15. The Sim Future of the Cinematic City

Nineteenth-century panoramas often staged local journeys through the great cities of the world. In much the same way, magic lanterns projected foreign streets on the wall, while lecturers guided the audience on a trip indoors. At least six copies of Venice were built between 1850 and 1910, particularly the Venices in Vienna and Los Angeles. At the Paris Exposition of 1900, illustrator Albert Robida installed an "Old Paris" off the Seine—the year 1450 built from scratch and fully dressed on a street 1,000 meters long. Robida also wrote and illustrated café science fiction about things to come, three volumes on "the imaginary twentieth century" He envisioned fluffy bourgeois ladies on animal-shaped airships cruising above a sky-high Paris. To fill the afternoons, they talk into massive telephonoscopes (telephones with video), watch TV news, and operate computer play stations before the fact. Like the decorative ladies of fashion that Robida illustrated for *La Vie Parisienne*, they pose in isolation away from noisy streets. Their feet rarely touch the pavement.

For an era new to arc lighting, speedy trains, and the telephone, Robida offered a dual fantasy. He imagined a future dominated by entertainment media, and built a future-past dominated by stylized medievalisms. Both were strangely similar, about escape from the hubbub. They captured the principle of "Tour du Monde," as one busy panorama declared, borrowing a phrase from a popular illustrated magazine—to travel in your mind without ever leaving. This was *armchair tourism*, a vogue that began during the Crimean War, then took off after 1855, in popular wood engravings for dozens of illustrated magazines in Europe and the United States, and in American Currier and Ives lithographs, in stereoptic (3-D) photos; botanical gardens, zoos, carny attractions, dime museums, world's fairs.

Armchair tourism produced hundreds of precursors to the movie set in the city. Gustave Doré's densely packed wood engravings for a travel book on *London* (1871, text by Blanchard Jerrold) may be the most influential armchair

imaginary of these. *Doré's London* set the standard for how movies staged Victorian London for over a hundred years; much the way that Piranesi's engravings are still the most popular tourist versions of ancient and Baroque Rome. In 1926, Doré's version of an exercise yard at Newgate Prison reappears as a factory tunnel inside *Metropolis*. In 1948, David Lean relied on *Doré's London* almost exclusively as background research for the movie *Oliver Twist*. Of course, Doré was never much of an anthropologist. He prided himself on always drawing places from memory never sketching on location. Occasionally a bridge from his childhood in Strasbourg shows up along the Thames; or a London fishmonger looks suspiciously French. Charles Dickens even took the same brief police tour that Doré did, to the same opium parlors in London, as research for *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

Today, location scouts for the movies are generally no more thorough than that. Some buildings in Los Angeles have been reused for as many as five hundred movies and TV episodes. Movie locations simply fulfill the director's fantasy. And now with digital postproduction, just the bare bones of that fantasy is enough. The rest can be added like putty, until every city becomes Venice; or even one of those streets on the moon that Victorians kept seeing in their telescopes.

Certainly, the movies continued what armchair tourism began. Movies remodel Victorian slums into noir cities circa 1950. As fantasy, both smell of cheap greed and perdition. Sherlock Holmes' London resembles novelist David Goodis's New York, written sixty years later. Only the oral position of Holmes is different. The filth stays about the same. Holmes needs to escape from this filth, return to his rooms despondently; Goodis's characters like to swim in it. In the Holmes story *The Sign of the Four*, the city is both a labyrinth and a monster on the same page, with its "monster tentacles … throwing out in the country:[1] The masque aestheticizes the city: Baroque theater stages the city: And painters evoke the city. But probably no medium has invaded the collective imaginary of what is urban the way that cinema has. Once the dark Gotham of Frank Miller's trend-setting graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns*[2] found its way into film, the imago (fierce internal image) seemed to be irrevocable.

Imago

After thousands of movies over the past eighty years, we carry inside us a combined mental picture of an imaginary American city. It is a city of crowds, during an industrial era, once upon a time between 1925 and 1960—a cinematic city.[3] Its details remain intensely vivid for audiences around the world, now probably more than ever. Its streets are mostly made of brick. Its secrets come to life at night. The camera can move through it in one of three ways:[4]

- A tracking shot inside a messy labyrinth[5] of streets.
- An overhead shot above a very geometric, controlled cityscape, sealed off as if by membrane.[6]
- A crane shot that rises up and down, like an elevator. It climbs toward the windows of fancy penthouses. It drops below the street, into the depths of poverty. Along the way, it crosses horizontal layers. Each layer has been isolated by social class, from the powerful up top, to the weak down below.

In Orlando, copies of movie sets of the city have been remade for theme park events. False brownstones and false Brooklyn Bridges serve as papier-mâché skylines. The sum effect looks indelible because it never existed, except as a phantom, a movie set—at casinos like New York/New York,[7] themed spaces like the New Times Square in New York, cine-malls like the Hollywood at Highland in L.A.; and on computer systems of all kinds, cities of bits, trans-architecture, games.

Since 1997, with the game version of *Blade Runner*, we find dozens of "adventure noirs," clearly featuring the cinematic city. For example*: Mafia: City of Lost Heaven*; *Dead to Rights*; *Discworld Noir*; *Grim Fandango*; *Nightshade*; *Mean Streets*; *The Pandora Directive*; *Hell*; *Hell Cab*; and, of course, *Max Payne*, "a Hong Kong-action-meets-film-noir detective story."[8] The details usually involve a detective, loose women, drugs, and bad lighting outdoors. Or in a cozier version, at New York/New York casino, double-hung windows are filled with Manhattan junk. Or in the movie *Spider-Man*, Spidey loops across the canyons of Manhattan. Or simply the alienation of the crowd: an amnionic light across the sidewalk at night, pointing toward a skyline dressed for murder.

These noir touches spark fond memories about poverty and urban chaos. The memories then are turned into miracles of synergy. They are marketed from film to computers to themed spaces. They fit the neoconservative corporate model of the inner city as hell, a racially unfit place: Better to clear out when

labor cogs go up. They are a global "*erehwon*" ("nowhere" spelled backward),[9] a Gotham for the ages—and yet, of no age at all—a powerful grammar for designers across media, from architectural space to cyberspace. And now with the bombing of the World Trade Center, this cinematic city becomes even more spectral, almost sacred; and certainly more traumatic.

This cinematic city makes for ghoulish redundancy in the arts. A good noir murder reeks with nostalgia and exoticism. Its aesthetic rules are also extremely rigid; it tends to strangle experimentation. When I run workshops on how to try something fresh with cinematic L.A., students are amazed by how many filmmakers worship noir as social realism, without questioning. In 1996, during a workshop on how movies misrepresent the L.A. police, two young men in the front row kept weighing in with useful insights, scribbling notes like court reporters. Afterward, they ran up to thank me. I had clarified a truth that they had always suspected: they now understood why movies never lie about cops. What? Didn't my lecture stress exactly the opposite? They looked at me condescendingly. One answered: "Well, we're screenwriters. This has to be the truth."

I felt as if I were trying to deprogram cultists. All my old new-lefty complaints had evaporated. One way or another, they were certain that movies delivered the truth about poverty through crime stories. Then they explained how this truth operated: Hollywood movies have to be fun. This fun makes them true. That's the only truth you can afford, if you want to keep working in the film business.

I made a hex sign with my fingers, and cheerfully walked on. I occasionally wonder if they are still in the industry today. But their story matches dozens of other encounters. The cinematic city lets a good crime go a long, long way.

As I often remind students, our world may not be deep, but it is definitely shallow and wide. A threshold has been passed. We have replaced public memory with the media. This was already predicted in the twenties, in Weimar criticism of the cinematic city in Berlin (where it was first built). In an advertising brochure for *Der Strasse* (1922), an imaginary viewer witnesses the erasure of Berlin by movies. He watches crews shooting inside a vast indoor set, a copy of Berlin streets (designed by Ludwig Meidner). Once the cameras start rolling, urban reality vanishes. "Forgotten are the gawking onlookers behind the barbed wire fence. Forgotten is the lit clock of the Steiglitz hall tower. Forgotten is Berlin's dark silhouette, even the annoying apparatus of the set."[10]

Instead, "the radiant facade city" takes over. It is just as noisy and crowded as the actual Berlin, but magically empty at the same time. "I am no longer me," he writes. "Instead, I am a medium who staggers hypnotized through the unchained chaos of the street." The spiraling action inside the set utterly hypnotizes him. He feels almost sexually aroused by the absence that is present, by the glamour; until finally the light of the floodlights is put out and the nocturnal apparition fades before the reality of the starry night."

That is a twenties version of shallow and wide, the erasure of expressionist intentions by the sheer, immersive artifice of the movie set. Siegfried Kracauer, of course, goes even further, by comparing this cinematic city to "mass ornament."[11]

In recent decades, the cinematic city has indeed gone far and wide, to a CG re-creation of a slum on Mars in *Total Recall*. Or it has gone microscopically wide, to the faint blue ignition when a synapse burns a memory inside your head (*The Cell*, *The Matrix*, etc.). Inside the cinematic sim-city, characters don't need an interior life. They move along like genetically engineered fruit with no flavor, but the shelf life of a doorknob.

Then, by the third act, this cinematic city goes to the dogs. It surrenders to cyborgs or grizzled lunatics with patches over one eye. The social pathology is much the same as noir classics of the fifties; or at least noir graphic novels since the seventies. There are still no safe neighborhoods, no domestic normalcy, except in colonies that escape to the bush in *Mad Max* films. Meanwhile, the overheads of the city at night are still there, as in the fifties. Now, instead of "diamonds on black velvet," it suggests fascism as feudalism, the neighborhood constantly under surveillance.

Neo-noir, and the city it requires, are Greek theater without an unconscious. All urban realities that are not scented with paranoia tend to be painted out, in order to make revenge and catharsis legible. That makes for rousing stories, but what if this paranoid style of erasure became normal? This noir cine-city is a global brand that helps keep the film industry roaring along. Its banal high concepts reinforce an imago; and this imago makes reactionary values very legible. This can be terrifying for a critic. In my DVD-ROM database novel, *Bleeding Through* (2003), I try to parody the sheer silliness of it. But frankly, many of us love a good imaginary murder on a dark street (I delivered over fifty actual murders in Bleeding Through). But that is still fantasy allegory; a *grottesche*. Beyond the fantasy lies the problem, that global marketing ignores neighborhoods and urban niches; and simply exoticizes poverty. Local

color still sells tickets; and that is what those two screenwriters were probably warning me.

Indeed, as a film grammar, this cinematic city is a magnificent edifice. Its noir cuteness is sweet as well as addictive—the flash editing, the epic chases, even its stock characters: the gangster boss and his schizophrenic brother; their long-suffering wives; the nervous bookkeeper who takes a bullet through his eye (gruesome) at the beginning of the third act. And the young hunk who is born again after being stomped by psychotic hoodlums. Down these dark streets, as Raymond Chandler wrote fifty years ago.[12]

In that essay ("The Simple Art of Murder"), Chandler left the impression that he was capturing the social realist fragrance of Los Angeles. At the same time, in letters, he apologized to a detective agency that he was simply inventing his crime world as he went along. Like many of the architects of cinematic L.A., he loved the truths of its untruths. But the best way to lie is with the truth. A little realist claptrap makes for pathologically great murders. So, in balance, complaints aside, I pay my respects to the cinematic city. It clearly deserves (and commands) respect. But what does it say about our fragile future?

> Not in the hidden interior—right in the middle of the street the unnoticed, the improbable is gathered and transformed, until it begins to shine, for everyone a consolation.
> —Siegfried Kracauer (1930)[13]

> Constructed space is … not simply the result of … its architectonic or urban references, but also the result of a sudden proliferation, an incessant multiplying of special effects, which, with consciousness over time and distance, affects perception of the environment.
> —Paul Virilio[14]

Five Thousdand New Yorks

As of 2003 surely, the imago of Manhattan is increasingly "white, wealthy and walled in," to use the late-1970s expression. That is not to say that lower Manhattan still does not have immense canyons of public housing, or that above 110th Street, despite "upgrading," there are not large expanses of warehouses, or streets where many windows show nothing but cardboard boxes. I am speaking of Manhattan as a collective imaginary. It has lost some of its epic

meaning for the twentieth century; the frantic bustle and layered chaos, like Dante's rings into Hell's Kitchen.

When Fritz Lang visited Manhattan in 1924, he saw it as cinema, a "beacon of beauty strong enough to be the centerpiece of a film." Ironically enough, he described two films at once—*Metropolis*, soon to be initiated, and most prophetically, its descendant, *Blade Runner*: Lang was particularly struck by New York at night: the red-and-blue 'tumult on the street enclosed by "screaming green." He saw it in layers. Spiraling lights from the street drew the eye above the cars, above the elevated trains, toward skyscrapers in blue and gold. But even higher still were "advertisements surpassing the stars with their light.[15]

Much the same filmic obsession about Manhattan compelled movie studios in Los Angeles to build "New York Streets" at the same time (Paramount /IMO, MGM, Warner's, Universal, Pox). It was possible to shoot in L.A., and make it look like anytown USA, but the studios needed Manhattan's imagery. This Gotham effect became even more important once sound came in. During the thirties, films could not be shot on L.A. streets any longer. To control the sound, they had to be shot indoors, for the most part. Thus an L.A./Manhattan became much more complex and, very soon, emblematic throughout the world.

But these New York "streets" were not enough. They were usually no more than twenty facades made of board and stucco. The cinematic city required more. You added an outdoor establishing shot of New York, Chicago, London, Paris, to match the wonderful hyperbolic dialogue and brittle melodrama. Indoors, sound stages were modeled on tenements, as in Warner's film *Dead End* (1937). Then effects compositing was added, not just swatting at airplanes in *King Kong*, but in dozens of tricks with urban panorama. Many skyscrapers were *imagined* in movies before they were actually built (e.g., *Things to Come*, 1936). Skylines were invented as miniatures, glass mattes, moving mattes. Harbors were moored indoors, through rear projection.

The result was convincing, but like the advertising brochure for *Der Strasse*, wonderfully fake. It was a highly theatricalized Manhattan, a Mannerist *teatro olimpico*, a world in a bottle. I am convinced that Depression audiences found these deodorized tenement streets oddly satisfying, like the hand of man correcting God's mistakes.

Then, after World War II, this emblematic movie city changes yet again. It gets grittier, more darkly lit (noir). Film crews increasingly return to actual L.A. streets, for "authenticity". However, the "authentic" city still had to match the artificial one made in the camera. Noir was a hybrid of the city with the sound

stage. Only rarely were films shot "entirely on location," like Dassin's *The Naked City* (1948), borrowing from Weegee's photos. "Entirely on location" was so rare that it was announced in the opening credits of Henry Hathaway's *Kiss of Death* (1948). But the New York locations of *Kiss of Death* look strangely like the L.A. /N.Y. streets anyway, as if the visual grammar had begun to erase the insides of buildings, and the mood of the city itself.

By 2003, of course, this erasure is complete. I am convinced that mental images from cinema have displaced our collective memory of the forties American city. We have all absorbed dozens if not hundreds of noir classics. Even by 1960, at the end of the first noir era, these classics were a very false, but thoroughly sexy, record of how inner cities had crumbled. But in fact, much of the inner city was *not* crumbling by 1960. Many downtown neighborhoods were poor, clearly run down, but very stable. It was during the sixties that the crisis struck hardest. Bulldozings and middle-class flight, along with distressed in-migrations and racist slum clearance crucified many poor neighborhoods, as the rebellions of 1965 to 1968 show (in Watts, Newark, Detroit, etc.). We have internalized a fantasy about fifties slums that generally ignores what actually took place. But what a fantasy, like Dante, Homer, and Rembrandt on a binge together. Hollywood had standardized the look of urban decay: a fully disposable, all-purpose Manhattan. This epic city, based on the three principles that I mention on the first page, could be tailored to every continent and every climate.

And when a location didn't quite fit, it was altered through special effects. L.A./Manhattan, even in its London version (*Night and the City*, 1950), was easy to manufacture. It could be moved from the effects room to the editing room, to a tenement setup inside a real slum. And then for the final shootout, you relied more on a sound stage and extremely delicate lighting, almost dainty lighting, with hundreds of arcs and dinkies, tones worthy of Rembrandt. (In fact, certain low-key lighting was Called Rembrandt lighting.) We also know that Hitchcock preferred the sound stage to real locations. He preferred rear projection for *Vertigo*, rather than drag his actors through a chilly, disruptive morning in San Francisco. One could even argue that the cinematic city was a hybrid between twenties theater and forties cinema; it was theatricalized naturalism as Baroque illusion.

Apparitions of a Street

By 1960, its nuances were carefully established, like a kit. They could travel the world but, when necessary, never leave the room. They made paranoia look as clean as a perfect crime. As part of the staging for special effects, as opposed to literary realism, noir is designed as illusion: a perspective awry; anamorphic panic; expressionist trompe l'oeil. Its visual etiquette is as formal as masque. Its grammar displaces the "real" city. Since 1948, dozens of cinematography manuals, published in London and the U.S., prove remarkably consistent. They clarify each noir setup, like a master text of Baroque scenography; or in John Alton's remarkable *Painting with Light*,[16] like a formula for designing terror.

Of course, we should remember that Alton had worked in the silent German film industry before arriving in L.A., like so many designers of the cinematic noir city, what Kracauer called "device-created fantasies."[17] It was Manhattan as twenties Berlin, by way of downtown L.A.—a trans-localized imaginary. But since 1960, global media have found other purposes for it, beyond film. The cinematic city has left the building. Its five thousand New Yorks now feature restaurants, thrill rides, and gentrification.

In Los Angeles, traces of these five thousand New Yorks are everywhere, a ghost in the machine. The Lower East Side is a short drive from the Hollywood sign. I used to live around the corner from a murder scene in *Chinatown*—the death of the false Mrs. Mulwray just a block away from Michael Jackson's Thriller, across the street from forties middle America in *The Winds of War*. That is Angelino Heights, less than a mile from Chicago in *The Sting*. And barely a kilometer to Mean Streets, and Cagney and Lacey—in East L.A. and eastern downtown, often trans-localized into Manhattan during the seventies.[18] My favorite breakfast joint is at neo-noir central: the opening setup for *Reservoir Dogs* (1992).

On the way to work, I drive by dozens of cinematic flashbacks, moments from fifties horror films like *Them* (on the embankments of the L.A. River), or glimpses of the sewers of West L.A. in *He Walked by Night*. Hundreds of locations that I have researched follow me like dogs chasing a milk wagon.

Of course, some locations are on the frontier, beyond cinematic Manhattan. The old movie ranches have been shut down, for the most part, but on each of them, as many as two thousand were filmed, particularly the Iverson Ranch, the Century Ranch, or the abandoned quarry on Brush Canyon.[19]

Some locations turn into lures for real estate. In Culver City, the old MGM back lot was converted into Raintree Village, a hive of condos centered around

the Lagoon where Johnny Weissmuller as Tarzan used to swim. Next door, another condo village features relics from Tara, which are rare, since Tara was mostly a movie matte, never was built.

Other film locations reclaim lost buildings, particularly those abandoned by the city, useless in any civic sense. The Lincoln Heights Jail was shut down in the sixties, then "staged a comeback" in dozens of films after 1970.[20] It is now a Latino youth club with its own boxing ring. A few remaining guards are proud of its heritage as a movie set. Downtown, meanwhile, is literally a hive of film production. Downtown on Broadway, on the second floor of a seismically abandoned building, a sign propped against the window reads *available for movie productions*.

Noticing all these locations reminds me of that brochure for Der Strasse again, but in reverse. Movie "apparitions" replace the city as you go—with inevitable confrontations. Everyone in L.A. has Buñuelian anecdotes about movie crews transmogrifying their block. I have been stuck in unexpected beer commercials, had film crews casually take over my house at dawn. I saw Planet Earth blow up near Spring Street downtown. One night in 1982, I entered a West Hollywood office building and found myself checking in at an imaginary airport. The sensation is banalizing and bizarre at the same time—cinematic locations as trompe l'oeil.

The most bizarre trompe l'oeil in L.A. may be found at the Belmont Tunnel, just west of downtown. It is 1.1 miles long, thirty feet wide, the bleak ruins left by an abandoned subway (1926–1958). Its grotto effect is worthy of a Piranesi. The walls inside and out are engulfed by graffiti fifty layers deep. Homeless men and feral dogs can be sensed everywhere, but not seen. At the same time, the Tunnel is littered with movie filters discarded by film crews. Dozens if not hundreds of hip-hop music videos, TV commercials, pulp shootouts, and alien encounters have been shot there (for example, *Predator* 2).[21]

But in August 2002, the Belmont Tunnel outdid itself. Suddenly, the dirt path at its mouth was paved over, for the first time in its history. Homeless smells were scrubbed out entirely, given a Lysol bath. Graffiti artists with spray cans were refused entry. A movie crew, protected by rent-a-cops, was preparing to shoot a feature there. The movie will be set in Malibu—about beach-town rich kids on a beer bust during semester break. (City Hall had licensed the deal; but the money it brings will never go to help the Latino kids who live around the Tunnel.)

Sometimes, a location reenacts a tragedy while it is taking place. In 1996, near Cedars-Sinai Hospital, real ambulances were blocked by movie ambu-

lances, because film crews were shooting *Volcano*. Mannequins were posed as corpses on makeshift gurneys. Fake lava and ash were blown like sawdust until it erased the street. For residents, it was a Baroque moment, like parallel universes getting their wires crossed.

Occasionally this is fun, if the private dicks guarding the movie equipment ever let you leave your own driveway. Someone famous might wink at you. Mostly, the feeling is more like watching someone else make money. For residents, "thrills" from movie crews are few and far between. But for tourists, the thrill can be glorious, an epiphany worth the plane fare.

And over the past eighty years, many tourist businesses have exploited this epiphany (glamour in person is undoubtedly a special effect). Indeed, selling movie memory is not new to L.A. In the twenties, up at Universal, the frugal mogul Carl Laemmle used to charge tourists to watch movie shoots. But that was prehistoric compared to Universal Tours parting the Red Sea every ten minutes, or posing King Kong on constant alert. Or compositing the tourist inside a fake movie itself. In 1978, to please my father visiting from New York, we went to Universal Tours. During one of the attractions, I was selected to be a greaseball hoodlum. A fake cop pretended to shake me down in a bluescreen simulation of racist policing. My father was thrilled to see me degraded on TV. I, of course, felt ridiculous.

That same year, at the Culver City studios, I walked through a movie set from my adolescence. As a teenager, I used to visit precisely the same street in Greenwich Village. Now it had been parboiled into a movie set, inside a sound stage for a movie starring the Village People. Even the cinnamon-smelling garbage pails were filled with molded plastic garbage. A chemically hazy skyline was painted in ugly chiaroscuro. Brownstones were made of stucco and chicken wire. For about ten minutes, I rummaged through the sound stage. Ever since, I can't quite separate that set from how Greenwich Village actually looked or smelled when I was a teenager.

This is what promoters call "movie magic," an infectious part of our global heritage. Even in Rome and Berlin, abandoned movie studios, UFA and Cinecittà, were turned into something like theme parks. In L.A., the Max Factor Museum features John Wayne's wig.

Not that the city of Los Angeles is interested in film locations: there is no program to commemorate them, no signage, no plaques anywhere, except the statue of James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*, up at the Planetarium; and that may refer more to the celebrity of a dead cult figure than scenes in a movie. For L.A., movie locations are campfires that must be stamped out and forgotten.

Recently, sets for DeMille's silent *Ten Commandments* (1923) were unearthed on a beach, like an archaeological discovery of prehistoric rubbish. They had been buried to save time and money, to hustle to the next production.

New York/New Yorks

The capital for exploiting the cinematic city may be Orlando more than Los Angeles. In Orlando, they have built two movie-set facsimiles of New York, and two more of Hollywood Boulevard. At the MGM/Disney New York street, a forty-foot panel has been transformed into a full-service ten-story skyscraper, with a real hotel next door. Along the street, a real New York police car is parked in front of a fake street. Blinking high-rises accelerate perspectives, literally box the compass.

Surely Las Vegas runs a close second after Orlando. In the past decade, five New Yorks were built in Las Vegas (along with Paris, Venice, the Italian Alps, ancient Rome, Morocco, Polynesia, and the West Indies). Near Oz, the MGM Grand set up a modest New York, not unlike the midtown delicatessen and Flatiron building above the Nile at the Luxor. A developer named Mark Adept considered developing a New York skyline as shopping mall, across the street.[22] Finally, that land was converted instead into the New York/New York casino hotel; which, in turn, sparked a very expensive, six-year lawsuit. Who legally held the copyright to build a New York skyline in facsimile? Surely not New York City. During the trial, dozens of other fake New Yorks were unearthed.

However, the prize for the most Manhattans must go to computer games, from *Fahrenheit* to *Mafia*: *City of Lost Heaven* (twelve square miles). But in 2002, the movie *Spider-Man* performed some interesting trans-local logistics. Along with models and establishing shots, the "canyons of New York" were built inside an old Rockwell defense plant in Downey. And Spidey himself jumped from building to building in downtown L.A., not New York.

Computer graphics adds new "thrills" to architecture, from Gehry to Lynn to Hadid to Rashid. But it does much stranger things to the cinematic city. It turns buildings into denture plates or dental implants, to fill gaps on a downtown street anywhere. The old studio New York streets were flexible, but not portable, or nearly gaseous, as the globalized cine-city has become, one of the ultimate floating signifiers.

As a result, we find inversions—the cinematic city collapsing in upon itself, as it merges with global real estate and branding. Forty-second Street in Manhattan has now been Los Angelized, turned into a welter of video screens. The Greater (and whiter) White Way turns into the Sunset Strip, or is it the other way around, as L.A. tries to invent its own Manhattans? At the Prater in Vienna, I found a miniature Las Vegas casino that could easily have worked for a noir movie shoot of Vegas.

But will this new role for the cinematic city be noir enough and reassuring enough at the same time? Will it meet the standard of special effects as power, to engage the nightmare as a cheerful labyrinth? In Los Angeles, the TrizecHahn mall at Hollywood and Highland (eight acres, 650,000 square feet) is a pale but vast homage to "movie magic." It even commemorates the famous Babylon set from *Intolerance*, which stood like a giant piano box almost two hundred feet high, intruding at the eastern corner of what became a heavily trafficked street in Hollywood after 1920.[23]

But reality sometimes sets in. Hollywood and Highland has become a red alert for the cinematic city. It has hemorrhaged cash, is on the edge of bankruptcy. The Oscar ceremonies might even be moved elsewhere in the future. After 9/11, the value of the property plummeted $560 million to $198 million, with write-downs of nearly $200 million in 2001 and 2002.[24] They had trusted movie-related businesses like the Warner's and Disney stores to carry on; they crashed also. Then, like a blizzard in July, to add to Trizec's misery, the Sears Tower in Chicago also toppled in value after the planes hit the World Trade Center on 9/11.[25] There is a modest, ironic silver lining. Hollywood and Highland boosted real estate values around it, in the neighborhoods nearby, mostly because the project is panoptical enough to make people feel safe around it, like farmers hovering just outside the city walls during a wave of panic. Indeed, as of June 2003, a new phantom is upon us—tastes altered by 9/11. And the slipping global economy. Suddenly, the cinematic city has new baggage; and tourists are not coming.

Polishing an imago can be like polishing a jellybean. First pretend that old photos were actually a street. Then hire an architect who relies on digital imaging. Then make the streets camera-ready. Let special-effects editing step in. Meanwhile in Europe, many old streets are already staged like movie sets. The only need a little polish.

All this, of course, begs the question: Can alternatives to the cinematic city be imagined? The future of cinema clearly lies in solid and digitized architecture, through urban planning, interactive installations and games, and in

themed spaces. But how will these respond to the crisis in content today, to the alienation that the cinematic city ignores—or hyperbolizes into pubescent surprise, a cultural equivalent of premature ejaculation?

As noted, media experimentation is restricted by this cinematic paramnesia, by a grammar based on misremembering—as much as we all love it. Computer games should not pride themselves on looking more "realistic" (that is, more like the cinematic city). We need more playful subversions of the cinematic city, to find a way out of this quandary, beyond fake labyrinths, and plastic alienation.

Meanwhile, the cinematic city grows ever more conservative in its ideology. It is now the new inner city; the new urbanism beyond *The Truman Show*. And I am surely preaching to the choir complaining about all this. So I won't play the hypocrite. I love a well-staged imaginary murder. But I want cinematic forms just as poignant as the cinematic city once was. Simply put, like most of the readers, I want a more engaged vision for our cities today, and for the future of cinema.