Cinematic Photography and the Misremembering of the City

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Photographs of cities are often a record of distraction and forgetting. The more of the architectural detail they retrieve, the more they camouflage, like a map replacing the inside of a house, like seeing a street through the windshield of a car, like Google Earth – and most of all, for this essay, like movie locations.

I will use Los Angeles as my case study – two docufables on how Los Angeles has been ”forgotten and distracted.” (These docufables will blend scholarly hyperbole with collective memory.) Then I will broaden to other questions on how photography responds to collective forgetting.

Hollywood films leave an extremely fragmentary memory of cities, often just an establishing shot lasting only a few seconds: Mulberry Street in Manhattan’s Little Italy; the Bradbury Building in downtown Los Angeles; a taste of skyline; a fire hydrant opened for kids in the summer. As the action brews, we track by way of panoramic overheads, or long shots at intersections (very much like nineteenth century versions of the city, as if floating beneath a balloon that has been blown across town). And yet, the traces are extremely influential. They literally are imagos that politically stand in for the history of many cities. They are the metropolises we think we have lost.

And the challenge, brilliantly handled by Karina Nimmerfall, is to slow down vision long enough to reveal these fleeting traces, to show us how they inhabit the mind’s eye. They survive in memory as sculptural details: clefts in the angle between buildings; membranes of available light; windows that suggest a drama passing out of sight.

But first, let us begin with a simple recipe. Go to your local food market; buy your favorite coffee beans. Prepare the coffee in your favorite way. Sit where the view is best, with the sun beginning to disappear. Sip and savor. Then ask yourself if you can tell where the coffee beans were picked.

That is the truth of the film industry and Los Angeles: a plantation economy. The locations are merely there to be harvested. Rarely, if ever does the scene on film have more than a slender connection to how people live at that location.

Coffee in hand, let us enter the first docufable, to help us understand what this harvesting ignores. At the end of these docufables, I’ll clarify further what tools tend to be the most useful for navigating collective forgetting.

1. The Cowboy and the Slaughter House

There is a tiny industrial city named Vernon, five miles southeast of downtown Los Angeles. In its golden years – mostly the twenties – it may have housed five thousand residents. Now the estimates run as low as fifty (in 2000 the census listed 91). Even the mayor uses a false address, in an apartment building that he owns near his restaurant. Who wants to live in Vernon? There hasn’t been a formal election since 1980. Lately, Vernon has been wracked with scandal: funds were misplaced by the now ”former” mayor; three new residents were illegally evicted for daring to run for office. Finally, in October 2006, a highly contested election declared the indicted mayor the winner.

Vernon used to be the home of Jack Doyle’s *Mile Long Bar* on Thirty-Eighth and Santa Fe Avenue; also Doyle’s *Arena*, where major boxing matches were held, even though prize fighting was ”illegal” in Vernon. The town once had its own baseball park, for a minor-league local team, the Vernon Tigers, until 1921 crashed business, after one of its owners, Fatty Arbuckle was falsely accused of rape and murder. To help save the stadium the Elks Club and Jack Doyle host a big match there, with movie star Douglas Fairbanks as master of ceremonies.

In the twenties, word was out that Prohibition never quite found its way to Vernon. Liquor was still available.

But beyond all this local color and smell, this little town was an industrial powerhouse, linked to the Sante Fe Railroad and to the oil industry. Vernon also had a large slaughterhouse, designed by the man who built the premier slaughterhouse in Chicago. Another Vernon company, *Farmer John Meats* (begun in 1931), grew into the largest pork processing company in America. Then, since 1957, Farmer John has featured the gigantic mural, *Hog Heaven*, painted by movie set designer Les Grimes; often a glimpse in neo noir films, and on *YouTube*. *Hog Heaven* is four blocks long, like a perverse Stations of the Cross for grotesque but cheerful

pigs running off to be slaughtered, thrilled to be churned into Farmer John sausages.

Vernon also had an oil refinery that soaked the ground with toxic oil, and aromatic packinghouses that tanned sheepskins. In the thirties, the stink from Vernon traveled easily as far as Boyle Heights, four miles away. But for the movies, Vernon had a special meaning. From 1936 on, singing cowboy Gene Autry used to hire beef wranglers from the Vernon slaughter yard, and put them in his upbeat cowboy B movies. Vernon helped the movies sell clean living and the American West.

Movie locations are a background staccato and internal sense of missing backgrounds and camera angles, like a brain scan from a movie clip. Facts of how these fragments of urban ”misremembering” affect culture has a noir irony all its own. That kind of irony is clearly essential to Karina Nimmerfall’s photographs here – how to capture the subtle overlapping of memory fragments into urban facts.

2. The Contrasts Inside Noir Imagery

The early 1940’s in L.A. is often glorified in cyberpunk films like *Blade Runner*, or even *Sin City*: the social imaginary of the sinful ”noir” Los Angeles. This is obviously pure fancy. It is linked to the birth of film noir in L.A., to the police scandals of the 1930’s, to noir crime fiction. The buildings do not tell us much, particularly now that there is a gothic revival hunger for the industrial modern city. Now the grimy lower Manhattan, the abandoned stockyards of Chicago, the ”noir” neighborhoods west of downtown L.A. have become very sexy. Even with real estate over (1997 to early 2006), that hunger for lofts, old hotels and craftsman rooflines remains. It is very much like the gothic revival of the late nineteenth century for medieval trimmings in Victorian architecture.

But let us play with that imaginary for a few pages. It is 1942 – soon after Americans enter World War II – in the book *Turn Off the Sunshine: Tales of Los Angeles on the Wrong Side of the Tracks* by journalist Timothy G. Turner.

Turner follows a ”big-shot” movie director named Hunter, who is wandering into the wrong part of downtown L.A. The director had traveled east from ”(the town of) Hollywood … a suburb of Los Angeles where some large canneries are located.” Hunter used to work in one of these canneries, then became an actor, then went into directing, with great success; that is until he was fired, quite suddenly, today. The movies were like the canneries. He had ”slaved…on a vast industrial lot where large, factory-like buildings were spread around as if they disliked each other.” So he was strangely glad to be done with it, but broke.

Hunter tries to make sense of ”the wrong side of downtown”, where movie cameras rarely went. Along Fifth Street he accidentally finds a circa 1890’s hotel with a slightly colonial façade, dingy red glass panes, and an oversized cupola ”bandaged with tar paper” (probably the Alexandria Hotel, where D.W. Griffith used to hold court in the teens).

”What a (movie) set,” he thinks.

The lobby was mostly empty. On the wall, he sees a cheap painting of two horses frightened by lightning, most likely copied from Géricault, Stubbs, and Giorgione.

Hunter rings the bell for help, like a gong for prayer. A short, bald fat man shows up. He speaks in a ”New England voice that smelled of fresh hay and boiling greens.”

They haggle over the daily rate. Hunter learns that the hotel used to be ”quite a place” back in the 1880’s. The pen on the counter is stuck in a dried potato from the Chinese restaurant next door.

Chan, the grumpy ”Chinaman”, is ordered to fetch another potato. Angrily, he ”flip flaps” in his slippers. Fifteen years of misery at the hotel have soured his temper.

Hunter probably knows that in 1942 the Chinese have become very trendy in the Hollywood movies. Fifteen per cent of all Chinese living in downtown L.A. work in the movies, particularly in adventures about the Japanese (who are being transported from downtown to internment camps that same year).

Hunter tries to stay out of trouble, as he is sized up by everybody–by panhandler hillbillies from Oklahoma, and by panhandling alcoholics, ”stew bums” as they are called. He stays clear of the bar maids, sloppers and front grippers (who sometimes double as ”B girls”), the hostesses and prostitutes (not his style). A policeman relaxes by beating up a stew bum until he falls nearly dead on the floor.

Hunter gets hungry, walks down Main Street toward a Greek food joint, past a byzantium of workers: Mexicans, Japanese, Chinese, Filipinos, Hindus, Sikhs, American ranch workers (perhaps from the stockyards) and longshoremen. While enjoying his meal he falls for the beautiful Greek cook named Sophie. Falling in love with food workers – with the service industry downtown – was popular in various novels where young men learn about the L.A. hidden behind the movie fantasy: shades of John Fante’s Bandini

character falling for a Mexican waitress in *Ask the Dust.*

Hunter drifts into the life inside downtown. He even lets his movie contacts know about Greek dancing: try that in a few melodramas.

Finally, Hunter is offered a good contract to return to movie directing. But he refuses, saying, ”they got better sets and better actors over on the East Side than you’ve got in Hollywood.”

Hunter decides to stay put. ”He is delivering soap. He says he is going to be promoted next month, from assistant driver to driver.” He works for a good boss, not a Simon Legree in Hollywood. In short, Hunter sends a message that ”he is happy.” ”O my God,” the producer replies. ”Happy! What the hell does that amount to?”

A Note on the Archeology of Cinematic Photographs

The cinematic photograph also needs a genealogy, a pre-history. We are not investigating simply the traces left by the movie camera: of close-ups, intercutting, and so on. We are entering a mental journey older than cinema. If I were writing a book about it I might start with the Romantics, and then to the Symbolists in the late nineteenth century – with what they meant by the sublime or the picturesque. The cinematic map is synaesthetic and metonymic – a place that triggers media memory. One might even compare it to what Proust meant by involuntary memory. More accurately, by the late nineteenth century thousands of photographs were meant to capture the hyper-stimulation of the emerging modern city. Like Captain Nemo surfacing, they ”showed” the phantom of the city rising from the harbor, or along the panorama at the intersections along boulevards, or at train stations.

The classic cities for these photos were Paris, London, Berlin, Chicago and most of all – after 1910 – New York: the epic metropolis. For example, Fritz Lang’s shimmering photos of Manhattan in 1924 clearly were converted into the stage directions for *Metropolis* (1927), almost as a coda to Paul Strand’s elegiac documentary *Mannahatta* (1921). The twenties invented the photographic echoes of the modern cityscape, in films by Vertov, Ruttmann, and Vidor; in the shimmering imaginary New York of Hugh Ferris; in the ”worm’s-eye view” illustrations of the vertical Manhattan.

Cinema merely gathered the traces left by decades of photos and architectural cartoons about the modern metropolis. With all this earlier imagery to guide the camera, movies turn city streets and overheads into nocturnes – into states of being. Like synaesthesia in expressionist painting, we feel the ruthlessness of capitalism on the sidewalks, the entire compass of responses, particularly the false glamour, the displacement, the ”roar of the crowd” from local neighborhoods to boulevards.

In recent years, notably since Thom Anderson’s film essay *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, interest in film locations and cinematic photography has grown considerably. For the most part there are a few tried and true methods for capturing this mental quicksilver – the way memory plays tricks with our sense of the city. These tend to be before and after shots; or comparison and contrast (the real with the fictive); or ”here’s what that location looks like today”.

But Nimmerfall has decided to steady her camera in a different way, to play with the media imaginary of the city. As I said earlier, she wants us to pause longer, to slow down our vision, to leave the absences, without an easy answer. She is suggesting that cinematic photography is now automatic in our material culture. It is the social imaginary of the city turned into global vapor, a shared memory of the unfindable.

Mapping the Unfindable

This collective experience must be understood as a thousand near misses, and no direct hit. In Hollywood movies collective distraction can be overlapping dialogue, like a Hawks or Altman film. In literature and painting it often is visualized through a sense of layers and simultaneous moments that pass too quickly to be summarized objectively (from my own work my database novel *Bleeding Through: Layers of Los Angeles, 1920–1986*; the fictive/factual study *Freud in Coney Island*, or my histories and fictions about forgetting and scripted spaces in other books).

After decades of drifting through countless case studies on the power of place, on psycho-geographies, on the poetics and production of space, the limitations of the tools are quite apparent – as well as their expressiveness. To recover forgetting may seem evasive, but that is only half of the story. The effect of forgetting is very literal, very precise. Real cities crumble under its confusions. Real people survive beneath the shadow that it casts. And more dangerous still, whoever masters the real power of the social

imaginary can invent a new religion, or change national politics. Most recently in the U.S. that has been Bush and the Bushismos. The dead and maimed from ”forgetting” and the radiating costs will dominate much of the next ten years. (But this essay is too modest for more complaints about Iraq. I’ll simply leave a blank for us to fill with collective rage.)

We try to decode the cinematic photograph. It is like a spirit photograph, but here the phantom is traces left by collective misremembering – about imaginary places and moments that are as solid as cement. I am currently obsessed with notions of the space between and correspondence. That is, the mental leaps that the viewer makes to complete an absence. The power of the images lies in the mental aperture, in what cannot be seen. However, cinematic photographs do not illustrate; nor are they metaphors. They are metonyms. They evoke the process of forgetting and the erasure that is essential to how we misremember cities. They remind us of the folklore that our visual codes have built – the shadow cities that we inhabit.

Julius Shulman is the grand master of architectural photography in Los Angeles. He invented a glowing membrane for the Case Study houses of the fifties in L.A., with architect Pierre Koenig often posing as if in an advertisement. During the recent housing boom some hungry buyers showed photos by Shulman to brokers, saying essentially: I want to live in that photograph.
In the next year, there are plans to build expensive condos in Vernon; there is so little open land around downtown anymore. But many people remain interested in the gothic revival fantasy of the old industrial downtown. That social imaginary may have some profit left.

Increasingly, many ”lost” noir corners of ”inner-city” slums are getting a lot of polish. Bedroom communities are being enclaved inside the vast belts of poverty there. Many downtowns in the U.S. are being turned into bedroom communities. The modernist imaginary about suburbs has met the gothic revival imaginary about ”noir cities.” Old neighborhoods are being turned into suburban boulevards. New modes of urban forgetting are rapidly taking shape, as ruthless as ever, but with new scenarios.

Thus, behind the cinematic photograph, new urban absences are emerging. The record left here by Nimmerfall will be recoded by viewers in years to come. New media imaginaries about the city will overwhelm what remains of twentieth century traces. In the future we will map the unfindable by way of the Internet, by way of electronic tourism; we will browse more than wander. We will dream horizontally across electronic spaces, rather than through the clefts between industrial buildings or flying upward along epic skyscrapers. I wonder what our misremembering of cities will look like then?