in many areas of the culture. We may indeed have to confront the urban core as more than the next step for mature suburbanisation. We may finally understand how to drive two hundred years a day, in architectonic work across the media and across the street.