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Imagined Urbanities: L.A. across Genres and Media at the Turn of the Twenty First Century

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RÉSUMÉ

Dans cette thése intitulée Imagined Urbanities: L.A. across Genres and Media at the Turn of the Twenty First Century, j'étudie la configuration imaginaire de Los Angeles à la fin du vingtième siècle. Devant la masse d'études critiques se concentrant sur la question des représentations urbaines, je prends le parti-pris d'une étude sélective et comparatiste. Mon objectif n'est pas ici de concevoir une typologie du genre urbain, mais plutôt d'explorer les facettes privilégiées par trois artistes différents.

Dans le premier chapitre, je me penche sur la vision résolument caustique et excessive de Karen Tei Yamashita dans Tropic of Orange. La romancière compose une critique mordante de l'Amérique mercantile et moralisatrice. Jonglant avec les genres, de la dystopie au réalisme magique, en passant par le film *noir*, elle construit une version originale de la ville qui remet en question les fondements historiques et idéologiques de la société américaine.

Dans le second volet de cette étude, j'analyse le DVD-ROM Bleeding Through: Layers of Los Angeles 1920-1986, de Norman Klein, qui examine l'histoire littéraire, culturelle et sociale de la ville. L'interface médiatique choisie invite l'utilisateur à explorer librement des documents d'archives : photos, films, articles et témoignages qui visent d'une part à ressusciter la mémoire et les récits oubliés de la ville, et d'autre part à documenter le rôle essentiel de ses diverses communautés.

Enfin mon dernier chapitre est consacré au dyptiche Mur, Murs/Documenteur d'Agnès Varda. La cinéaste y offre d'abord un portrait kaléidoscopique de L.A. inspiré par la scène artistique bigarrée des muralistes californiens. Puis prenant le contrepied de sa démarche première, elle invite le spectateur à déconstruire cette vision de la ville dans Documenteur qui propose une perspective plus intimiste.

Parce que ces trois artistes participent à la construction de l'imaginaire de Los

Angeles, il est étonnant que la critique universaire les ait presque totalement ignorés. Allant contre les stéréotypes établis et le canon, ils posent un regard réfléchi sur cette ville frontière changeante, sur ses communautés, et sur ses discours marginaux. L'analyse minutieuse de leurs regards croisés espère donc les sortir de l'ombre et mettre en avant leur contribution notable.

Mots-clés : Los Angeles, Californie, ville, littérature, cinéma, Agnès Varda, Karen Tei Yamashita, Norman Klein, réalisme magique, dystopie.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the imaginary configurations of the city of Los Angeles at the end of the twentieth century. Many imaginary versions of this city, either cinematographic or literary, favour a dystopian type of representation, while others privilege a blank style. This thesis avoids the canonical references and assembles an eclectic and multimedia corpus focused on the work of three artists in particular: Tropic of Orange by Karen Tei Yamashita, the DVD-ROM Bleeding Through Layers of Los Angeles 1920-1986 by Norman Klein, and Mur, Murs-Documenteur by Agnès Varda.

Though these pieces have seen little critical attention, they make a vital contribution to the ongoing construction of Los Angeles' specific imaginary. The thesis examines each piece in turn, investigating the urban geography created by their artists. The motivations for these imaginary configurations are considered, as are the relative originality of the three representations of Los Angeles. While the three pieces work through different media, the thesis will show that common ambitions exist: to focus on the ordinary, to reveal the roles of minorities, and to highlight marginal discourse. Klein, Varda, and Yamashita seek to remain critical *vis à vis* other representations. The thesis demonstrates that their creations warrant critical attention, and that their outlook on the city of angels should not be ignored.

Keywords : Karen Tei Yamashita, AgnésVarda, Norman Klein, urban literature, California, dystopia, cinema, magical realism.

TABLE DES MATIÈRES

LISTES DES ABRÉVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used throughout the text:

AV	Agnès Varda
AO	Architecture from the Outside
BTL	Bleeding Through Layers of Los Angeles 1920-1986
BTLtxt	the text of the novella
BTLdvd	the DVD-ROM
CQ	City of Quartz
D	Documenteur
EF	Ecology of Fear, Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster
HFLA	The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory
LNM	The Language of New Media
LRLA	Literature and Race in Los Angeles
MM	Mur, Murs
OO	l'Oeuvre ouverte
OW	The Open Work
PEL	The Practice of Everyday Life
TDD	To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema
TO	Tropic of Orange

LISTE DES FIGURES

AVANT-PROPOS ET REMERCIEMENTS

Writing an introduction or a preface is always a difficult task. The many imperfections that remain in what follows are highlighted by the time elapsed between the writing of the manuscript and that of this opening. At the same time, it gives me the opportunity to look back on this intellectual journey, and to reconsider the subject that triggered my curiosity in the first place. After a few years, and a couple of transnational and 'trans-urban' displacements, it is almost with surprise that I realize how persistent my "professional" obsession with the city of Los Angeles has been.

Along the way, in Montreal, Dublin, and London, I have been lucky enough to get the support of many. In Montreal, I would like to thank in particular my supervisor, Livia Monnet, as well as Silvestra Mariniello and Michèle Garneau for their advice at various stages of this project. Over the course of preparing this dissertation, I've had the pleasure to present samples of this text to "le groupe des thésards", a group of fellow PhD students without whom I wouldn't have completed the writing of this dissertation. Many thanks to Frank Runcie, Sébastien Côté, and Ragnhild Johnsrud for their unwavering enthusiasm and patience. It goes without saying that none of this could have been possible without the support of my family. My husband Chris has lived almost every step of this process with me, cheering me up in the darkest moments of the writing, including the crazy last months of my pregnancy. Finally, I dedicate this work to my daughter Lucy

INTRODUCTION

The phrase "Imagined Urbanities" is an obvious reference to Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities. Anderson defines the nation as an imagined political community. He also describes the novel as one of the cultural products that perfectly re-presents "the kind of imagined community that is the nation"[1]. The cleverly deconstructive exploration of the processes that created these communities is a model of thought-provoking, cross-disciplinary research that I will aim to emulate. I could not agree more with Anderson when he attributes to the novel a crucial role in the edification of communities. Novels may be entertaining objects, but they are also important tools that enable literary critics to venture into the analysis of a specific time, culture and/or ideology. At the same time, the term "urbanity" marks the divergence between Anderson's work and mine. Theorists such as Jean François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson have defined our contemporary era as one of general crisis. According to James Holsten and Arjun Appadurai our century is characterized by "the failure of nation-states to produce convincing fantasies of the commensurability of its citizens"[2]. This is why they want to develop a framework of investigation that lays emphasis on cities and on urban cultures. So if this work is, in the wake of Anderson, definitely attentive to the nature and meaning of imaginary constructions, it will consider the city, and not the nation, as its primary focus.

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1 In Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, London, New York, Verso, 1991, p. 6, and p. 25.

2 In James Holston and Arjun Appadurai, 'Cities and Citizenship', in Public Culture, 8.2, University of Chicago, 1996, p. 202.

For most of us, cities are an ordinary sight. Urban spaces have spread everywhere, adapting to local circumstances, whether it meant compromising with the design of an ancient cartography, or abiding by the rules of more recent and sophisticated planning. This is not to say that cities cannot surprise us anymore. Today, walking the streets of a city may not be as disturbing as it may have been for people with limited mobility a century or so ago. Yet, even for a streetwise urbanite, roaming through an unfamiliar city can still be an altogether exciting experience. This discovery process is akin to what Martin Jay describes in his Songs of Experience:

> However much we may construe experience as a personal possession–"no one can take my experiences from me," it is sometimes argued–it is inevitably acquired through an encounter with otherness, whether human or not. That is, an experience, however we define it, cannot simply duplicate the prior reality of the one who undergoes it, leaving him or her precisely as before; something must be altered, something must happen, to make the term meaningful.3

When faced with urban otherness, reactions and experiences differ depending on many factors, such as gender and social status. Even if this study is not an analysis of direct urban experience per se, it will take into account such differences. My focus here will be on individuals who, when faced with urban otherness, transformed their experience into art at the end of the twentieth century. Cities experienced thus become cities imagined. Most literary critics would call these imagined cities representations. When thinking about imagined cities, novelists often have a less theoretical, and more personal approach, like Marge Piercy, who envisions these

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3 Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a universal Theme, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005, p. 7.

imaginary constructions as "paper cities":

> Fiction builds us alternative cities superimposed on the city whose streets we walk or drive. Some of the paper cities seem close to our own, evoking the pleasure of reading a story set in a Boston you remember, or an Upper West Side of Manhattan you live in. (...) Since our cities are grids of Them-and-Us experiences, fiction is a way of inducing you into the cities other people know: people who are poorer or richer than you are; people who speak another language; people who construct the world of different forces and different necessities and different desires; people who live down streets you fear or streets who fear you. (...) I consider fiction one way of persuading people to cross those borders of alienation and mistrust into the existence of someone in whose mind and body they may find it enlightening to spend some time.[4]

The idea of connections through art between individual experiences of a city is one of this project's founding principles. Many analyses of urban space have unfortunately been written without taking into account or even acknowledging the importance of experience[5]. I am not endorsing an examination free of critical distance that would naively reflect on representations as if they were mirror images of reality. Nor do I intend to lament over the loss of experience that is supposedly characteristic of overcrowded urban spaces at the end of the twentieth century. The notions of hyperreality, of simulacrum, and of late capitalism are fruitful categories, but I am not interested in discussing them as defining traits of Los Angeles, in the way thinkers

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4 In 'Cities as Battleground: The Novelist as Combatant' in Literature and the Urban Experience, Essays on the City and Literature, Michael C. Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watts, eds., Rutgers University Press, 1981, pp. 209-217.

5 Interestingly the authors who most accurately pinpointed and discussed the notion of experience are historians or sociologists, and not literature specialists. For examples of provocative arguments, see Michel de Certeau's The Practice of Everyday Life, Raymond Ledrut's Les images de la ville or Raymond Lefebvre's The Production of Space.

such as Fredric Jameson, Marc Augé or Jean Baudrillard have. Rather, this analysis will be productively deconstructive, and critical of the inevitable involvement any intellectual exploration implies. As a novelist, Piercy focuses on paper cities and ignores all the other media that generate similar imagined urbanities. I want to explore the work of artists whose work trespass the frontiers of literature, but also produce imagined urbanities. My goal is therefore not only to induce my reader into the specific paper cities of a novelist, but also to invite her to explore the celluloid and digital cities that other people create. To do so, I will concentrate on the city of Los Angeles and on its diverse imaginary configurations in the work of three artists: the novelist Karen Tei Yamashita, the scholar/creator Norman Klein, and the filmmaker Agnès Varda.

Despite its recent edification, the city of Los Angeles has inspired many artists, and generated abundant academic analyses. It is interesting to note that the way L.A is perceived and defined is highly variable, as Julian Murphet remarks: "According to your point of view, Los Angeles is either exhilarating or nihilistic, sun-drenched or smog-enshrouded, a multicultural haven or a segregated ethnic concentration camp – Atlantis or high capitalism– and orchestrating these polarized alternatives is an urban identity thriving precisely on their interchangeability."(LRLA 8). Most scholars opt for narrowly defined analyses. These usually concentrate on a particular feature of the city, or they exclude anything beyond the author's field of expertise. This type of analysis is interesting, but also frustrating because of its strict limits. On the other hand, there is another type of analysis, which covers a wider spectrum of works, but whose content is unfortunately quite often either superficial or essentialist. A good example is David Fine's Los Angeles in Fiction. Fine gathers information about

hundreds of literary sources, but his work is in the end a clever catalogue and reference book. It is clear then that to avoid the pitfalls of such an enterprise is no easy work[6]. My ambition is that the following work be a happy compromise between extremes: I offer close analyses of a limited number of cultural productions, which are at the same time wide-ranging, so that this study can be of interest to people working in literature, as well as in cultural and film studies. A mixed corpus is crucial, because it will enable the reader to pinpoint parallels between the different works selected. Like Elizabeth Grosz, I believe that cultural productions emerge out of a particular context. They reflect other tendencies and practices of a specific *Zeitgeist*, in the present case the end of the twentieth century.

> A text, whether book, paper, film, painting, or building, (...) steals ideas from all around, from its own milieu and history, and better still from its outside, and disseminates them elsewhere. It is not only a conduit for the circulation of ideas (...) but a passage or point of transition from one (...) space to another. (...) It is a process of scattering thought; scrambling terms, concepts, and practices; forging linkages; becoming a form of action. (AO 56-57).

In choosing to focus on three different creators inspired by the same city, I want to underline the individual character of their perspective on Los Angeles, and see if any parallels or connections are also possible. My purpose here is not to establish a neat typology of the urban novel/film/DVD-ROM. Many valuable attempts have been and are still being made in this direction by other scholars[7].

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6 Some scholars nonetheless manage to write remarkably balanced and engaging analyses on the subject, among them Julian Murphet and his Literature and Race in Los Angeles, and Min Hyoung Song and his Strange Future, Pessimism and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots.

7 See the work of David B. Clarke. In The Cinematic City. London; New York: Routledge, 1997, or the ongoing research of Christina Horvarth in contemporary French literature.

Rather, the following study will closely examine each of these artists' imagined city and address questions such as, what type of urban geography does this particular artist create? What motivations can explain this type of imaginary configuration? Which artistic traditions inform these creations and this treatment of the city? Are these imagined cities inventive and original, or are they redundant?

The lack of critical work on Tropic of Orange, Bleeding Through Layers of Los Angeles 1920-1986 and Mur, Murs/Documenteur was part of the reason why I selected these particular pieces. Taking these individual works out of the shadows will hopefully add to this project's significance. One may wonder, for instance, why Varda's Californian diptych Mur, Murs/Documenteur is nearly always ignored in her filmography? Are these films neither French nor feminist enough for the scholars usually interested in her work? Similarly, what can possibly account for the lack of interest in Yamashita's fiction among specialists of Asian-American literature? And, why are there only scarce detailed analyses of DVD-ROM projects such as Klein's? One possibility is that, instead of belonging to a strictly defined territory, these works critically engage across easily defined categories. Like the city they deal with, they are situated on the border of well-known territories, and can as a consequence be challenging. My hope is that this work will contribute to the ongoing discussion about Los Angeles' imaginary configurations, and that it will demonstrate that Tropic of Orange, Bleeding Through Layers of Los Angeles 1920-1986 and Mur, Murs-Documenteur warrant critical attention.

In the following study, I analyze how each of these artists understands and recreates Los Angeles, a place whose cityscape is commonly considered an ever-shifting environment. In Strange Future, Min Hyoung Song notes: "The emergent

postwar Southern California cityscape was, and continues to be, dispersed, resistant to generalization and full of the capacity to remake itself continually according to the pressure of capital investments. (...) Like the blank matrices found in many science fiction movies about virtual reality (...) the gridlike structure of Southern California acts as a near-invisible staging ground (...)."[8] This open staging ground is precisely what I intend to explore and analyze, using each artist's specific perspective. Depending on their background, and on their artistic agenda, each creates a distinctive Los Angeles whose characteristics I want not only to delineate but also to discuss. Klein and Yamashita's knowledge of L.A. is for instance informed by the years they spent either growing up or living there. Varda travelled to and lived in the U.S. for extended periods in the sixties and late seventies. Nevertheless one should not underplay the fact that she probably remained an outsider *vis à vis* the locals. These artists' position at the time of writing, filming, or assembling their project plays an important part in the making of a distinctive urban configuration. It is also clear that their earlier creations have effects on the works under scrutiny here. Agnès Varda is a well-known director both in France and abroad, even if most of her films cannot be described as mainstream[9]. Karen Tei Yamashita, whose work has been well received (if rarely analyzed), shares with Norman Klein the particularity that she is both a practitioner and an analyst. Her readership and his audience can therefore be described as more niche-like. But most importantly all these artists privilege an informed and thoughtful approach when dealing with the image of the city. A

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8 In Min Hyoung Song, Strange Future, Pessimism and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, Durham, Duke University Press, 2005, p. 41.

9 Exceptions paved her career, since two of her long features were popular and fairly successful in terms of box office, they are Sans Toit, Ni loi (1985) and Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse (2000).

common interest in experimentation, and the attention to the complex processes of representation (whatever the artistic medium used), are elements that will be analyzed in more details in the core chapters of this study.

In the first chapter, I will show how in Tropic of Orange Yamashita revivifies with irony the conventions of several genres including dystopia and magical realism. She presents us with an elaborate urban geography, which is an eccentric revision of Los Angeles' territory. But behind the carnivalesque scenes of her novel, Yamashita calls attention to the clichés and conventions associated with the city and its inhabitants. Far from idealizing the region by presenting it as a space characterized by some kind of joyful multiculturalism, she underscores the inequities and traumas experienced by marginal groups living in, or migrating to the city. When she redesigns L.A., she makes it a place where personal stories are crucial elements in shaping the city's history and identity. By challenging many of her reader's assumptions, she offers an original and critical revision of the fictional landscape of California. Her prose is a clever and playful invitation to question many of this border city's characteristics. As we will see, Klein shares this revisionist mentality, though his project is oriented more towards the past of the city, rather than its present condition.

In chapter two, I turn to the efforts of Norman M. Klein, who supervised the making of the collaborative DVD-ROM Bleeding Through Layers of Los Angeles 1920-1986. In this complex work[10] Klein invites us to a fictional revisiting of Los Angeles' past. His take on the city is unconventional, since he mixes imaginary

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10 Notably because large sections of this piece are constantly re-organizing themselves as you navigate the DVD-ROM.

sections with more theoretical material. In BTL, one of his obvious objectives, besides the collection and preservation of documents and films focusing on the city's social and cultural history, is to have us reconsider the role of some of L.A.'s marginalized groups. In an almost dizzying attempt to show as much as possible, Klein gathers archival photos and documents, local testimonies, and film clips from different eras throughout the century. To give a sense of continuity to this encyclopedic project, he uses the narrative of a *noir* like investigation, which focuses on a mysterious old lady, Molly. Klein's version of Los Angeles calls attention to its many ghosts by digging through the various layers of the city's history. By telling the story of disappeared neighbourhoods like Bunker Hill, or revisiting long-time favourites in detective fiction, he aims to lead the participant through an alternative and often-corrective journey through L.A. It is obvious that the research he undertook for this project was probably the part he enjoyed most. Ultimately, whether his experimental narrative is a success depends on the determination of the participant to spend time exploring this unusual interface, and reading the novella that accompanies it.

Finally, in the last chapter, I focus on two films shot locally in the eighties by Agnès Varda. While this diptych's form may at first seem less innovative than Klein's experiment, it is in fact a subtle double portrayal of L.A. Out of the many scenes and interviews she conducted when she lived there, Varda edits a documentary Mur, Murs, whose apparent theme is murals and muralists. Varda's film contains allusions to several questions she is interested in, such as the function of art in society, the notions of minority and identity politics, and the question of political activism. In the first section of the diptych, the poetics of space she favours is based

on a kaleidoscopic portrayal that tries to give voice to a myriad of Angelenos. In the second more fictional film of her Californian diptych, Varda introduces us to Émilie, a French woman, who recently separated from the father of her son, Martin. The film follows her journey as she tries to settle in this unknown city. Documenteur is a much more introspective and intimate exploration of the city. Yet, its trajectory often crisscrosses elements and scenes presented in Mur, Murs. The complementary status of these two apparently divergent films illustrates the director's desire to reflect both on cinematographic representations and on the practice of filmmaking. Los Angeles' highly malleable environment provides a perfect opportunity for Varda to address the questions that she is interested in. Having now outlined the basic structure of this study, I want to begin with a detailed exploration of the first of these artists' works, Yamashita's novel.

1. Tropic of Orange, or how to stretch L.A.'s grid in seven days

Karen Tei Yamashita is of Japanese descent; she was born in California and later brought up in Los Angeles. She lived in Brazil and Japan for various research and writing projects, and now resides in Los Angeles and teaches at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her third novel, Tropic of Orange, which was published in 1997, is self consciously postmodern, theoretical and parodic when dealing with the city of Los Angeles and its neighbour Mexico.

The narrative takes place in modern-day Los Angeles and tells the stories of seven apparently unrelated characters. As the novel unfolds, Los Angeles gradually becomes more and more chaotic, and the reader begins to realize that all characters are related or bound to meet and interact with one another. Since the novel is built on their voices and visions, I will introduce each of them.

Gabriel is a journalist who writes for a local newspaper and who favours marginal and unglamorous events and stories. A few years before the novel begins he buys a house in Mexico that he wants to restore for his retirement. It is located precisely on the Tropic of Cancer, not far from where his mother grew up in Mazatlán. He visits the place from time to time to check on the work, which is being done by locals. Gabriel's newspaper has engaged Rafaela to clean their premises. As he often works late, he sometimes chats with her. She wants a temporary separation from her husband Bobby, so he invites her and her son Sol to stay at his house in Mazatlán. She then lives in his house south of the border and supervises the ongoing construction of the house. Bobby is a political refugee from Singapore; he arrived in

the U.S. with his brother when he was a child. He finally settled in Los Angeles and had several jobs while his brother was a student. Bobby met Rafaela through her brother, Pepe, while she was still living on the other side of the American border. Bobby owns a cleaning business, and truly believes in the "American way to make it", but the separation makes him reconsider his idea of happiness. Buzzworm is an African-American Vietnam veteran. He spends his time trying to keep kids in his neighbourhood away from drugs and gangbangs. He is also Gabriel's main informant, leading him to subjects for his articles such as the trade in drugs and organs. Gabriel's girlfriend, Emi, works in television, her parents are Japanese. She is an assertive and independent woman, and helps Gabriel to cope with difficult situations. Manzanar Murakami used to be a surgeon, but now lives on the streets and believes that he is the great "conductor" of traffic in Los Angeles. He spends most of his time standing on the bridges that overlook the city's many highways. He is also Emi's grandfather, though both of them only realize it quite late in the novel, since the rest of their family had decided to forget Manzanar's shameful disappearance, as well as his sudden and unexpected change of career. Finally Arcangel is a multidimensional figure, he is at times a performer and at others a wrestler, an angel or both. He travels North from Mexico to the United States and will help Rafaela and Bobby by taking care of Sol when Rafaela is forced to leave him.

The novel is carefully structured and divided into several sections, each of which corresponds to a character, as well as to the day of the week on which the action takes place. The book opens on a double set of indexes[11]. The first one is a

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11 Both indexes have been scanned and reproduced on plates 1.1 and 1.2.

quite straightforward and chronological table of contents going from Monday to Sunday. The second index "Hypercontexts" enables the reader to follow any itinerary by choosing a day, a character, or another random order.

When the novel begins Rafaela is in Mexico with Sol and thinking about what she left behind. She reports to Gabriel on a regular basis and seems to manage the building of a wall around his property and the decorating of the house quite effectively. She visits her neighbour Dona Maria from time to time to use her phone and wonders why she keeps finding crabs every morning in such a dry region. Meanwhile, in Los Angeles Gabriel and Emi are working, Manzanar is conducting the flow of cars and Bobby is going back home in Koreatown. The Monday section is mainly devoted to introducing the various characters. It establishes their daily routine, activities and aspirations. Then things accelerate as catastrophes take place one after the other in the L.A. area. A giant car accident blocks the highway and completely stops the traffic. Huge downpours wash out entire areas of the city and some people mysteriously die from violent overdoses after having eaten oranges. These oranges will later be acknowledged to be the latest way to smuggle huge concentrations of drugs over the border.

South of the border, Arcangel gets a day-job at Gabriel's property and then decides to head North. He takes with him a strange orange. This tenuous event is the trigger for the events that will take place in California. The orange in Arcangel's suitcase pulls the tropic up North and drags the whole Mexican geography towards the U.S. The effects of this journey are surprising. In Los Angeles everything is put to a sudden stop, people blocked on the highway leave their cars, which become occupied by homeless people who have been forced out of their encampments by the

rain.

In the meantime Gabriel is simultaneously investigating two stories. The first is Manzanar Murakami and his ability to sense the city's inner music, the second the trafficking of organs and drugs across the border by an elaborate network of criminals, one of which is Dona Maria's son. Rafaela, who overhears a telephone conversation at Dona Maria's, steals a suspicious-looking cooler from the fridge, and sends it to Gabriel. Immediately after that she leaves with Sol and takes the bus North with Arcangel. Unfortunately Dona Maria's son catches up with her on the way to the United States and she is forced to leave Sol with Arcangel.

In Los Angeles things slowly but surely seem to settle back into place. However, they follow a new and twisted order as Buzzworm becomes a live reporter for Emi's television broadcast and organizes a whole new set of programs animated by homeless people. They broadcast from the van of Emi's team and Buzzworm becomes a hugely popular media figure. Meanwhile Gabriel has decided to go to Mexico as his last phone call with Rafaela has him worried. He finds her on the side of the road, disfigured and hurt. She tells him that she got rid of her assailant (Dona Maria's son) and asks him to let Bobby know where she is and to ask him to find Sol. At this point Gabriel leaves her in Dona Maria's hands, who is unaware of her son's criminal activities. He also discovers that the criminal network he is investigating can spot any orange shipment thanks to a highly accurate satellite-tracking device, which can be checked on one of the many satellite TV channels. Once the state discovers this clever drug import-export business, a ban is passed in California on oranges, which then become a valued commodity.

After Gabriel has phoned him, Bobby heads to the wrestling arena where

Arcangel/El Gran Mojado is supposed to meet his opponent Supernafta. Bobby gets there in time for the fight and finally finds Sol. Rafaela feeds Arcangel with the orange, and finally joins Bobby. In the end, Arcangel manages to defeat Supernafta. In the meantime, Emi is delaying her meeting with Manzanar, whom she has finally recognized and fears to face. Eventually she does not succeed in meeting him while still alive as a helicopter that aimed at the van's parabolic dish shoots her. The attack is probably carried out by the criminal organization following the drugs' movements via satellite. Panic overwhelms the scene as gunshots are exchanged in total disarray, and homeless people run in every possible direction. Finally Buzzworm hands her corpse to Manzanar in the middle of the shootings and explosions, and the 'war' finally comes to an unexpected end when all the airbags simultaneously pop out of their compartments and silence the area.

> And Manzanar, peering cautiously from his higher perch, saw bird's eye the inflation of thousands upon thousands of automobile airbags, bursting simultaneously everywhere from their pouches in steering wheels and glove compartments like white poppies in a sudden bloom. All the airbags in L.A. ruptured forth, unfurled their white powdered wings against the barrage of bullets, and stunned the war to a dead stop. (TO 256)

This only constitutes a partial summary of Yamashita's novel, but it outlines the main events of the plot. Other episodes will be discussed in detail in the following pages of this analysis. Critical reviews and studies of Yamashita's fiction are rare. Much of the existing critical literature highlights her ethnic background and considers her work as an example of contemporary Asian-American literature. Other texts stress the diasporic consciousness of Yamashita's texts. Florence Hsiao-ching Li's article, for instance, examines the trope of motherhood in Tropic of Orange in

comparison with Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Dictee. As my perspective here is focused on the city, I will use the critical literature on Yamashita only insofar as it is relevant to the urban perspective of this analysis.

Yamashita's Tropic of Orange takes place in California and focuses in particular on Los Angeles as a border zone. Two of the novel's characters, Gabriel and Buzzworm, quite explicitly discuss Mike Davis' understanding of urban geography (a member of what is commonly known as the L.A. school of urban studies). I will also examine Yamashita's fictional construction of L.A. As she teaches creative writing and is well versed in urban theory, it can be assumed that the fictional urban space in Tropic of Orange is carefully crafted.

I will position my analysis of Yamashita's novel in relation to theorists such as Soja and Davis, whose texts are central to the contemporary fields of urban, cultural and literary studies. Starting from their theorizing of what urban geography is and reveals, I will consider each of their definitions of urban geography to construct my own perspective on the latter, and on Yamashita's conception of urban space in Tropic of Orange.

In Postmodern Geographies, Edward Soja explains that his objective is to spatialize historical narratives and to reassert the importance of space in critical social theory. In the wake of thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre, he insists on looking at space in a different way: "The landscape has a textuality that we are just beginning to understand, for we have only recently been able to see it whole and to 'read' it with respect to its broader movements and inscribed events and

meanings."[12]. In Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions, Soja proposes a confirmation of the same agenda. He wants to write a new geohistory of urbanism, one that would acknowledge the complexities and differences of L.A. as a symptomatic example of a post-metropolis. Instead of considering space as a neutral background against which various events are played out, he invites his reader to think of geographic space as contested, socially constructed and as part of social hierarchies and relationships. His definition of urban geography is therefore deeply rooted in a specific historical, social and practical context. Soja's theories are interesting for my analysis of Yamashita's California since the imaginary space she sets in place is much determined by two elements he stresses: history and American citizens.

People often affiliate both Soja and his colleague, Mike Davis, with the "L.A. School", as defined by Davis in his book City of Quartz:

> While surveying L.A in a systematic way, the UCLA researchers are most interested in exploiting the metropolis, à la Adorno or Horkheimer, as a "laboratory of the future". They have made clear that they see themselves excavating the outsides of paradigmatic post-fordism, an emergent 21st century urbanism. Their belief in the region as a crystal ball is redoubled by Fredric Jameson 's famous evocation of Bunker Hill as a concrete totalization of postmodernism. (CQ 157)

The L.A. School could be defined in broad terms as a group of researchers who are interested in re-writing, re-defining and questioning the specificity of Southern California, who want to conceptualize new mappings of this particular

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12 In Postmodern Geographies, The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory, London, Verso, 1989, p.157.

region. These scholars' work, like that of any school of thought, notably includes disparate elements and approaches. Mike Davis cultivates for instance differences with Edward Soja's works.

For the purpose of this study, one of Davis's most interesting books is Ecology of Fear, Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster. In one of its chapters, Davis tries to elucidate the reasons behind the recurring literary destruction of Los Angeles. Of course "in American literature, the city of doom is a potent image" (EF 284), and this could be exemplified by classical histories of literature or by genre studies. Yet in his attempt to build a typology of disaster novels set in California, there is another explicative element. As Davis' book discusses many novels and films in Los Angeles, he emphasizes the ever-present yet often underlying "specter of subversive immigrants and non-whites" (EF 287), a specter that according to him accounts for the creation of many of these novels. I will follow Davis's approach of looking at novels as tools to learn about social history and urban geography. Likewise his focus on racial issues is important as Yamashita offers us a fascinating example of what Davis would call a typical "magical dystopia"[13](EF 280) whose characters noticeably belong to non Caucasian and marginalized groups.

In order to analyze a text as dense as Yamashita's novel, built on so many voices, events and characters, I will organize my analysis around a review of the various components which give shape to the specific urban geography she creates. My definition of urban geography is a composite one. It is inspired by the theorists

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13 In the chapter devoted to 'The Literary Destruction of Los Angeles' in Ecology of Fear, Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster, Davis categorizes disaster fiction into nine subgenres, which he calls: hordes, romantic disaster, cult-catastrophe, the bomb, ecocatastrophe, cinematic disaster, Armageddon, alien invasions, and finally magical dystopia.

mentioned above, who have reshaped urban studies. As a consequence, I will use the word "geography" as a term referring to a specific territory whose characteristics can be revealing in relation both to American society and history. Yet I will underline the fact that this geography can only be read, known and understood throughout someone's unique experience. Without these prisms, be they the perception of the characters, the author, or the reader, there would be no point discussing such a notion.

The rest of this chapter is devoted to an examination of Yamashita's urban geography, and is organized in two sections. The first section examines Tropic of Orange as a magical dystopia, while the second section will assess Yamashita's creation as space of convergence.

1.1 Yamashita's California, an example of magical dystopia

Despite the author's goal of anchoring her fictional version of Los Angeles in a realist framework by using real location names and references that are recognizable to most Angelenos, the urban space she creates is linked to the fictional disaster scenario Mike Davis examines in some of his texts. Reading and analyzing Yamashita's novel thus necessarily implies a questioning of its connections and relations to other fictional and non-fictional texts. As a consequence, I will begin by examining the novel's affinities with dystopia and disaster stories as Yamashita's text shares characteristics with this genre:

> Critical or open-ended dystopias are texts that maintain a utopian core at their center, a locus of hope that contributes to deconstructing traditions and reconstructing alternatives. On the one hand, one of the most striking results of this questioning is the creation of open-ended dystopias (...). On the other hand, blurring borders between genres has created science fiction novels that introduce conventions from other genres such as the epistolary

> novel, the diary, and the historical novel. It is precisely the use, re-vision, and appropriation of generic fiction that constitute an oppositional writing practice (...).[14]

Among the elements affiliating Yamashita's plot and narrative to the classical disaster story, I will focus on two only which are first the pervasive violence, and second the extreme catastrophes and radical climate changes taking place in Los Angeles and in Mazatlán.

1.1.1 California, a place of ubiquitous violence

There is a whole corpus of critical literature, which views urban centres as places that attract people. The explanation for these migrations is often designated as push and pull factors. Los Angeles is a huge urban centre, with considerable employment opportunities: "The Los Angeles urban region (covering the five counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Ventura, Riverside, and San Bernardino) is today one of the largest industrial metropolises in the world, having recently passed Greater New York in manufacturing employment and total industrial production."[15] In Yamashita's novel many characters visibly want to go and work there; she therefore exemplifies with concrete cases some of the pull factors. Of course, the common desire of thousands of people coupled with a strict anti-immigration legislation often gives rise to competition and to violence. The particular status of L.A., and its geographical location understandably give rise to a market for illegal immigration and illegal work. All these job seekers are therefore maintained in an unfavourable

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14 In Raffaella Baccolini "Gender and Genre in the Feminist Critical Dystopias of Katherine Burdekin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler, Future Females, The next Generation, New Voices and Velocities in Feminist Science Fiction Criticism, Ed. Marleen S. Barr, New York, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000, p.13

15 In Postmodern Geographies, The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory, London, Verso, 1989, pp. 191-192.

and marginal position, a position that is of interest to the novelist.

The economic inequities in Los Angeles can be considered a trigger to violence. L.A. has also been the scene of numerous riots, whether one thinks of the Watts riots in 1965, local gang wars, or race riots[16] such as those following the 1992 Rodney King trial. In Tropic of Orange, Yamashita refers to these two kinds of urban violence. The link with the literary genre of dystopia originates from the fact that these literary narratives often describe the critical degradation of a specific society and its transformation into an oppressive and violent environment. In this section, my intention is to concentrate on violence in relation to urban space, first by examining the most obvious forms of violence pervading the city, and second by observing its more indirect and insidious manifestations.

The first and most obvious form of violence in Tropic of Orange is street violence in L.A. Gabriel mentions at some point that his first and quite idealistic motivation for being a journalist dates back to one of the city's uprisings. On a different level Buzzworm faces violence on a daily basis because of the activity he has chosen. By trying to get teenagers out of street gangs and away from drug trafficking and drug use, he confronts violence on a regular basis. His dialogue with some of the boys he tries to convince is informative: "When I talk about surviving, I don't mean pushing a needle up your veins and waiting for the next time. (...) Little homey like you pack a twenty-two. Think you're cool. And watcha doing? Out with the crew marking your territory like some dog. Some other dog come and piss on the

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16 For an interesting analysis of the 1992 Los Angeles riots and the way other creators reacted to them, see Min Hyoung Song's Strange Future : Pessimism and the 1992 Riots, Durham, Duke University Press, 2005.

wall, you gonna shoot him" (TO 26). Drugs act as a catalyst feeding violence. The accident that originally blocks L.A.'s highway system is due to a car crash in which the driver is believed to have overdosed by biting into an orange. After this accident and the official announcement that all oranges have to be handed back to the government as they might contain high doses of pure drug, chaos and violence gradually take over the city. Drugs appear then not only as pervasive substances addicting teenagers in poor neighbourhoods, but also as an irrational angel of death. One of these oranges kills for instance Margarita, a friend of Buzzworm's who owned a 'Mexican cooking corner' where he loved to stop to eat.

This kind of violence is already close to the more insidious forms of violence that I mentioned earlier. Buzzworm discusses one example of this type of violence when he tells the reader about the history of his neighbourhood. In the section where he mentions Davis' book, he speculates on the definition of the terms territory and mapping to finally come to the conclusion that maps are never really accurate:

> Buzzworm studied the map. Balboa'd torn it out of a book for him to study. Quartz City or some such title. He followed the thick lines of the map showing the territorial standing of Crips versus Bloods. Old map. 1972. Even if it were true. Even if it were true, whose territory was it anyway? (...) Was it his territory? According to the map, it was in Crips or Bloods territory. (TO 80-81)

In that same lengthy section he also elaborates on the way the city has been transformed and rebuilt by bureaucrats who cleverly claim that only a few people would be displaced to widen the highways, and assure them that it will be for the best. Of course their alluring discourse is nothing but lies and soon enough Buzzworm explains how the master plan is to let the neighbourhood deteriorate. Soon

it becomes much easier to get land for a very low price because no one is willing to keep this deserted territory. The violence here is much more covert but no less effective, as Buzzworm voices it:

> By the time the freeway could be widened, people forget what they got promised. Politicians who promised could be gone. (...) Make sure it took five years to clear out the houses. Make sure the houses left to be broken into and tagged. Let the houses be there for everyone to see. Use for illegal purposes. Pass drugs. House homeless. Make sure the ramp took another five years. (...) Leave it crumbling and abandoned enough; nothing left but for bulldozers. Just plow it away. Take it all away for free. (TO 83)

The strategy or rather the "master plan" as Buzzworm refers to it, is a clever one since people like his grandmother spend their life working to buy a property that in the end will be destroyed for the redevelopment plans of wealthy corporations. The violence exerted on this neighbourhood's inhabitants is devious but it clearly illustrates how a specific portion of a determined territory can be turned into an undesirable no man's land, one which can later on easily be gotten rid of. Issues of power, ownership and freedom of choice are thus ultimately linked in this urban environment while violence is a tool in the politicians or planners' hands.

Finally the last form of violence I will examine is the one related to the questions of employment, immigration and poverty. In her novel, Yamashita uses a wide range of characters to present us with various perspectives. Two of them (at least) give the reader an insight into what it means to be an immigrant in desperate need of work. The couple formed by Rafaela and Bobby is in this sense interesting, as they seem to disagree on some of these questions. Their separation at the beginning of the narrative is justified by the fact that they obviously cannot find a middle

ground anymore. Rafaela seems to have reached a point where she cannot stand her husband's need to achieve more material comfort (such as a TV, an answering machine, a car) and his stubborn refusal to try to improve his employees' working conditions. Bobby appears in the novel as a character who has few second thoughts and whose main preoccupation is to make it in order to bring comfort to his brother, wife and son. The way the author presents him is symptomatic, especially in the first few sections of the text, as is illustrated here:

> Ever since he's been here, never stopped working. Always working. Washing dishes. Chopping vegetable. Cleaning floors. Cooking hamburgers. Painting walls. Laying bricks. Cutting hedges. Mowing lawn, Digging ditches. Sweeping trash. Fixing pipes. Pumping toilets. Scrubbing urinals. Washing clothes. Pressing clothes. Sewing clothes. Planting trees. Changing tires. Changing oil and filters. Stocking shelves. Lifting sacks. Loading trucks. Smashing trash. Recycling plastic. Recycling aluminum. Recycling cans and glass. Drilling asphalt. Pouring cement. Building up. Tearing down. Fixing up. Cleaning up. Keeping up. (TO 79).

Bobby stands in clear contrast to his wife here; whatever the job is, he is ready and would do anything as this long inventory of occupations shows. The repetitive pattern of this extract reproduces Bobby's automatic mode of thinking.

On the contrary Yamashita presents Rafaela as a more intellectually inclined character who keeps on studying while working with her husband as a cleaner. She strongly thinks that there is more to be obtained from America than material comfort, and she would like her husband to share her views. For Rafaela there is absolutely no point in leaving one's country to go to the USA if the improvement is only financial or material. In the beginning of the novel, she tightly clings to her ideals: "But she

kept talking, saying we're not wanted here. Nobody respects our work. Say we cost money. Live on welfare. It's a lie. We pay taxes." (TO 80). Her stubbornness is even more obvious after leaving Bobby. She thought that things would be better in Mexico, but faces the same kind of situation as in the States. In the following passage she feels uncomfortable with her neighbour's reaction toward one of the workers she hired for Gabriel. Dona Maria tells her that she does not approve of her compassion towards him and considers it to be weakness. "Rafaela wanted to defend the old man, wanted to say that after so many years of work, perhaps he deserved some rest, deserved to leave work early. But this was Mexico. This was the way of her country. Her relationship to Dona Maria depended on her ability to pay Rodriguez and to get paid for." (TO 65-66). Mexico and what happens there are therefore no better than the USA, it is as unforgiving when it comes to old or tired workers as elsewhere. Rafaela soon must acknowledge that her dream of a better life has just been an illusion.

In many other scenes the poverty and exploitation of these migrant communities are denounced either in vehement or cynical terms depending on the character speaking or witnessing the scene. The misery and urgent need that all these people share is proof of the violence their wealthier neighbour is performing on them. When Arcangel has lunch in a local restaurant on his way up North, the name and description of the place speak for themselves: "Arcangel sat alone at a table outside the Cantina de Miseria y Hambre. (...) All day and night long the tables and chairs of the Cantina of Misery & Hunger were filled with people. Of course some were miserable, some hungry, some miserable and hungry. They saw the sign from a distance as they crossed the street, wending their way through life's travails to a place of commonalities." (TO 130). The author also has him noticing that in this place, he

is the only one ordering local nopales while everyone is having the special: "Hamburger, Fritos and catsup". This detail emphasizes even more the blending of frontiers as well as some of the consequences of these migrations.

In a more cynical tone, Yamashita devotes some sections of her text to Bobby's alleged relative, whom he helps getting into the country. This episode is significant, especially when he thinks back to his past situation and remembers the way he and his brother came to America. His drive across the border after having dressed her up like what he assumes to be a more typical American finishes on this note: "Bobby's in line like one more tourist. He's got the cuz holding a new barbie doll in a box, like she bought it cheap in T.J. Official eyeballs Bobby's passport and waves them through. That's it. Two celestials without a plan. Drag themselves through the slit jus' like any Americanos. Just like visa cards." (TO 204). The comparison between him, his alleged niece and visa cards is telling. Immigrants are often regarded as desirable if they can bring in money. These movements of population are indeed much dictated by economics and depend on each country's state of development.

The last form of violence that will be examined here is also related to the notions of poverty and despair. When Rafaela goes to visit Dona Maria, her neighbour in Mazatlán, she discovers a cooler in the fridge and overhears a phone conversation that makes her steal it on an impulse. This event plays back to the beginning of the novel where Gabriel tries to entangle the various leads he has about a woman. Just after arriving from Mexico, the said woman goes to a local hospital with her infant and leaves soon afterwards. The correlation of these events with our knowledge as readers makes the trafficking of organs more obvious to us than to the

characters. Quickly enough they also come to the same conclusion about these specific travels either instinctively or more sensibly. A market for human organs is set between California and South America, a network that Gabriel manages to discover and to understand through a collaborative investigation over the Internet. The infant's heart stolen by Rafaela is proof of the difficult poverty experienced South of the US border. When Yamashita portrays Rafaela as a woman willing to sacrifice for the sake of her child's life, she clearly wishes to contrast her with the mothers that are forced to sell their offspring's organs. The quasi magical fight that takes place between her and Dona Maria's son over the cooler and its precious content resembles a mystic fight between good and evil echoing the more ironic wrestling match between Arcangel and Supernafta.

Things have gone so crazy that even the last highway scene does not look as shocking as it should. When Buzzworm realizes that the piece of meat being roasted by a group of people around a fire is nothing but the heart from the cooler, it does not come as much of a surprise. As things have gone so wild during the last week this unconscious cannibalism appears quite logical. Violence is omnipresent and variously represented in the text, whether it is obvious and explosive on the street, or latent and more unexpected as can be seen in the daily relations between individuals.

1.1.2 Catastrophes and climate changes

In several sections of the novel, Yamashita makes clear that the city evolves according to the drastic climate change or dramatic events that take place: "As noted by many others, **climatic change in L.A.** was different from other places. **It had** less perhaps to do with weather and perhaps **more to do with disaster**. For example when the city rioted or when the city was on fire or when the city shook, the program was

particularly apt, controversial, hair-rising, horrific, intense-apocalyptic, if you will." (My emphasis) (TO 36). In another section the author describes Rafaela walking back home under a violent thunderstorm. The storm brings the odd sight of hundreds of crabs floating on the highway.

> The path was soon awash, and Rafaela could barely see anything. (...) Suddenly she noticed them. Just like the crabs she swept from the house daily, but hundreds of them, large and small, crawling frantically sideways in every direction, washing down with the river of rain. Rafaela forgot the necessity of the umbrella's protection (...) She hugged Sol, securing her hand over the back of his head and ran, crabs grappling the earth and crunching beneath her feet. (TO 70).

This strange scene, where the whole region is completely awash, is a subtle way to signal the unfamiliar turn the narrative will take, a turn which is later on partially explained when Rafaela notices that the orange she was looking after fell from the tree and appeared to be gone. This end-of-world sequence therefore signals in a metaphorical way what she has not discovered yet, namely that the Tropic of Cancer, symbolized by the myriad of crabs has gone astray. This downpour is not only a sign of the climate changes affecting the Californian region but also an indicator that the geography of Mazatlán is heavily affected. Of course this will not turn out to be an isolated event as things in Mexico and L.A. are mysteriously synchronized from the outset. For instance Buzzworm tells Gabriel in one of their first exchanges that he has just seen the village of a whole transvestite community being destroyed under a sudden and devastating downpour. To Gabriel it is as he mentally puts it: "A flash-flood-L.A.-river-transvestite-drowning story with a happy ending." (TO 42). These two examples as well as other events to which I will come

back later clearly demonstrate that the climatic circumstances are akin to the dystopian character of the novel.

An interesting characteristic of the dystopian discourse in Yamashita's novel is the focus on large-scale disasters and sudden changes. In many classical dystopian texts, terrible events need to be on a grand scale. As Davis discusses in many of his books, L.A. and dystopia have had a common history for a long time. In her novel, Yamashita cleverly uses some of the traits that he and other critics usually discuss in relation with California to turn them into a thought-provoking and personal version. Among the large scale changes occurring in California are of course the sudden paralysis of the highway system. In a city so defined by its network of freeways, the author's choice of bringing it to a sudden stop is daring and extreme. Yamashita's prose eschews the repertory of stereotypes associated with highways such as speed, cars, and the impersonality of city dwellers. Los Angeles' landscape has often been described as surreal with its dense and intertwining network of roads and Yamashita does not minimize this specificity. Most if not all of her characters use the highway system to get where they want to go, or use it in a different way once it is completely blocked. Buzzworm considers the roads an escape route from one's neighbourhood, a way to go elsewhere as well as to gain a new perspective. When he recounts the first time he drove out of his area he underlines the fact that he realized how the palm trees stood as symbols and guardians of his neighbourhood.

> One day, Buzzworm got taken for a ride on the freeway. Got to pass over the Harbor Freeway, speed over the hood like the freeway was a giant bridge. He realized you could just skip out over his house, his streets, his part of town. (...) Only thing you could see that anyone might take notice of were the palm trees. That was what the palm trees were for. To

make out the place where he lived. To make sure that people noticed.' (TO 33).

The view from above or afar is a recurring one in this novel, as Yamashita lets her characters give their own interpretation of the network of highways. Manzanar's perspective is also of a grand scale, but quite different from Buzzworm's. He does not think of the roads only as a way for L.A.'s inhabitants to move away from their neighbourhoods. Rather he thinks of the traffic and of the automobile flux as the circulation system, providing the heart beat of the city. Manzanar conceives the city in terms of music, so that he stands on bridges like a conductor in front of an orchestra. To him there is a music produced by the city that needs to be tamed and conducted, an exhausting and lonely task for the conductor. "And yet, standing there, he bore and raised each note, joined them, united families, created a community, a great society, an entire civilization of sound. The great flow of humanity ran below and beyond his feet in every direction, pumping and pulsating, that blood connection, the great heartbeat of a great city." (TO 35). To most people in their cars, he is just another homeless person, a lunatic standing on an overpass. Yet as this quotation shows he manages to keep order in the city, to give it unity until the tropic begins to shift North with Sol and Arcangel. Murakami is a sign which gives sense and meaning to this huge entity: "Manzanar Murakami had become a fixture on the freeway overpass much like a mural or a traffic information sign or a tagger's mark. He was there everyday, sometimes even when it rained, but it rarely rained. After all, this was L.A." (TO 36).

But Manzanar's attempt to tame the city cannot be completely effective; otherwise the novel would lose its definite dystopian dimension. The first incident disrupting Manzanar's conducting is impressive in scale and appears inspired by

classic disaster movies. In this sequence, when the fire reaches the accident site, two dissimilar tones mingle. One is related to the genre of the typically visual spectacle of dystopia, and echoes disaster films. The other is Yamashita's own construction in which she turns this terrible accident into a jungle, with trucks represented as the dying animals of a great jungle.

> The slain semis with their great stainless steal tanks had sprawled across five lanes, bleeding precious fuel over the asphalt. The smaller vehicles of the automobile kingdom gawked with a certain reverence or huddled near, impatiently awaiting a resolution. (...) Helicopters hovered, swooping-in occasionally for a closer shot, a giant vortex of scavengers. (...) When the tanks blew and the great wall of flames flew up the brush and ivy along the freeway canyon, Manzanar knew instinctively the consequences, knew that his humble encampment wedged against a retaining wall and hidden in oleander would be soon be a pile of ash. (TO 120).

Finally, another good example of the way Yamashita plays with scale to turn her text into a narrative inspired by dystopia is the scene of the final shooting, which also takes place on the highway. Emi has set up her TV-team in the middle of chaos in order to provide live coverage of the events taking place there. As life begins to re-organize itself, a general shooting disrupts the turn of events. One quickly understands that the dish on top of their vehicle must have been seen as a threatening tracking device by one of the powerful drug trafficking networks. As soon as Buzzworm realizes that Emi is shot, he grabs and pulls her into the van and tries to escape the shooting, while hundreds of guns begin firing even though the shooters do not really know what is going on. Again the scene is referring to classical cinematic pursuits but with a self-referential and ironic twist as exemplified in this passage:

> He could see the chasing helicopters in the rearview mirror approaching in a cloud of rainbow smoke. It could have be an air show, even with the strafing machine guns and multiple explosions. Emi bleeding in her New Age tan and towel, appreciated the precision timing as if it were special FX. (...) Buzzworm wove the van through the droves of screaming and panic stricken people like so many walks-on, avoiding the sudden car explosions and shattering glass, careening around the digitally-constructed dismembering of cats and dogs and even a horse. A cast of thousands-military and civilians- ran this way and that in an epic disaster. (TO 248).

The title of the section in itself is a hint at the way Yamashita expects the reader to insert this section into a wider context of cultural productions since it is entitled "Commercial Break-The Big Sleep". The passage quoted before refers both to cinema, with the special effects associated with disaster movies, and to literature through The Big Sleep, a classic Californian *noir*. The epic disaster Yamashita describes is therefore to be discussed in relation to its ties with other cultural and artistic works. Now that the connection between the dystopian genre and Yamashita's text has been established, I would like to show how the author does not simply recycle the concerns of urban theorists or artists but oscillates between several tendencies. One such tendency is the tradition of magical realism.

1.1.3 Tropic of Orange's connection with magical realism

Many difficulties arise when one decides to use the concept of magical realism. This concept, borrowed from art history, was later theorized by writers and intellectuals such as Luis Costa Lima and has gained fairly wide currency in critical discussions of literature over the last few decades. The definition of this concept is highly debated among scholars of the field. For the purpose of this study I will

therefore use a general and inclusive definition instead of discussing the conflicting arguments of specialists. Magical realism will here be considered as a story telling and a narrative writing mode which: "challenges realistic representation in order to introduce poiesis into mimesis"[17], a mode which amalgamates mimetic writing with sections of text including fantastic and dreamlike elements. Another theoretician of magical realism is Wendy B. Farris. She includes among the five primary characteristics of the mode of magical realism, three at least which correspond to Yamashita's writing:

> (...) first the text contains an irreducible element of magic; second, the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events; fourth, the narrative merges different realms; and finally magical realism disturbs the received ideas about time, space, and identity. (My emphasis)[18]

The characteristics underlined here are general, while Yamashita's interpretation of magical realism is personal and original. She integrates into her novel varied elements from different origins (these will be analyzed in a later section devoted to the notion of convergence in the novel). Yet one can easily retrieve the elements in her fictional text, which are part of a definitively magical realist tendency. The mere fact that the novelist decides to represent Los Angeles, a city so associated with speed and mobility, in a stasis is evidence of her tendency to go against the grain of more realist narratives. Several of her characters do underline the

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17 In Amaryll Chanady, 'Territorialization of the Imaginary in Latin America : Self Affirmation and Resistance to Metropolitan Paradigms', Magical Realism, Theory, History, Community, Ed. L. Parkinson Zamora, W. B. Faris, Durham and London: Duke University, 1995, p. 130.

18 In Wendy B. Faris, Ordinary Enchantements. Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative, Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 2004, p.7.

oddity of this absolute standstill. Buzzworm notes: "Amazing thing was everybody in L.A. was walking. They just had no choice. There wasn't a transportation artery that a vehicle could pass through. It was a big-time thrombosis. Massive stroke. Heart attack. You name it. (...) Only way to navigate was to feel the streets with your own two feet." (TO 218-219). In order to elaborate I will consider two specific elements, first her depiction of Los Angeles and second the character of Arcangel.

In the beginning of this chapter, I outlined the fact that Tropic of Orange questions many of the latest theories and analyses dealing with urban geography. Some parts of the text seem to echo in an imaginative way the concerns of these theorists, whether they center on ethnicity, immigration or urban development and architecture. On the one hand Yamashita's novel is a serious investigation about L.A. It represents what Los Angeles is made of at the turn of the twenty first century. On the other hand, it is a freely built environment that she constantly modifies by using narrative strategies typical of magical realism. Los Angeles' urban geography therefore constitutes a mixture of both realist and magical elements. Among these magical episodes are the moments when some of the characters come to realize that the city dramatically changes as the tropic is being displaced. Buzzworm, who looks at palm trees as the distinctive mark of his neighbourhood, realizes that something odd is happening when these trees all seem to bend in the same direction: "He looked up, up at his palm trees catching the light, fluttering like tinsel, unlike any other tree. (...) Palm trees looked like they were all bending, all stretching their necks in the same direction. Pointing. Trying to say something. Buzzworm thought he'd seen everything. But lately things were going off their own direction." (TO 141). Manzanar, who is especially attentive to the city's inner movements, also perceives

the changes occurring in L.A.'s geography. As he is trying to conduct the traffic despite the overwhelming chaos (after the cars have come to a complete stop) he senses the shifting geography, and comes to detect its origin. "The entire city of Angels seemed to have opened its singular voice to herald a naked old man and a little boy with an orange followed by a motley parade approaching from the south. Once again the grid was changing." (TO 238-239).

Yamashita's strategy here seems to be to defeat any expectation the reader might have regarding Los Angeles. She turns a densely built and minutely organized space into a malleable and almost elastic entity. The grid, the ultimate index of rectitude and order, the embodiment in America of the superiority of man's design over nature becomes inefficient and inappropriate. The grid is also a way to replace these extraordinary events into the history of this territory and of its occupants. Many passages refer to contemporary migrations, such as the immigration of Bobby's cousin, but other sections of the text also allude to some of the earlier migrations on the American continent, like in this passage: "there was a time when the v-6 and the double-overheard cam did not reign. In those days, there were the railroads and the harbors and the aqueduct. These were the first infrastructures built by the migrant and immigrant labor that created the initial grid on which everything else began to fill in." (TO 237). This overlapping of geography and history is quite widely used by Yamashita who often suggests that the nature of a place depends not only on its current inhabitants but also on its history. When Buzzworm thinks about questions of mapping and urban development, he does so in retrospect by articulating together the story of his grandmother's life, the various accounts of the locals he has heard, and the discourses of politicians made at the various stages of his neighbourhood's

transformation. Subsequently, when the geography is changing, one can assume that history is too. This flexibility of notions and its adaptation and inclusion into the fictive universe is thus an element linking Yamashita's novel with magical realism. Finally when looking for something or someone in the novel that most perfectly stands as the epitome of all these changes, Arcangel immediately comes to mind. He is indeed one, if not the most mysterious figures in the novel, as well as a multi-faceted character[19]. Arcangel surely stands at the source of many of the disruptions happening in the narrative. After all, he is the one carrying the orange across the border and therefore more or less intentionally modifying the contours of America's geography.

To look more closely at Arcangel is to look at the novelist's engagement with the idea of carnivalesque, an idea which is connected to magical realism. David K. Danow's The Spirit of Carnival, Magical Realism and the Grotesque offers a study of the carnivalesque as "carnival's reflection in literature, a mode and perspective that at once produces transformations, reversals, and inversions of fate and fortune that reveal in turn a resultant, necessarily dualistic view of the world."[20] (My emphasis). Carnivals originally enabled the poor to be king for a day and temporarily erased society's boundaries and hierarchies. It gave to powerless people the opportunity to reverse roles once a year. As examples of these transformations and reversals, one can think of the whole second half of the novel, which deals with the reorganization of life on the highway after the first accident put a stop to traffic. Some homeless

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19 It should also be noted that Yamashita almost certainly intended her reader to identify a parallel (or at least an echo) between her Arcangel and that of another postmodern work of magical realism, Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses.

20 In The Spirit of Carnival, Magical Realism and the Grotesque, Kentucky, University Press of Kentucky, 1995 p.5.

people become the occupants of expensive cars and come to inhabit them while others instantly become celebrities after taking jobs as local television hosts, a manifest proof of the reversal of fate present in the text.

Even though Danow's study concentrates on writers other than Yamashita, he underlines a central fact for this study, which is that the carnivalesque often permeates works of magical realism in many ways. "While negotiating the tortuous terrain of credibility, magical realism manages to present a view of life that exudes a sense of energy and vitality in a world that promises not only joy but also a fair share of misery as well."[21] What Danow accentuates in this passage seems to be perfectly exemplified by the character of Arcangel, who brings energy and vitality to the novel. The sections devoted to him are always dense, merging different realms, different eras and different places, all of which makes the reader quite uncertain of what to consider reality, dream, performance or magic. The first lengthy description provided by Yamashita is quite emblematic of his multifaceted and mysterious nature:

> (...) his voice was often a jumble of unknown dialects, guttural and whining, Latin mixed e aboriginal, colonial, slave, or immigrant tongue, a great confusion discernible to all. (...) Of course this was part of an accomplished performance, but no one was ever certain where or how he had perfected his art. He was an actor and a prankster, mimic and comic, freak, a one-man circus act. (...) He did big epics and short poetry -as short as a single haiku- romantic musicals, political scandal, and, as they say, comical tragedy and tragical comedy. (TO 47).

Passages devoted to this character portray him in various situations, yet all of

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21 The Spirit of Carnival, Magical Realism and the Grotesque, Kentucky, University Press of Kentucky, 1995 p. 5.

them include unfamiliar and odd events. During his trip north, for instance, he offers to pull a truck stuck in traffic, and once he has done so, is offered gifts. This scene foreshadows his final wrestling match but it also proves the extraordinary abilities of this old man. "When the cable was in place, Arcangel secured both ends to the two hooks and drew the hooks through the skin of his body, through the strangely scarred lobes at the sides of his torso. He moved slowly forward until the entire contraption was taut, until he was harnessed securely as an ox to its plough." (TO 73-74). Despite his age, Yamashita presents Arcangel as a strong and vigorous man, one whose energy and virility are unquestionable. "He possessed the beauty of an ancient body, a gnarled and twisted tree, tortured and serene, wise and innocent all at once. Here in this body-tree -more like bamboo than birch, more like birch than oak, more like oak than pine, more like pine than sequoia, more like sequoia than cactus, more like cactus- was the secret of his youth and the secret of his age." (TO 47).

Arcangel stands out both by his physical strength and by his knowledge and experience. His monologues and poetry (directly inserted into the text, yet most of the time identified because they are italicized) seem to trace back and narrate various episodes of American history. Even though he can appear as a jester at times, one that juggles, wrestles and performs tricks, Yamashita confirms his particular status by having some of the people he meets testifying that he truly experienced many if not all the events he refers to, incredible as this may be. Arcangel is therefore a dual character, one who is able to encompass contradictions and opposites. For instance he can while pulling the Tropic of Cancer north, also declare himself a pilgrim to sceptical customs officials and offer to his audience a grandiose spectacle: "It was one of those odd moments in liberation theology in which a messenger called

Arcangel stood at the top of Angel's Flight, looking out over the City of Angels with his arms raised to the heavens and his body fastened to the whole continent. (...) [Sol] sat obediently on the suitcase while Arcangel performed tricks of magic, prophecy, comedy and political satire." (TO 213).

His trip north, which is often referred to as inevitable (more precisely it is said to be his manifest destiny[22]), creates a bond, a closeness between countries with a long common history. Bringing them together creates chaos, transformations and reversals but most importantly it unites and connects people. Arcangel seems to be willing to rally people to him, to bring them together, to make them understand that they can peacefully live with and understand each other. The task he assigns himself of bringing the continent together is a colossal mission and his disappearance at the end of the novel shows how idealistic and utopian his project was. Bobby together with Emi, the most down to earth character of all, for a moment grabs the cut line of the tropic and tries to hold it in place but soon he clearly voices his skepticism and lets go of it, most probably bringing things back to what they originally were.

> He sees the line where it gets cut through the orange. So he grabs the two ends. Is he some kind of fool? Maybe so. But he is hanging on. (...) Little by little the slack of the line's gone. Things stretching tight. Just Bobby grabbing the two sides. Making the connection. Pretty soon he's sweating it. Lines reaping through the palms. How long can he hold on? Dude's skinny but he's an Atlas. (...) Family out there. Still stuck on the other side. He's gritting his teeth and crying like a fool. What are these goddamn lines anyway? What do they connect? What do they divide? What's he holding on to? What's he holding on to? (TO 267-268).

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22 (TO 132).

This ending is not all negative though, because Bobby lets go to embrace his family, to re-unite with Rafaela and Sol. It is an open-ended conclusion as many elements are voluntarily left unknown (such as where Gabriel is and what he does). In this sense this ending perfectly fits with the critical and open-ended dystopia referred to in the beginning of this section. One could also read this outcome as a cyclical conclusion, since it is suggested that Arcangel may be buried under an orange tree marking the tropic. Hence Arcangel remains the incarnation of a possible harmonious union of opposites as well as a mirthful figure weaving Yamashita's text together with the wide and diverse corpus of magical realism. As such Arcangel stands as an example of convergence, an idea that will be the focus of the following section as I want to show how Yamashita's urban geography is also what I will define as a space of convergence.

1.2 Tropic of Orange, a textual space of convergence

Numerous elements congregate in Yamashita's novel, some of them that appear contradictory. In order to make sense and critically analyze her novel, my aim is to use the idea of convergence. To study the process of convergence in a text, one needs to find two or more disparate elements brought together by the author who thus establishes an otherwise absent connection between them. This concept of convergence can be applied to various levels of the novel. I shall therefore establish the validity of the overarching concept of convergence when it comes first to geographies, second to imaginaries and finally to stories, and then see how this idea is deployed in the novel. The order chosen to discuss different types of convergence emerges from the fact that stories can be considered to originate from or to be affiliated with particular imaginaries, while I consider imaginaries to be broadly

derivative of geographies.

1.2.1. Convergence of geographies

In the current work, the term geography refers (as explained earlier) to a specific territory, which can only be read, known and understood through someone's unique experience. Indeed "geography" becomes void of meaning if one does not acknowledge the different prisms of perception of the characters, the author and ultimately the reader. There are several reasons for defining Tropic of Orange as a novel, which brings together different geographies. In Yamashita's novel the neighbouring territories of the United States of America and Mexico are mapped like spaces, where passages and movements are omnipresent as Molly Wallace underlines in her article 'Tropics of Globalisation: Reading the New North America'[23]:

> A "transnational" text, *Tropic of Orange* tracks the passage of migrants (documented and undocumented), and commodities (legal and illegal) across the U.S./Mexican border. Through a series of allusions and citations in epigraphs and in the body of the text itself (from Guillermo G of "cultural glia Butler, Mike Davis, and Gabriel García Márquez, among others), Yamashita explicitly contextualizes the novel within a larger inter-textual conversation on L.A. as a global city in particular, and on North America as a "community" in general. A range of issues--both intra- and inter-national, micro- and macro-political--are pulled into the vortex of the novel and mixed in chaotic fashion: Gingrich's "contract with America;" Wilson's proposition 187; the international organ trade; multiculturalism debates; and global capitalism in the form of the Pacific Rim and NAFTA. (152).

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23 'Tropics of Globalisation: Reading the New North America' in Symploke 9.1-2, University of Nebraska Press, pp. 145-160, 2001.

The issues therefore discussed and the events taking place in the text visibly have to do with converging geographies instead of isolated ones. When characters talk of migration, they often seem to mention the fact that California is a place that reveals that many of the differences between these two countries are artificial. During the Cantina sequence, Arcangel, or rather his wrestling persona 'El Gran Mojado', strikes up a conversation about NAFTA with some of the workers surrounding him. When Arcangel, pointing at his can of Budweiser says that at the moment North has come South, a quite outspoken diner answers his remark by saying: "What's the good of being North when it feels, looks, tastes, smells shit like South? [And another immediately adds:] That's right if Martians landed here, they would know. They would swim nude in Acapulco, buy sombreros, ride burros, take pictures of the pyramids, build a maquiladora, hire us and leave." (TO 132). Similarly, but on a less cynical note Rafaela's trip back to Mexico is said to be disappointing, especially because she has to face the same selfish and profit-driven behavior that she was hoping to leave behind in Los Angeles. Los Angeles is obviously much closer that she assumed to be, as seen in this quotation from the end of the novel, which unmistakably designates L.A as part of Mexico: "(...) Arcangel - naked to the waist- continued to press forward toward his destination: The Village of the Queen of the Angels of Porciuncula, the second largest city of Mexico, also known as Los Angeles." (TO 211).

This convergence of geographies does not imply that the novelist is mystified by an idealized version of transnationalism. She has several of her characters voicing their concerns about these financial and population exchanges. Her description of Bobby when he disguises his cousin into the stereotype of an American little girl,

fully equipped with Nikes and a Barbie doll, is a perfect example of this mixture of seriousness and wit prominent in the best sections of the novel. Yamashita describes how obvious signs of difference can easily be obliterated or masked, yet she also suggests that it is Bobby's knowledge of illegal immigration and his American Express card, which probably enable him to get her into the US.

The act of choosing a tropic as a conceptual separation instead of a real border is evidence of Yamashita's desire to undermine this artificial[24] frontier. When Arcangel arrives at the border, he is questioned by what the reader assumes to be customs officials. At this point Arcangel's monologue/poetry alternates with descriptive passages showing the anticipation with which the disappearance of the frontier is awaited. "The thing called the New World Border waited for him with the anticipation of five centuries. (...) Here was a mere moment of passage. As he approached, he could hear the chant of the border over and over again: Catch'em and throw'em back. Catch'em and throw'em back. Catch'em and throw'em back. It was the beginning of the North of his dream, but they questioned him anyway." (TO 198). Once Arcangel has passed and annihilated the frontier, the obvious result is a distorted geography that only some of the characters can perceive, either because they have a special sensitivity (such as Manzanar or Buzzworm) or because they have to face the impossibility of orienting themselves in the city the normal way. As Bobby, the most down to earth character voices it: "Streets stretched and shrunk this way and that. Someone put the city in the washer/dryer. Shrunk 50% in places. Then ironed it out 200% in others." (TO 230).

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24 Artificial refers here to the idea of a frontier drawn by human population contrary to a "natural' dividing line which could for example correspond to a mountain range.

Shifting attention from the frontier to the tropic and having two territories mingling together is an enticing way for the author to make her reader reconsider this region not so much in terms of economic exchanges but in a more general sense. Instead of speaking of the Latin Americanization of Los Angeles[25], she shifts attention to the contact zone between the U.S and Mexico. By doing so Yamashita seems to value an understanding of this area known as *la frontera* rather than as *la linea*. The distinction between these two terms is a subtle one that Mike Davis clearly explains as follows. "Spanish offers the useful distinction between La Linea, the physical and jurisprudential border with it two hundred and thirty million individuals crossing each year, and La Frontera, the distinctive, two thousand mile long zone of daily cultural and economic interchange it defines, with an estimated eight millions inhabitants."[26] *La frontera* is an interesting idea for this study, because it defines the frontier more as a contact zone between Mexico and the USA, where geographies can converge than as a strict dividing line[27]. Yamashita definitely prefers to lay emphasis on the contacts and interactions taking place in this wide territory rather than considering the US as completely separate and untouched by the rest of America.

Finally there is another tactic that Yamashita employs to make geographies converge, which applies to the Asia Pacific area. In an authoritative article, Rachel C. Lee clarifies the definition and implications of this particular geographical

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25 Davis indeed writes that 'all major Latino groups are heavily concentrated in the twenty largest cities, with L.A. and New York accounting for almost one third of the Spanish surname population'. in Magical Urbanism, Latinos reinvent the US City, London &New York, Verso, 2000, p. 7.

26 In Magical Urbanism, Latinos reinvent the US City, London &New York, Verso, 2000, pp. 26-27.

27 It should be noted that this particular concept has also been provocatively explored in Gloria Anzaldúa 's classic postmodern feminist ethnography, Borderlands the New Mestiza=la Frontera, San Francisco, Calif. : Aunt Lute ; Enfield : Airlift, 1999.

construction, which stands for motions of people and capital and/or for a counter hegemonic space of cultural productions, depending on how one spells it. "Orthographically, Asia-Pacific with a hyphen refers to the capitalist utopia, while Asia/Pacific with a slash indicates a "counter hegemonic space of cultural production" derivative of the local memories of Pacific Basin peoples."[28] Lee then proceeds to analyze in a comparative manner how both the definitions of the Asia-/Pacific and Yamashita's second novel entitled Through the Arc of the Rain Forest seem to respond to "the unsettling effects of globalization and of time-space compression"[29]. Like Tropic of Orange, Through the Arc of the Rain Forest is shaped by the voices of several protagonists (six in total, of which five are non-Asian). The novel mostly takes place in Brazil but also discusses experiences in Asia, notably Japan. In her interpretation of Yamashita's novel Through the Arc of the Rain Forest, Lee underlines some characteristics that would be valid if applied to the novel I am more interested in. She writes:

> (...) **Yamashita's text grapples with both new and old imaginative formations of community** and coalition enabled and transformed by spatial convergences particular to post-modernity or late capitalism. **These alternative communities are composed of nationally and racially heterogeneous social actors who are globally interrelated** by virtue of worldwide media links, touristic travel across the borders, international financial networks, transnational trade, and a shared ecology.[30] (My emphasis).

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28 In 'Asian American Cultural Production in Asian-Pacific Perspective', Boundary 2, 26.2, Summer 1999, p. 237. In the quoted section, she discusses and quotes abundantly another book by Arif Dirlik and Rob Wilson untitled Asia/Pacific as Space of Cultural Production, Durham, Duke University Press, 1995.

29 Ibid., p. 238.

30 Ibid., pp. 246-247.

In Tropic of Orange, Yamashita also has different protagonists share with the reader their experience of immigration and dislocation from Asia to America, the main examples being Manzanar and Bobby. When she introduces them, again she shows how appearances can be deceitful and how one should go beyond the either/or dichotomy. This passage, which is the first portrait of Bobby, is both excessive and humorous but also representative of the author's strategy to simultaneously blur and question stereotypes:

> If you know your Asians, you look at Bobby. You say, that's Vietnamese. That's what you say. Color's pallid. Kinda blue just beneath the skin. Little underweight. Korean's got rounder face. Chinese's taller. Japanese's dressed better. If you know your Asians. Turns out you'll be wrong. And you gonna be confused. Dude speaks Spanish. Comprende? So you figure it's one of those Japanese from Peru. Or maybe Korean from Brazil. Or Chinamex. Turns out Bobby is from Singapore. You say, okay, Indonesian. Malaysian. Wrong again. (...) Bobby's Chinese. Chinese from Singapore with a Vietnam name speaking like a Mexican living in Koreatown. That's it. (TO 14-15).

By openly playing with stereotypes, Yamashita challenges conventions and makes clear that her fictional world is informed by more than her Asian American origin. Using Asia-Pacific protagonists and having them remembering their past experience is a means of bringing together these otherwise distant geographies. This emphasis on illegal immigration, on camps, on the trauma experienced by these immigrants, enables her to draw parallels between these experiences and those of other populations on the American continent. These converging geographies do not underestimate the disparities between specific communities but they obviously contribute to the emergence of connections and understanding between these actors.

1.2.2. Convergence of imaginaries

By resorting to various imaginaries, Yamashita actively engages in a process of subversion, a process which confirm that the novel is a critical dystopia as defined by Baccolini[31]. Yamashita's main sources are the contemporary literary and filmic imaginaries. In the following section, my central concern will be to decode the kind of association and merging that the novelist establishes when dealing with Los Angeles and its area. I will limit my analysis here to two powerful imaginaries she seems to value, that of *noir*[32] and the wider one of Mexican cinema.

The *noir* references in Tropic of Orange are quite numerous but they can be classified in two different categories. The first category of *noir* references plays with irony. Thanks mainly to the character of Emi, Yamashita playfully evokes the classical representation of Los Angeles in classical *noir* films of the forties and fifties such as The Big Sleep or The Maltese Falcon. Her character often complains of the addiction her boyfriend Gabriel has for such old movies, and she often mocks them. Here is a typical excerpt from their conversation when discussing *noir* films and novels:" 'That film noir stuff is passé. Don't you get it?' Emi told Gabriel over her Bloody Mary. (...) 'Stop being such a film buff. Raymond Chandler. Alfred Hitchcock. Film nostalgia.' " (TO 18-19). Of course just after this conversation, during which she criticizes *noir* films for giving improbable description of an always-rainy California, a sudden and violent downpour soaks her. This use of Emi's critical

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31 In "Gender and Genre in the Feminist Critical Dystopias of Katherine Burdekin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler, Future Females, The next Generation, New Voices and Velocities in Feminist Science Fiction Criticism, Ed. Marleen S. Barr, New York, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000, p. 13.

32 The origins of the *noir* sensibility and its many variables will not be discussed in this chapter, since they will be the focus of a longer development related to Norman Klein's work.

sense is clever, as it enables the author to display one of the well-established versions of this urban environment and also to show how she can modify it in her own way. She uses an uncommon event (as it does rain that often in Los Angeles) and turns it into a proleptic hint of the catastrophes to come. Therefore she manages to make the classical *noir* representation of the city come together with its magical realist version to be, a clever superimposition indeed.

The second category of *noir* references or echoes (as they are always reworked into Yamashita's own text) is a means for the novelist to establish Gabriel as an important character, one who is unveiling mysteries in the text. His job as a journalist and the fact that he investigates different matters throughout the city and across the border places him in a central position, that of the investigator or the private eye figure. His taste for male heroes of classical *noir* films makes the reader all the more inclined to perceive this character this way. Gabriel even compares himself to several figures, some of them journalists and others detectives. The first historical figure he mentions in relation to his job is Ruben Salazar, a journalist born in Ciudad Juarez, who worked for the Los Angeles Times in the 1960s and gave voice to the problems and concerns of Chicanos at the time. Salazar was killed in 1970 by a gas projectile during an anti-Vietnam war protest and no legal action was taken against the L.A. County Sheriff's Deputy. This tragic death symbolized the abusive attitude of the police towards Mexican Americans. One easily sees the resonance between Salazar and the character of Gabriel, who also wants to give a voice to some of the marginal Angelenos: homeless people. After recognizing Salazar's influence on himself, he calls attention to the detective side of his occupation:

> Now I'm not so pretentious as to think I am some kind of modern day Salazar, but remembering my roots can keep me on track (...). So I might be considered idealistic in that regard. On the other hand, I must say I keep a handle on the nitty-gritty. **It's the detective side of this business that gives me a real charge**, getting into the grimy crevices of the street and pulling out real stories. (My emphasis) (TO 39).

As a consequence, Gabriel can be said to be the product of a mix between the classical *noir* detective and the political activist. Nonetheless, his character is not driven by utopian or romantic impulses, despite Emi's frequent complaints. Over the course of the novel, as he uses the Internet to advance his investigation into the organ trafficking network, his persona merges with a more recent version of the detective coming from neo *noir* and cyberpunk novels and films. At one point, he asserts during the process of his investigation: "Maybe I had lost my romantic notions; I'd become truly noir, a neuromancer in dark space." (TO 245). The reference to these novels and their imaginary is unequivocal. Yamashita is referring of course to the foundational text of cyberpunk, William Gibson's Neuromancer. Hence the *noir* references play several roles in Yamashita's novel as they do not only engage her text into a dialogue with former fictional versions of the city but because they also reassert the proximity between these representations and the history of this region and of its inhabitants. Like Soja, Yamashita spatializes historical narratives. Her choice of a mixed "cast of characters", who belong exclusively to minorities, demonstrates her highly critical take on *noir*, a genre which more often than not privileges iconic models of white masculinity.

If *noir* films and novels correspond to the occidental side of Yamashita's cultural inheritance, then Mexican cinema could be seen as her less eurocentric

imaginary source. Here again two types of films will be underlined as participating in the formation of Tropic of Orange. In Mexican cinema one of the common genres from the seventies to the nineties was that of immigrant stories. According to Garcia-Acefado and Maciel[33], most of these films shared common characteristics such as the presence of violence and sex (since they were made for commercial purposes) and of violations of the human rights of migrant workers. As these authors summarize it: "The production formula for such features is evident: complete the film in the shortest possible shooting schedule, place one or two major stars in the film, include ample sex and violence (the more, the better), and inundate the theatre chains, particularly in provincia (a term used in Mexico to denote all areas outside of Mexico city) and the US border states."[34] Yamashita's text does not include stars and sex, yet when she writes she is surely aware of this trend of immigrant stories either in film or in literature. "Whether it be in journalism, literature, or cinema, the frontier is a topic that engages all Mexicans, including the approximately 4 million residing in the U.S., whatever their status and the 14 million US citizens of Mexican descent."[35]. The voices of these immigrants from Mexico are present when one thinks of Rafaela, but also of the numerous phone calls Bobby receives from Hispanics desperately looking for work. The attraction of the North is an omnipresent element, one which transcends frontiers as the reader is presented with multiple examples of immigrants, like Bobby, his brother, his cousin as well as Arcangel, Pepe, and so on. As

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33 In "The Celluloid Immigrant", Culture across Borders. Mexican Immigration and Popular Culture, Eds David R. Maciel and María Herrera-Sobek, Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 1998, pp. 149-202.

34 Ibid., pp. 174-175.

35 In 'Shifting Borders, Free Trade, and Frontier Narratives : US, Canada, and Mexico' by Pamela Maria Smorkaloff in American Literary History, 6.1, Spring 1994, p. 96.

Smorkaloff writes: "**Frontier or transfrontier narratives** in cinema and increasingly in prose fiction **explore the theme of displacement** not only within but across national borders."[36] (My emphasis).

Finally for film scholars interested in Mexican productions, the figure of Arcangel is not only a simple variation of the American comics' superhero. Rather it looks like it is loosely inspired by Mexican masked wrestler movies, a classic genre which was popular. The most famous of all, called Santo, starred in over fifty films in twenty-five years after a successful career in wrestling. Clad in a silver mask, he fought various villains including vampires, mummies or gangsters, which is not without reminding the reader of Arcangel/El Gran Mojado's final fight with Supernafta. One of his adventures, Santo en la Frontera de Terror, tells the story of illegal immigrants lured North by the promise of high wages, who end up trapped by a crazy doctor willing to remove and sell their organs. The parallels here are far too numerous to go unnoticed. First, during a bizarre conversation (to say the least) with Rafaela, Arcangel reveals that he is conscious of his fictional nature, and of the artificial character of his final fight, a point which is also true of Santo, as he is undoubtedly aware his heroic status:

> "What is this championship?" she asked.
>
> "A symbolic travesty at best." The old man said seriously.
>
> "Will you see it?"
>
> "Yes, I am traveling for that reason."(...)
>
> "Then you are a poet?" She asked , fingering with the flyer in her pocket.

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36 Ibid., p. 96.

"No, not at all," he waved his hand. "**I am merely a character** in a poem."(My emphasis) (TO 183).

Second, Gabriel's investigation into the organ trafficking is also drawn from Santo's stories, even if it is modernized and transformed to look more contemporary. One can only speculate as to why Yamashita re-uses some of the characteristics of these films. The first reason is linked to her desire to make cultural elements from various imaginaries converge in her story, thus undermining the more traditional "Chicano" or "Asian-American" plot line. Surely the extravagant, charismatic figure of Arcangel as a wrestler makes him a more convincing advocate than if he simply was an intellectual, a politician or even a poet. One should also not forget that by his wrestling name El gran Mojado, Yamashita makes indirect reference to many other Mexicans, called "wetbacks" in the US, or "indocumentados" south of the border (i.e. illegal immigrants who enter the country by swimming across the Rio Grande).

All in all this convergence of filmic and literary imaginaries perfectly fit with Yamashita's overall project to reflect transnational issues in a playful way. By using these literary and cinematographic sources, Yamashita generates an original intermedial imaginary, which contributes to the self-reflexive and parodic qualities of the novel. Yamashita's often parodic and critical reworking of these references anchors the novel into an eclectic cultural network. She thus follows the footsteps of other novelists, who by writing critical dystopias and/or magical realism, engage in an "oppositional writing practice"[37]. By weaving into her text references from

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37 In "Gender and Genre in the Feminist Critical Dystopias of Katherine Burdekin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler, Future Females, The next Generation, New Voices and Velocities in Feminist Science Fiction Criticism, Ed. Marleen S. Barr, New York, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000, p.13.

popular culture, she shows that texts and films of mass culture are a crucial place of contestation and that they should be considered as important components of the city's imaginary. By mixing together such disparate references and genres, the novelist not only adds to the visuality of the novel, but also to the carnivalesque energy of her text. Shohat and Stam, freely using some of Bakhtin's arguments, describe carnival as "an artistic practice [that] transforms into art the spirit of popular festivities, embracing an anticlassical aesthetics that rejects formal harmony and unity in favour of the asymmetrical, the heterogeneous, the oxymoronic, the misgeneated."[38]. Their description of carnivals has strong echoes in Tropic of Orange, and the convergence of imaginaries certainly contributes to affiliate Yamashita's text even more with this type of a decentering, non-homogenizing and alternative force. Now that imaginaries have been discussed, let's focus on the place and role of stories in Yamashita's novel.

1.2.3. Convergence of stories

An important characteristic of Yamashita's fiction is her particular use of multiple stories. She brings together an eclectic selection of stories, some coming from films or novels (so that she can interlace them into an intermedial dialogue with previous cultural productions), and others originating in individual experiences. To make her text relevant to urban reality at the end of the twentieth century, she includes references to non-literary discourse, such as that of publicity, the World Wide Web or television. For instance, when Emi ironically states that everything in this world is about "selling things"[39], she voices some of the author's reservations,

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38 In 'Narrativizing Visual Culture: Towards a Polycentric Aesthetics' by Elia Shohat and Robert Stam in The Visual Culture Reader, ed Nicholas Mirzoeff, London, Routledge, 2002. p. 45

39 (TO 126).

also readable in her humorous reworking of advertisements.

In this novel, Yamashita quite cleverly manages to piece together individual stories with American History. She inscribes into her characters forgotten and private stories, which are in fact part of a larger and more general history. Thus urban discourse, poetry, and the protagonists' stories are all combined to create Yamashita's specific text. This inventive imbricating process enables the city to become the recipient of multiple histories partaking in a wider history. For example, the characters of Manzanar, Bobby, and Rafaela, with their personal experiences of dislocation, provide the reader with plural accounts of their migrations. Pamela Maria Smorkaloff's article about what she calls "New World and transfrontier narratives" goes in much the same direction as my interpretation of Tropic of Orange. "(...) New World and frontier narratives look to oral history for sources of meaning or assume the form of testimonial or chronicle with the narrator as witness in order to explore unofficial history through literature, acknowledging, as official history often cannot or does not, the geopolitical forces at work in shaping the development of national literature."[40] The poems of Arcangel, which are too long to be reproduced here, tell the history of the inhabitants of America before the arrival of Columbus. In that sense the return of the orange North as a symbol of colonization is a strong one, especially if one considers that this trip is the cause of the annihilation of frontiers. Similarly, when Yamashita invites the reader to hear the seemingly innocent story of Buzzworm's grandmother, she is in fact pointing at certain trends in politics and urbanism, which do not consider the condition of locals and less wealthy people. Her

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40 In 'Shifting Borders, Free Trade, and Frontier Narratives: US, Canada, and Mexico' in American Literary History, 6.1, Spring 1994, p. 93.

text is not a manifesto denouncing such politics, nor a treatise on the history of neighbourhoods and minorities in Los Angeles, yet she explores a certain kind of unofficial history through literature. Through her attention to detail, the author underlines debatable decisions and developments, such as in this apparently descriptive sentence: "We met around Pershing Square and tried to get comfortable on one of those curved bus benches that won't support a sleeping homeless person" (TO 107). In the end all these stories put together aim to give a representative view of the city, its origins, and its transformations. As Smorkaloff wrote: "As borders shift and their function changes, the writer-cartographer has had to chart new territory, approaching the border not merely as a delimiting factor or dividing line but as a social and cultural world unto itself (...)."[41]

This world is composed of individuals, with specific voices and positions in society. Regardless of social status, they all contribute to the evolution of the city. In that sense Yamashita goes further than just looking to oral history to create her specific urban geography, as she also describes 'unheard' voices. She gives homeless characters such as Murakami a powerful role in the text. She enables them to appropriate the space of the city and, in the meantime, its history. Manzanar and his shadowy homeless companions play a role in building the city, as this excerpt shows:

> Manzanar imagined himself a kind of recycler. After all he, like other homeless in the city was a recycler of the last rung. The homeless were the insects and scavengers of society, feeding on leftovers, living in residue, collecting refuse, carting in this way and that for pennies. In the same manner, who would use the residue of sounds in the city if Manzanar

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41 In 'Shifting Borders, Free Trade, and Frontier Narratives: US, Canada, and Mexico' in American Literary History, 6.1, Spring 1994, p.90.

did not? (TO 56).

Their subsequent change of destiny when many become highly popular TV hosts is a witty reversal. Their appropriation of this popular cultural medium is proof that, in Yamashita's urban geography, minorities and marginal groups can find a place for themselves and even become creators. They are not mere shadows roaming through the city unnoticed; they actively take part in the life of the city, and participate in the ongoing elaboration of its specific identity. Despite this, Yamashita's city is not an idealized environment, since it can turn into a battlefield in an instant, filled with violence and cruelty. The final scene where Buzzworm sees a bunch of homeless people biting at the barbecued baby heart is a cynical example of this. Most importantly, Yamashita's urban geography is inclusive. It is a space where, with the assistance of 'magical events', one can reassert one's talent and place, and minorities can join and unite with the majority. Yamashita is not ignorant of inequalities: these are acknowledged and transformed through fiction. She is also aware that the traditional myths of the city such as guns, drugs, and music (the things Bobby's cousin has been warned against even before she landed in the US[42]) are part of its identity. She will therefore redefine this identity through fiction by transforming history (time) and geography (space) and by unveiling its rebellious beauty. Her work scrapes below the surface of urban stereotype to find urban beauty, such as in this scene, where Buzzworm witnesses the recording of a car show:

> "Yeah. I got me here a '64 Impala. I did the paint job myself. It's like a Diego Rivera. You know the man?"

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42 (TO 229-230).

> "Mexican Muralist," said host Frank. (...)
>
> "It's like my car's tattooed. (...) Yeah. Got a mother and her child living in it. I mean I actually went down to talk to her. (...) Sat in the car and held the baby for her. It's not so bad and I think the baby likes me." What did this have to do with cars? What happened to the dirty talk about pistons, lug nuts, camshafts, and drive lines? What about the engine specs and the zero-to-sixty times? But Buzzworm had to give it the nod. He knew the tattooed car and the mother. She was storing baby food and diapers under the trunk hood painted with the calla lilies. (TO 215)

In the middle of this messy highway Buzzworm realizes that there is hope in human nature, and that the city and the car can be more than symbols of industrialization and individualism. In this short passage, the mother and her child appropriate the ultimate symbol of American society: the automobile. The drastic changes that the city has undergone are not turning its space into a dreadful dystopian environment, as could have been expected. This woman and her child have found a place to live, and they are now part of the city. The reference to the Rivera-inspired painting of the car is also interesting. It is the image of an idyllic garden in the freeway, an environment that used to be the epitome of human intervention in nature. Now it has become a haven and a symbol of the blending of Mexican tradition and art within the United States.

Yamashita's achievement in relation to the city is that she changes the reader's perception by subverting stereotypes, and by creating an original urban geography. She does not shy away from issues and references to local events whose imprints are still strong in her readers' mind (and certainly in Angelenos') like the race riots of 1992, and the violence related to local gang wars. When creating a fictional version

of L.A., she uses a classical disaster scenario, yet she enriches it by connecting it tightly within the rest of the American continent. The charisma of characters such as Arcangel, and the subversion of other typical figures, like that of the detective Gabriel, gives a carnivalesque quality to her text. The novel's originality lies in the witty and colourful environment that California becomes, after the novelist gives it a new face and new protagonists. A transnational California is not doomed to become an all-white, consumer-friendly, nationalist territory in Yamashita's literary realm. In her imaginary version of the city, there is space for a version of multiculturalism that would not attempt to assimilate people's differences and that would rely on a critical and even sometimes cynical posture, a multiculturalism that would include marginal figures and minorities alike. This is probably the utopian horizon of the novel, a perspective that remains open, like the text, since the novelist does not give the reader any clue as to the events that follow El Gran Mojado's victory and the return of the tropic to its original location.

2. Bleeding Through: Layers of Los Angeles 1920-1986, a labyrinth meant to recreate L.A.'s past landscapes

Norman Klein is what film specialists call "the talking head" of Bleeding Through: Layers of Los Angeles 1920-1986, and I will use his role as such in this introduction. In this project, his role is indeed central, even if one should always remember that this is a collaborative work. Rosemary Comella, one of Klein's collaborators, calls the final DVD-ROM a "sort of stream-of-consciousness interactive bricolage-documentary overlaying a fictionalized story based on a real person." (BLTnov 59) This rather clumsy attempt at defining the final product of their collaboration illustrates the complex nature of Bleeding Through: Layers of Los Angeles 1920-1986, as well as its composite character.

A brief description would go as follows: Bleeding Through: Layers of Los Angeles 1920-1986 is an interactive narrative that combines a database detective story with a digital city symphony (in the tradition of cinematographic classics such as Ruttmann's Berlin: Symphony of a Great City or Vertov's The Man with a Movie Camera) and a metanarrative reflection on storytelling in this new medium. Mainly set in a three-mile radius near downtown Los Angeles, this DVD-ROM explores several areas including Boyle Heights, Bunker Hill, Chávez Ravine, Chinatown, Echo Park and Little Tokyo. These ethnically diverse and complex neighbourhoods are documented through archival photographs and films, but also through contemporary images and interviews. BTLdvd is accompanied by a book, which contains a novella by Klein and four short essays on the production of the DVD-ROM by Jeffrey Shaw,

Marsha Kinder, Rosemary Comella, and Andreas Kratky. Both the novella and the essays gathered in this textual complement to the DVD-ROM give valuable insights into the project.

The structure of BTLdvd is dense and unstable, since the fragments of each sub-section re-arrange themselves while one navigates through the DVD-ROM. To get an idea of the structure of BTLdvd, one can turn to the partial plan in appendix 2. BTLdvd's interface enables the *vuser*43 to navigate the narrative in two different ways. The most traditional manner of familiarizing oneself with this work is to let Norman Klein, the talking head and authorial figure, tell the story. Positioned within a small window44, Klein tells the story of Molly, the fictional protagonist of his novella, who is based on a real-life person, and who may have murdered one of her former husbands, Walt. He invites the *vuser* to cooperate with him in writing this fictional life, although one can decide to shut Klein's window at any time to undertake an unsupervised discovery of BTLdvd. The second available option is precisely to explore BTL randomly, without any guidance, in order to freely discover the various fragments constituting the work. For instance, the *vuser* can see the contrast between past and present, by sliding fluidly between old and new photographs of the same cityscape taken from the same angle. Drawing on hundreds of photographs, newspaper clippings and films from the archives of USC, the Los Angeles Public Library and the Automobile Club of Southern California, and other

43 As defined by Bill Seaman in his article, the term *vuser* describes a person who interacts with an interactive work in "Exchange Fields: Embodied Positioning as Interface Strategy", Accessed June 7 2005 at http://digitalmedia.risd.edu/billseaman/textsExchangeEmbody.php. I will here use this term to emphasize the active status of the person that encounters Bleeding Through: Layers of Los Angeles 1920-1986, since she is both a viewer (or a spectator) and an active user. .

44 See plate 2.1, which is a captured image of the screen including Klein as the main narrator.

sources, Bleeding Through: Layers of Los Angeles 1920-1986 offers the *vuser* and the reader the chance to reconsider her understanding and vision of Los Angeles, particularly if it has been based primarily on representations in mainstream Hollywood movies. This is why BTL is an interesting production to analyze, since it tries to propose a multi-perspectived and critically informed version of Los Angeles' imagined urbanity.

For the structure of this project, I will stick to Klein's, or rather his alter ego's presentation, which provides a fairly accurate summary of the way Klein's team organized BTLdvd, and which shows Norman Klein's central role in the project. Here, I will quote extensively:

> Now for the structure:
>
> As I mentioned earlier, there are three tiers. The first are the seven moments that Molly remembered when she almost died. You will notice a flow of photographs (a *durée*, if you will) from the left to the right; and a bleeding through, from back to front. Norman will persist in the corner, a few minutes of video for each moment. Then, below the photos streaming and bleeding through, a band of texts crawls with more information.
>
> The sum of these will be a visual, interactive, radio program, where you will finally get the last act in which I begin to reveal the unenviable Walt's final days. Of course, it is not me revealing it. Jack left a diary from 1959 to 1961. Molly inherited it, along with Jack's shoes and his suits.
>
> Put it this way: The seven moments are a kind of modern novel on a screen with hundreds of photos and Norman as narrator. You might say they are also a docu-fictional movie. But Jack's story is the land of noir. His orbit is closer to the noir movie structure that you know so well, and of which you will find hundreds of examples throughout the DVD-

ROM.

The second tier is more like a contextualization. I like to compare it with Henry James' notion of the fragrant. What sort of information would you need to know to fill in the absences left in the first tier? After all, only seven moments in sixty-six years? Thus, in Tier 2, you will learn about other characters in Molly's story, like her sister Nettie. You will learn much more about the neighborhoods within Molly's orbit; and within Jack's orbit. If the first tier is dominated by photographs, the second integrates a great many newspaper clippings, scanned in as they looked in the newspaper morgue. Each tier, then, comments on a specific medium that tries to make the city intelligible as it erases, collectively forgets, survives from day to day. The history of forgetting is a distraction from the basic reality of urban life in Los Angeles, its quotidian power of survival.

The third tier is the aporia of media itself. It is dominated by film and video imagery, by a vast 'iconic index' of what Molly left out, forgot, couldn't see. It samples from the back-story that gets lost when the movie or novel is made legible. Essentially, ninety percent must be erased to make sense. Tier Three (in)completes a 'making of' so vast that there is really no point in boiling it down, like a tomato sauce, into a feature-length film. All the interviews are gesture-driven, anecdotal: the kind of material novelists and screenwriters use, and actors study, in order to enter their characters. (BTLnov 42-43).

2.1 The foundations of Bleeding Through: Layers of Los Angeles 1920-1986

2.1.1 The role of social and cultural history in BTL

The first section of this chapter intends to shed light on the foundations of BTL, by which I mean not so much the chronological conception of the DVD-ROM,

but rather the numerous hypotexts[45] and other sources of this particular project. It goes without saying that when Norman Klein engaged in the making of BTL, he did so with his specific academic and cultural background. This is particularly noticeable in the novella, when Klein occasionally draws attention to his role as a biased narrator and storyteller, like in this particular section: "Have I hit a motive that is convincing yet? It is a daunting prospect to give up all those newspaper clippings in order to make this story legible. Perhaps I am too reliable to be a narrator." (BTLnov 27). Yet Klein also approaches BTL with a set of intentions, one of which is to relate his work on the one hand to the social and political history of Los Angeles, and on the other hand to specific literary and cinematographic traditions. I will then analyze BTL by proceeding in the following order; first I will deal with the historical, social and cultural history of the city, and second, I will investigate various literary and cinematographic traditions that are of significance in relation to Los Angeles and Klein's project.

BTL is an autonomous project, yet I believe it would be beneficial to draw on another of Klein's work in this analysis, namely, The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory. Some of the acknowledged ambitions of this earlier book are present in the later and collaborative BTL. Molly, for example, was already part of Klein's former book, although he did not use her, at the time, as a protagonist but more as a fleeting presence. In the section of HFLA that he devotes to her, he writes: "Years ago, I knew a 93-year-old lady named Molly Frankel, who owned a battered Queen Ann Victorian house, about five years older than she was, on

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45 Hypotext is an expression borrowed from Genette's discussion of the phenomena of transtextuality in Palimpsestes.

what was once a fancy corner lot just North of Carroll Avenue, in Angelino Heights. She had moved in somewhere between 1919 and 1928; had survived two husbands, one a possible suicide. No one knew the details for certain (...)." (HFLA 230-231). One cannot read this passage without making the connection between the Molly in BTL and the one that he presents here. They are obviously the same person. These two works also share many similarities in terms of what Klein wants to achieve. The objectives of his research project in HFLA can be traced through the book's outline, in the following citation:

> In the chapters that follow (Part I), I will examine the map of what is left of downtown Los Angeles, how urban myths (social imaginaries) have been used as public policy. In the second part, I present a docunovel (or novella) based on Vietnamese immigrants who live in areas affected by these policies. In the third part, I present docufables from other residents in these communities, particularly about how their memories are affected by public traumas; drive-by shootings, racist neglect, policies towards immigrants, the Uprising of 1992, and so on. And in the final parts, I examine how literature and now media use techniques of the "unreliable narrator," and how the corporate uses of "unreliable" memory are transforming the cultures of Los Angeles. (HFLA 17).

In this passage, it is clear that some of the concerns of this book still carry over to BTL, especially when one reads the description of the third section, which includes the personal accounts of local residents. Because Klein shifts between academic and fictional writing in both in BTL and in HFLA, I will step back from his docufables and comments. In order not to repeat Klein's scheme and methodology, I will use an external analytical framework, loosely based on some of David Punter's

ideas on postcolonial writings[46]. In Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order, Punter analyzes a wide range of literary texts from various origins and develops (mainly in chapters five and six) the idea of a "rhetoric of haunting". His analyses are based on a sample of specific passages from the novels he has selected. Despite their discrepancies, many of these novels invite their readers to a fictional revisiting of the past, or to a journey involving historic residue, ghosts, or some other haunting presence. Voices of the past are therefore whispering throughout these fictional stories, and they often propose to the reader a different version of history. Punter may be discussing novels, yet his idea of a rhetoric of haunting is not far from something one can see through the multimedia project elaborated by Klein and his team. In fact, what is BTL if not a fictional revisiting of Los Angeles' past, as well as an invitation to reconsider the role of previously marginalized groups and communities unaccounted for?

By summoning Molly, and by creating multiple hypotheses to explain Walt's disappearance, Klein shows the *vuser* that any citizen can become an entryway into an era's universe. Spectral, vanished individuals can form the source of a thought-provoking haunting process that aims to correct some common misconceptions and stereotypes associated with the city and its inhabitants. My understanding of Punter's "rhetoric of haunting" is that it can be a valuable tool to discuss the importance and the various roles that local groups have played, and still play today, in both the city's daily life and in its representation, whatever the mediatic format. One should nonetheless point out that, when considering the particular question of communities

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46 In Punter David, Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000.

and neighbourhoods in Los Angeles, BTLdvd is definitely more enlightening than BTLnov, probably because its length and multimedia format enables more possibilities.

In Tier Three of BTLdvd for example, all the interviewees play an important role in the recreation of a vivid and tangible representation of the city across time. Surely each of them alludes to personal experiences, but each of their accounts can be associated to some recent developments in the historiography of California. Let's take Bill Shishima, (who was born in Los Angeles of Japanese parents) and see what description he gives of his childhood[47]: "We were welcomed in the Mexican community (...). I had the feeling that my mum was more fluent in Spanish than in English (...). Most of my neighbours were Mexicans or Hispanics, so that's all I had, Mexican friends. My diet was mainly Mexican food: tacos and burritos. Our playground was the street, Main Street, plus the lawn of the city hall". At face value, his testimony could look like the slightly nostalgic account of Shishima's early friendship with some of his neighbours, who all came from a different ethnic background. But his personal recollection of a time when the dynamics of everyday social relationships among racially diverse groups was unproblematic clearly evokes some recent scholarly studies, like Mark Wild's examination of the lives of city children in the twenties, in Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles. In the fourth chapter of his book entitled "So Many Children at Once and So Many Kinds", he refers to both personal testimonies and statistics (for instance the population of primary schools and the census of selected

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47 In Tier Three, section 'People Molly Never Met But Would Make Good Characters in Her Story'.

playgrounds, by race or ethnicity) to demonstrate that, in some neighbourhoods, children could cross socially and culturally built racial boundaries.

> In the schools, playgrounds, and other public spaces where they played and learned, children of these districts enjoyed opportunities to cultivate cross-cultural relationships that often were unavailable to (or undesired by) their elders. Kunitsugo's [one of his interviewees] notion of "security island" describes a cultural space in which central city children of his generation could associate irrespective of their ethnoracial backgrounds.[48]).

Similarly, in BTLdvd, imperfect and partially reliable memories collectively re-shape the *vuser*'s conception of the city and her interpretation of Los Angeles' complex history. Even if BTLdvd is organized around Molly's story, it assigns these recollections a significant role. Many of these testimonies are situated in Tier Three, but Klein does his best to incorporate some of these anecdotes, or some of the details he gleaned from these interviews, into Molly's narrative. This clearly shows that all these "bits and pieces" are not peripheral but crucial to the project that he undertakes.

What Klein wants to demonstrate in weaving these voices into the canvas of BTL is that there is no need for definitive answers and that exploring the past of Los Angeles can be a desirable end in itself. Learning first hand, through testimonies, about its at times harmonious, and at times more tense atmosphere works as a corrective against, for example, the sole stereotype of a violent urban environment harshly divided along racialized lines. These people's testimonies flavor our understanding of urban space, as well as they plead for a more open and plural exploration of history and geography. Because most of these witnesses were only

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48 In Wild, H. Mark, Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005, p. 95.

ordinary citizens and not, for example, major political figures, historians did not always give a critical place to their accounts. In BTLdvd, what Klein and his team try to do is to show the *vuser* that however ephemeral and subjective these testimonies may be, they should still be considered noteworthy since they help to understand the city and its dynamics. Besides, as many if not all of these testimonies intersect with Molly's story, or with the context she lived in, they deepen our understanding of Los Angeles's social and cultural history, adding to the layers that are gradually built both in the novella and the DVD-ROM.

Another interesting example of the "rhetoric of haunting" at work in BTL is the references made to Chávez Ravine. This neighbourhood was, for a while, inhabited by immigrants, who had just arrived, usually from nearby Mexico. Chávez Ravine's residents occupied fragile homes that most often resembled shantytowns. But in 1953, city officials decided that this area was not good for the city's image and that it should be emptied of its population and replaced with a baseball stadium, which is today the well-known Dodgers Stadium, named after its baseball team. These are the historical facts that make up the basis for Klein and his team. They describe one of the numerous postwar projects of redevelopment, alluded to in the work of some historians, like Wild's:

> The razing of Chinatown to make room for Union Square in the early 1930s foreshadowed larger but fundamentally similar postwar programs. Turning their backs on federal public housing funds in the 1950s, city officials embarked on a series of projects that bulldozed working-class homes to make room for commercial establishments, office buildings, and industrial plants. The aging mansions of Bunker Hill gave way to high-rises, the ramshackle cottages of Chávez Ravine to Dodger Stadium. Warehouses and storage facilities replaced

much of the working class districts between Main Street and the river.[49]

This series of events and the removal of Chávez Ravine's residents is an important episode in the history of ethnic communities in Los Angeles. This event did not only change the architectural face of the city; it was a landmark, a definitive sign of the radical policy established by the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA). Historian Ernesto Chávez compares the fate of Chávez Ravine's residents to that of people from neighbourhoods Klein focuses on too: Bunker Hill and Boyle Heights. In "Mi Raza Primero!" (My People First!): Nationalism, Identity, and Insurgency in the Chicano Movement in Los Angeles, 1966-1978, he writes: "In addition to Boyle Heights, the forces of modernity also converged on Chávez Ravine. The two neighbourhoods had much in common: a poor Mexican population, substandard housing, and little to no political clout in the city. Urban renewal worked its will on Chávez Ravine." (28). Despite the formation of the "Committee to Save Chávez Ravine for the People", the 82 000 signatures gathered and the many letters city officials received, residents were given, in early March 1959, thirty days to vacate their dwellings. As Chávez concludes: "The Chávez Ravine removal would become part of the historical memory of Los Angeles's ethnic Mexicans, as an example of how the city's authorities looked upon them and poor people in general."[50]

While Wild and Chávez stick to the facts in both their books, since their ambition is to write serious, detailed and documented academic research, Klein and his team organize a more personal and kaleidoscopic presentation of the situation.

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49 In Wild, H. Mark. Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005, pp. 203-204.

50 In Chávez, Ernesto, "Mi Raza Primero!" (My People First!): Nationalism, Identity, and Insurgency in the Chicano Movement in Los Angeles, 1966-1978. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, p. 29.

Reading, searching through local archives, screening films that were shot at the time, they assemble a multidimensional staging of the facts surrounding this particular chain of events. They summon the phantoms of residents; they mix different formats in order to provide an elaborate narrative of all the actions that lead to the disappearance of this local community. It is therefore a collection of miscellaneous traces, of faint recollections, of old but tangible pieces that enables the *vuser* to immerse herself into what Klein likes to call Los Angeles' "social imaginary". In the testimonies, for example, Bill Shishima recounts his experience of Chávez Ravine. He explains how he used to accompany his father on the bumpy dirt roads of Chávez Ravine to deliver groceries to the local residents. He remembers small details, such as "the Sunday treat", when after mass, people came to his father's shop to buy roasted lamb's heads. By inserting these testimonies and clips, Klein and his team give their project a more humane dimension. The *vuser* is not simply dealing with the scientific account of historical facts; she is involved in the process of "remembering" past events through various perspectives and media. Because some elements regarding the social and cultural life of Los Angeles' neighbourhoods intersect with the upcoming section on the cultural productions that permeate through BTL, I will now directly move to the section that investigates the role of the main literary tradition present in Klein's project, that of detective fiction.

2.1.2 The novella and its *noir* flavor

This project may well be an exploration of Los Angeles and of its local history, but it was definitely shaped to echo specific literary and cinematographic productions and was obviously inspired by the *noir* sensibility. When discussing detective fiction and its numerous variations, I may use *noir* as an equivalent term for

detective, even though the two terms are not strictly synonymous. The former expression is mainly used for dealing with literary texts, while the latter is more often associated with the cinematographic productions adapted from novels, to which a full section will be devoted further along. Given the overlapping typologies and the various arguments between specialists in the field of detective fiction, I will only mention the references which directly contributed to my interpretation of the detective component of BTL. Among these is the work of George Grella, who clearly differentiates between hard-boiled fiction and its British ancestor and companion.

> The form that dominates American practice is the "hard-boiled" detective story, radically different from the classic whodunit. Rejecting the established patterns, it drew its materials from the indigenous life of America (...). Abandoning the static calm, the intricate puzzle, the ingenious deductions, [hard-boiled writers] wrote an entirely different detective story, characterized by rapid action, colloquial language, emotional impact, and the violence that pervades American fiction.51

Grella's distinction is central to this analysis since my aim is to examine the specific relationship between Los Angeles and the fictional versions it generated in literature. Hard-boiled fiction is considered to have germinated in what Frank Krutnik calls "the lurid pulp-magazines which emerged in the 1910s as an extension and modification of the dime novel"52. Those desiring a synthetic summary of the genre's genealogy (and of its numerous contemporary ramifications) can turn to the reproduction on plate 2.2, from Megan E. Abbot's The Street Was Mine. Because not

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51 Grella, Georges 'The Hard Boiled Detective Fiction' in Winks, Robin W. Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays. Woodstock, Vt.: Countryman Press, 1988, pp. 103-104. All references to this article will be done from on, by using the abbreviated form HBDF.

52 In In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity. London; New York, NY: Routledge, 1991, p.34.

all types of references to detective fiction are the same in *BTLnov*, I will start by establishing a brief classification of the types of references to detective fiction to show, in a following section, which characteristics of detective fiction can be found in *BTL*.

2.1.2.a. A brief typology of *noir* references in the novella

In BTLnov, references to detective fiction flourish and can be roughly classified in two different categories. The first kind of reference, and the most obvious, is the explicit mention of hard-boiled writers, such as Raymond Chandler, considered by many critics as "the most distinguished practitioner of the genre". (HBDF 105). Such occurrences in BTLnov generally serve to establish connections between Molly's story and environment and that of well-known literary figures. Here is a passage illustrating this type of reference: "She worked as a temporary bookkeeper; legend has it, according to her step-daughter, that she actually spent three weeks in the same office as Raymond Chandler, at Dabney Oil. Chandler looked young, a little soft under the chin, and pretended that he came from England. That was all Molly remembered." (BTLnov 15). In this passage, two elements are noteworthy: the first is the way Klein weaves together fragments of Chandler's biography (since he indeed worked at Dabney Oil, although he lost the job in 1932, because of his alcoholism and absenteeism) with Molly's story; and the second is the way he also lays emphasis on the partial character of Molly's memories. Another clever use of this type of direct reference helps Klein to blur the boundaries between his novella, his research in connection with BTL and classic detective fiction. In this type of occurrence, Klein skips from an interpretation of Chandler's Little Sister, to considerations about the art of writing a good murder story, to pseudo-scripts of his interviews with Molly, where

she is compared to the figure of a novelist (BTLnov 34-35). Such passages strengthen the connection between classic detective fiction, hard-boiled novels, and Molly's story. Also, it should not be forgotten that one of Klein's objectives (or at least one he acknowledges often) is to investigate the mysterious disappearance of Molly's second husband Walt.

The second type of references to detective fiction has to do with the shape and style of the text itself. The novella is divided in four consecutive sections. The first section has no title, while the others are respectively 'Unreliable Narrators', 'Zones of Death' and 'Digital Murder: The Aporia'. Each section contains hints, and more or less vaporous traces, that testify to the importance of detective fiction in BTLnov. In the first section, the narrator clearly identifies with the figure of the investigator, also known as the private eye[53], which is central to detective novels.

> Nevertheless, over the next eight months, I gathered what I could to assemble a story about Molly. There was definitely a story there, but what rhythm captured the best of it – that there were vast absences, and that these excited me much more than the facts themselves? There seemed no way to prove for or against the death of the dangerously organized Walt. The newspapers do not cover every corpse that shows up on the beach (...). (BTLnov.10).

Klein's original research project about Molly, an elderly lady who has lived most of her life in Angelino Heights, and who can therefore tell of the particulars of life in Los Angeles during the 20th century, subtly turns into an investigation about her husband's mysterious disappearance. This change of focus corresponds to the

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53 As David Geherin reminds it in The American Private Eye: "the term "private eye" dates back to the mid-nineteenth century when the detective agency founded by Allan Pinkerton used a wide-open eye and the slogan "We Never Sleep" as its trademark (...). In The American Private Eye: The Image in Fiction. New York: F. Ungar Pub. Co., 1985, p. xi.

typical structure of hard-boiled fiction as defined by Grella: "The quest motif often supplies its structure, as in the medieval and mythic romance. The hard-boiled detective novel thus employs a characteristically American hero and worldview, which it translates into the framework of a twentieth century mystery story." (HBDF 104). Klein's goal therefore becomes not only the gathering of memories and fragments of Molly's life and time, but also the search for answers regarding Walt's death.

In the second section, 'Unreliable Narrators', the narrator (who incidentally introduces himself 'not as Norman Klein') provides us with details about his research and investigation, as well as reminding the reader of his creative agenda: 'I try to concoct a *noir* murder mystery out of Harry's junk mail. My problem, however, is separating Harry –and Walt – from the movie *Chinatown*.' (BTLnov 31). *Noir* fiction, here, is used not really as a source of characters or themes, but as a comprehensive means to organize random elements that are meant to form a story. It also serves to tell the reader what genre she should associate this work with. This selection of examples shows what types of references to detective fiction can be found in the novella, but it had not given details on their specificity, nor on their relation to that genre and to urban spaces, so let us now embark on a more thorough examination of these questions.

2.1.2.b. The main characteristics of *noir* fiction in *BTLnov*

2.1.2.b.(1) Space, a central element

Detective fiction, as any literary genre, grows out of canonical texts, even though its contemporary practitioners re-work its codes and conventions. This is why both the questioning and the analysis of this work's hypotexts are critical. "Critics writing

on detective fiction often rank its practitioners, with Hammet and Raymond Chandler –usually in that order– at the top of the aesthetic pile."[54] Rather than trying to evaluate detective fiction among other literary genres, I believe it is crucial to select some of its codes and conventions, to see what Klein, and his team, have decided to recycle and re-use, and what they have voluntarily left aside or transformed.

The American detective novel, as Grella explains it, draws "its materials from the indigenous life of America". Its protagonist, the private eye, investigates crimes and usually embarks on a quest for truth and justice, which requires a negative and hostile *décor* to roam through and possibly fight against. The notion of space is therefore a central part of the "template"[55] of detective fiction, as Richard B. Schwartz calls it. In the case of hard-boiled fiction, space is sometimes interpreted as even more important than the denouement, or consistency of the plot itself. In his book, entitled LRLA, Julian Murphet lays emphasis on this interesting particularity:

> (…) **'hard-boiled' literature was decisive in substituting spatial totalities for temporal ones**, less interested in fluid connections than in juxtapositions and jump-cuts. Its chronotope tended towards a volatising of the temporal plane, madly accelerated here, aimlessly meandering there, but always 'thrown' (…) into some spatial configuration or other, in which the activity of detection had less to do with plot development than wide-eyed perception and being *per-se*. (My emphasis)

The idea that the spatial journey of a protagonist should be considered at least as important as the resolution of the plot, is a driving principle that Klein

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54 In Reddy, Maureen T. Traces, Codes, and Clues: Reading Race in Crime Fiction. New Brunswick, N.J.; London: Rutgers University Press, 2003, p. 7.

55 In Schwartz, Richard B. Nice and Noir: Contemporary American Crime Fiction. Columbia; London: University of Missouri Press, 2002, p.3.

unambiguously acknowledges in the novella and adopts for the project: "The journey through the evidence is more exciting than the crime itself". (BTLnov 37). By admitting the centrality of the journey, Klein not only demonstrates his interest in the idea of the city as a space to explore, but he also proves his clear desire to affiliate his project with the long tradition of "*noir* semiology"[56] and of detective fiction in general.

Cruising through BTL implies a spatial exploration of Los Angeles, of its lost neighbourhoods, and of its mythical places. One example is the now vanished neighbourhood of Bunker Hill, around which testimonials, photos, maps and newspaper clippings gravitate (see plates 2.3, 2.4 and 2.5 for examples). One thing to remember is that Klein and his team are not, as I stated earlier, only interested in re-creating spaces that have disappeared thanks to technology. Their aim is to make us actively participate and feel as if we are joining their exploration of urban space and history (I will come back to this idea of active participation more thoroughly, in the second part of this section). Of course, the journey, on which they invite the reader/*vuser*, has much to do with the notion of space in the U.S.A. and with its various meanings. Klein is not naïve with regards to the rhetorical and imaginary construction of urban space. After all, he is the author of The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory. We can be sure that he examines this complex process not only with attention, but also with suspicion: "Los Angeles is a city that was imagined to avoid city-wide bankruptcy in the 1890s, and has stayed on a knife-edge ever since, camouflaged by promotional rhetoric...It was the new

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56 In LRLA, see chapter 2: Neo-noir and the archeology of urban space, (37-73).

Jerusalem, first come, first served, at the semi arid, most westerly –and newly civilized– corner of the great frontier." (HFLA 27). The West Coast, and Los Angeles in particular, were considered for decades as appealing destinations, as a kind of land of milk and honey that fed the dreams of both newcomers and immigrants. California stood as a utopian frontier, a dreamlike space one secretly hoped for; it literally corresponded to a mythical horizon. Of course, this idyllic vision and its related urban imaginary were soon to be dramatically counterbalanced by an opposite vision of the city. In Literature and Race in Los Angeles, Murphet perfectly summarizes these two opposite tendencies when he writes: "While the social imaginers unveiled their successive airbrushed visions of the city, a strange assortment of mostly émigré intellectuals and disenchanted artists concocted a dystopian imaginary for it, a 'representational space' haunted by death, despair, entropy, dissolution and apocalypse."(LRLA 37). He also comments on the formation of this particularly negative vision of urban spaces:

> Confronted in the 1920s and the 1930 by the city's slick, idyllic packaging, sham architecture, deracinated cultural tradition, civic incohesion, and the sheer improbability of the mostly retired Mid-West populace, writers from the East such as Nathanael West, Horace McCoy and James M. Cain assumed the role of Cassandra in local letters. Together they assembled the *noir* semiotic matrix of Los Angeles as an urban hell, or the Los Angeles Anti Myth. (LRLA 37)

This negative vision of the city, which comes to replace the original idyllic vision of the frontier, is a *topos* upon which most critics of detective fiction comment. Megan E. Abbot is no exception and she accurately points to the special relationship between Los Angeles and the significant notion of manifest destiny: "(...) Los

Angeles is overdetermined as both the newest of all cities but also the dropping-off of the American frontier. (...) Manifest destiny has reached its endpoint and remains stagnant in a never-ending network of modern freeways wrapping around each other in hopeless repetition."[57] Klein and his team, who are aware of this type of reading of the city, seem to favour a *noir* representation of the city, be it in the novella or the DVD-ROM. Because the project covers the life of the city and its communities from the 1920s to 1986, it was fairly easy for Klein's team to match Molly's personal story with events and representations typical of the 1930s and 1940s. For the time span corresponding to her youth, they create a vision of Los Angeles peopled by gamblers (such as Molly's first husband), thieves, and other petty criminals (see plates 2.6 and 2.7 for examples).

While Klein mentions in the novella that he admires and enjoys the classics of film *noir* and their essential criminal component, Molly bluntly answers that she knew real criminals and is not interested in their cinematographically fantasized versions: " 'I knew men who committed murder', she interrupted suddenly. 'Three men to be exact. But I don't want their ghosts coming back to slug me, because I told.' Then she peered vaguely through those beer-bottle glasses." (BTLnov 22). This negative vision of the city as a threatening environment is therefore a constant in *BTL*, which is directly inherited from classic detective novels, as Grella explains:

> The general tawdriness characterizes the urban locale of all hard-boiled fiction; in keeping with the American agrarian bias, the city is a place of wickedness. Unlike most American heroes, however, the detective has no other place to go. A man of the wilderness, he finds

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57 The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir. New York; Houndmills, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. 9.

> the wilderness destroyed, replaced by the urban jungle. (...) Where he had expected innocence and love, he finds the pervasive blight of sin, a society fallen from grace, an endless struggle against evil.' (HBDF 112-113).

Now that the setting and its importance have been established, it is time to turn to three other elements that are related to the protagonist of *noir* literature, and that are often paired: whiteness, masculinity and violence.

2.1.2.b (2) Whiteness, Masculinity and Violence

The title of this section may, at first, sound restrictive, but these three elements could truly be considered as a necessary trinity in hard-boiled fiction, that is, if one considers the canonical core of hard-boiled fiction as a limited corpus. In her introduction to The Street Was Mine, Abbot traces the origin of this set of elements to the historical and cultural context in the U.S.A. from the 1930s to the 1950s: "In their depiction of the crises of the modern white American male model trapped in a battered and enclosing American city, hard-boiled novels embodied, assuaged, and galvanized an array of contemporary anxieties: Depression-era fears about a capitalism-defeated masculinity, anti-immigrant paranoia, Cold War xenophobia, and the grip of post-World War II consumerism."[58] The multiple effects of these anxieties have been analyzed in various academic fields, and it is my intention to show how these anxieties that appeared in hard-boiled fiction re-surface in BTL. If one considers, for instance, like Maureen T. Reddy, that "Hammet and Chandler set the standards for writers in the genre" and that "they are the models

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58 In The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir. New York; Houndmills, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. 2.

against whom all comers are measured"[59], then it becomes all the more important to consider their impact on BTL's project (even if it is veiled or indirect).

Most protagonists of hard-boiled fiction share a common set of attributes related, according to Abbot, to the archetypal "tough guy figure"[60]. These three attributes are his masculinity, his whiteness and his urban isolation. The specifics of urban space, in relation with this genre and BTL, have been established in the former section. However, the notions of whiteness, masculinity and violence remain to be investigated (in this specific order).

Despite the slippery nature of "whiteness", and the recent critical attention it has generated, some critics have tried to give this term a tangible definition. As a starting point, I use the one coined by Reddy: "(...) whiteness seems to most white people anyhow to need no definition, as only the not-white needs naming. Whiteness's status as a default position or a norm (unless specified otherwise, whiteness is taken for granted) virtually guarantees its transparency."[61] But besides the fact that whiteness, in 20th century America, occupies a normative and falsely transparent position, I believe it is important to underline that whiteness is usually constructed in opposition to "Others". Depending on the author, the era and possibly the audience, the target of this "othering" can be a certain type of individual, or an ethnic, religious or other group with a particular orientation. Dennis Porter discusses this tendency and writes that the hard-boiled novel offers "a radicalism of nostalgia

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59 In Reddy, Maureen T. Traces, Codes, and Clues: Reading Race in Crime Fiction. New Brunswick, N.J.; London: Rutgers University Press, 2003, p. 8.

60 In The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir. New York; Houndmills, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. 6.

61 In Reddy, Maureen T. Traces, Codes, and Clues: Reading Race in Crime Fiction. New Brunswick, N.J.; London: Rutgers University Press, 2003, p. 15.

for a mythical past. If any political program is implied at all, it is one that looks forward to the restoration of a traditional order of things, associated retrospectively with the innocent young Republic and its frontier (...)"[62] For that reason, any other group symbolizes in these days a threat to the white, patriarchal and heteronormative system in place. Los Angeles, being a big city favoured by immigrants, is an ideal environment for such anxieties and for a nostalgia for imaginary "good old times". As Reddy observes: "Hard-boiled fiction's rise, then, coincides neatly with widespread anxiety about race and about the difficulties of maintaining the whiteness of the United States."[63] The protagonists of these popular novels are white, male and straight (although the specificities of their sexual orientation and behaviour could be debated, especially in the case of Chandler's Marlowe). As a consequence, it is no surprise that critics frequently point to and comment on the significant connection between whiteness and hard-boiled novels, such as Klein himself, who defines *noir* as: "a mythos about white male panic – the white knight in a cesspool of urban decay; (...) the hard-boiled story cannot help but operate, fundamentally, as white males building a social imaginary" (HFLA 79).

If this connection between whiteness and hard-boiled novels has been widely researched and documented in the canonical texts from the 1930s to the 1950s, what does it become in a work like BTL, thirty to fifty years later? Does Klein merely re-use or recycle these xenophobic undertones? More importantly, does he consider whiteness as a transparent and rampant entity? Or, on the contrary, does he try, in

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62 In The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981, p. 181.

63 In Traces, Codes, and Clues: Reading Race in Crime Fiction. New Brunswick, N.J.; London: Rutgers University Press, 2003, p. 18.

collaboration with his team, to put Molly's story into a new perspective and a more complex framework, in order to problematize the question of whiteness? And above all, is the city still represented as a white enclave, assailed by threatening hordes of "Others"? Or is it presented in BTL as a more complex and multi-layered entity? Despite today's acute political and racial awareness, this stereotyped vision is far from being obsolete. In many contemporary novels written by legitimate successors of the classic hard-boiled novelists, like James Ellroy and his famous tetralogy "L.A. Quartet"[64], the relation between urban space and whiteness is still a decisive question.

In BTLdvd, whiteness is undeniably a pervasive presence, whether it is through the intimate photos of Molly's circle of friends and family, or through the numerous pictures of crowds, on the occasion, for example, of the dollar day. For a telling example, see plate 2.8. On the narrative level, most of the protagonists of Molly's story are white, even though emphasis is hardly ever laid on this particularity. Some of them are described in a fashion that voluntarily echoes hard-boiled novels' depiction of petty criminals or gamblers of the time, but none seem important enough to justify a detailed account of their relations with "Others". Also, in spite of the *noir* varnish that Klein's team unquestionably adopts, there are few instances of Molly being aware that she is white and that she has, as a direct consequence of this situation, a special and privileged status. On the contrary, when her independence is evoked, it is linked to her skills as a determined worker, and to the fact that she has a flair for business, and it never appears as correlated with her whiteness. Among the possible explanations that justify the fact that Molly's

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64 The four novels that Ellroy terms the "L.A. Quartet" are The Black Dahlia, The Big Nowhere, L.A. Confidential and White Jazz.

whiteness does not appear as an advantage, there is first, her Jewishness (which places her in a somewhat marginal situation akin to that of other immigrants), and secondly, her gender.

While I focus first on BTLdvd before exploring BTLnov, it should be noted here that the narrator of the novella explicitly notes that Molly does not quite fit as a *noir* heroine. According to him, she lacks some of the attributes necessary to perfectly fit the *noir* profile: "So we begin by locating Molly in noir flashback. However, the grammar of noir is built around racist and sexist egoism, mostly a white, male tradition (...) But fundamentally, the point of view that gives these sinister tales their ferocity will not do here. **Molly simply was not a noir heroine**." (My emphasis) (BTLnov 27). This short passage, shaped as commentary on the making of BTL, calls attention to two points. First, it illustrates the creators' understanding of the set of expectations associated with hard-boiled and *noir* novels. Second, it exemplifies their visible desire to move away from this conventional, stereotyped representation of a leading protagonist. I would even go as far as to say that Molly's status as a fictional heroine could be debated. To be fair to BTLdvd, Molly is more a sort of vantage point[65], an entryway into Los Angeles' history and into the lives of its inhabitants, than a consistent character whose story would be the project's main focus.

These details on the status of Molly as *noir* heroine should nonetheless not obliterate the present discussion of whiteness, because despite its veiled presence in Molly's story, it does play an active part in specific sections of BTLdvd. Particularly

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65 A more detailed section will be devoted to this idea of Molly as a perceiving consciousness.

in Tier Three[66], the questions of whiteness and of transparency indeed play a central part, even if it is neither directly associated with the genre of hard-boiled novels, nor associated with Molly's personal story. In this specific section, Klein and his team voluntarily reintroduce and carefully tint Molly's décor with elements that deal with questions of immigration, xenophobia and of course, whiteness. These elements figure in two sections whose titles are representative of their distinctive and somehow separate position, relative to Molly's narrative, they are: "What Molly Barely Noticed or Managed to Forget" and "People Molly Never Met but Would Make Good Characters in her Story".

In the section called "What Molly Barely Noticed or Managed to Forget", which is dominated by film clips, the central piece undeniably is The Exiles by Kent MacKenzie. This feature film, shot in the early sixties, received a fairly good critical reception. Today, it is largely forgotten and unavailable, probably because its director made only one other film. Filmed in the streets, back alleys and public places of Los Angeles, it tells the story of a group of Navajos jostling through the crowds of the city. Instead of focusing on the plot or on the protagonists of MacKenzie's loose narrative, Klein and his team chose to digitalize and reproduce some fragments of this film that emphasize its urban locale as well as the film's documentary quality. For example, Klein and his team include scenes shot in Grand Central Market. Such clips clearly assert the vibrant presence of "Others" and their role in the history of Los Angeles, and this despite their frequently overlooked status in much of the region's

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66 Tier Three (as mentioned earlier) is a section dominated by film and video imagery, that Klein considers like a "meta-text" for BTL, (BTLnov 38).

academic historiography[67]. Compared to the latter section, "People Molly Never Met but Would Make Good Characters in her Story" can mainly be described as an assemblage of filmed interviews and testimonies (most probably shot in the late 1980s). Many of the interviewees speak about the sometimes tense atmosphere they experienced in Los Angeles. Some, like Esther Raucher[68], evoke people's widespread fear of the police and the atmosphere that pervaded in this time because of, for instance, police brutalities. At the time, many police operations were related to "the Red Scare" and contributed to the climate of general suspicion under which all had to live. Other participants prefer to call attention to some specific historical events such as the Zoot Suit Riots during World War II, an event that testifies to the prevalent tension in the city between various groups and communities.

The Zoot Suit Riots took place in 1943, a time during which tensions were intense because of wartime paranoia, segregation and changing social realities (including the massive influx of Mexican refugees fleeing the Mexican revolution). These riots erupted after a fight between a group of Marines and some Mexican American Zoot suiters[69] ended badly for one of the soldiers. These riots only lasted a couple of days, but they had a strong impact both on the Mexican American community and on the other immigrant groups. They marked the beginning of a

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67 Some historians tried to re-establish the importance of marginal groups in the making of the region and in its history, such as Robert F. Heizer and Alan F. Almquist in The Other Californians, Prejudice and Discrimination under Spain, Mexico, and the United States to 1920. Further references on the role of marginal groups in local history have also been mentioned in the earlier section on the historical background of BTL.

68 Esther Raucher's Interview, entitled "Fear of the Police", is part of the subsection "People Molly Never Met but Would Make Good Characters in her Story" in "Tier 3".

69 The Zoot suit was initially an African American youth fashion, closely connected to jazz culture, which soon became co-opted by a generation of Mexican American kids, who made it their own. The oversized suit was both an outrageous style and a statement of defiance. Zoot suiters asserted themselves, at a time when fabric was being rationed for the war effort, and in the face of widespread discrimination.

period of growing discrimination and violence against ethnic communities, as Mark Wild underlines it:

> (...) Anglo gangs of enlisted men rampaged through the central districts, pummeling Mexicans youth they considered dangerous and disloyal. Along Central Avenue, LAPD officers harassed revelers, especially interracial couples, casting a pall over neighborhood's vibrant nightlife. (...) Discrimination, intimidation, and violence against African Americans, and to a lesser extent, Mexicans, Chinese, and other ethnic minorities plagued the factories.70

There is no doubt that during the long period covered by BTLdvd, (that is to say roughly from 1916 to 1986) the fear of others and the question of immigration were often intimately correlated. What Klein's team does, through this project, is to re-inject these overlooked questions into the framework of Molly's *noir* narrative, thus giving it at the same time both a more encompassing scope and a politically more acceptable edge. Today, it would be difficult to consider Los Angeles' social and cultural history without acknowledging the critical role of ethnic minorities and the hardships they had to bear. The status of *noir* fiction as a borderline genre that explores various oppositions helps them to achieve a composite representation of the city and its inhabitants. Richard B. Schwarz in Nice and Noir alludes to this specific status:

> As a literary form, crime fiction explores (and thrives on) the border between good and evil, madness and sanity, war and peace, and guilt and innocence. (...) It both commingles and separates the ethnic segments of our society and takes those alignments and divisions as one

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70 In Wild, H. Mark, Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005, p. 202.

> of its prime subjects. (...) It lives, aesthetically, on the border between high art, and broad popular culture.71

Building on the popular and mass culture character of *noir* novels, it seems that Klein and his team attempt to use the space of the narrative they build in BTLdvd as a place for contesting and questioning whiteness and its falsely transparent position. To sum it up briefly, Molly's city is no longer a homogeneous white enclave, but a more complex and contested space incorporating "Others".

In the novella, however, the notion of whiteness takes quite a different shape. Its treatment is dissimilar, partly because of the text's structure and the novella's short format. In BTLnov, whiteness is evoked in swift brushes that are nearly always related to Molly, or to her set of acquaintances: "[Jack] He remembered seeing, as a child, his father talking to white-robed Klansmen riding horses across downtown to the auditorium on Olive to see Birth of a Nation in 1915." (BTLnov 21). In this brief passage, Klein instantly associates, on the one hand, the memories of Molly's husband as a child, with, on the other hand, not only Griffith's film72, which occupies a central position in the history of cinema, but also with an historical era and rhetoric based on paranoia, fear and racism. In BTL, one can find many male figures that bear a resemblance to the profile of the "tough guy figure", but they are not the designated protagonist, since Molly is. Also, because she is immediately described and identified as white, but a white woman whose family immigrated to the United States, she does not quite fit the all male, all white schema. "I try to visualize Molly arriving at the

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71 In Schwartz, Richard B. Nice and Noir: Contemporary American Crime Fiction. Columbia; London: University of Missouri Press, 2002, p. 13.

72 It should also be kept in mind that Griffith's film is devoted to the story of two families which takes place during the civil war and the Klu Klux Klan era and that it stages, among other disturbing episodes, the strongly criticized aggression of a young girl by an Afro-American.

Santa Fe station in Los Angeles in 1920 or 1919, after the war. (...) Molly was twenty-two (...) Her hair was thick and almost red, Russian Jewish, and knotted in a bun." (BTLnov 13). This short passage uses the same trivial categories that are used to categorize individuals into a specific ethnic community. It shows how physical characteristics do not always match the categorization, and thus demonstrates the obvious inefficiency and ridiculousness of such assumptions. Molly, again, does not quite fit.

Rather than a contrast between Molly's white roots and the "Others", what the narrator tries to present is a protagonist who is at ease with many of the groups considered as "Others". From where she lives, to what she thinks of them, as in the two passages that follow, there seems to be no decisive opposition between her social position and theirs:

> (...) she had settled into a rooming house near Brooklyn Avenue in Boyle Heights. (...) As for Brooklyn Avenue with its famous mix of Jews and Mexicans, Japanese and other 'swart' young men, the *hamische* smells of herring barrels and the bins stuffed with soup greens only reminded her of Katy's cooking." (BTLnov 15). Molly knew about the wooden mill, but not the murders in the movies. She had watched the Mex take over the Lake, but they never bothered her. In 1943, she saw blood on a store window after the Zoot Suit Riots. She knew about dinges, the Watts Rebellion, and sixty years of hop, one kind of social trauma or the other. (BTLnov, 22).

Molly mingles with this varied crowd and seems to have no problem whatsoever considering them as ordinary neighbours or members of her staff, whatever the social or political climate. For an accurate and complete picture of Molly's whiteness, though, one should finally mention that like most of the white

people living in Los Angeles at the time, she is said to use pejorative descriptions of her fellow Angelinos, including for example "Bronzeville", "Japs", and "Nips" (BTLnov 22). This detail introduced in the text on one occasion probably aims only to give credibility to Klein's depiction of Molly, who otherwise might have feared a politically correct and possibly contemporary rendering of his character's account.

Even if in *noir* fiction, the construction of normative gender binaries seems most often to work in concert with the question of whiteness, I would like to set this section apart in order to examine and question the way masculinity is used in BTL. The concept of masculinity, as Leo Braudy convincingly argues in From Chivalry to Terrorism, War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity, is not a given; it is rather a composite idea constituted by assumptions that "have been gradually created over the last few centuries" and that "have shifted in response to the prevailing social and cultural demands"[73]. This section on masculinity does not have the ambition to emulate the scope of Braudy's work, but it aims to shed light on the particular role of this concept in relation with *noir* fiction, and in particular with its specific contemporary version in *BTL*.

As most critics remark, one of the particularities of hard-boiled fiction is reliance on a pivotal male protagonist who is supposed to restore order.

> The classic (hard-boiled or not) detective novel begins in disorder or in violation of order and proceeds more or less linearly to order; it is therefore basically reassuring and conservative, because it suggests, first, that it is not only desirable but actually possible to banish or destroy disruptive social elements, and, second, that the greatly-to-be desired

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73 In From Chivalry to Terrorism, War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity. 1st ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 2003, p. xiii

> continuation of bourgeois, white, masculinist society depends on the general acceptance of a masculine authority figure who alone is capable of explaining the world satisfactorily.74

Two factors can explain the choice of a male protagonist in this specific genre. First, in terms of genealogy, the "tough guy figure", roaming through a threatening and hostile urban jungle, is nothing less than an updated version of the errant knight, and of its quintessentially American version: the cowboy. As Abbot notes: "The idea of the solitary white man trekking down urban streets has forerunners in like-minded navigators of Western space or wilderness (...)"75. Other academics, working in the field of gender studies, such as R. W. Connell, also confirm this significant association between masculinity and the idea of the frontier, which makes California a perfect setting for questioning masculinity and its fictional incarnations: "Popular culture tells us this without prompting. Exemplars of masculinity, whether legendary or real (...) have often been men of the frontier."76 In the case of hard-boiled fiction, the wilderness and its inherent dangers are supplanted by the well-established idea of urban decadence and vice.

The second factor accounting for the choice of a male protagonist has to do with what Abbot calls "a time of needed re-masculinization"77, which is clearly linked to the historical and political anxieties from the 1930s to the 1950s. Braudy stresses the difference between two types of masculinity, one associated with

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74 In Reddy, Maureen T. Traces, Codes, and Clues: Reading Race in Crime Fiction. New Brunswick, N.J.; London: Rutgers University Press, 2003, p. 55.

75 In The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir. New York; Houndmills, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. 3.

76 R. W. Connell in "The History of Masculinity" in The Masculinity Studies Reader, Oxford, Blackwell, 2002, p. 245.

77 In The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir. New York; Houndmills, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. 26.

peacetime and the other with wartime. I will quote extensively here since I believe that hard-boiled novels, as a cultural genre, produced in connection with a specific historical context, do echo some of the notions associated with Braudy's idea of "wartime masculinity":

> Men at war are on the front line of a more exacting and more one-sided definition of what it means to be a man than ever faces men at peace. By its emphasis on the physical prowess of men enhanced by their machines, by its distillation of national identity into abrupt contrast between winning and losing, war enforces an extreme version of male behavior as the ideal model for all such behavior. Just as epic formulas focus on the hero with his undying fame, war focuses attention on certain ways of being a man and ignores or arouses suspicions about others. Wartime masculinity is a top-down and bottom-up effort to emphasize a code of masculine behavior more single-minded and more traditional than the wide array of circumstances and personal nature that influences the behavior of men in nonwar situations.78

In tackling the question of masculinity, one should remember the continuity in literary forms between the masculinity of knights/frontiermen and that of the private investigator, as well as acknowledge the determining influence of historical circumstances on cultural forms. Now that this preamble has hopefully clarified some of the roots of masculinity in hard-boiled fiction, let us consider the type of masculinity, and possibly femininity, set in place in BTL.

I have already affirmed that Klein's enterprise takes many liberties with the shape and motifs of hard-boiled fiction. It is my objective in this section to

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78 In From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity. 1st ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 2003, p. xvi.

investigate the way masculinity is either used or altered in BTL, and to comment on these particular choices in relation with this specific idea. The first striking feature, in opposition to the canonical core of hard-boiled fiction, is the choice of a female character as the central individual of the narrative. It surely is a strong variation, although in contemporary noir fiction, many female protagonists subvert the genre's specific codes by taking center stage. "In the 1970s and 1980s, white feminist writers such as Amanda Cross (Carolyn Heilbrun), Sara Paretsky, and Barbara Wilson established a counter tradition in crime fiction, challenging in their novels virtually every convention of nonfeminist detective novels."[79] In BTL, Molly is, without a doubt, the unifying character who holds the numerous fragments of the narrative together. But can it be concluded from this choice that BTL indeed tries to problematize the representation of masculinity and maybe of its counterpart: femininity? Is BTL innovative in its positioning of Molly as a central figure in a *noir*-flavoured narrative?

The choice of Molly as the protagonist of the story may unfortunately be the only element that deviates from the classically misogynist representation of women in hard-boiled fiction. Klein's team shatters the genre by choosing a female protagonist. Somehow, this decision does stretch the template of *noir* fiction, but the way Molly is presented must be analyzed in further detail in order to reach a substantial conclusion. Molly's ferocious independence and secrecy could support the claim that this choice aims to transcend the constraints of the genre. However, the way she is described, as well as her role as informer instead an active agent of the investigation, leaves no

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79 In Reddy, Maureen T. Traces, Codes, and Clues: Reading Race in Crime Fiction. New Brunswick, N.J.; London: Rutgers University Press, 2003, p. 49.

doubt as to who is in command of representation. Surely Mr. Klein is the sole narrator, the one in charge of the investigating process, the one who wants to solve Molly's mystery.

Several elements, some even structural, support this interpretation of BTL as a not particularly progressive example of *noir* narrative. I will begin with the main structural argument, since it relates directly to the question of authority. The structure of BTLdvd has already been outlined in the introduction. This DVD-ROM is an elaborate assemblage of photos, of archival material, of interviews and of film clips. But even though Molly provides cohesion as the common thread, it is essential to remember that she is not the voice behind Los Angeles' multiple stories. The narrator that automatically appears in "Tier one", at the beginning of each section is Norman Klein. He is the voice and the only narrator; he is the puppet master who decides that Molly's lifestory can be turned into a *noir* mystery. In hard-boiled novels, the central figure, the one that embodies authority is also often that of a man. Molly may be the one who directly experienced Los Angeles from the 1920s to the late 1980s, but she is spoken for. Of course, the *vuser* can, at any time, close Klein's window, but in "Tier three", Klein re-introduces himself as part of the section "People Molly Never Met but Would Make Good Characters in her Story", thus blurring the *vuser*'s points of reference and re-establishing his status of authority. My point here is not to blame or to criticize BTL's team decision. It is worth mentioning, though, that a visible female narrator would probably have altered the presence of masculinity in BTL. Selecting a female narrator, as artificial as it may sound, since Molly passed away before the DVD was released, would probably have balanced things out. It would not have altered the *noir* framework of BTL, but it certainly would have provided a more

thought-provoking twist to the project and challenged conventions more.

Is Molly a strong female figure as her independence sometimes suggests, or is Klein perpetuating some of the *clichés* associated with female characters in many hard-boiled novels? In the novella, Molly is regarded an unreliable informer. Depending on the way this unreliability is presented in the text, Molly appears in a more or less flattering fashion. "I could not trust any of her stories. Not that her facts were wrong. Or that she didn't make an effort. Before each story, she would inhale deeply, to bring oxygen into her brain cells. Then she'd fog out dozens of key facts. Whenever I noticed, she would blow me off, smiling and say, 'So, I lose a few years'." (BTLnov 10). On the other hand, one cannot but note the fact that on occasion, Klein describes Molly's mystery and her failing memory with more positive and imaginative terms: "She was smiling delphically this morning (...)." (BTLnov 35). But in the former quotation, it seems quite obvious that he associates her with the *femme fatale* of *noir* fiction, a dishonest and potentially harmful figure, whose task is to interfere with and possibly to slow down the private investigator's mission. The fact that women may be obstacles to the detective's progress is part of the long time tradition of the knight figure. As Baudry argues, women can disrupt masculine behavior and warrior temperament: "(...) the lure of love, expressed through the twin enticements of the sexual and the domestic, has the tendency to erode the warrior ethic and expose the knight to potentially subversive forces."[80] Molly therefore occupies a paradoxical position since she is both the origin and one of the main sources of Klein's investigation, while also being a potential obstacle

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80 In From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity. 1st ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 2003, p. 106.

because of her unreliability.

Another element to be considered is the sexualized representation that Klein gives of Molly. In a particular section of the novella, Molly appears as the repository of fantasies that seem incongruous with the rest of the elements provided to the reader in BTLnov. "She went to a dry-good store to get some stockings. (...) His nails were magnificently trimmed and lacquered. (...) Like a button loose on his fly, he slid his fingers through the nylons and made gestures with them, Molly got the point. She even got faintly wet, faintly." (BTLnov 15-16). Of course, there is always room for interpretation, but because this passage has no tangible narrative impact on the plot, I am inclined to compare it to other sexualized versions of female *noir* characters. It also seems that when thinking of a woman above the age of eighty, most would probably not immediately wonder about the intimate and libidinously tinted details of her youth. This example of a sexualized Molly is not the only one appearing in the novella; there are a few others, which stress different aspects of her personality. Some passages of the text indeed bring attention to Molly's relative independence and to the fact that she decided whom she would marry without any supervision. However, in other sections of BTLnov, Molly's sexualized character appears, to say the least, at odds with the image of an eighty-plus person conversing with a scholar:

> She had just lost her virginity to a roofer back in Indiana, one of the few Jews her age in the small town. He was barrel-chested, rather stout, named Archie because the sound faintly resembled a Hebrew name. Archie initiated what Molly liked to call her theory on burly men. It had something to do with the way a woman's hips and a burly man's thighs met. I took this to mean that Molly did not prefer the missionary position. I tried to put the question to her. (BTLnov 13-14).

The first part of this passage could almost appear a fictionalized account of Molly's sexual experiences, and this would make sense in Klein's research framework, since he wants to assemble as many solid elements about her life as possible. I do not doubt that investigating how specific groups considered sexual relationships, and how these conceptions evolved across time can even lead to groundbreaking analyses.[81] What I find more unusual, in this passage though, is the way the narrator (alias Norman Klein) ends up asking Molly about her favourite positions for making love. I find it quite difficult to find a rational justification for this particular question, which is why I take it that some descriptions of Molly are rather subjective distortions that emphasize the idea of a highly sexualized and therefore potentially dangerous individual. There is no doubt that some representations of predatory women in hard-boiled fiction had to do with female emancipation in wartime years. Consciously or unconsciously, when presented as a sexualized presence, Molly definitely seems to echo the misogynist *clichés* of *noir* fiction.

Two other basic ingredients of hard-boiled fiction are violence and crime. Of course, the fact that these characteristics are present in hard-boiled novels could be attributed to the individual taste of each novelist. But it seems to me (and to others commentators) that if the canonical texts of hard-boiled fiction include crime and violence, it is because these texts clearly reflect their time. From the 1930s to the 1950s, in the fast-growing cities of the U.S., crime and corruption were, as Edward Thorpe remarks, "part of the social fabric attendant upon rapid commercial

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81 See, for instance, the justified impact of Foucault's History of Sexuality on the field of humanities as a whole.

development"[82]. It is therefore logical to find these elements in many, if not all, hard-boiled novels, and to find them associated with some of the questions discussed earlier, such as that of masculinity and of urban environment: "This threat to normative masculinity is enhanced by the location in which hardboiled protagonists find themselves: the American city, where criminal dangers, aggressive modern women, crooked juridical systems, and urban decadence lurk around every corner."[83] The city thus prevails as the perfect milieu for crime, decadence and corruption. It is a place where "we find empty modernity, corruption and death. A gleaming and deceptive façade hides a world of exploitation and criminality (...)."[84]. As a result the city provides a perfect framework for criminal activities and a need for the detective to undertake investigations in order to restore moral equilibrium.

In BTL, there are two different types of references to crime and violence. The first refers to the actual crimes and the numerous illegal activities that took place in Los Angeles. They are related to the prohibition of alcohol in the 1920s, to gambling, and to many other types of illicit activities. The second type of references is not as direct as the first one, since it relates to the literary production that echoed, transformed and fictionalized crime and violence, like pulp magazines and hard-boiled novels. BTL, whose title reveals an intention to "peel through the layers" of the city, includes references both to illegal activities across time, and to their fictional versions too. In BTLdvd, for example, some selected photos are used to remind us of

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82 In Chandlertown: The Los Angeles of Philip Marlowe. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984, p.11.

83 In The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir. New York; Houndmills, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. 8.

84 In Calwelti "Adventure, Mystery and Romance", in Kaplan, E. Ann. Women in Film Noir. Rev. ed. London: BFI Publishing, 1980, p. 141.

the many illegal deeds and of the forbidden places that were a familiar sight at the time, like the gambling ships of the Bay area. These archival traces echo some classical images of the canonical texts of hard-boiled tradition. To follow on this particular example, a gambling ship provides the setting for a climactic scene of Chandler's Farewell, My Lovely. In the novella, mentions of real and fictional crimes also seem to penetrate one another. In the following passage, the narrator presents his investigation of Walt's disappearance and his search in the archives where he catalogues all sorts of actual, similar murders:

> Next day, I went to a newspaper morgue, looking for articles on Walt's disappearance. Instead, I found fifty ways to kill a man between 1959 and 1961 (along with five suicides). I've scanned all the articles into a database for you: the 'sluggings', the bodies dumped in olive groves, in the bushes, in vacant lots, hotels, railroad yards, at Long Beach Recreational Center. (BTLnov 24).

Crime and violence are anchored in Los Angeles's concrete history, and in the fictional tradition of hard-boiled novels, and other popular publications of the time. This anchoring of criminality is important, and it has been stressed both by critics and authors, including Chandler himself. In his interpretative text, entitled 'Raymond Chandler Introduces the Simple Art of Murder', he presents hard-boiled novels as successors of British mystery stories, but he also underlines the fact that this successor definitely "shed its refined good manners and **went native**." [85] (My emphasis). Location thus plays a significant role in the creation and subsequent success of American hard-boiled novels. In the same text, Chandler also notes that

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85 In Chandler, Raymond, The Midnight Raymond Chandler. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971, p. 1.

crime and decadence were among the main components of this type of story and again he associates crime with the dark streets of the city:

> Their characters lived in a world gone wrong, a world in which, long before the atom bomb, civilization had created the machinery for its own destruction, and was learning to use it with all the moronic delight of a gangster trying out his first machine gun. The law was something to be manipulated for profit and power. The streets were dark with something more than night.86

In BTL as a whole, the origin of Klein's investigation is twofold and it replicates the two types of references to crime and violence. On the one hand, Walt's unexplained disappearance awakens Klein's desire to "solve the case". Klein is drawn by the absence of a rational explanation for Walt's disappearance: "There seemed to be no way to prove for or against the death of the dangerously organized Walt. The newspapers do not cover every corpse that shows up on the beach, or in a dump site near the train yards above downtown." (BTLnov 10). Klein is also influenced by his fascination for fiction, and in particular for murder stories and film *noir* to which I return later. "We are bizarrely charmed by the comedy of murder. Crime story takes us farther from the intense realities of a person's life toward a hypnogogic escape, extremely vivid but somehow medicated, easy on nerves." (BTLnov 24). This fascination determines his decision to turn Molly's story into a crime story, and if possible to make it as attractive and suspenseful as possible, for both the reader and the *vuser*: "I've decided that Walt is a drop in the bucket. The crime was the urban pathology itself, from 1920 to 1986. That would be my story, with Walt's corpse as

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86 In Chandler, Raymond, The Midnight Raymond Chandler Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971, pp. 1-2.

emblematic of traces we cannot decipher. And Molly as the great sieve of forgetting, the guardian of all we really don't want to know." (BTLnov 32).

Beyond the use of crime as an obvious and convenient link between Molly's story and the literary tradition of hard-boiled novels, Klein also uses crime and violence as indicators of the social and racial conflicts that happened across time. When he evokes the Zoot Suit Riots, for instance, he does so not only to echo the established construction of whiteness in hard-boiled fiction, but also to demonstrate that violence is linked to the social and cultural history of the various groups that shape the city. The deliberate inclusion of groups that were considered marginal for a long time brings new perspectives to the project, which are more focused on social history than on literary criticism.

2.1.3. The role of film history and genres in *BTL*

The period covered by BTL (from 1920 to 1986) is widely recognized as an important era in the establishment and development of the cinematographic industry in Los Angeles, and its now mythical quarters in Hollywood. My intention is not to summarize the local history of this industry and of its studios; recognized scholars have already done so, and their works should be consulted for more in-depth examinations of these questions. What seems crucial in relation with BTL is to look at the specific cinematographic traditions evoked by Klein (mainly but not exclusively in BTLdvd), and to see what explicit relation they have to Los Angeles and its fictional representation.

In BTLdvd, three different types of reference to film history can be distinguished: the comedies (many of them silent, dating from 1912 to 1929), the

documentaries (or long features, with a documentarist orientation[87]) and the previously mentioned film *noir* category. Of these three categories, only two have, I believe, a specific relation with Los Angeles and its fictional representations: film *noir* and documentaries. The particular cinematographic tradition of comedies does not strike me as a genre in which the geographical location is a central question, but I will briefly examine the role of comedies in BTLdvd.

2.1.3.a Comedies

In the section "People Molly Never Met But Would Make Good Characters in Her Story" (in Tier Three), Klein, who is interviewed as if he was (or rather could have been) a character in his own story, states that one of the project's ambitions is to recreate the distinctive atmosphere of certain areas and eras. Some characteristics of BTL that have already been discussed seem to confirm this statement. Recreating a specific atmosphere can be performed in many ways, and using films that belong to the period of interest is one of them. Comedies may appear to be fictional, but they still reflect the social and cultural contexts surrounding their production. In the particular case of comedies, the clips chosen by Klein and his team seem to illustrate some of the social and cultural activities that were typical of certain historical periods. The clips from Teddy at the Throttle, for example, which show people dancing and enjoying themselves in bars and ballrooms, illustrate the vibrant and euphoric "roaring twenties". People could legally buy alcohol and drink it in public

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87 Needless to say that like any label, this type of categorizing is problematic, even though it has practical values. As Paula Rabinowitz reminds us, the term documentary, for example, was "coined in 1926 by the filmmaker, John Grierson, to describe the 'value' of Robert Flaherty's visual account of the daily life of Polynesian islanders, Moana. However, documentary images, caught by still and moving cameras, precede this moment." in They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary. London; New York: Verso, 1994, p. 5.

places. This kind of clip is, of course, meant to contrast with the rigid regulations regarding alcohol and the conservatism that were to follow. This type of scene speaks for the optimism, the frivolity and the eccentric non-conformism of the time, as well as reminding the *vuser* of the popularity of comedies. Molly, who came to Los Angeles in the early twenties, is no exception when it comes to her taste in terms of films. When asked about her preferences, she gladly answers that she never much cared for anything but comedies. However, she also admits to watching other types of movies, but mostly "to see the cuts of the suits", which sounds as though she watched with her profession in mind (BTLnov 22). Comedies are therefore an astute way for the makers of BTL to reconstruct some of the characteristics of an era for the *vuser*.

Another function of comedy is to comment, sometimes quite obliquely, on Molly's personal story and status in the narrative. For instance, the fact that she likes comedies and does not share Klein's taste and fascination for film *noir* is an interesting way to set her apart from the "puppet master" and to show her oft-cited independence of character. Because her story is full of gaps and uncertainties on which Klein frequently insists, films, including comedies, should be regarded as complements and comments on Molly's evanescent character. In one of the clips from Teddy at the Throttle, a rather stout lady sends her dancing partner flying in the air, in an obvious excess of enthusiasm and pride. This scene, which does not correspond to any anecdote told by Molly or her acquaintances, does echo the way Klein describes Molly as a woman in control, who knows, in a subtle but determined manner, how to handle gentlemen when it comes to business. She is always the one who has the upper hand, since this is a key to her survival and success. A passage from BTLnov exemplifies this trait: "One fact was clear: by May 1921, Molly was an

expert on male etiquette, on how to make the famous first impression. (...) 'Beneath a ragged coat,' she would say, 'there may beat an honest heart.' That was one of her best opening lines. The tone was crucial. It had to be delivered naively, as if she'd just memorized it from a book" (BTLnov 16).

Other clips also seem to refer in a comic way to her unsuccessful first marriage with Jack. He was a gambler, an avid drinker and a womanizer, and also disappeared at times, as this passage shows: " 'When it comes to romance, I never had a good sense of timing,' she said. In 1927, Jack disappeared for two days. He came back like a Viking on a death barge. He was literally too tired to make excuses. That was Jack." (BTLnov 23). This episode, coupled with other descriptions of his rather unreliable character visibly, parallels several films starring Stan Laurel. In a clip from His Marriage Vows, for example, Laurel nearly misses his own wedding ceremony, because he cannot seem to remember the church where he is supposed to meet his fiancée. In a clip from Pie-Eyed, Laurel is seen inebriated, brought back by a policeman to his house; eventually the viewer realizes that he is not in his home, since the hostess desperately tries to make him leave, while her own husband is getting ready to go to bed. This presentation of male figures as unpredictable and unreliable individuals surely de-emphasizes Molly's difficulties when dealing with her husband on a daily basis. As Molly is presented as a mysterious and at times secretive person, Klein inserts these clips into BTLdvd and lets the *vuser* fill in the gaps rather than trying to guess her feelings. These clips may appear overly light-hearted to some, but they do give BTLdvd a sense of balance, in comparison with the much darker references to film *noir* and criminality, or to documentaries and their lucid outlook on social and cultural changes across time. Besides providing us with

information on the taste and typical entertainment of a certain period, these clips show the license that the makers of BTL allow themselves and their *vuser*, a point to which I shall return back in the last section of this analysis.

2.1.3.b Film *noir*

I mentioned earlier that discussing hard-boiled literature and its characteristics implies an acknowledgment of the multiple debates surrounding this literary genre. The definition of film *noir*, far from being a consensus, shows that this label is at least as debated in film studies, as in literature. The contested label of film *noir* triggers debates among film historians, film theorists, cultural analysts and feminists, as Frank Krutnik summarizes:

> Across the critical and historical accounts, there is little agreement not only about what characteristics it takes to make a particular film *noir*, and thus which films actually constitute the corpus, but also (...) about the precise status of the category itself. For example, Higham and Greenberg and Paul Kerr refer to *film noir* as a genre; Raymond Durgnat and Paul Shrader see it as defined more by 'mood' and 'tone'; Janet Place and Robert Porfirio describe it as a 'movement' (...).88

Because Frank Nino, a French film critic, coined the label film *noir* in 1946 to describe a set of American thrillers[89] that appeared on French screens, only after the war, the label was originally subjective. From the beginning, then, film *noir* was a problematic category:

> [Film *noir*] was not initially a definitional or categorical term but served rather to locate

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88 In In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity. London; New York, NY: Routledge, 1991, p.17.

89 These films were The Maltese Falcon (1941), Murder, My Sweet (1944), Double Indemnity (1944), Laura (1944) and The Woman in the Window (1944).

> multiple and unsystematised forms of differentiation; referring to an unflattering representation of law and society, to a fatalistic or existential thematic or to the representation of disturbed, often criminal excessive sexuality. It was only subsequently that film noir began to be consolidated as a unified category, with the book of Borde and Chaumeton providing it definitional characteristics, and fleshing out a history and an internal momentum for the noir 'corpus'.90

Despite the absence of a consensual definition, some recurring elements of film noir can easily be identified: "a femme fatale, a morally compromised detective, an urban setting, voice-over narration, convoluted plot structure, chiaroscuro lighting, skewed framing (...)."91 Some of these elements obviously resonate with some of the characteristics of hard-boiled fiction that have been alluded to earlier. Nevertheless, one should not underestimate the many transformations that occur from hard-boiled fiction to film *noir*, and especially from one medium to another. Finally, it should also be underlined that a chronological gap exists between the popular success of pulp magazines in the 1920s, which originally launched a vogue for criminal and detective stories, and their cinematographic counterparts that were produced mainly in the 1940s. American citizens were affected by several major historical events between these decades, one of them being World War II. Marc Vernet remarks, for instance, that: "World War Two and the newsreels had delivered a decisive blow to the system of censorship in operation since 1933, **reality having taken upon itself to**

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90 In In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity. London; New York, NY: Routledge, 1991, pp. 16-17. It should be underlined that this passage explicitly builds on William Straw's reflection in his MA Thesis, entitled Problems in the Historiography of Cinema: the case of Film Noir, p. 87, and on David Bordwell's 'The Case of Film noir' in The Classical Hollywood Cinema by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, Routledge, London, 1985, p. 75.

91 Joan Copjec, Shades of Noir: A Reader. London; New York: Verso, 1993, p. xi.

extend the list of crimes and horrors that could be looked at. Acts of violence as well as bodies gained access to a more direct representation (...)." (My emphasis)[92]. Because many points could be commented on when examining the role of film *noir* in BTL, I will voluntarily limit my analysis to two interrelated elements of film *noir* that are significant in BTL: the overwhelming presence of crime and violence, and the idea of paranoia.

The fact that violence is among the conventional elements of film *noir* is hardly a surprise, especially since it has already been mentioned as a key ingredient of hard-boiled fiction. Compared to hard-boiled fiction, the setting of film *noir* looks unchanged; the city remains a place of decadence, where corruption and criminality lurk around the corner of any dark street. One of the differences between violence in hard-boiled novels and that of film *noir* is, as Vernet commented earlier, that a shift in the degree of acceptable violence on screen can be identified in the 1940s. The war transformed audiences; people could now watch any seedy crime story without being shocked, since most of the population had become used to the generalised display of sordid photos and details in the media.

A real-case investigation that exemplifies this pervasive display of violence is the story related to "the Black Dahlia". This investigation, which was widely publicized at the time, generated many fictional accounts including the novels The Black Dahlia (1988) by James Ellroy and True Confessions (1978) by Gregory Dunne. It is an excellent example of how reality and fiction are intimately tied together when dealing with the representation of Los Angeles. David Fine gives, in

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92 In 'Film Noir on the Edge of Doom', in to Shades of Noir: A Reader. London; New York: Verso, 1993, My emphasis, p. 24.

Imagining Los Angeles, a comprehensive summary of the case:

> On January 15, 1947, the nude body of a twenty-two-year-old female was found in an empty parking lot at the corner of Thirty-ninth and Norton Streets in Los Angeles's Leimert Park district. She had been tortured (cigarette burns on her breasts), skilfully bisected at the waist, and eviscerated. The grisly murder made daily headlines in all three of the city's newspapers and set off one of the biggest manhunts in Los Angeles police history. (...) Some of her personal effects turned up in a post office –letters, photos, and a birth certificate enclosed in an envelope with a message pieced together from letters cut from magazines: "Here is Dahlia's belongings. Letter to follow." No letter followed. Her nickname came from a reporter who learned from a bartender that she was called that because of her penchant for wearing black and her thick, luxurious black hair.(...) Although the news coverage died down after a time as lead after lead failed to produce a killer (...) the Black Dahlia case remained active in the collective memory of the city.

This murder is an ideal case in point to show the wide dissemination of information about crime. But this particular murder is also of interest when dealing with BTL, because it is explicitly referred to by several interviewees (in Tier Three of BTLdvd), who all seem to confirm the conclusion drawn by Fine, when he writes that the Black Dahlia case had a strong and lasting impact on the collective memory of the city. The inclusion of The Black Dahlia case in BTL shows us at least two things. First, the fact that Klein incorporates this particular case in this project reveals his desire to recreate the city's past, as accurately as possible, even in its gruesome details. Second, when collecting the interviewee's memories about this specific case, and when assembling together many clippings about murder cases in BTLdvd, such as the one reproduced in plate 2.9, Klein tries to counterbalance the erasure and the

forgetting of some aspects of the city's history. When he reminds the *vuser* of the city's past and of some of its unsolved mysteries, he arouses her curiosity, as well as underlining that Los Angeles and its local history have fascinated many artists across time (whether novelists, screenwriters or directors).

Using a similar method to the one used when dealing with hard-boiled fiction, Klein bridges the gaps between the actual events and their fictional versions in film *noir*. A good example of this particular practice of 'meaningful connections' is the *noir* filmography that is reproduced on plate 2.10. In this particular section of BTLdvd, Klein not only establishes direct connections between specific geographical locations and films, but he also binds Molly's story with the criminal activities of her time. The rhetoric of haunting mentioned earlier still plays an important part in Klein's strategy, since the ghosts of crimes are literally said to haunt Molly's story, while they are simultaneously presented as a founding part of the city's cinematographic heritage.

Klein may recognize in BTLnov that he is a specialist of imaginary murders only, when he writes: "What I know best is imaginary murder. In movies they are staged in shadows no more than two blocks long. In fact, in Los Angeles, there are actual zones of death, ideal for murdering people in the movies." (BTLnov 36). But what he chooses to show, in the section entitled "Cinematic Zones of Death" in Tier Three of BTLdvd, is another proof of his desire to connect Los Angeles' history with his personal project, and with all the cultural productions that provide an entryway into the city's imaginary. In this particular section, Klein gathers a collection of contemporary photos, which show the location of fictional murders. These locations appear to the *vuser* more often than not as banal and they seem to lack the aura of

their *noir* versions. Nonetheless, what these photos strongly indicate is that to be understood and interpreted, they require all the layers that Klein (or another "conductor" or "puppetmaster") may decide to provide us. Geography in itself isn't of great interest to Klein; locations always need to be connected to their heterogeneous historical, social, and cultural backgrounds to make sense and to teach us something.

One of these many layers is, of course, that of history and it is central to the understanding of the golden age of film *noir* in the 1940s and 1950s. At the time, the general atmosphere is of paranoia, and this is reflected in film *noir*. When analyzing film *noir*, paranoia can be quite a revealing instrument, as it can be understood and interpreted in many ways. On a purely diegetic level, paranoia is often part of the psyche associated with the typical characters of film *noir*. Because a classical film *noir* is often devoted to the description of a specific investigation (related to a single crime, or a series of crime), suspicion and its more extreme form, paranoia, generally appear as natural elements of the plot. To be an effective investigator, the *noir* hero needs to be wary of all and to consider each and every individual involved as a potential participant in the crime. In the end, after a series of adventures, the hero usually manages to solve the case, thanks to his cynicism, and his attention to apparently trivial details.

Paranoia is a common motif in film *noir* and this motif is often associated with the *femme fatale*, a figure also present in hard-boiled novels. As Krutnik accurately explains it:

> There is (...) a significant ambivalence attached to the 'erotic woman': she is fascinating yet at the same time feared. There is an emphatic strain of male sexual paranoia that runs

> through the 1940s 'tough' thrillers (...). The *noir* hero frequently agonises about whether the woman can be trusted, whether she means it when she professes love for him, or whether she is seeking to dupe him in order to achieve her own ends.93

Examples in which the female figure is potentially unreliable and threatening indeed abound in film *noir*. A telling example is the opening sequence of The Big Sleep, directed by Howard Hawks and adapted from Chandler's novel in 1946. In this short series of scenes, private eye Philip Marlowe arrives at the Sternwood's estate, in order to discuss, with the patriarch of the house, the details of an affair that he is about to work on. The opening is masterfully organized since, in the first ten to fifteen minutes, Hawks manages not only to introduce the circumstances of the case Marlowe is asked to investigate, but also to present the two potentially predatory women (Sternwood's daughters), who might interfere with Marlowe's investigation. Two scenes devoted to the General's daughters frame the manly dialogue between Marlowe and General Sternwood. The first one shows Carmen, the younger daughter, unashamedly trying to seduce Marlowe, while the second presents Viviane, receiving him in her "*boudoir*", in what looks like a bedtime gown, and trying to talk him into telling her the professional reasons for his visit. After such an introduction, there is no wonder that Marlowe needs to be alone to think clearly about the case that he has just agreed to investigate.

In BTL, despite the recurring references to Molly's unreliable nature, paranoia is not exclusively related to the endangered status of the male figure, threatened by the predatory woman, even though this aspect has been evoked earlier in that it ties

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93 In In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity. London; New York, NY: Routledge, 1991, p.63.

Klein's investigation with the literary tradition of hard-boiled novels. In the case of film *noir*, paranoia more generally mirrors the political climate of the time. As Krutnik stresses: "The postwar period was marked by (...) the widespread cultural paranoia of the Cold war (which saw the return of the Soviet Union as a 'demonising force' against which the US could define itself)."[94] In film *noir*, paranoia has therefore wide implications and takes various forms. In Power and Paranoia, Dana Polan explains, for instance, how he considers paranoia to be "a historical activity", a "social practice among many, (...) one imaginary way that the forties come up with to live with the contingencies of the moment"[95]. Paranoia should be considered like a pervasive force whose impact should not to be underrated during this particular period.

In Tier Two of BTLdvd, Klein shows that he is well aware that paranoia is an important element in the American psyche, as he entitles a whole section "Collective Paranoias". Paranoia can be linked to some characteristics typical of film *noir*. Polan explains, for example, that: "(...) the forties *film noir* seems to offer a malevolent image of seductive femininity little different from the malevolence of postwar communism (with the two frequently combined in the representation of the dark haired, exotic Russian agent out to trap American men in such films as *The Woman on the Pier* [a.k.a. I Married a Communist (1949)] or *the Red Menace* [1949]) (...)"[96]. This passage may deal with representations typical of the forties, yet they also echo the way Molly is described when she arrives in Los Angeles: "Molly was twenty-two

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94 Ibid., p. 60.

95 In Polan, Dana B. Power and Paranoia: History, Narrative, and the American Cinema, 1940-1950. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 13.

96 Ibid, p. 13.

(...) Her hair was thick and almost red, Russian Jewish, and knotted in a bun." (BTLnov 13). It is therefore logical to see Molly as an encompassing figure, which represents and crystallizes many of the anxieties of the fifties. Not only does she stand for the unreliable woman typical of many classical hard-boiled novels and of film *noir*, but she also clearly embodies the national and political anxieties of Americans in the forties and fifties *vis à vis* the Others.

As Krutnik aptly explains it, in his article 'Something more than Night', there is a widespread feeling in film *noir* that something has gone wrong: "In the arena of the *noir* city, protagonists must confront both the strangeness of others and the strange otherness within – as *film noir*'s scenarios of disorientation and dislocation challenge their ability to chart an identity in *noir*'s expressionistic simulacrum of modern America.'[97] This will give rise to another type of film, often classified as science fiction or dystopia that will be concerned with apocalyptic threats, such as nuclear bombs and alien invasions. Klein does not include these trends in his examination of imagined versions of Los Angeles, but his emphasis on the notion of paranoia illustrates his desire to tie the political climate of fear and suspicion with the cultural productions such as film *noir* which exploited it. A good example of that are the clippings, which underline the widespread idea of paranoia, such as the article reproduced on plate 2.11.

2.1.3.c Documentaries

If film *noir* acts as a reference to which Klein frequently relies on, it is because he wants BTL to fit in the tradition of the local *noir* cinematographic

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97 In 'Something More than Night' in Clarke, David B. The Cinematic City. London; New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 89.

productions. But in the twentieth century, Los Angeles has been much more than the mere theatre of film *noir*. California and Los Angeles have generated an array of films going well beyond the *noir* tradition. Klein and his team undoubtedly aim to present a rich and diversified portrayal of the city and of its representations throughout various artistic productions. As a consequence, they reproduce in BTLdvd a number of clips from more obscure films such as, The Exiles, And Ten Thousand More, or Out of Service. Because they are quite numerous, I will focus on only a few examples that are more significant in relation to Klein's overall project. Beyond their specific particularities, it should be noted that most of these films focus on a rather circumscribed urban subject and that many if not all use a definitive documentarist perspective.

The two films directed by Kent MacKenzie, Bunker Hill and The Exiles, focus for instance on a specific group of Angelenos. Bunker Hill, MacKenzie's first student documentary, was shot in 1956 and deals with the mostly poor and elderly residents of this particular neighbourhood when faced with massive redevelopment projects. Because Bunker Hill is one of the "disappeared" neighbourhoods, to which Klein wants to draw attention, MacKenzie's documentary is a perfect reminder of what life was like before the transformation of the area. The place may have disappeared, but the memories of its inhabitants, the photos, and the cinematographic traces of its existence enable Klein to revive this neighbourhood. The clips from MacKenzie's film, as well as some photos connected to similarly disappeared neighbourhoods, participate to the re-creation of lost areas.

The Exiles, MacKenzie's second and last film (1961), is the result of a collaboration with three Native Americans, who participated in drafting a script about

their life in the city. The film is briefly discussed in David E. James's book on *Avant Garde* film:

> Depicting a Friday night in their lives, the film is structured as an alternating montage of the experience of a young man, Homer, and his wife, who is pregnant with their child. For him the night offers excitement and adventure; for her, only loneliness. Meeting his friends in the bars and juke joints of Main Street, he spends it drinking, gambling, brawling. (...) His wife meanwhile goes alone to the movies and then drifts from one shop window to another, in her voice-over monologue recounting her disillusion with her life and her hope that her child will know a better one. Eventually she visits her girlfriend, and it is from her window that she sees Homer and his companions return in the dawn to their apartment.98

In this description, the Exiles may appear fictional, but its loose narrative thread invites the viewer to take a documentary stance. Many passages of the film show the city at night and focus on the activities of its various inhabitants, rather than the actions of the protagonists. This film is an attempt to illustrate the experience of a group of Native Americans who have left their reservation. Yet it is also much more than a simple documentary on Native Americans. Beyond the need to represent this specific group of people, the film demonstrates the director's desire to question the social and political situation of marginal groups in the American society of the 1950s and 1960s. This is why one could interpret the Exiles in relation to the New American Cinema Group, formed in 1960 under the leadership of John Mekas99. In 1960, Mekas published in Film Culture the Group's manifesto, whose objectives parallel

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98 In The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, pp. 294-295.

99 James remarks this in The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, p.386.

some of the characteristics of MacKenzie's film. The authors of this manifesto see "official cinema all over the world" as being "morally corrupt, aesthetically obsolete, thematically superficial, temperamentally boring". Their text concluded thus: "We don't want false, polished, slick films– we prefer them rough, unpolished but alive; we don't want rosy films, we want them the color of blood."[100] If this description corresponds to the way films shot in the context of New American cinema were to be made, then one can confirm that MacKenzie's films follow largely same principles. The Exiles deals with a marginal group, with low-keyed aspirations indeed. In terms of technical and aesthetic achievement, it appears 'rough and alive' when it follows the night of the group of young and restless men driving and partying through nightlife Los Angeles. While MacKenzie was not affiliated with the group, he comes close to many of their objectives, and this especially when one compares his Exiles to one of the films most often associated with this movement, Shadows by John Cassavetes (1959). The location is different –Shadows follows the lives of three African Americans in New York (two brothers and a sister to be precise– but the focus remains as in MacKenzie's film, the urban wanderings of a marginal group of young people.

The use made by Klein of MacKenzie's work is in tune with the ideas that drove the New American Cinema Group. In BTLdvd, the fragments from Bunker Hill and from The Exiles are not selected to emphasize the narrative aspect of MacKenzie's films, and they fit with some of the goals of Klein's project. Some passages of The Exiles seem to mirror the descriptions of Molly, when she wanders

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100 In "The First Statement of the New American Cinema Group", Film Culture, 22-23, summer 1961, pp.131-134.

in the streets, when she gets lost in the crowds, and when she thinks back about her life. This roughly corresponds to the scenes focusing on the inner monologue of Homer's wife. On the other hand, other passages echo the interviews that deal with nightlife and marginality in the city. In the fifties and sixties, the city was a place where the Beat generation could enjoy a new freedom and where marginal groups had the freedom to roam through the city. Watching these scenes makes the *vuser* feel like Los Angeles was at the time a place, which accepted difference, despite the overwhelming paranoid atmosphere referred to earlier. In reproducing these clips from The Exiles and Bunker Hill, Klein brings his work into another cinematographic tradition, that of the documentary, particularly as practiced in the New American Cinema. By using films such as MacKenzie's, he also manages to create a more vivid evocation of Los Angeles, one whose characteristics will now be thoroughly examined.

2.2 Digging Through the Layers, Uncovering the Collaborative Interplay across Media and the Potential of Database Narrative

Now that the artistic foundations at the basis of BTL have been analyzed, I would like to examine the specific characteristics which structure this database narrative. The following section, which studies BTL's formal characteristics, will be divided in two. First, I will analyze two central characteristics of BTL: its exploration of mediatic combinations, and its resistance to narrative closure. I will then consider how these characteristics relate to the general objective of Klein when dealing with the city of Los Angeles, which is to invite the reader/*vuser* to a renewed urban experience.

Before examining the specificities of BTL's structure, I want to explain why I

am convinced that "database narrative" is a suitable label for Klein's project. In much of the literature about new media, including Lev Manovich's seminal book, The Language of New Media, a marked opposition between database and narrative is established.

> As a cultural form, the database represents the world as a list of items, and it refuses to order this list. In contrast, a narrative creates a cause and effect trajectory of seemingly unordered items (events). Therefore, database and narrative are cultural enemies. Competing for the same territory of human culture, each claims an exclusive right to make meaning out of the world.[101]

This opposition unfolds largely from the voluntarily limited definition of narrative that Manovich privileges. Later in his text, he becomes more explicit about his subjective take on database and narrative as "two competing imaginations, two basic creative impulses, two essential responses to the world." (LNM 233). The definition of narrative that I will adopt in this analysis enables a more encompassing and challenging examination of the choices made in Klein's project. My understanding of narrative is broader and it implies that the idea of narrative be considered as an evolving concept, which most certainly diverges from Manovich's more constrained definition. In fact, my interpretation of narrative is more akin to Marsha Kinder's suggestion that narrative should not be restricted to a single type of discourse.

> In western academic theory, "narrative" is traditionally perceived as a mode of discourse (whether in art, myth or history) containing actions and characters that interact and change

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101 In Lev Manovich, The Language of New Media. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001, p. 225. Further references will use the abbreviated form LNM.

> according to laws of causality within a temporal and spatial setting. But new media, as modes of nonlinear storytelling and communication, help us see that in a much broader cognitive and ideological sense, narrative is also a means of patterning and interpreting the meaning of all sensory input and "object of knowledge"(...). For narratives map the world and its inhabitants and locate us within that textual landscape and seascape, requiring a constant refiguring of our mental cartography with its supporting databases, search engines and representational conventions.[102]

Therefore, if one considers narrative as a way to map and interpret our world, rather than as a limited mode of discourse obeying a set of rigid rules, the opposition between narrative and database is less clear. Building on this reconsideration of the definition of the term narrative, I believe one can rightly re-evaluate the way the expression "database narrative" is often carelessly handled. Because BTLdvd is technically speaking a multimedia database, and because it is structured around a definitive (even if not always consistent) narrative thread, I believe that it should rightly be called a database narrative. This expression seems all the more appropriate when one reads the rest of Kinder's text, which is based on her experience as the director of the Labyrinth Project, a research initiative on interactive narrative hosted by the University of California since 1997[103]. Despite the fact that Kinder does not include BTL in the examples of database narrative that she mentions, her definition of "database narrative" is consistent with Klein's overall project when she writes:

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102 In Marsha Kinder, "Honoring the Past and Creating the Future in Cyberspace: New Technologies and Cultural Specificity" in The Contemporary Pacific, Volume 15, Number 1, Spring 2003, p. 97.

103 It should be reminded that BTL is the result of a collaborative work produced under the auspices of this particular research initiative, which makes Kinder's comments all the more relevant to this analysis.

> By database narratives, I am referring to narratives whose structure exposes or thematizes the dual processes of selection and combination that lie at the heart of all stories and that are crucial to language: the selection of particular data (characters, objects, settings, sounds, events) from a series of database or paradigms, which are then combined to generate specific tales. Such narratives reveal the possibility of making other combinations, which would create alternative stories, and they encourage us to question the choice of categories and of what is included and omitted.[104]

In BTLnov, which can literally be interpreted as a meta-text about BTL, there is no doubt that Klein aims to expose some if not all of "the processes of selection and combination" that presided over the making of this particular cultural production. In this short passage for instance, Klein clearly thinks about the various possibilities to re-create Molly's story and to turn it into a multi-layered artistic project: "As I gradually felt my eyes needing to open, I turned toward my research on Molly's life, as if I could edit her sensations into a story that was symphonic in some way, or contrapuntal. (...) Then I could assemble my assets into a vast database, for a search engine that could be selected according to the senses." (BTLnov 11). As for BTLdvd, having a table of contents that defines Tier 1 as "The Phantom of a Novel: Seven Moments", Tier 2 as "The Writer's Backstory" and Tier 3 as "Excavation: Digging behind the story and its locale" demonstrates that this project is not only about the particular story of Molly, but also about the act of creating a story.

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104 In Marsha Kinder, "Honoring the Past and Creating the Future in Cyberspace: New Technologies and Cultural Specificity" in The Contemporary Pacific, Volume 15, Number 1, Spring 2003, p. 113.

2.2.1. Exploring combinations and resisting narrative closure

When I write that BTL is a collaborative work that explores mediatic combinations, I have in mind the concept of "recombinant poetics", as defined by Bill Seaman in the following quote: "Art works which exemplify recombinant poetics are characterised by the interaction of a *vuser* with a computer-based mechanism that enables her/him to become actively engaged with aspects of experience arising from the combination and recombination of text, image and/or music/sound elements."[105] Seaman, who is both an academic and a recognized new media artist, uses this expression to describe the type of work that he makes and exhibits throughout the world. I will not engage here in a lengthy discussion of Seaman's artwork. It is Seaman's reflection on new media that is valuable when considering similar art forms, and in the following section, using Seaman's definition as a basis, I will demonstrate that BTL is a database narrative which is representative of the concept of recombinant poetics.

BTLnov may originally appear as a mere collection of texts, including a novella and some critical texts composed by the projects' creators. However, it should also be considered an essential part of the project that complements BTLdvd. The lingering difference between these two elements is their mediatic format, since BTLnov is an assemblage of textual material while BTLdvd makes the most of its multimedia possibilities. This double format is already indicative of the plural perspective favoured by BTL's creators. Besides this double format, Klein and his

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105 In William Curtis Seaman's dissertation Recombinant Poetics: Emergent Meaning as Examined and Explored Within a Specific Generative Virtual Environment, http://digitalmedia.risd.edu/billseaman/pdf/recombinantPoeticsDis.pdf, Accessed January 2004, p. 35.

team also pair in BTLdvd, among other things, archival photos with newspaper clippings, film clips with segments of oral narrative, and interviews with various texts (such as bibliographies, filmographies, and even written sketches of the project). Despite their discrepancies, all these fragments contribute to what Seaman would call the recombinant poetics of this work. All these bits and pieces are part of the *vuser*'s journey, and they form what Seaman describes as the "combination and recombination of text, image and/or music/sound elements".

Another significant aspect of BTLdvd that validates the parallel between Seaman's definition and Klein's work is the fact that these combinations are not simply displayed to the *vuser* in a preset order. These fragments are combined and re-combined depending on the choices that the *vuser* makes along his or her journey. So for this work to be operative, it needs an active participant, someone ready to interact with BTL's specific interface, and to engage in fairly long and sometimes surprising manipulations. Interactivity is therefore a decisive element when arguing that Klein uses recombinant poetics in BTLdvd. In the field of new media and game studies, interactivity is often a basic quality of the works under scrutiny. It is therefore hardly surprising to find that interactivity plays a major role in BTLdvd. Assembling fragments from various origins is an immemorial process in art, whether one thinks of ancient mosaics, or of more modern collages, so what makes this particular case of recombinant poetics an innovative and stimulating strategy? Here I wish to focus on a couple of more detailed micro-analyzes, which will help to determine the objectives and effects of such a poetics.

Let's take a concrete example in Tier 1, chapter 6 which demonstrates how Klein combines mediatic layers, and what kind of effects these produce, once

experienced by the *vuser*. First, it is quite striking to note that in BTLdvd there is a deliberate emphasis on the use and inclusion of older media, and this despite the widespread craze for the "newness" of digital art, which was promoted by new media enthusiasts in the nineties. Why did Klein and his team decide to include so many examples of older mediatic forms? Is it simply for the pleasure of showing off the technical possibilities of the DVD-ROM format? This seems an unlikely hypothesis, even if Klein does make a point of exploring this particular format by, as we shall see later, shattering classical narrative structures. Is it, then, to make the *vuser* reconsider her interaction with, and her reception of database narratives? Or is it meant to give the *vuser* a diverse, rather than unified, perspective on the city of Los Angeles? These two propositions seem more in tune with the strategies used by Klein, as I will demonstrate below.

Part of the title of this specific section (Tier 1, chapter 6) provides an important clue to explain Klein's decision of including older media in his own project. "A life of erasures" certainly refers to the specific destruction of neighbourhoods, like Bunker Hill and Chávez Ravine, but the recurring presence of the notions of memory and amnesia also points towards a more extensive interpretation of this title. Many images and characters in BTLdvd are indeed related to this idea of memory, whether one thinks of the erratic nature of Molly's recollections, or of the figure of the helpless amnesiac. Yet on a different level, this concern with memory is also a means to point to the transient character of mediatic images themselves.

In order to entice the *vuser* to ponder over the becoming of media and of images, Klein skilfully assembles various examples of these mediatic forms.

Combining different mediatic formats, such as newspaper clippings, photos, and film is symptomatic of two driving forces behind BTL. In this particular case, recombinant poetics strikes me as a clever tool of aesthetic inquiry and social critique. BTLdvd is therefore not only a combination of fragments that summon back to life past urban experiences; it is also a reflection on the drastic need to preserve older forms of art and on the future of such images. Many of the films whose fragments are reproduced in BTLdvd, are available only thanks to the effort of Klein and his team. BTL's recombinant poetics thus clearly indicates the creators' desire to question digital art and new media. In some way, Klein and his team echo the concerns of some critics and theorists of digital art, like Oliver Grau, when he writes that: "Media art is (...) an essential component of how contemporary societies may achieve an adequate self-description and by which means they can seek to attain a critical distance to the increasing pace of change."[106]

Another sign of the determination to question new media art lies in the structure of BTL. Because of the fragmentary nature of BTLdvd, the *vuser* is forced into an active position, since she is the one who is supposed to establish loose or missing connections. As a consequence, when the combinations do not perfectly match, they make the *vuser* wonder about the mediatic format that enables their association in the first place. Despite the narrative thread provided by Molly's story, what are the possible common elements between the photos of some long gone houses, newspaper clippings relating random murders and the filmed images of an old cable car? The concept of recombinant poetics echoes some of Bolter and

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106 In Grau, Oliver. Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion. Rev. and expanded ed. Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 2003, p. 347.

Grusin's considerations in Remediation. One of the two strategies of remediation is, according to the two authors, that of hypermediacy which they define as: "A style of visual representation whose goal is to remind the viewer of the medium."[107] In order to make their point, Bolter and Grusin give examples of art forms that make the viewer conscious of the medium, some of which like collage and photomontage, that clearly echo the characteristics of recombinant poetics as defined earlier:

> In collage and photomontage as **in hypermedia, to create is to rearrange existing forms**. In photomontage the preexisting forms are photographs; in literary hypertext they are paragraphs of prose; and in hypermedia **they may be prose, graphics, animations, videos and sounds**. In all cases, the artist is defining a space through **the disposition and interplay of forms** that have been detached form their original context and then **recombined**.[108] (My emphasis).

In this passage, the parallel between the processes of collage, photomontage and hypermedia is evident. This shows even more clearly that Klein has in mind the questioning of art forms, and in particular of new media. As Kinder writes, in her essay adjacent to Klein's novella, by exposing the ideological implications of combining elements together to form a narrative, Klein undermines the authority of master narratives and shifts "the locus of power and pleasure both in the creation and reception of stories" (BTLnov 54).

Now that we have seen how recombinant poetics can be used as a powerful tool of aesthetic inquiry, I would like to focus on social critique, the second driving

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107 In Bolter, J. David, and Richard A. Grusin. Remediation: Understanding New Media. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999, p. 272.

108 In Bolter, J. David, and Richard A. Grusin. Remediation: Understanding New Media. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999, p. 39.

force that was identified as part of recombinant poetics. Social critique is an underlying principle in BTLdvd, since part of Klein's ultimate objective is, with this project, to recreate and assemble various layers of the city of Los Angeles that are now gone. In the section considered here, for example, the *vuser* is presented not only with photos of demolition and construction sites, but also with the filmed testimonies of inhabitants of these sites, who voice their disappointment at seeing these places disappear. On the one hand, Klein presents a nostalgic account of these disappearances, which makes us aware of the fragile nature of solid looking buildings. On the other hand, the recurrent morphing of black and white pictures into current colour photos of these neighbourhoods makes these places look more tangible. They may have physically vanished, but they remain a haunting presence. They are remembered, and sometimes missed, by the protagonists of BTL. And, they often look more vivid than the picture-perfect shots of reconstruction scenarios as shown on plate 2.12. These assembled elements, both from the past and the present, appear at regular intervals throughout the *vuser*'s journey. These architectural landmarks, and sometimes the story of their creation (like that of Union Station as seen on plate 2.13), remind us of the transient quality of even the most memorable buildings and neighbourhoods. By exposing these fragments, Klein shows us that there is no ending to what men can build up and alternately destroy, and that Los Angeles is an excellent example of the ever growing and ever changing nature of a city. By combining maps of the city (like in Tier 3, section "Mapping the Unfindable") with the voices of its inhabitants (such as in Tier 3, section "People Molly Never Met But Would Make Good Characters in Her Story"), Klein demonstrates that knowing a city means experiencing it. Urban territories are made

by the people that enliven them, and this is why, when considering Los Angeles, Klein pays specific attention to its diverse and evolving society. Klein tries in his own way, like Michel de Certeau, to go beyond appearances and to be critical, to overcome the stereotypical discourse about the city that has been elaborated by urbanists and city planners for years. "(...) I shall try to locate the practices that are foreign to the "geometrical" or "geographical" space of visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions. (...) A migrational, or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city."(PEL 93)

In BTLdvd, there are many moments when the material presented is explicitly critical, for example when Klein evokes major urban plans or smaller reconstruction projects, and these moments surely benefit from the friction between overlapping perspectives and images. There are many reasons that may have led Klein and his team to privilege a recombinant poetics. My analysis suggests that the presentation of an openly multi-faceted, critical, and self-reflexive creation was one important motivation.

The title of the whole project, Bleeding Through: Layers of Los Angeles 1920-1987, can without a doubt be interpreted as a way to remind the *vuser* of the "murdered", disappeared, areas of the city. All the interviews in Tier 3 validate this claim, since most of these relate the past experiences of various Angelenos. Some of these people's considerations echo the claims of recognized analysts, such as Jane Jacobs, who explains the need for aged buildings in her seminal book, The Death and Life of Great Americans Cities[109].

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109 For more details, see Part two, section 10: "The Need for Aged Buildings", in Jacobs, Jane. The Death and Life of Great American Cities. 2002 ed. New York: Random House, 2002, pp. 200-213.

The combination of textual, visual and verbal elements in Tier 1, chapter 6 confirms that to learn anything about a place, be it a neighbourhood or a city, one needs a kaleidoscopic view that includes many versions and visions, including the highly subjective. There cannot be only one version, one grand and cohesive master narrative for a city, especially when it is as diverse and changing as Los Angeles. Even when considering Molly's story, one could say that Klein's mission is to provide the *vuser* with as many contextual and related elements as possible, even at the risk of creating conflicting views. The association of images with titles that seem meticulously chosen (or with the short sentences that sometimes accompany them) does give to the *vuser* useful clues. However, these associations never provide a definitive answer, which makes the navigation of BTLdvd an ever-challenging journey. While there is a distinguishable puppet master behind the project, BTLdvd strikes me as a production that tries to be as polyphonic and critically inventive as possible, thanks to its recombinant poetics. The characteristic of BTL that I now wish to turn to is the second important formal trait evoked earlier, BTL's resistance to narrative closure.

As many of the analyses presented in this chapter have already shown, despite the narrative thread provided by Molly's character, the narrative structure behind both BTLnov and BTLdvd has been kept volatile. BTLdvd as a whole oscillates between the creators' desire to generate a convincing tale, structured around Molly's story, and between their desire to let the seams of their canvas show. In BTLdvd, a *vuser* would need to confine his exploration to Tier 1 to stick with a more traditional-looking narrative. And even then, some pieces of the puzzle provided by Klein do not perfectly match or correlate. In Tier 1, the combination of images requires the talking

head of Klein, since it helps the *vuser* to make connections between the miscellaneous fragments. If the *vuser* tries to navigate BTLnov only without reading the "captions" or listening to Klein's audio-story, significant pieces of the puzzle will be missing. One cannot really analyze BTLdvd as one would a classically progressing narrative, with only one or two protagonists and a pre-determined sequence of actions that culminates in a straightforward denouement.

Tier 1 in BTLdvd is the most cohesive, since it relies heavily on the story of Molly's life. Nevertheless, some details such as the polyphonic tone that is sometimes adopted, or the changing presentations of characters also point toward the sophisticated process of creating fiction. The character of Molly's first husband, Jack, is a case in point and it illustrates the attention that Klein paid to the fictional process. The bits and pieces that we learn about Jack usually originate in Klein's comments. Yet, at the same time, some photos show direct quotations, probably from Klein's interviews with Molly, regarding her husband's attitude. Finally, to add complexity and density to this story, Klein also gives us iconic examples of Jack's playful and malleable nature. On plates 2.14, 2.15 and 2.16, the *vuser* can see Jack wearing various attires, which all attest that he enjoys re-inventing himself, with the help of a little equipment. This is obvious proof that Jack is a multifaceted character who can play different roles, depending on his own mood, or on the choice made by the teller of the story, whether it is Klein or Molly. Playing with masks, clothes, dialogues, is a way for the "narrator", or puppet master as I called him before, to propose many options to the *vuser* and thus to enrich the story.

Even in Tier 1, the creators of BTL remain inconclusive when it comes to the characters, but also in relation to the plot. An essential instance in relation to the plot

is the disappearance of Molly's second husband, Walt. In BTLnov, the reader cannot but notice the contradictory sections that regularly pop up in the text, as well as the self-reflexive passages, which underline Klein's various hypothesizes.

> Next day, I went to a newspaper morgue, looking for articles on Walt's disappearance. Instead, I found fifty ways to kill a man between 1959 and 1961 (...) So many of these murders feature domestic partners. The story turns into a dark sexual farce about forensic detail:
>
> > Point of entry- for the bullet, the adulterer, or the assailant;
> >
> > Time of murder- the last time, the first time, the best time, her time of the month, his bad timing; (...) (BTLnov 24).

As this passage shows, the research turns into a game, a conscious assemblage of possibilities that cannot provide a clear-cut and definitive version to explain Walt's disappearance. In BTLdvd, evidence of this playfulness can also be found in the clues and leads that Klein gives to us about the plot. Another potential lead that could explain the disappearance of Walt is present in Klein's audio commentary, when he reveals that, years later, Molly's step daughter realizes that there is a third man in her step mother's life, a Philippino who may well have been part of the staff when Walt was still around. Slowly but surely, Klein always seems to leave room for alternative interpretations and possibilities. Who was this "third" man for instance? Was he involved in Walt's mysterious disappearance? Or is he simply a way to link Molly's love life with historical considerations on interethnic marriages? Whatever the option the *vuser* decides to favour, one cannot but notice the way Klein cultivates an aura of inconclusiveness and openness in relation with this project. Both in BTLdvd and in

BTLnov, there is an obvious resistance to narrative closure. Even if one spends hours navigating BTLdvd and analyzing BTLnov, an imperfect causality of actions remains. Indeed, Klein's team tries to work against the predictability of traditional narratives. Instead of providing the *vuser* with straightforward answers and neatly cohesive subplots or characters, Klein and his team intently focus on ruptures, surprises, inconclusiveness and openness.

The openness that is displayed in *BTL* can be paralleled with some of Umberto Eco's enlightening considerations about art in The Open Work[110]. Thinking of *BTL* as both a multi-layered database narrative, and an open work is an interesting way to reveal the potential of this format. Despite the fact that Eco at the time of his writing[111] did not refer to new media, his application to a wide range of works suggests that his argumentation can be extended to projects such as Klein's. When he considers novels such as James Joyce's Ulysses and Finnegans Wake and analyzes their radical originality, he opposes them to the traditional pattern of causality established by Aristotle in his Poetics.

> La poétique du roman bien fait remonte à Aristote; ses règles sont celles là même qui qui devaient, selon le philosophe, présider à l'élaboration d'une « intrigue » tragique. Alors que « l'histoire » (j'entends la vie quotidienne) se compose d'un ensemble d'événements désordonnés, qui ne sont pas unis entre eux par aucun lien logique et qui peuvent au cours d'un laps de temps donné concerner un ou plusieurs individus, « la poésie » (et l'art en

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110 Umberto Eco, The Open Work. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989. Further references to Eco's book will use the abbreviated form OW, or OO for l'Oeuvre ouverte its French version. Some sections of the French version seem to be missing from the English translation. In the absence of a definitive English manuscript, they will therefore be quoted in French.

111 The Open Work was first published in Italian in 1962.

> général) introduit entre ces divers événements un lien logique, une succession nécessaire; elle en choisit certains et en néglige d'autres, conformément aux exigences, tenues pour inévitables, de la vraisemblance.» (*OO* 222)

Openness can therefore be correlated with attributes such as chaos, randomness[112], and the absence of causality. Some of these attributes obviously echo the formal characteristics discussed earlier in relation with the structure of BTL. Another element contributing to my reading of BTL as an open work is the accent the creators put on both the narrative and the creative process leading to the project's completion. In BTLdvd, particularly in Tier 2 and 3, the emphasis laid on the choices they made, and on what was left out of Tier 1, shows that Klein and his team expect the *vuser* to question the categories that presided over their selection. The research undertaken to make the DVD-ROM is an undisguised part of BTL. For example, Klein and his team voluntarily make it apparent that much more could have been added to the final production when they mention the lost section, a part of BTLdvd that was destroyed in an accidental fire, as seen on plate 12.17. The title of Tier 3 "Excavation: Digging behind the story and its locale" also makes it clear that the project is not only about reconstructing Molly's story, but also about going beyond mere narrative. Some parts of the following subtitle, in BTLdvd's table of contents, also acknowledge Klein's desire to show the "raw material" behind his research, as well as his enjoyment of the potentially endless research process: "(...) for an instant, the pleasure of researching as an end in itself seems much richer than making plot points, storyboards, movie setups. Why give up feeling so completely inhabited? The

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112 See Eco's preface for a general discussion of the attributes that can be associated with his idea of an open work. (OW 10).

'making of' has become a picaresque (...)." There obviously is pleasure involved in the gathering of sources, in the assemblage of extra material, and in the showing of the work "behind the scene". *BTL* is in this sense an open work, as it leaves room for further additions, as well as indicating its own construction.

Such an emphasis clearly goes against what literary theorists commonly call suspension of disbelief, a characteristic that is often associated with structural elements such as narrative drive, matching causality and similitude. On the contrary, when Klein leaves traces of the scanned articles that he used to illustrate the specifics of some particular period, when he magnifies the imperfections, the limits, and the fragility of the medium, he encourages the *vuser* to reconsider her certainties about what an art piece is. An important reason of this openness relates to one of Klein's ultimate objectives, which is to encourage an active interaction with BTL, which should lead the *vuser* to think again about the central subject of this project, the city of Los Angeles. As Eco writes: "(...) The openness is converted into an instrument of revolutionary pedagogics" (OW 11). Now that some of the main structural characteristics of this database narrative have been analyzed, I would like to dig further into the potential of this database narrative in relation with the idea of the city. From what has been considered before in this chapter, it is quite obvious that BTL's particular format aims to invite us to a different type of discovery, but what exactly does this renewed urban experience entail? And what is it built on?

2.2.2 BTL, towards a renewed urban experience

When Klein and his team began to work on BTL, they clearly undertook an ambitious project. Numerous attempts have been made to represent the inner life of a city, both in literature and on screen. Examples come to mind from the classics, such

as Zola's Le Ventre de Paris and Ruttmann's Berlin: Symphony of a Great City, to more recent works like Didion's Play It as It Lays and Lee's Do the Right Thing. In academia, the study of cities is also a subject of choice, whatever the disciplinary field one decides to associate with, be it architecture, sociology, literature or film studies. Narrowing the focus of this section to the city of Los Angeles does not make things easier since, as Mike Davis shows in City of Quartz, L.A. and California have given rise to countless cultural productions, as well as numerous theoretical works focusing on the question of urbanity.

Despite these numerous antecedents, Klein's project is different because of many of the singular characteristics that were discussed throughout this chapter. This project was not only developed thanks to in-depth academic research and fieldwork, but also designed to be experienced as an artwork. By choosing a double format (that of a DVD-ROM coupled with a text) and by opting for an open recombinant poetics, Klein and his team make clear the ultimate challenge that they set for their project, to invite us to a renewed and original urban experience. Of course, this renewed urban experience cannot be achieved if the *vuser* is not willing to partake in the project, and this explains why I laid emphasis earlier on the role of the *vuser*. When I examined BTL as an open work, I meant first to underline the *vuser*'s engagement with Klein's project, and second to stress the subjectivity at work when manipulating BTLdvd. Eco articulates this idea: "This search for suggestiveness is a deliberate move to « open » the work to the free response of the addressee. An artistic work that suggests is also one that can be performed with the full emotional and imaginative resources of the interpreter" (OW 9). When analysing BTL, it will always be assumed that the *vuser*'s personal input is essential, because of the versatility of each individual's

experience with BTL's interface. Now that these details have been specified, let us focus on the central questions that follow: what kind of exploration are we invited to, and what experience is it built on?

When tackling the subject of the city, BTL cleverly plays on two distinct approaches to the city, one that I would define as essentially modernist, and the other that feeds on more contemporary and postmodernist considerations. The modernist approach that one can still strongly detect throughout Klein's work originates in two factors: first the impressive collection of documents dating from the early 20th century, and second the constant association made between the body and the city. When Klein organizes in BTL the story of the city of Los Angeles and that of Molly in parallel, he crucially connects this city's specific architecture, as well as all the imaginary configurations attached to it, with a woman's body. He thus calls attention to the crucial relationship between on the one hand urban spaces, and on the other hand the bodies that occupy these spaces. In the footsteps of thinkers like Merleau Ponty who wrote: "my body is the pivot of the world [and] (...) I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body"[113], Klein reaffirms the centrality of the body as a significant mode to experience not only the world but also what preoccupies him most, i.e. the city. When the *vuser* manipulates BTL's interface, what she experiences is a combination of sensations and perceptions that depend on the specifics of Los Angeles as presented by Klein, and not on a disembodied and abstract experience of this particular space. This crucial connection between urban space and the body is one thoroughly discussed and analyzed by contemporary theorists, like Elisabeth

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113 In Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. Phenomenology of Perception. London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1962, p. 82.

Grosz and Christine Boyer[114]. Grosz, in an essay entitled "Bodies-Cities", focuses for example on 'the constitutive and mutually defining relations between bodies and cities'[115]. In this theoretical piece of work, which re-examines the different types of models used in the past to describe the relations between bodies and cities, she defends an alternative to what she calls the representational and the causal models.

> These two models are inappropriate insofar as they give precedence to one term or the other of the body/city pair. A more appropriate model combines elements from each. (...) What I am suggesting is a model of relations between bodies and cities that sees them, not as megalithic total entities, but assemblages or collections of parts, capable of crossing the threshold between substances to form linkages, machines, provisional and often sub- or micro-groupings. This model is practical, based on the productivity of bodies and cities in defining and establishing each other.[116]

Despite Klein's frequent commentaries on the making of the whole project, we are only given a few hints regarding the politics that determined the shape of the final product. What appears obvious throughout this work, though, is the interdependence existing between the figure of Molly and the city of Los Angeles.

The city's geographical and architectural arrangements are a definitive ingredient in the social constitution of Molly's body, and these connections appear to

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114 Throughout all their writing, Grosz and Boyer manifest their constant interest for such questions even though this is particularly prevalent in Grosz, E. A. Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies. New York: Routledge, 1995 and in Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001 and in Boyer, M. Christine. Cybercities: Visual Perception in the Age of Electronic Communication. 1st ed. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996.

115 In Grosz, E. A. Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies. New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 104.

116 In Grosz, E. A. Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies. New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 109.

me as crucial elements in explaining BTL's politics. Some passages of BTLnov make the bond between Molly's body and the city quite blatant:

> I try to visualize Molly arriving at the Santa Fe Station in Los Angeles in 1920 or 1919, after the war. Under the glare of a much fiercer desert heat than today, she stared at the dust rising subtly at the train yards on Traction. She could smell ripe oranges on the ground blocks away, in groves to the east. Molly was twenty-two, but as uncomfortable as a teenager with her body. (BTLnov 13).

When Klein narrates and illustrates the various changes in Molly's life, he repeatedly associates them with the social circumstances of the times, and with her physical environment. The "interview section"[117] in BTLdvd is for example crucial, because it simultaneously gives us access to some of the sources that Klein used to give shape to Molly's story, while it also demonstrates the determining role of this urban environment on its inhabitants.

All the references to the now gone cable car, for instance, and to the activities it helped to maintain, provide the *vuser* with a concrete idea of what the city was like in the past. Klein thus makes it clear that "the form, structure, and norms of the city seep into and affect all the other elements that go into the constitution of corporality"[118]. This particular transportation system is referred to on numerous occasions. Klein assembles a multi-faceted patchwork that enables the *vuser* to understand the importance of this cable car for many of Los Angeles' communities. We are given to see various archival photos at different moments in time, we are

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117 I referred to this section before as Tier 3, section "People Molly Never Met But Would Make Good Characters in Her Story".

118 In Grosz, E. A. Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies. New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 108.

shown clips from the documentary film Red Car[119], we can also listen to Bob Pramenko's interview, who used to drive them, and finally we can watch it in the clips of some feature films, like the Exiles. This particular example shows how Klein makes use of a modernist understanding of cinema to establish the connections between urban space and its inhabitants. Like Walter Benjamin and Dziga Vertov before him, he considers that "the camera [offers] a new way of exploring reality, making visual images into a form of tactile knowledge (...)."[120]

Despite the fact that the city is the theatre of acute power struggles often unknown by the average citizen, Klein shows that the city's inhabitants, including Molly, can also give shape to and change their environment. The relations that he presents between the cities and its inhabitants always go both ways; they exemplify the constant dialogue and exchanges that take place between Angelenos and their city across time. In the section 'The chorus of Idle Footsteps' in The Practice of Everyday Life (PEL 97-102), De Certeau explains in a similar fashion, how individuals create singular ways to occupy urban space and how they influence their urban environment: "The long poem of walking manipulates spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may be: it is neither foreign to them (it can take place only within them) nor in conformity with them (it does not receive its identity from them). It creates shadows and ambiguities within them. It inserts its multitudinous references, and citations into them (social models, cultural mores, personal factors)." (PEL 101)

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119 Directed by Robert Tarlton in 1958.

120 In Boyer, M. Christine. Cybercities: Visual Perception in the Age of Electronic Communication. 1st ed. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996, p. 86.

In this particular case of relations, the clips from Kent MacKenzie's The Exiles are certainly most representative. Despite the marginal status of the group that MacKenzie decides to follow, he continually presents them as free moving elements in the city. The city may be static and conservative in its ways, but the group that is represented is free to ride from one place to the next and to appropriate, even if temporarily, the space they are in. Interestingly, the female figure is also shown as a being in movement; she is an active wanderer who roams through the streets and reflects on her life and future. This recurring figure of the urban wanderer, which resembles Molly in many ways, could be described as a *flaneuse* figure.

Without a doubt, this collection of visual evocations of movement builds on the writings about modernity, perception and representation as formulated by critics and theorists such as Georg Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin, as well as on the cinematographic work of directors like Dziga Vertov. In The Art of Taking a Walk, Anke Gleber who is interested in delineating "a history of perception and representation in modernity by analyzing one of its significant modes of observation, (...)'*flanerie*'." [121], defines this phenomenon in a way that resonates with Klein's project:

> As a privileged means of looking closely at exterior reality, *flanerie* works to register the minute historical nature of things, taking note of the immediate material changes that shape the images, sights and spaces of society. (...) The gaze of *flanerie* not only reveals the shape and structure of many social processes but also works to provide and inventory of its society

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121 In Gleber, Anke. The Art of Taking a Walk: Flanerie, Literature, and Film in Weimar Culture. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999, p.vii.

and its imaginary spaces, of its historical moment.[122].

Of course in her book, Gleber focuses on a more restricted period than Klein in BTL, and she also confines her study to mainly continental subjects. Nevertheless, her description of *flanerie* perfectly seems to fit with Klein's project, with an important difference of course, that of the mediatic format. As I underlined before, the specific format of BTL enables Klein to invite the *vuser* to a renewed urban experience, which results from the complex combinations of several mediatic forms. The *flanerie* that we are invited to is therefore not only a modernist walk among some of the literary and cinematographic moments of Los Angeles' life (although it does built on some of its quintessential representations like film *noir* or detective fiction). It is also a contemporary and more postmodernist attempt to immerse the *vuser* into a multidimensional environment that evokes the daily experience of many 21st century urbanites.

When Klein decides to concentrate on the subject of Los Angeles, he challenges our ways to experience and understand urban spaces. In our day and age, his approach may appear at first traditional, but this project's final format and its way of critically questioning our experience is a clever way to approach the question of urbanity. As Boyer writes, this is far from an easy task, since urban spaces are today more than ever made of challenging and saturated layers of signification. "Developing an image of the city in an age of visual saturation appears to be a problem, precisely because awareness of the physical space of the city is disappearing or dematerializing –the result, we are told, of new digital information and

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122 Ibid, p. 137.

communication technologies."[123] One of the concerns of Grosz and other theorists like Paul Virilio, Marc Augé and Fredric Jameson, who are all interested in the changes affecting cities in the late 20th century and early 21st century, is that direct experience might decline and that as a consequence memory may be replaced by immaterial realms of hypervisuality and simulation.

In BTL, Klein offers his artistic answer to these questions by digging through the layers of the city and its various representations, by organizing in a personal way the lived experiences and the stories that he has collected, in short, by using the vast potential of the form of the database narrative. Acknowledging the *vuser*'s desire for a narrative, Klein skilfully assembles fragments from Molly's life and invents the missing parts, telling us about his subjective role in the project: "(...) I came up with a model that captures the immersive power of a Balzac novel or a stream-of-consciousness journey through a city (Musil, Joyce, Proust, even Melville –the ship as city– and Virginia Woolf)." (BTLnov 42). He also explains how he hopes to edit Molly's "sensations into a story that is symphonic (...)" (BTLnov 11). At the same time, digging in archives of collective memory, he makes use of the myriad of earlier artistic and documentary attempts to represent the city. He invites us to an immersion into miscellaneous places and times, by way of exploring this database narrative. Ultimately, he requires us to explore Los Angeles in a new way and to become archaeologists in both the city and the story[124]. By digging through the layers and showing off the seams of such a vast project, Klein and his team do not only gather

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123 In Boyer, M. Christine. Cybercities: Visual Perception in the Age of Electronic Communication. 1st ed. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996, p. 138.

124 See his conclusion in BTLnov 44.

urban artefacts; they demonstrate that one can reinvent the way to engage with art and to write history, and they do so with relentless passion and consistency.

This fairly recent cultural production is not a definitive take on the city but it definitely offers a compelling example of the ongoing interest of scholars and artists in Los Angeles and the idea of urbanity.

3. VARDA'S ECCLECTIC JOURNEY IN L.A.

In this chapter, I will consider only a limited section of Varda's work. It is striking though that the two films I shall discuss in this chapter, Mur, Murs and Documenteur, receive little attention in the critical literature[125]. After a brief introduction, I will undertake a detailed analysis of these two films, in order to shed light on Varda's personal understanding of the city of Los Angeles.

Mur, Murs and Documenteur date from 1980-1981 and were made at a time when Agnès Varda had already acquired substantial experience as a filmmaker, despite her original outsider status. Her cinematographic career began almost by chance in 1954, when she made La Pointe Courte with Alain Resnais as her editor, a remarkable piece of work that had critics and scholars calling her "the grandmother of the new wave" in France. Even though she often declares that she had no intention to become a filmmaker, and was happy to continue to work as the official photographer of the Théâtre National Populaire, by the 1980s she had definitively moved from her early formative years to a sustained and thoughtful cinematographic practice. By the early eighties, Varda has already lived for several years in the United States, shooting films like Lions' Love (1968), which like Mur, Murs and Documenteur, has received little attention from scholars and critics.

Varda returned to the U.S. in the late 1970s to work on a project with EMI, from which a final film never materialized. Despite this aborted project, she managed

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125 The few exceptions will of course form an integral part of the following chapter; they include Sandy Flitterman Lewis, Susan Hayward and Alison Smith to which I will refer at length.

to shoot, with a small budget culled from the French film industry[126], the diptych that will be discussed here. Both films were shot simultaneously, and then edited to form two distinct, albeit complementary works. The filmmaker's intention was that they be screened one after the other in the following order: Mur, Murs and Documenteur[127]. Besides the similar location and time of shooting, a clear evidence of the complementary status of these two films is the way the final shot of Mur, Murs corresponds to the first shot of Documenteur. As Flitterman Lewis writes it, these two films can only be conceived as companion pieces:

> *Documenteur* (whose parenthetical title, An Emotion Picture, plays on its fictional nature) is a sixty-five minute narrative about a divorced woman with a child who works as a secretary and struggles to make ends meet. It is a companion piece to *Mur, Murs* (a pun on "walls" and "whispers") which is a documentary about the murals in Los Angeles that is briefly but only tangentially referred to in *Documenteur.* (TDD 141).

Because of the complementary status of these films, it would be difficult to analyze either Mur, Murs without referring to Documenteur, or vice versa. However, because of the different take on Los Angeles privileged by each film, my argument will be organized in two separate but successive sections, each devoted to one of the two films. Because the cultural productions analyzed so far have been a novel and a DVD-ROM, my objective is to determine the specificities of Varda's cinematic work in relation to the city of Los Angeles. I will therefore try to provide answers to the following questions: what kind of distinctive experience are we, the viewers,

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126 For details on this particular episode, see Smith's first chapter "Who is Agnès Varda?", Agnès Varda. Manchester, NY: Manchester University Press, 1998, pp. 1-11.

127 Some critics even refer to the diptych with a single name, like Michel Mesnil who calls it Varda 81, in "Agnès Varda la voyeuse, ou l'art de la pointe, courte", in Bastide, Bernard. Agnès Varda, Études Cinématographiques; Nos 179-186. Paris: Minard, 1991.p. 108.

receiving from Varda's personal vision of Los Angeles? On which fundamental principles is this vision being built? How, in Mur, Murs and Documenteur, is the city created, enacted and interpreted?

3.1.Los Angeles, a communal poetics of space

3.1.1 Mur, Murs: a clever collective portrayal of Angelenos

As Klein demonstrated in his encyclopedic DVD-ROM, Los Angeles is a vast city and a subject matter that has been dealt with and represented by dozens of artists, and in many different ways. When Varda decides to put Los Angeles at the center of her film Mur, Murs, she does so knowing that others have been inspired by this specific place, though her film is far less referential than some sections of Klein's BTL. My objective here is to determine what sort of imaginary shape Varda gives to Los Angeles in Mur, Murs and to show how, in the first part of her Californian diptych, she elaborates what I will call a communal poetics of space. This poetics of space relies on three elements: the idea of collective portrayal; the digging through cultural, historical and social layers; and finally the idea of the filmmaker as a *passeur*.

Having enjoyed some of Gaston Bachelard's lectures in Paris in the fifties, Varda is most certainly aware of the importance of the notion of space when dealing with imaginary and artistic configurations. In Mur, Murs she considers Los Angeles as a fertile starting point, as a living space where various influences cross-fertilize one another. It is clear from the beginning of the film that she decides to use some of these influences in her own work. Los Angeles is therefore neither a blank canvas, nor a neutral physical space that she intends to manipulate at will. It is an ever present and complex force, which has decisive consequences on those who occupy it,

including Varda. In Varda's other films, space plays a significant role, as several other scholars have noted:

> Varda believes that place has a profound effect on character and perception, and this was a guiding principle in her work as far back as 1961: 'Je crois que les gens sont faits des endroits non seulement où ils ont été élevés, mais qu'ils aiment, je crois que le décor nous habite, nous dirige (...) en comprenant les gens on comprend mieux les lieux, en comprenant les lieux on comprend mieux les gens' (Varda, 1961 :14, 20).128

This conception is clearly perceptible in Varda's films Mur, Murs and Documenteur, and it should definitely be considered as a structural principle of Mur, Murs, since the portrayal of Los Angeles created by the filmmaker is as much about physical spaces and murals, as it is about Angelenos. Varda avoids the difficulty of portraying such a multiple and changing city by opting for a collective and plural portrayal of local artists, and of other Angelenos. The space that she presents is always connected to a certain community and to its many actors, whether they are artists, educators, workers, or mere passers by. For critics like Smith, the murals of Mur, Murs seem "a good approach to understanding how the community may see and express itself, even more so when we discover –as we rapidly do– that the artists are for the most part local and responding to the places they have grown up in by the paintings they produce there." (AV 80-81.)

Expressing her views in a specifically cinematic manner, Varda intends to expose and discuss the various elements that constitute Los Angeles in the late

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128 In Smith, Alison. Agnès Varda. Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press; Distributed exclusively in the USA by St. Martin's Press, 1998, p. 60. Further references to Smith's book will use the abbreviated form AV.

seventies and early eighties. Her perspective is close to that of cultural geographers, as Arlene Dávila presents it: "Cultural geographers posit that space is always socially constituted, and not solely through physical boundaries, representations, or practices, but by the interaction of these various elements. These may sometimes coalesce or oppose each other, but most centrally, are always connected to how we understand, live and experience a particular 'space'."[129] In this sense, her approach is comprehensive, even though she chose to focus on the specific topic of murals.

Many instances come to mind to testify to the wide-ranging type of Angelenos that Varda interviews in her film. When she focuses on artists and their work, Varda more often than not takes the time to show them on screen, to question them on what drives their artistic practice, and to show their work *in situ*. For some, painting murals is a reaction to a personal tragedy and constitutes a cathartic need to overcome their personal situation. For others, the desire to paint murals comes from the belief that art should neither be confined to artistic galleries, nor limited to a selected audience. It should be accessible to and enjoyable by all.

The path taken by Varda in Mur, Murs can at first seem random, even though it mainly conforms to the principle of associations between a place and an individual (or a community). At the beginning of the film, Varda simply voices this principle in her off-screen commentary: "les murs racontent la ville et ses gens"[130]. At times, a mural seems to lead the viewer to the interview of a specific person, like the French photographer obsessed with Venice Beach and its roller-skaters, or Larry Freeman,

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129 In Dávila, Arlene M. Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, p. 65.

130 These walls are telling the story of this city and of its inhabitants (My translation).

principal of Willowbrook High School, who hired two of the school's former students to paint some of the walls and rooms of his institution. Varda also introduces us to the benefactors who paid for the murals that she films. This is how we meet, for instance, Orlando Pellegrini, the Italian owner of an ice cream parlor, who wanted to have a little piece of Rome with him on a daily basis, and Carloz Ortiz, who commissioned a five-story mural for his bridal shop. On other occasions, Varda films groups of children who run and play in front of murals, capturing their daily activities on film. Through these instances, Varda creates a vibrant patchwork of scenes and locations, while simultaneously presenting us with many faces of the city, from the young and trendy beach lovers, to the preachers and educators of Chicano neighbourhoods.

By editing these fragments into a cohesive film, Varda assembles a vignette portrayal of Los Angeles in the early 1980s, which unquestionably favours the idea of "collective". By alternating between sections during which she focuses on one person or a group, for a few minutes, and quick snapshots of murals, or of faces, she combines bright colors, music and voices that ultimately leave the viewer with a kaleidoscopic view of the city and of its various communities. Even when specific artists or interviewees appear more than once in the documentary, because of the relatively short time devoted to each of them, and because of the different issues they address in each sequence, it seems to the viewer that the director never favours a particular participant, granting all of her subjects equal status.

In short, in Mur, Murs Varda succeeds in creating a truly convincing portrayal of the city based on its multiple inhabitants and communities. Through the subtle juxtaposition and blending of various materials, such as color, music, and texture,

Varda achieves what Hamid Naficy would label "tactile optics"[131]. Varda indeed juxtaposes "multiple spaces, times, voices, narratives, and foci"[132] to create a composite and inclusive representation of the city of Los Angeles. Murals are used not only as clues to the functioning of the communities that she presents, but also as pure forms and colors that give shape to a kaleidoscopic vision of the city.

Besides this presentation of the city as a multiple space where different people interact, Varda also privileges a polyphonic enunciation for Mur, Murs. This refers to the fact that assembling a visual patchwork based on a collective portrayal, Varda also plays with the figures of authority and authorship in the film by using different types of voice-over or commentators. The collective visual portrayal is paralleled by a distinctive constellation of voices. If one considers Mur, Murs as a standard documentary (as this is often the case in critical literature[133]), then one could expect a "talking head" to comment upon the images that give shape to the film's narrative. Answering the viewer's expectations, Varda indeed comments on her experience with the people that she includes in Mur, Murs, as the first few words of the film testify. She is therefore positioning herself, at times, as the traditional authorial voice associated with what Bill Nichols would define as "the Griersonian tradition" of documentary practice[134]. In other words, she uses a didactic style of commentary to give the viewer information on the images and interviews that she has edited.

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131 In Naficy, Hamid. An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking. Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 29.

132 Ibid. p. 29.

133 See for instance Flitterman-Lewis's description of Mur, Murs, quoted on page 128, and in TDD, p. 241.

134 For a detailed analysis of the four major styles in the history of documentary, see Nichols' s article 'The Voice of Documentary' in Henderson, Brian, Ann Martin, and Lee Amazonas. Film Quarterly: Forty Years, a Selection. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, pp. 246-267. Further references to this article will elaborate on his classification

However, Varda adds to these otherwise traditional sections by playing with other authorial figures and voices, a process that aims to blur the boundaries between the classical notions of director, narrator/creator and actor/participant. For example, the woman identified as Juliet Berto in the credits sometimes relays on screen Varda's off-screen voice. She is shown interviewing some of the Angelenos that Varda films, as if she was herself in charge of the fieldwork undertaken for the making of the film. This particular figure, added to the fact that Juliet Berto is quite a well-known actress and a filmmaker, shows how malleable the frontiers can be between these different roles. In Nichols's classification, these interview sections correspond to a different style of documentary practice"(...) which incorporates direct address (...) usually in the form of the interview"[135].

Using direct address may seem more straightforward. Again, the fact that Varda chooses a familiar face to play the role of her surrogate figure is quite revealing. She certainly wants us to think about some of the questions that she pondered when preparing Mur, Murs: how should Los Angeles be presented in a vivid and authentic way; should the focus be on: its history, its inhabitants or its vibrant art scene; and how can the viewer be integrated into this project? As one section of the film has one of the interviewees explicitly mentioning the difficulties that female artists often face to find a place as well as a voice, the choice of Juliet Berto is decisive. It perfectly reflects Varda's "search for a way of filming as a woman [filmer en femme]" (TDD 243) and illustrates how she intends her

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135 In 'The Voice of Documentary' in Henderson, Brian, Ann Martin, and Lee Amazonas. Film Quarterly: Forty Years, a Selection. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, p. 248. Further reference to this article will use the abbreviated form 'VD'.

documentary to be self-reflexive.

The last voice with which the filmmaker plays is equally representative of her aesthetic as well as political concerns. During the whole film, Varda adds a whispering male voice, which is superimposed over her own off-screen voice, and those of Juliet Berto and other participants. This lingering whisper gives the spectator a chance to identify the murals on screen, and to learn the name of their creators. This counterbalances the common tendency people have to forget the ones who made possible these individual and/or collective creations. This particular voice also justifies the pun in the title, which should literally be translated "Wall, Walls", but which sounds like the French word meaning whisper, *murmure*. The ever-present character of this voice shows that Mur, Murs is meant to be more than a colourful visual patchwork. It is also an aural experiment, which points beyond the technical overlapping of voices to the questions embedded in any type of representational and creative process. Varda uses here the fourth type of documentary identified by Nichols, a documentary practice informed by all its filmic predecessors, which requires from the viewer an actively reflective process:

> These new self-reflexive documentaries mix observational passages with interviews, the voice-over of the film-maker with inter-titles, making patently clear what has been implicit all along: documentaries always were forms of re-presentation, never clear windows onto "reality"; the film-maker was always a participant-witness and an active fabricator of meaning, a producer of cinematic discourse rather than a neutral or all-knowing reporter of the way things truly are. ('VD' 248).

If we were to categorize Varda's practice in Mur, Murs the last of Nichols's categories would unquestionably be the most appropriate. Building on the

experiments of other filmmakers, on her past experience, Varda gradually builds up her personal rendering of Los Angeles, expecting the viewer to discover the city's less known facets. Now that the idea of collective portrayal has been established, I would like to explore another aspect at the core of Varda's poetics of space that helps her to mix apparently heterogeneous elements and to come up with a comprehensive rendering of Los Angeles.

3.1.2 Mur, Murs: Digging through the layers

Considering that Varda was mainly addressing a French or perhaps continental audience, it would have been easy for her to build on established *clichés* about Los Angeles and its cinematographic industry. However, she decides to expose what lies beneath the glossy, sunny, and apparently picture perfect surface of Los Angeles. To do so, Varda opts for a multi-layered portrayal of Los Angeles, a city that she thinks can only be experienced if one fully engages in an exploration of its various intertwined histories and myths. In The Practice of Everyday Life, De Certeau echoes Varda's conviction and explains the importance of the notion of "multiple stories" in relation to cities. To him, a specific place is always a receptacle of stories, and a mystery that is waiting to be unravelled: "Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state (...)."(PEL 108). When Varda undertakes the filming of Mur, Murs, one of her ambitions appears to be to perform this type of unfolding and unravelling of stories.

Organizing her film around the discovery of murals and her encounters with their creators, Varda has the opportunity to unveil different aspects of the city's specific history, and to make connections between seemingly distinctive elements.

One of the muralists interviewed by the director is clear: "If the murals reveal something, it's what L.A. is, what it might be (...) everybody dreaming together." Murals thus constitute a rich starting point, because they enable the director to tackle many questions at the same time. One of the first aspects that Varda evokes when she refers to Los Angeles is this overlaying and mixture of stories and myths that is so particular to this city.

For example, among the murals that Varda studies, The Fall of Icarus[136] by John Wehrle perfectly illustrates the many stories and myths associated with the city of Los Angeles. The scene represents three distinctive figures in the desert: Icarus, a cowboy and a cosmonaut. Representing Los Angeles as a desert in nothing new, it is an easy way to remind the viewer of the recent edification of this modern metropolis. California was originally not a place where settlers thought they could develop profitable activities, even if their dream was to colonize the whole American continent. Showing L.A. as a desert place is therefore a simple way to think of its evolution, and of the role men played in its creation. After panning on the mural, Varda quickly evokes her phone conversation with the muralist. She soon explains that, in this particular mural, she sees the confluence of three myths that can be related to Los Angeles, as the ultimate dream city of America. The cowboy corresponds to the quintessential hero of western movies; in the collective imagination, he is the one who civilized the Wild West and turned California into a real *El Dorado*. Icarus, who temporarily managed to escape from Daedelus's labyrinth is a hero from Greek mythology. But by daring to fly too close to the sun he

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136 A photo of this work is reproduced in Plate 3.1.

echoes the more dystopian visions of the city. His death is what awaits unconscious Californians, as he is the one who thought he could confront nature and win. As Varda shows in other sections of Mur, Murs, the end of the world is a vivid and an ever-present idea in the Angelenos' psyche. Icarus could therefore embody this idea of a due punishment. As for the cosmonaut, because Armstrong was the first human to walk on the moon, he can surely be equated with American pride.

When Varda interprets this mural, she does not only tell us that the murals are keys to understand the city, but she also shows us that there are more layers to Los Angeles than one might imagine. What this city stands for lies in the many stories and myths associated with it. In this short sequence, Varda demonstrates that these myths play a significant part in the definition and understanding of Los Angeles, whether they are part of popular culture and cinema, of ancient mythology, or of contemporary history.

To be sure, popular culture is something that Varda embraces in Mur, Murs, as much as much as the muralists and Angelenos that she interviews. One of the longest interviews of the documentary is with Kent Twitchell, and it deals for instance with the fact that television heroes are potent symbols whose influence is tangible in the United States. In many of his murals, like the Freeway Lady, Strother Martin Monument and the Holy Trinity with Virgin[137], Twitchell portrays famous actors of the fifties and sixties. On other occasions, like when she films Venice Beach and its roller skaters, Varda makes it clear that the murals are part of a wider cultural scene, which includes music, dance and other popular forms of arts. Murals are not to be

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137 Photos of these murals correspond to plates 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4.

considered backgrounds, mere props meant to promote these specific artists' achievements. To Varda they provide direct access into the lives and psyche of Angelenos.

Hollywood and its factory of dreams play a part in this network of connections, but American cinema does not prevail over other elements in the director's account. At one point, she reminds the viewer that a small number of murals include famous cinematic figures, like Charlie Chaplin and Steve McQueen. She omits the whole *noir* tradition that is so central to Klein's vision of L.A. She is more interested in the unraveling of less sensational stories related to the city. This is why the role of communities is an essential aspect of Mur, Murs. Critics writing about California's murals often refer to the work of some of the artists interviewed by Varda and underline these muralists' desire to root their art in a specific urban environment:

> Murals represent a chance for the struggling artist to be seen, as well as to help alter the quality of life in one's own neighborhood. (...) The murals in Venice, California, grew out of this same kind of direct action by local artists. In 1969 two young men in Venice, Terry Schoonhoven and Vic Henderson who later were to be known as the Los Angeles Fine Arts Squad, decided one day to walk outside their studio and paint the exterior wall with a photographic image of the street on which it stood (*Brooks Street Scene*).138

This desire to establish connections and to generate reactions from the locals is one that Varda associates with the claims of different ethnic communities. Among the many communities she gives voice to, two stand out: the Chicano and the African-American. As a consequence, it is essential to examine the way these two

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138 In Cockcroft, Eva, John Weber, and James D. Cockcroft. Toward a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement. New York: Dutton, 1977, p. 43.

communities and their contribution to local history and culture are played out in Mur, Murs.

3.1.2.a Chicano culture

From the collection of interviews edited by Varda, one can see that she intends to offer a wide-ranging portrayal of the city. In addition to the linking between the art of painting murals to young artists and youth culture, she also emphasizes their Mexican lineage. This tracing is a subtle way to indicate that history is an essential tool to read and understand Los Angeles as it is today. By highlighting the connections between recognized Mexican muralists, like Diego Rivera, and contemporary artists, like Willie Herron, Varda makes clear that Los Angeles is the product of its immigrants and founders, be they white, black, Mexican, Chicano or otherwise.

This reminder of the prominence of Mexican culture and art in America also enables Varda to situate the contemporary practice of mural painting in the aftermath of the civil rights movement in the States. Varda's film may have been made a decade later than the many events surrounding this historical movement, but Mur, Murs illustrates the continual relevance of the concept of activism at the end of the twentieth century. Politics and activism were, and still are, important drivers in the practice of mural painting, as critics such as Cockroft observe: "Most of California's Chicano murals have grown out of the larger political context of La Raza Movement, which was epitomized the national-liberation struggle of Chicanos throughout the country from Houston to Santa Fe, Denver to Chicago, city factories to farm

fields."[139]

Varda uses several strategies to make the viewer aware of the influence of Mexican culture and the Chicano movement. At one point for instance, she interviews Father John Santiano, a charismatic priest in East Los Angeles, who explains that the murals of Ramona Gardens are mainly addressing local youth. They are supposed to remind the locals of their roots, even if the "American way of life" has become the dominant lifestyle. According to him, the murals provide young people with "a picturesque history of their ancestors". Many of these murals, like the series painted on Ramona Gardens public housing complex, include Aztec and pre-Columbian imagery[140]. They are meant to illustrate the lingering presence of this culture and of its symbols in California. In a way, they encourage the recognition of these often forgotten founding mothers[141] and fathers.

Beside the promotion of Chicano culture, these murals attest of the community's desire to be recognized as a specific group with equal rights as the mural We are not a minority, on plate 3.5 testifies. Another purpose of these murals is to call for a non-violent recollection of those who died in gang fights, and to promote peace in *el barrio*. Varda punctuates the documentary with various evocations of violence when she interviews educators or artists who are in direct contact with gangs, but also when she films children playing with toy guns and firecrackers. One of the interviewees, Willie Herron, explains that he decided that he would use art a

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139 In Cockcroft, Eva, John Weber, and James D. Cockcroft. Toward a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement. New York: Dutton, 1977, p. 59.

140 For an example of such imagery, see the photo of one of Willie Herron's murals, which represents Quetzacoatl, on plate 3.6.

141 Several murals in Los Angeles illustrate the role of women in history; one of the best examples is certainly The Great Wall.

therapy after his brother was stabbed by a rival gang. In a short sequence, where he stands in front of The Wall that Cracked Open[142], he gives a detailed account of how he decided to become an artist in the ambulance that drove him and his dying brother to the hospital.

Bit by bit, Varda calls attention to the political and historical dimension of mural painting, either by carefully choosing the murals that she shows in the film, or by editing segments of interviews that highlight this lineage. Even though she does not always provide explicit clues as to their political dimension, her selection of murals is highly significant. A relevant example of this careful selection is the mural Moratorium[143], whose fragments frequently appear in Varda's montage. The poignant faces and figures on this mural, painted in black and white, may at first glance simply appear as a visual evocation of the idea of urban violence that Varda discusses. However, beyond this obvious illustrative function, these images also serve as a reminder of the 1970 anti-Vietnam War Chicano protest attacked by the Sheriff's Department. For the informed viewer, they have a strong political significance due to their association with this event[144]. These images therefore have an immediate impact thanks to the explicit narrative of the film, but they are also meaningful when considering Varda's project as a whole. Besides the repeated occurrences throughout Mur, Murs of Moratorium, Varda also devotes a full sequence to this particular mural. She cleverly parallel-edits the performance of a local rock band, "Los Illegals", with rapid snapshots of Moratorium, thus creating a strong connection

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142 For a reproduction of this mural, see plate 3.7.

143 For a reproduction of this mural, see plate 3.8.

144 Interestingly this particular event is also referred to in Yamashita's Tropic of Orange, since one of the lead characters, Gabriel, becomes a journalist thinking that he may be able to help the cause of marginal Angelenos, such as Chicanos, like Ruben Salazar did.

between the angry and rebellious text of the band's song with strongly suggestive pieces of Moratorium. By patching together segments of the mural, music by "Los Illegals", and images of their performance in a dehumanized environment (they are filmed playing with a busy network of highways as their background), Varda leaves the viewer with a sensual, vibrant impression. The force of this sequence leaves the viewer the impression that he knows what it feels like to be a minority in the U.S.A.

This strategy of appealing to the viewer's senses and emotions is complemented by what I would call more intellectual or reflective sequences. In this type of sequence, Varda stresses the crucial part played by immigrants in the city, but she does so through her interviewees. One of the articulate artists involved in the Great Wall of Los Angeles, Judy Baca, explains for instance that during the project one of the teams under her supervision discovered that Thomas Edison, the famous inventor of the light bulb, had Mexican roots. Since one of the objectives of the Great Wall is to give visibility to the actors that were left out of the city's official history (such as Blacks, Natives, Chicanos, and women among others), Baca and her team decided to use this discovery by representing Edison's figure in a visual way that would make his lineage obvious to all. For that reason, they painted the goddess Chichimeca, whispering in his ear the secret that helped to invent the light bulb and the kinetoscope, one of the first movie cameras. Having Baca explaining the thoughtful research that was done before the painting of the Great Wall is an astute strategy both to document the muralist's objectives, and to appropriate her concerns regarding minorities. But since Varda aims to assemble a representative portrayal of Los Angeles, she also pays attention to other groups that ought to be mentioned, including African-Americans.

3.1.2.b Black panthers and Black pride

As established in the first section, which focused on the idea of collective portrayal, Varda presents Los Angeles as a heterogeneous entity. From the beginning of the film, she declares in her off-screen commentary that the murals are peopled with typical Angelenos, that is to say "des noirs, des jaunes et des terres brulées". This is a colorful way to acknowledge California's diversity. From then on, the viewer will expect a representation of Los Angeles that includes people of diverse origin. The African-American community is another of the groups whose crucial role Varda acknowledges. This inclusion is hardly surprising considering Varda's longstanding interest in political questions, as evidenced in her earlier documentary titled Black Panthers[145].

In Mur, Murs her approach when dealing with this group is akin to the one she uses to present the Chicano community. First, she uses a myriad of apparently unrelated snapshot images in order to establish that African-Americans are a vibrant and vital fragment of the city's identity. When in the beginning of MM, she films Venice Beach, she assembles some photos taken by the photographer interviewed with some of her own shots of roller skaters, many of them being African-Americans. Then, more ostensibly, she makes clear that the black community and its fight not only for recognition, but also for equal rights, is inscribed in the city, on the murals, and echoed in her editing of African-American interviewees. For instance, she devotes a full sequence to St Elmo's village and its festival. In the mid-sixties, visual artists, Roderick and Rozzel Sykes, decided to rent some of the dwellings on St Elmo

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145 This particular film was shot in 1968 during her first stay in America and dealt with the pivotal Free Huey rally held on February 17th, 1968, at Oakland Auditorium in Alameda, California.

drive and to transform this environment into an art space, where they could organize exhibitions and welcome children and adults of the local communities to explore and develop their creativity through art. It is easy to see why a project providing locals with art workshops and festivals appealed to Varda. Not only does it display beautiful and vibrant murals (as seen on plates 3.9 and 3.10), but it is also established on the principle of a vital connection between a specific space, its inhabitants, and art.

In the rest of the film, Varda uses other strategies to underline this community's essential presence. Sometimes, her narrative hops from one particular participant, like Ken Twitchell, and his mural 6 L.A. Artists (see plate 3.11) to another interviewee without any apparent transition. However, in these successive interviews, both participants address the marginal status of artists in American society, particularly among black artists. At other times, a mural will lead the viewer from a place and a mural to a particular person, such as when the filmmaker takes us from the painted walls of Willowbrook High School to Richard Wyatt's interview.

It is also interesting to note that in spite of her particular focus, Varda is careful to integrate different opinions and discourses relating to the African-American community. In the case of Wyatt's interview, she does not try to conceal the artist's apparent difficulty in commenting on his own work, or on his artistic agenda. Wyatt's mural may be the one that she chooses to illustrate her own conception of a multi-ethnic city, yet his on-screen persona testifies to the less straightforward nature of things. On the contrary, other artists, like Suzanne Jackson, do not seem to have any problem at articulating the politics, or the ideological drive of their work. In the section devoted to her by Varda, Jackson straightforwardly explains that she has often been confronted by members of the Black Panthers who wanted to know why she

would not include in her murals symbols such as clenched fists or riffles. Her answer is simple, that she believes alternative and more peaceful symbols like birds or hearts are also necessary motifs in African-American art.

Varda's choice regarding this group is interesting because even if she assembles a racially conscious portrayal of the city, she does not try to camouflage the discordant voices among the community. On the whole, it could be concluded that she presents a carefully edited, yet authentically polyphonic mosaic of images and interviews that aim to provide a comprehensive vision of Los Angeles. Of course, however comprehensive Varda may wish to be, her documentary on Los Angeles remains a subjective view of the city. To round up the analysis of MM's poetics of space, I will examine Varda's positioning in this film, which corresponds to the figure of the *passeur*.

3.1.3 The filmmaker as *passeur*

As I mentioned before, Mur, Murs and its companion piece Documenteur have not been the subject of detailed scholarly enquiry. To critics like Flitterman-Lewis, Mur, Murs should, for instance, be regarded as a typical example of the political documentary produced by Varda.

> *Salut les Cubains* marks the first of a long list of political documentary films, both short and feature-length, that Varda has made throughout her career. Her consistent commitment to the Left, and to the struggles against oppression in any form–political, economic, or social–has led her to treat a broad range of topics in these films, from the Black power movement in California (*Black Panthers*, a 1968 film dealing with the Oakland trial of Huey Newton) and the Viet Nam war (*Loin du Vietnam*, a collective film in episodes made in 1967), to the situation of Greek exiles in France (*Nausicaa*, a 1970 television documentary using actual

> Greek exiles in a fictional chronicle), the Hispanic community in Los Angeles (*Mur Murs*, a 1980 "look" at the murals in Los Angeles and their sociopolitical context), photography (*Une minute pour une image*, 1983, a television documentary of 170 ninety-second films, each about a different photograph), and women's liberation (*Réponse de femmes*, 1975). (TDD 230-231)

While I agree that Mur, Murs should be considered a politically oriented production, confining it to a category such as "political documentary" is far too restrictive. By articulating Mur, Murs around a personal poetics of space (whose specifics I am trying to delineate here), Varda demonstrates that her interest in the city of Los Angeles does not lie only in its politically determined dimension, but also in its social components.

In the first part of this cinematic diptych, the notions of engagement and of activism are as crucial as those of testimony and exchange. This is why I will begin by discussing the political facet of Varda's poetics of space, in order to move on to an examination of the way Mur, Murs also lays emphasis on the idea of exchange. Mur, Murs is definitely determined by affect as much as by intellect, so in order to analyze its specificities, I will use the figure of the filmmaker, as a common denominator. This approach is justified by Varda's position in MM as a mediator that some analysts, like Dominique Baqué, would probably define as a "*cinéaste passeur*".

Baqué was trained in philosophy, and has mainly written about contemporary art. Yet in her latest book, Pour un nouvel art politique : de l'art contemporain au documentaire, she argues that the production of many contemporary artists has been less concerned with politics and activism in the late twentieth century. According to her, when artists try to create politically conscious works today, or at least pretend to,

their motives and the efficiency of their approach ought to be questioned. After a detailed analysis of many examples meant to make her point, Baqué suggests that documentary films may be the redemptive solution to this trend of political nonchalance. In the following passage, she clearly articulates her main hypothesis, and claims that:

> (…) face à l'urgence du décryptage du reel en souffrance, face aussi à la nécessité de ne pas « abandonner » les images à leurs avatars délètères, peut être faut-il s'aventurer à penser ce que l'on pourrait nommer –dans toutes les acceptions du terme– un « **passage de témoin** ». Soit l'hypothèse selon laquelle l'art, déchu de ses prétensions politiques, pourrait « passer le témoin » à une autre forme plastique, discursive et informative : l**e documentaire engagé, photographique et, plus encore cinématographique**. (My emphasis) 146

Baqué's claim may well be radical, but some of her analyzes, in the section that she devotes to documentary film, are insightful and stimulating. In particular, her interpretation of the director of documentary films as a *passeur*[147] is of interest here. Even if Baqué does not elaborate on this particular concept, she explains that she conceives of the filmmaker as a *passeur*, or a mediator between several elements of different nature. In a specific passage of her text discussing Raymond Depardon's films, Baqué ponders over some questions, which are, I believe, just as relevant in the case of Varda's work: "comment dire le social, comment témoigner du politique et comment faire oeuvre aussi (…)? [148]" (*PNAP* 186). As will be made evident in the

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146 In Baqué, Dominique. Pour Un Nouvel Art Politique: De L'art Contemporain Au Documentaire. Paris: Éditions Flammarion, 2004, p. 33. Further references will use the abbreviated form: PNAP.

147 *Passeur* and *passage* are recurring expressions in PNAP, notably on p. 230.

148 These three questions could roughly be translated as: "how should a director show society, how should he (or she) testify of political questions, and how should he (or she) conceive at the same time an original piece of work?"

following section, Varda answers these three questions with Mur, Murs.

One may consider Varda an outsider, because she is a French director filming a foreign country and its citizens. However, what she presents is an original account of the portion of American society that she discovered and explored in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Her version may be subjective and limited in scope, but it is her own, and will enable us to compare her version to that of the artists previously discussed.

When detailing the various components of Varda's poetics of space, I made clear that the African-American and Chicano communities are represented as politically active entities, even if their activism shows though their practice of mural painting, rather than through demonstrations or other practical means. Because African-Americans and Chicanos are viewed as minorities in the U.S., they may receive little attention, or suffer discrimination. As a consequence, these communities and their leaders feel justified in defending their rights, and to have their presence acknowledged. In Varda's film, several scenes and interviews illustrate the discrimination that some of the people she meets have experienced. Some sections also illustrate their desire to educate their peers. Judy Baca is, for instance, the perfect example of an artist who is keen on developing her own artistic practice, while letting others benefit from her knowledge and experience. As an artist, she wants to be involved in the local community, as she articulates in her first words in the film: "my name is Judy Baca, I'm an artist, and educator and a feminist".

Visually, the fragments of the Great Wall of Los Angeles that Varda assembles in Mur, Murs are also indicative of the importance of politics. The city of Los Angeles, like any other city, is far from being a neutral territory; it is a space where

power is constantly negotiated. The selected images of The Great Wall show some of these struggles and conflicts across time, such as exploitation, and they emphasize the role of minorities such as women and immigrants. At times these images are paired with Baca's militant description of the project, but they are also occasionally matched with Varda's commentary, which echoes some of Baca's concerns. This position of the director as an "in-between" is typical of Varda, who alternates between shots and comments that are advocating activism, and passages where she relies on participants to voice her beliefs, instead of getting directly involved.

The city on which Varda focuses determines some of the characteristics of her film, but ultimately she is the one who decides to assemble, in the first part of her cinematic diptych, a collective portrayal, which gives voice to a myriad of different Angelenos. For some viewers, the first screening of Mur, Murs can be an unsettling experience, due to the number of participants on screen, and to the recurring voice of the whisperer. Despite subtitles indicating the names of some of the participants, it is fairly difficult, if not impossible, to keep track of who appears when, and of who says what. The choice of a collective portrayal makes Mur, Murs representative of California, but its kaleidoscopic form and the mass of information can also baffle the viewer.

When Varda shows American society, she does not present a falsely utopian representation of Los Angeles, where everyone lives peacefully with their neighbours. Instead she favours an honest vision of Los Angeles showing the life of its various inhabitants in the early eighties. She does not shy away from the practical problems that her interviewees experience on a daily basis. For example, the persistent issue of violence, and of gang fighting between different neighbourhoods,

is addressed several times, even if the filmmaker generally relates it to her original focus point: mural painting. Some of her interviewees are artists, and for that reason, they have a specific status in the narrative, but others have no direct connection with murals. For example, Varda interviews an anonymous teenager who lives in one of the *barrios*, as well as a singer, an old woman, a baker, a bartender, and many passers-by.

As the director, she has control over MM's final montage, and could have discarded these ordinary people. Their inclusion in the final cut shows that she intends to present a comprehensive vision of the city, that gives voice to its various inhabitants. Some specific sections are meant to familiarize the viewer with political issues that are dear to Varda, but there are also sections, which plainly illustrate what De Certeau calls "the ordinary" and its innumerable "obscure heroes of the ephemeral" (PEL 256). By refusing to use the common *clichés* regarding Hollywood and its stars, Varda proves that she wants to pay attention to "the ordinary". Even with a focus on Los Angeles and its murals, she could have opted for more renowned participants, and her preference in that particular matter speaks volumes. The muralists that she interviews may have gained recognition today, but at the time, most of them were relatively unknown. Varda did not care about the fame of the artists featured in Mur, Murs, because she wanted the viewers to meet Angelenos in the flesh, whatever their occupation or origin. This genuine attention to the lives of others is the reason why Varda can rightly be considered a "*cinéaste passeur*", that is to say an artist who truly wants to make the viewers share her encounters. As she sometimes tells when interviewed, her cinematic ambition is to watch and capture her discoveries in a spontaneous manner, whatever the shape they ultimately take on

film: «En regardant les gens se mettre en scène eux même, en les écoutant parler comme ils parlent, en observant les murs, les sols, les campagnes, les paysages, les routes, etc., on découvre tant de variétés entre le « à peine vrai » et « le surréel », qu'il y a de quoi filmer dans le plaisir. En fait on pourrait presque dire que le réel fait son cinéma![149]»

Critics like Baqué, and scholars of documentary cinema, such as Patrice Chagnard, Jean Louis Comolli and Marion Froger have discussed, with different perspectives, the relationship between the filmed subject and the filmmaker at the moment of the recording[150]. On this question, Comolli has inspiring ideas, notably when he writes that cinema is supposed to bring back to life (for the viewer) the "here and now" of the filmed meeting between the filmmaker and the documentary's participants[151]. As stated before, even if Mur, Murs focuses on the subject of murals, the film is as much about Angelenos and their city as it is about this particular artistic practice. The meetings collected and assembled in this documentary show how fundamental spending time with, listening to, and speaking to Angelenos is to Varda. The fleeting but frequent images of children confirm, for instance, that live recording and local shooting are vital qualities for Varda. These Californian encounters she captures on film are at the core of her cinematic practice, and this is why they ought

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149 In Navacelle, Marie-Christine de, and Claire Devarrieux. Cinéma Du Réel: Avec Imamura, Ivens, Malle, Rouch, Storck, Varda. Et Le Ciné-Journal De Depardon. Paris: Autrement, 1988, p. 46.

150 Respectively in Bizern, Catherine (ed.). Cinéma Documentaire: Manières De Faire, Formes De Pensée: Addoc 1992-1996, Côté Cinéma. Crisnée: Addoc: Yellow Now, 2002; in Comolli, Jean-Louis, and Jacques Rancière. Arrêt Sur Histoire, Supplémentaires. Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997; and in Froger, Marion. "Don Et Image Du Don; Esthétique Documentaire Et Communauté." In Intermédialités, n. 4 "Aimer" (2004): 115-40.

151 My translation of :(...) le travail du cinéma est avant tout de ressuciter pour chaque spectateur l'ici et maintenant de la rencontre filmée (...) in Comolli, Jean-Louis, and Jacques Rancière. Arrêt Sur Histoire, Supplémentaires. Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997, p. 22.

to be considered carefully. Here again, the position of the filmmaker and her decisions regarding the final product are crucial. So what about the specificity of the "here and now" in Mur, Murs? And how do these encounters establish a special relationship between Los Angeles and Angelenos in the early eighties and the present day viewer?

In this documentary, Varda films the "here and now" of her encounters with many different Angelenos. The question of time is something that permeates many of her documentary and feature films, even if it varies in form from one work to the other. In Mur, Murs this question is particularly relevant when considering the idea of the "*cinéaste passeur*". In filming the "here and now" of these various meetings, it is obvious that Varda means to lay emphasis on the fugacious nature of this "being together". An interesting parallel can be drawn between her encounters with Angelenos and her discoveries of murals, since they share a certain transient quality. The fact that murals are an ephemeral art form, that they are frequently destroyed or erased, finally fade into oblivion make the collective experience of painting them, and their public enjoyment (for the time they are visible) the main point of the murals. During the course of the film, Varda underlines this particularity several times.

Among the artists interviewed many, like Arthur Mortimer, acknowledge this ongoing process: "mural painting is ephemeral by nature, murals fade, they are mutilated, they change with time, and this is all part of their beauty". But to him and other artists, it is more important to paint "vital art", where it is most needed, than to produce collectible pieces. This is precisely where Varda's project accomplishes the unexpected, since she literally lends these murals a lasting value for as long as copies of her film are available for screening. She truly becomes a "*cinéaste passeur*",

because her film keeps material traces of the murals, even if their preservation is uncertain. By documenting these murals, Varda freezes them in time and anchors them in history. She materially associates them with Los Angeles and its representation. Besides, she makes their appreciation possible to thousands of potential viewers, and in doing so she makes them durable.

When she films her personal experience in Los Angeles, Varda also goes back to the essence of cinema, or at least to one of its essential characteristics, as Comolli puts it: "(...) le cinéma filme du temps, fabrique des durées, les fait expérimenter, c'est à dire vivre par le spectateur.[152]" Varda indeed films time as it is passing by, and as it is affecting murals and changing people, in short as it is mechanically recorded on film, in its inherent irreducibility. Several examples come to mind, which all evoke this idea of fugitive time. When she shows certain murals like, for example, the Great Wall, or Bride and Groom by Twitchell (as seen on plate 3.12), the long process it took to paint them is mentioned, sometimes even illustrated by still images. Of course, what is visible at the time of MM's shooting is only the end result, but by detailing the step-by-step composition of these murals, Varda highlights the notion of time.

In other cases, Varda privileges ordinary people (and not artists) to illustrate this idea of time, like Betty Brandelli. Betty is briefly interviewed in front of Mortimer's mural titled Brandelli's Brig (reproduced on plate 3.13). On this particular mural, Betty and her husband are represented standing side by side in front of their bar in 1973. Since then, Betty has aged visibly. She explains that she is now

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152 In Comolli, Jean-Louis, and Jacques Rancière. Arrêt Sur Histoire, Supplémentaires. Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997, p. 36.

standing alone in front of the mural, because her husband has passed away. Following this revelation, a wider shot shows her surrounded by the technical material (lights and microphones) that has been used to film her, while she gathers her things and leaves the set. This episode is a striking example of the way Varda makes the viewer realize the fugacity and the fragility of any artistic practice, and of those who partake in their elaboration. Other testimonies and short passages reinforce this idea, like the unexpected episode of the motorcyclist who survives an accident, on the corner where the director happened to be filming. The whole experience of meeting Angelenos, and of filming them is simultaneously presented as precious and vulnerable. The documentary is presented as a collection of momentary images that testify of the collective experience between Varda and the participants. This singular experience is shown in its variability: things may happen that the director has neither planned, nor hoped for, as well as in its fugacity: people may die, or not be present when she assumed they would (this is the case of the muralist, John Wehrle that she originally wanted to film). What is essential though is the recording of these fugacious moments, which testify of the connection/relation with the other, as Froger writes: "Le film est le moment et la trace d'un don et d'un abandon où l'image, en tant que donnée, importe moins qu'en tant que chiffre d'un acte qui atteste du lien à l'autre.[153]" Varda is therefore a "*cinéaste passeur*" insofar as she makes visible the unique character of these encounters recorded in Mur, Murs.

On the other hand, Varda is also a "*cinéaste passeur*" because she mediates between her spectators and the subjects of her film. The director is the connective

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153 In Froger, Marion. "Don Et Image Du Don: Esthétique Documentaire Et Communauté." Intermédialités, no.4, "Aimer" (2004), pp. 115-40.

element between the spectators sitting in the dark theatre, and the bodies and words of Angelenos. Her body may not be visible onscreen, but her voice is a persistent occurrence, a thread thrown at the viewer as Comolli underlines: "La narration est ce pont jeté par dessus la scène de sujet à sujet, d'une voix porteuse d'une absence, celle du corps du narrateur à une oreille porteuse d'une autre absence, celle de la voix du spectateur. "Je" est en même temps labyrinthe et fil d'Ariane.[154]" Varda's disembodied voice is the crucial element, which connects the viewers to the participants. This relationship between what Baqué defines as the "corps-parole" (or speaking bodies) of Mur, Murs and the spectator is only possible thanks to the mediation of the filmmaker. She is the one creating this opportunity and this particular space where stories and testimonies can be recorded, to be shared by others later in time.

The "in between" position is one in which Varda is comfortable, and one that she has experimented with. Mediating between participants and spectators gives her the chance to pull the strings, and to tell their stories, as well as hers indirectly. By personalizing some of these images, and by creating a specific poetics of space based on her personal experience and encounters, she disturbs the traditional distinction between documentary and fiction. She documents behaviors and places, but she also assembles these moments according to her liking, privileging some of her own preoccupations along the way.

3.2 Los Angeles, an individual and introspective experience of a city

At first sight, Documenteur seems much less shaped by its local environment

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154 In Comolli, Jean-Louis, and Jacques Rancière. Arrêt Sur Histoire, Supplémentaires. Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997, p. 26.

than Mur, Murs. However, these two films have in common the fact that Varda still considers the dialectic between the environment and the characters/participants crucial. Among commentators and critics, Flitterman-Lewis underlines this particularity of Varda's approach: "(...) for many of her films, Varda starts with a locale–a deeply felt sense of the effects of environment, both geographic and social– and works from there. In this way, a vision, an image of a place evokes more than the narrative itself, such that the interaction of the character and milieu produces the theme, or "meaning" of the film." (TDD 224). In interviews, Varda also confirms the importance of the dialectic between the protagonist and his or her environment: "When I know I'm going to make a film, I often go to the site which will be the setting of the film. I try to really understand the arrangement of things, so that I can integrate the character as accurately as possible into an environment which explains him, justifies him, attacks or contradicts him, so that one understands the dialectic between the character and the environment." (TDD 224). As a consequence, even if the name of Los Angeles is only uttered once in Documenteur, there are many ways in which the protagonist's story intertwines with the environment. It would be a terrible mistake to discard the city as a minor element in the interpretation of this film.

Another of Varda's comments encourages the study of the full diptych with this specific urban environment in mind. In an interview published in Les Cahiers du cinéma [155], she affirms that all her films are based on the "principle of contradiction-juxtaposition". The formal principle of contradiction-juxtaposition also applies to the

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155 Translated and quoted by Flitterman-Lewis (TDD 218)

case of the diptych Mur, Murs/Documenteur . When screened together, like they were meant to be, these two films illustrate how, with a similar locale, Varda manages to play and experiment with different representations of the city. In the diptych, she juxtaposes two visually different versions of Los Angeles, one organized as a collective portrayal, the other based on a single woman's impressions.

Documenteur tells the story of a French woman, Émilie, who has recently separated from her husband Tom, and who is trying to settle in the city of Los Angeles with her young son Martin. Although Documenteur has been called "an autobiography in the third person"[156], mainly because its main narrative purportedly reflects Varda's short-term separation from her husband Jacques Demy, and because Varda's own son, Mathieu Demy, plays the protagonist's son, my intention is neither to examine, nor to elaborate on these parallels. Instead of looking for connections between some elements of the diegesis and biographical information, I will consider Documenteur as an alternative version of Varda's cinematic vision of Los Angeles.

In this film, Varda mainly relies on the character of Émilie to present the city, as Smith notes: "In Documenteur the image of the place is (...) not so much a description of Los Angeles as of the emotions of a character who is faced with a loss and loneliness which she is unused to and the effects of which she cannot foresee." (AV 83). I will therefore begin my investigation of Varda's Documenteur by questioning the way this film oscillates between two opposite poles: surface and intimacy. To do so, I will concentrate on three questions: how is the figure of the outsider used in relation with the city, how is the opposition between the

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156 This is Flitterman-Lewis's expression. (TDD 241).

protagonist's intimate world and her surroundings established, and finally how does this opposition relate to the director's idea of the female body and of its experience of space? This last question will then lead to the final part of the film's study, which will consider Documenteur in relation to the director's theoretical understanding of cinema.

3.2.1 Opposite polarities: surfaces vs. intimacy

The beginning of Documenteur shows The Isle of California painted by Victor Henderson and Terry Schoonhoven[157], in front of which a woman plays catch with a child. These first images, followed by selected fragments of the mural Moratorium, are accompanied by a monologue, narrated by Varda herself. Varda explains that the inner thoughts she gives voice to are those of the sad-looking woman on screen. Émilie is introduced as the mother of the child sitting next to her, named Martin. As images of Émilie and Martin walking on a pier alternate with close shots of anonymous faces, Varda gives expression to this woman's solitude and pain: "je me perds (...) là où je suis, il y a seulement des mots et des visages. (...) Un mot s'impose et s'incruste: c'est le mot douleur[158]". Varda goes on to explain that Émilie, at that particular moment of her life, is doing her best to rid herself of this feeling of pain, apprehension and isolation. When Martin asks his mother if she would buy him a fishing rod, Varda's monologue finally stops. Martin and his mother exchange a few words about his sudden passion for fishing, and his desire to become a fisherman who would not catch any real fish. After this short "in-sync" interlude, another off

157 Plate 3.14 is a photo of the said mural.

158 "I feel lost, (...) where I am, there are only faces and words. (...) One word persists, that of pain" My translation.

screen voice takes charge of the narrative, that of the female protagonist, Émilie.

In this opening sequence, which does not last more than five minutes, the viewer is given a lot of information about Émilie, about her state of mind and her various relations with other people, including her son Martin. She sees the world, and watches people around her, but her position is clearly that of an outsider. She is presented as being unable to know or communicate with those around her. In short, even if they are sharing the same environment on screen, she remains estranged from them, and them from her. From the beginning of the film, Émilie's interior monologue is a crucial indicator of her estrangement and isolation. That first sequence with Martin on the pier is exemplary, since while she gazes at life around her, her voice-over dominates the soundtrack and conveys her impressions and emotions. Seemingly, she observes various groups of Angelenos fishing on the pier, and she chats with her son Martin. However, the monologue tells us that in spite of what we are watching, the pain she feels is constant and overwhelming.

The overflowing emotions that Émilie attempts to restrain generate feelings of loneliness and inadequacy. This disjunction of Émilie's extradiegetic monologue with the visual elements of the narrative inscribes Émilie in a separate space. She obviously lives and works in the city of Los Angeles, yet because she does not feel "at home", she remains isolated. In this impressive opening, Varda defines her protagonist an outsider, and an exile among all men: "Être séparé d'un homme, c'est être en exil parmi tous les hommes"[159]. Émilie's comment shows that her position as an outsider in the city relates to her emotional status. When Varda renders Émilie's

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159 When you separate from a man, you are like an exile in the middle of all men. (My translation).

feelings of inadequacy and distress through space, geographical and emotional spaces coincide. Rather than filming her protagonist while integrated an urban crowd, Varda chooses to lay emphasis on the numerous anonymous and silent faces around her, and to let Émilie tell the viewer how isolated and ostracized she feels. Her exile is as geographic, as it is emotional, and this is why it is essential to investigate the director's strategies to illustrate the contrast between Émilie's intimate world and her surroundings.

Émilie's social and professional interactions are occasional and limited. She has few contacts with her employer, a film director who is never visible on screen. Similarly, she only seems to see and speak to her distant friends, when she needs to collect her scattered belongings after her separation with Tom. In this part of the diptych, Varda's approach contrasts with the one she adopts in Mur, Murs. Here, she focuses on Émilie's subjectivity, and on how her surroundings contribute to her thoughts. As Smith explains, an opposite strategy drives each film: "If *Mur, Murs* sets out, in fairly conventional documentary manner, to understand its surroundings through the mediation of the film-maker, *Documenteur* turns this on its head and sets out to understand the person through the mediation of the surroundings." (AV 81).

Until Émilie finds a small house, she is only an errant figure in the city. Some scenes showing snapshots of homeless Angelenos are meant to make the viewer think of Émilie's estranged condition in the city. She wanders the streets of coastal Los Angeles, looking for a place to rent. She is shown in a variety of public places, like a laundromat, a bar, a phone booth, and a bus station. In all these places, people physically surround her, move around her, while Émilie is static, almost out of touch. When she is not filmed in a static and meditative position, the fact that she moves

from one place to another illustrates the fluctuant character of her emotions, and the uncertainty that oppresses her. Only when she finds a proper house to live in, does she begin to come to terms with her new situation. At some point, she explains this to Martin quite bluntly, when she tells him that until they find a "home", they are disturbing their friends' lives. In other words, they are for the time literally "out of place".

Émilie's definition of a "house" is indicative of what she is missing. She may describe the basic structure of a house as "a door and four windows", but what she longs for is a "home", a place that she can appropriate and feel comfortable in. Some passages of Bachelard's Poetics of Space[160] echo this double nature of houses, as mere geometrical volumes and as personal and intimate places:

> (...) la maison est de prime abord un objet à forte géométrie. On est tenté de l'analyzer rationnellement. Sa réalité première est visible et tangible. Elle est faite de solides bien taillés, de charpentes bien associées. La ligne droite y est dominatrice. (...) Mais la transposition à l'humain se fait tout de suite, dés qu'on prend la maison comme un espace de réconfort et d'intimité, comme un espace qui doit condenser et défendre l'intimité.

In Varda's film, Émilie is looking for a house where she can make her marks and create a new life for herself and her child. She wants to find an anchor in the city she has been exiled to. Her longing for furniture reveals her need for certainty and stability. To her young son Martin, using cardboard boxes instead of furniture is fun; to Émilie, it means uncertainty and stasis.

In visual terms, Varda provides different examples of houses that seem to

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160 Bachelard Gaston, Poetics of Space, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1958, p. 59, section IV "maison et univers".

correspond to the protagonist's fluctuant state of mind. In the beginning of Documenteur, a series of tracking shots follow Émilie's frail silhouette, as she walks past a row of identical houses. Contrary to the vibrant communities and colorful buildings presented in Mur, Murs, these houses look drab, empty and lifeless. They obviously echo Émilie's emotions. At this stage of the narrative, Émilie is longs for a house that would simultaneously protect her and give her some freedom, a place where the pain would not be so bad, like the house of her employer on the beach. In the beach house, Émilie is able both to concentrate on her work, and to contemplate her past in order to overcome its obsessive presence. What Émilie ultimately hopes for in terms of accommodation is shown in a series of short night shots, which show anonymous silhouettes, possibly some neighbours, entering warmly lit hallways. These images illustrate some of the characteristics that the protagonist values, such as warmth, comfort, and privacy.

If this longing for a new home exposes Émilie's need for a new beginning, her contacts and relationships with other people suggest that she still struggles with her present circumstances. At times, she seems to be able to overcome the difficulties associated with being a single mother in a foreign country and a foreign city. She manages to find a house and a school for Martin; she befriends a few Angelenos. In the presence of men, she seems able to keep up appearances, and to manage things, as she wishes to. Two episodes are representative of this particular capacity, one when she agrees to record the commentary of a film (which turns out to be Mur, Murs), while her employer is away on a trip, and the other when she refuses the advances made by one of her former husband's acquaintances. Nevertheless a few more intimate conversations reveal her vulnerability. Some of her discussions with women

confirm her lasting disorientation and anguish. Émilie has not come to terms with her new situation yet; she is gradually re-organizing her life. The film is a sample of that specific time in her existence and of her attempts to overcome some of the "words/emotions[161]" that are mentioned in the opening like desire, pain, disgust. One of the first instances revealing the grief that still afflicts her is the phone call she receives from a friend at her employer's., She can hardly answer to her friend's questions as the mention of her separation with Tom makes her break out in tears. This scene is remarkable because it is one of the few in which Émilie shares the burden of her grief with someone. She is shown crying and looking at the beach, while her interlocutor apologizes and desperately tries to make Émilie say that she is doing fine. This episode is important because as a spectator, the insight we are given on Émilie's state of mind is almost exclusively provided by her inner monologue. In the first part of Documenteur, we know what the protagonist feels thanks to her introspective reflections. This episode is thus visually in sharp contrast with the rest of the film, where she appears more in control. Most of the time, Émilie maintains a slightly distant attitude and seems to react to situations in a contemplative and reflective manner. This sudden outburst of emotion gives the viewer an alternative image of Émilie's way to cope with her circumstances. It certainly contrasts with scenes that I would call meditative ones. In one of these, Émilie is filmed in a store gazing at a shop assistant, Millie, whose elaborate hairstyle makes her forget her present difficulties. Like a child soothed by a familiar object, Émilie comes to see her

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161 Varda's off screen voice utters these exact words : « Il y a des mots qui sont des émotions : désir, douleur, dégout (…) peur, peine, panique.» Some words are pure emotions: desire, pain, disgust (…) fear, grief, panic. (My translation).

"sister" when in distress. She watches intently at her black and purplish curls and forgets about her difficulties.

Varda's portrayal of Émilie builds on several elements, among them the correspondences between the protagonist's inner world, her geographical environment, and her relationships with others. An essential aspect of this dialectic between individual and space that Varda questions is the gender specificity of this experience. Documenteur is no exception to the rule, especially as the protagonist is identified from the start as a single woman in a foreign city. Ineluctably we are then led to think about how Émilie acts and performs as a woman in Los Angeles. In other films, like Cléo de 5 à 7, Varda establishes a clear distinction between sections of the film during which the female protagonist willingly plays the role of an object of desire (which is merely there to be looked at) and other sections in which the protagonist returns people's gaze visually conquering her environment[162].

In Documenteur, Émilie's situation is different from Cléo's, because of the time, place and circumstance. She is a mother, she lives in a foreign city and she is positioned from the beginning of the film as an outsider. While Cléo was a professional singer, a master at playing the seductive, and frivolous Parisian, Émilie is a secretary, who simply came to America to follow her husband Tom. Despite these obvious differences, the stories of these two women share an essential element in that both suddenly have to face an unexpected trauma, the separation from Tom in the case of Émilie, and the possibility of cancer for Cléo.

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162 For a more detailed analysis of this film, see in TDD's chapter 10: "From Déesse to Idée: Cleo from 5 to 7", pp. 268-284, as well as Susan Hayward's discussion of Cleo from 5 to 7 and Le Bonheur in "Ahistory of French Cinema 1895-1991: Pioneering Film-Makers (Guy, Dulac, Varda) and Their Heritage." In Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory, vol. 15 no. 1. 1992, pp. 19-37. Further references to this article will use the abbreviated form AFC.

Because of the predominance in Documenteur of Émilie's inner voice, the viewer is constantly in touch with the protagonist's emotions. This confessional structure creates the impression of a voice-over narrator telling us her true feelings. As a consequence, it has a direct impact on our interpretation of space. In addition to Émilie's voice, Varda inserts specific scenes in the flow of Émilie's story, which are meant to evoke the protagonist's past, or which relate to her personal situation. Two specific instances are of particular interest here, since they illustrate this type of evocation, and also address the link between a particular space and gender.

In the first part of Documenteur, when Émilie is still looking for a place to live, her off screen voice tells us that she associates several ideas together. These ideas are central to understanding her reactions, and to analyze Varda's understanding and use of space. "Moi je dirais à la maison de ton corps; la maison, l'homme, le foyer. En chinois paix ça s'écrit l'homme plus le toit plus le feu." This direct quote reveals the connections that Émilie makes between these otherwise disparate elements. The idea of the house (that has been discussed earlier) is not only associated with the notions of comfort and intimacy, it is also directly linked to the idea of the body. It is a place where one can enjoy a private space and where one should feel in harmony with oneself. Martin's frequent requests to share his mother's bedroom in their new house and her consistent refusal confirm the validity of this connection.

In Documenteur, there is no doubt that Émilie is aware that her new status as a single mother changes the perception that others have of her. The scene in which a friend of Tom's tries to woo her is proof of that change. Many of the situations and people she comes across, like this man, are part of her evolution. In a sort of cathartic journey, Émilie needs to face her past in order to move on and find her bearings. Her

story is composed of a variety of episodes, and of several significant sequences that can be associated to them. I will focus here on a selection of the most relevant ones to discuss the dialectic between space and gender.

Among the Angelenos that Émilie comes across in the early stages of the film, there is a couple arguing in front of their house. Émilie does not interfere in any way, as she often observes them from a distance. In this case, she continues her phone call as if she was only a passive witness. Yet the filming of their argument, and the fact that we are shown Émilie's contemplation is significant. From what can be gathered, the couple is arguing about material questions of ownership and money, but at the origin of their quarrel lies the crucial question of sharing. Does this scene remind Émilie of her own situation with Tom? Does it disturb her because of its public character? Does the couple's dialogue make her realize even more intensely the importance of having her own space? Because the director opts for a synchronized soundtrack for the scene, the viewer is left with more questions than answers. Varda surely expects that we will question the relevance and meaning of this scene. The characters at stake may not be the protagonist and her husband, but the questions at stake in this couple's argument echo the kind of crisis that Émilie and Tom must have been through. This illustrates the constant dialectic between someone's intimate universe and the social space they occupy.

This scene is not crucial in terms of narrative, but as with many shots appearing at random-looking moments in the film, it is meaningful when associated with the protagonist's situation. Another important element of this scene is that the man finally leaves the premises referring to his partner as an "independent bitch". Could this be what the problem was between Tom and Émilie? Did their relationship

deteriorate because of her independence, or due to other reasons? Did they have similar difficulties when it came to sharing space in their new environment? After all, the only explanation we are given by Émilie (during a phone conversation) is that since they had moved to America, things had gone astray. Because this scene is situated early in the film, and because Émilie's inner monologue has until then provided few hints about her past relationship with Tom, this moment stands out as one of the possible hypothesis to explain their separation. On a more general level, this episode also makes the viewer think of the questions any individual needs to face, when he or she decides to share his life with someone else. Living with someone implies that the two parties accept new conditions of living, and the sharing of space, which can be problematic as this scene illustrates. Besides, the implications of sharing are not only material, they are also emotional and physical, as the analysis of the other scenes selected will indicate.

Among the other scenes key to understanding the complex relation between the idea of space and that of gender, are the ones that I will call the nude series. Because the director intertwines Émilie's story with her spatial environment, and because of her interest in the connections between space and the female body in general, sequences where nude bodies are shown are crucial. In Cléo de 5 à 7, the scenes of seduction, or of mock seduction, are key; in Documenteur the status of Émilie as a single parent, recently separated from her husband, offers a different perspective on these questions.

On four occasions, scenes or flashbacks, in which either Tom, Émilie, or the two of them are filmed nude, interrupt the flow of Émilie's narrative. The first occurrence of this type of scene is a flashback, and it occurs while Émilie is working

at her employer's. She is filmed typing and observing the beach silently. The inner monologue first describes the setting and, in one of its typical free association[163] twists, it suddenly moves from the sand of the beach to the poetic evocation of a naked body. This sudden evocation summons up in Émilie's mind the memory of Tom's naked body. While Émilie's voice comments: "Que peut on dire d'un homme qu'on a aimé, sinon que douleur ressemble à douceur", Varda slowly zooms in on Tom's naked body, which is filmed in a resting position. This particular scene illustrates some of the words/emotions[164] with which Émilie is still striving at that point of the narrative. More importantly, it also shows the viewer that whatever the situation or space, Émilie can be dragged back into the past, even if only for a few seconds. A particular space can therefore make a specific memory re-surface, like Tom's "body of sand and milk". This type of association seems typical of Émilie's imagination, but it echoes in a singular manner the director's use of color and her understanding of cinema, as a material and emotional substance: "In a film, **colour circulates like blood**, regularly. Suddenly we feel our blood racing, the colours have impressed us for a moment. I like irregularity of sensations, coloured or not. **Cinema is the movement of sensations**.[165](My emphasis)" This is why understanding and interpreting such a scene is essential not only to understand some features of

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163 I am voluntarily using here the Freudian term of "free association" to describe Émilie's monologue. One could validly argue that this type of monologue is also akin to literary practices, such as that of the stream of consciousness, as practiced by Virginia Woolf. My choice of "free association" is based on the distinct nature of each practice, since in a novel, the reader encounters a text, while in the case of a film, the viewer deals with an audio-visual form.

164 Among the words/emotions evoked by Émilie in the opening of the film, the following cluster is particularly relevant: desire, pain, disgust ('désir, douleur, dégoût').

165 This quote is taken off and translated by Smith in AV, pp. 26-27. Its original version is readable in Varda, Agnès, and Bernard Bastide. Varda Par Agnès. Paris: Editions Cahiers du cinéma: Diffusion Seuil, 1994, p.62 « Dans un film la couleur circule comme le sang, régulièrement. Soudain l'on sent battre le sang plus fort, les couleurs nous ont fait impression, l'espace d'un instant. J'aime l'irrégularité des sensations colorés ou pas . Le cinéma, c'est lemouvement des sensations.»

Documenteur, but also to tackle important aspects of Varda's filmic practice.

In this nude series, two occurrences differ from the others because they show Émilie and Tom having sex. Again it can be assumed that these two scenes are flashbacks, reinforcing the idea that Émilie is still haunted by her relation with Tom. In both cases, the place in the narrative of these fairly short, slow-paced and silent scenes impacts on their meaning. The first occurrence of these love scenes is justified by another free association in Émilie's monologue. While the faces of various Angelenos appear on screen, the viewer can hear Émilie, who makes Martin recite part of his French language lesson about the verb to do. From his voice, we move to Émilie saying: "faire pitié, faire envie, faire la pluie et le beau temps, faire l'amour". The last expression gives rise to the vision of Tom and her, embracing, which is followed by another series of consecutive snapshots of unknown faces. At the same time, Émilie is noting that despite her ability to see these people, she does not know who they are, what they think, or what they do, adding to our impression that she feels utterly estranged from her fellow Angelenos. Her memory of a time when she was physically and emotionally attached to Tom triggers in Émilie a feeling of isolation and disorientation. The potency of this type of memory shows that her present situation is still affected by her past relationship with Tom.

The second of these love scenes occurs after a series of melancholic night shots, the last one revealing a close up of undressed mannequins in a shop window. Again, this nude scene is followed by a sequence where the spectator is confronted with a shot representing anonymous Angelenos. What she sees is the back of a woman, sitting alone in a laundromat. Again, this scene gives the impression that Los Angeles is a city where people come across each other but do not communicate. An

important point (which will be developed further) is that during the mannequin and the Laundromat scenes a solo piano is the only soundtrack. Émilie's usually omnipresent monologue is absent, which leaves the spectator free to interpret the scene as they wish. As Hayward notes in her insightful article, this is a common strategy in Varda's work: "Varda speaks of her film work in terms of asking questions and of doing it in a disturbing way." (AFC 31).

Finally, the last scene of the nude series takes place in the beach house, owned by Émilie's employer. Contrary to the other scenes of the series, it does not correspond to an emotionally charged vision of the past, since it takes place at the time of the narrative. It has to do with the character of Émilie only, and therefore appears as a counterpart to the first nude scene showing Tom. This different status in terms of narrative, and the fact that this scene is exclusively devoted to Émilie make it unique. Its specific characteristics should be analyzed, as they mark a definite change in the protagonist.

In this fairly long scene, Émilie puts the phone off the hooks after finishing a conversation with her employer. She then decides to venture in the rest of the house and enters the bedroom. This room, where red shades prevail, contains a large bed, next to which a floor to ceiling mirror is standing. Until that moment, Émilie's interior monologue accompanies our discovery of the room. It goes:

> Des chambres fermées, des portes, des verrous, des clés, des lits, des lampes, des tiroirs, des lettres liées par un ruban, des parents sortis, le silence, lit, oreiller, cachemire, odeur de cire, bois, forêt, champignons, arbres, cache cache, cachemire, je me souviens que j'avais un châle en cachemire que j'aimais beaucoup que j'ai perdu quand nous sommes allés en Allemagne. Je n'ai jamais retrouvé le même.

When she begins to get undressed, and lies down on the bed, the room becomes silent, and a piano solo starts playing. Émilie then turns towards the mirror, and spends a long moment looking at her own reflection, obviously enjoying these precious moments of peace and quiet. The sequence is broken up by a couple of short scenes (which are edited in parallel) in which Martin comes back from school, asks a neighbour to unlock his door and then leaves to play outside. Interruptions aside, there is a definitive sense of continuity to the scene due to the constant focus on Émilie's body. Naked on the bed, she observes herself in the mirror, plays with shadows, and smiles for what seems like a long time.

This distinctive nude scene could lend itself to many different interpretations, and it is surprising that it has drawn no critical attention. This scene fits in the series because its overall dim lighting, as well as the warm colour palette echo the two love scenes mentioned earlier. It is different in that it is not a flashback, and Emilie's monologue is absent. In its nature *vis à vis* the narrative, and in at least one characteristic, it deviates significantly from the rest of the series.

For the first time, once Émilie is on the bed, naked, looking at herself, there seems to be no disjunction between her off-screen voice and the image of her body. She remains silent during the whole time but, contrary to most of the scenes she was in before, she looks as if she was completely comfortable in the space that she occupies. Of course, one could attribute this to the fact that she is by herself, and quite certain that she will not be interrupted by anything or anyone. But, whatever the contextual reasons, this signals a remarkable moment in the film. This change may at first not even strike the viewer, but this scene is a radical turning point, because it coincides with the vanishing of Émilie's interior monologue. This decisive change in

the film corresponds to a perfect moment of harmony and to a reconciliation between Émilie and her intimate self. Because Varda has located this particular scene in the final section of Documenteur, one can also assume that she meant to accentuate its significance and impact.

When considered in its context, this scene marks a double change in the protagonist, first through the rearticulation of Émilie's voice with her body, and through her re-appropriation of the gaze. In the prelude to this key scene, the director slips a few hints, regarding Émilie's evolution to come. First, she devotes a short sequence to Émilie and Tom in order to give the impression that she wants to move on with her past. In this sequence, she shows a black and white photo of Tom and Émilie with Martin, followed by the reproduction of a section of Moratorium, whose composition is strangely similar. On both images, the couple embraces amorously, while the child stands at the periphery of the frame, observing his parents from a distance. At this moment, Martin's voice asks his mother to tell him about their love story, while a subtle zoom out reveals Martin's silhouette in front of the mural. Émilie's answer is unambiguous: she has already told him everything that he needs to know about them, and their story is really not different from that of other people. An abrupt cut takes us to the beach house, where the camera zooms on the typewriter. A few seconds before Émilie answers the phone, we can clearly read on the page in front of her the phrase: "séparation de corps", typed many times. In French, this expression is synonymous with divorce and separation, but literally it means the separation of bodies. These apparently trivial details, once added to each other, prepare the spectator for the nude scene to come, foretelling Émilie's change. Images of the past like the still photo, a fossilized relic of the past, expressions like

"séparation de corps", and even Émilie's answer to her son make it clear that she has reached a point where she is ready to move on. Technically and formally speaking the disjunction in many scenes between the protagonist's voice and her image has several functions (some of which will be detailed later). One of these is to translate in a material way Émilie's state at different points of the narrative. At that point, Émilie is ready to separate from Tom, and from the overpowering memory of their love story. The separation expression refers much more to the end of her lingering attachment towards Tom, than to the legal procedure she will have to go through. As she leaves this affection behind, her voice and body become one again.

The fact that this particular rearticulation occurs thanks to a solitary visual experience with a mirror is also significant. Until this particular scene, Émilie is like a prism through which the spectator perceives her surroundings and the people she meets, and her inner monologue serves as his or her guide throughout the narrative. As a consequence, Émilie's examination and perception of her surroundings is crucial. In this scene, the fact that she turns her gaze inward, and stares at her own body is decisive for the character and the spectator. Even though Émilie is not a character obsessed with her self-image (like Cléo is, for instance), her femininity is nonetheless the product of a social and psychological construction. Until then, the memory of her past has been a determining element, one that seeped through her daily experience. By finding a protected space that she can fully take over, and by staring at her reflection in the mirror, Émilie is asserting her independence and her desire to become active in the construction of her own image. She is literally appropriating the gaze that others have used before to subject her to their own desires. She becomes visually an independent woman free to make her own choices and

decisions.

Shortly after this sequence, Varda shows Émilie under a new and significant light, which illustrates this reappropriation of the gaze. Émilie is filmed as she assertively refuses a casual affair with one of Tom's friends, and thus demonstrates that she will actively take charge of what happens in her life. In this scene, not only does she clearly refuse this man's proposition, but she also facetiously mocks the conventions of seduction. The last few words they exchange almost sound as if they both recognized the artificiality of their conversation and have turned it into a game:

Émilie: Est ce que vous avez les clés?

Tom's friend: Mais oui. Voilà vos clés ma petite dame, vous êtes libre, vous êtes seule, ramassez vos petits cailloux et tout va bien.

Émilie: Au revoir,mon petit Monsieur.

This dialogue sounds like two children playing and mimicking a social meeting. In Documenteur's opening, Varda deconstructs the film's title. In a similar manner, here she presents how a casual exchange can also be deconstructed, and subverted. This scene is also a way to show the hard and cold realities of social relationships, since they can quite often be summed up as power struggles.

Émilie's reappropriation of the gaze, and the rearticulation of her voice with her body mark a turning point in the narrative. Both elements point to the fact that the director does not intend to "reflect or reproduce already constituted or given definitions of woman"[166]. Rather she means to produce her own definition and invites the spectator to participate in the process. In Documenteur, the definition of woman

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166 As Flitterman-Lewis aptly phrases it when she evokes cinema in general. (TDD 11).

that Varda constructs is defined by her interactions with space and with other people. From the moment Émilie's voice stops, the spectator is compelled to make her own decisions. She can no longer rely on the protagonist's interventions, but only on her attention to images and details. Somehow Varda cleverly forces the viewer to reconsider the first part of the narrative and its construction, while she also compels her to realize the active part she needs to play in the film's interpretation. This phenomenon is typical in Varda's films, although the strategies used by the director vary from one film to the other.

3.2.2 Varda's Documenteur, a typical example of self-reflexive cinema and experimentation

3.2.2.a Los Angeles in Documenteur and its relation with Varda's other works

The importance of the dialectic between a defined locale and the agents of the film, whether they are fictional characters played by actors, or non-professional participants, is a constant element in Varda's films. Because both the role and importance of this dialectic have been discussed earlier, I will not deal with it in detail again. Nonetheless, it is essential to underline that this element is present in Varda's past and recent production. To cite only a few of her films, this dialectic was central when she followed Cléo's itinerary in the streets of Paris in the sixties (in Cléo de 5 à 7), and it still is present in more recent documentaries, like Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse, when Varda roams France with her digital camera to capture glimpses of a striking contemporary social practice, "gleaning" (le glanage). Despite the discrepancies in shape and style between the two sections of the diptych, it is not surprising to see that she appeals to this fundamental ingredient in both cases. In Documenteur the city of Los Angeles is the element against which the director

constructs Émilie's intimate journey. The fact that the city presented in Documenteur diverges from the version offered in the first section of the diptych is proof of the versatility of urban space in the hand of the specific artist. Varda shows in these two films that Los Angeles has many facets, from public art to private lives, and that it is only up to the filmmaker to privilege one version or the other of this complex and sometimes contradictory environment.

Another characteristic of Varda's practice is the focus on women, and on questions that are important to them. By this I do not mean that Varda's films target an exclusively female audience, or that they share a particular feminist agenda. Because Varda has always been interested in political questions, the defence of women's rights is prevalent in some of her films, like L'une chante, l'autre pas. But her commitment to tackling questions that concern women goes beyond the model of militant cinema. In Varda's universe, women are part of every aspect of life, and as agents of society, their role and actions are to be examined, questioned and represented, possibly in ways that will differ from established stereotypes. As a consequence, in most, if not in all of her films, she engages in an examination of women, of their lives and of their interactions, and strives for a reconsideration of their representation. As Flitterman writes: "Varda (...) retains (...) the feminine focus on issues of concern to women and explores new possibilities for a cinematic discourse capable of expressing feminine realities" (TDD 249).

Her cinematographic practice has evolved over several ideological periods, but she has maintained throughout the years an earnest commitment to such questions. Some analyses of her work focus exclusively on this tendency in Varda's cinematic universe. In 'Voyage en Pays Féminin', Marie Claire Trigoulet writes:

"L'œuvre qu'Agnès Varda construit devant nous, film après film, évoque une encyclopédie de la femme occidentale de la deuxième moitié du XXème siècle. Cette galerie de portraits est d'autant plus passionnante qu'elle se situe dans ces quelques dizaines d'années qui ont plus modifié le destin des femmes que les deux derniers siècles"[167].

In Documenteur Los Angeles is an environment peopled with women of all kinds and scarred by the absence of a particular man, Tom. But how does Varda's interest in women manifest itself in Documenteur? In terms of representation, two recurrent female figures appear in Documenteur, the mother and the sister or companion. These two female roles and their representations have been part of Varda's productions for most of her career. In Kung Fu Master, for instance, Varda imagines the situation of a mother (played by Jane Birkin) who becomes emotionally involved with one of her daughter's much younger friends. This film is an example of her thematic use of the maternal figure. Varda also enjoys dealing with this female role on other levels. The principle dictating the form of Daguerreotypes was to limit the filming to the range of the wired camera used by Varda. In many interviews, she acknowledges that being pregnant at the time had inspired her to adopt this particular restriction. She thought that shooting with such a limited "umbilical cord" would be a challenging experiment, and she hoped that it would lead to interesting results. As Flitterman notes: "In an attempt to convey the sense of limitation that pregnancy imposes on a filmmaker's freedom, Varda firmly circumscribes the area she filmed to conform to the exact amount of space of her apartment." (TDD 238). Rather than

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167 In Bastide, Bernard. Agnès Varda, Études Cinématographiques; Nos 179-186. Paris: Minard, 1991, p. 58.

recycling visual stereotypes, Varda again opts for more original and sometimes unexpected figures and procedures.

In Documenteur, the mother is obviously a central figure and an overwhelming presence. She is not only the protagonist but also the narrator. From the opening scene Varda films Émilie as a woman accompanied by her son, while her off-screen commentary underlines her satisfaction in being a loving and caring mother. Even if a switch occurs to Émilie's inner monologue, it seems that much of her preoccupations still relate to this particular role. The protagonist may be commenting on her separation with Tom and on dealing with difficult emotions, but she almost always includes her son into her reflections. His candid enquiries as to their future sometimes act as a trigger for her reflection. The title of the film testifies of the importance of the mother-son relationship. Documenteur is subtitled: "Dodo, cucu, maman, vas-tu-te-taire?/Film écrit et réalisé par Agnès Varda", a list of words that put together form the title, but which also outline Émilie's daily activities.

When Varda represents a mother, instead of exploiting established *clichés* of the happy and contented mother, or of the trouble free and loving couple, she assembles an intimate portrayal of a woman simultaneously struggling with practical difficulties and grief. Instead of focusing on eventful episodes of this mother's journey throughout Los Angeles, Varda seems to insist on the trivial and repetitive activities of Émilie's daily life, such as washing clothes at the laundromat, putting her son to bed, and helping him with his homework. To get a sense of what Émilie's life is like, she makes the spectator witness all these activities to better understand the pace of her existence. Also, she films Émilie in situations that also portray her in different roles, such as her employment as the personal assistant of a filmmaker.

Another female figure, that of the sister or companion, is also a regular presence in Varda's films. From the friends Pomme and Suzanne in L'une chante et l'autre pas, to Émilie and her friend Tina, this recurring theme suggests that female companionship is important in times of crisis for the protagonist. Tina helps Émilie to carry some furniture in her new home, but she is also the person with whom Émilie shares details of her intimate life. When Émilie feels down, she mentions visiting her "sister", a shop assistant she does not know personally but whose crazy hairdo she finds soothing. Here again Varda chooses to display a wide range of representations of companionship, and leaves the spectator reflect on their differences. This gallery of female portrayals is all the more interesting in that it often favours women in the absence of men, that is to say women who are not defined by their status as a wife or partner. Whether it is Tina, Émilie, or other anonymous women, they are quite often shown as engaging and independent individuals.

This short section aimed to show how Varda's treatment of the city in Documenteur is consistent with other principles in her other films. On the surface, it may appear to be an opus on solitude and motherhood. On closer examination, the film also suggests that Émilie's story should be interpreted in connection with the society she belongs to and the space she inhabits. These characteristics of Documenteur also provide an insight into Varda's theoretical approach to cinema. The Los Angeles that she films and creates in Mur, Murs and in Documenteur reveals a number of artistic ambitions. Among these, I have selected a few that I want to discuss here because they definitely affect the representation of the city provided to the spectator.

3.2.2.b Varda's ambitions, a combination Méliès Lumière

Commentators have assigned many labels to Varda's cinema, as feminist or exilic. I do not want to match a particular label with Varda's practice. I am more interested in delineating the most relevant characteristics of her cinema with regard to the city. To do so, the first aspect I wish to underline is Varda's choice of an exploration and recreation of the city favouring a combinatory style. One striking feature of all her productions is indeed the persistent intersection and/or oscillation between a documentary and a narrative drive that she has openly acknowledged: "I really try for a Lumière/Méliès cinema. Using this superb cinematographic matter which is the faces of people really enmeshed in their situation (daily lives) (...) And using, as well, this imagery from the dream-cinema, all the baggage and iconography (...) of our mental world." (TDD 242). This quote confirms that Varda aims to film in an authentic manner, while using the tricks of the trade in creating images.

I believe that this Lumière/Méliès combination, as she calls it, is visible in both films, and that it can be most acutely felt in Documenteur. In this part of the diptych, Los Angeles is much about the way Angelenos play a role both in Émilie's life and in her comprehension of the world. L.A. is above all a human city. Its people are what shapes the protagonist's experience, and as a consequence the experience of the spectators. Since women are of prime importance in Varda's cinematographic universe, I will illustrate how Varda achieves this particular combination by using images of women in the city. On the one hand, like the Lumière brothers, Varda uses the camera as a means to record Los Angeles and its female inhabitants. She makes a film, which records images of life in L.A. in the 1980s while also narrating Émilie's journey. The documentary dimension of Documenteur lies in the recurring shots of

anonymous faces, and in the scenes showing Angelenos in their daily lives. Despite the voice over narrative focused on Émilie's feelings, the opening scene is a good example of a sequence showing Angelenos busy with their daily activities.

On the other hand, like Méliès who used many devices of illusion to create a highly evocative and magical cinema, Varda brings her own take to classical imagery and iconography. Considering her vast knowledge of art and her penchant for Dutch painting, it is hardly surprising to see her setting Émilie in scenes that echo classical representations of the mother and child such as Pieter de Hoogh's or Nicolaes Maes', contemporaries of Vermeer and Rembrandt. When Varda films interiors at night, she records the daily routine of Émilie and Martin, yet she also plays with the shadows and lights created by the figure of the mother looking after her son, echoing previous versions of similar scenes. Every viewer may not identify these references, yet they situate Varda's cinema at the intersection of various artistic practices, and show her desire to use different strategies to enrich her films.

Varda's artistic choices show how she applies this theoretical principle of combination to her films impacting on her treatment of the city. Even when she adds labels such as "film de fiction" in the opening credits (as is the case of Documenteur), one can expect a subversion of this simple dichotomy. In this chapter's introduction, I defined Mur, Murs as a documentary, and Documenteur as fiction. One could argue, however, against this clear-cut categorization through the subtleties of each part of this carefully made diptych. In Documenteur, it is clear that Varda combines the fictional narrative of Émilie with more documentary sections. When closely examined, the categories of documentary and fiction intermingle in Mur, Murs and in Documenteur.

An additional example is the title of Documenteur and its opening credits. As mentioned earlier, the first time the title appears, it is followed by the expression "film de fiction". Here Varda plays with language, since she mixes the following terms: "documentaire" (which in French means documentary) and "menteur" (liar). The end result could either illustrate the debatable verisimilitude of documentary practice in general, or designate the documentary maker in a facetious manner. After the seemingly straightforward opening and list of the participants, Varda suggests another interpretation, encouraging further deconstruction and speculation. The title Documenteur then appears a second time accompanied by the following text: "Dodo, cucu, maman, vas-tu-te-taire? Film écrit et réalisé par Agnès Varda". Because the credits unroll fairly quickly, this may go unnoticed. However, Varda uses the same words "Dodo, cucu, maman, vas-tu-te-taire?" in the first sequence of the film. She tells the spectator that these words are Martin's. Far from being randomly assembled, these words are significant elements in interpreting Varda's film. They may sound like childlike gibberish, but as Varda has explained that these are the only words that still make sense for Émilie, their importance should not be underrated.

In the diptych as a whole, Varda strives for is a complementary combination of documentary and fiction. The second section, Documenteur, may strike critics as a fiction about solitude[168]. Yet it incorporates personal elements of Varda's life and plays with distinctions between reality and fiction. When Varda stages herself as Émilie's invisible employer, she wants to confuse viewers by blurring the boundaries

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168 This is René Prédal's interpretation in "Agnès Varda, une oeuvre en marge du cinéma français, in Bastide, Bernard. Agnès Varda, Études Cinématographiques; Nos 179-186. Paris: Minard, 1991, p. 34.

between the two films. She deliberately chooses not to appear on screen in Documenteur, yet her voice is present as that of Émilie's employer, a filmmaker who shot a documentary about murals in Los Angeles. Mur, Murs is therefore subtly embedded in Émilie's story. This detail could pass for an intrusion of a real event into the fictional script of Documenteur. Yet there is one thing that distinguishes it, and that shows that Varda is encouraging a reconsideration of the definitions of fiction and documentary. In Documenteur the director's assistants talk Émilie into recording the voice over narrative used in Mur, Murs. But for viewers familiar with Varda's voice, it is clear that she is speaking in Mur, Murs, and not Émilie/Sabine Mamou.

Varda is the off-screen narrator in many of her films; it is therefore not unusual for spectators to recognize her voice. By asking her *monteuse* to play the part of Émilie in the second part of the diptych, by having her character take charge (even temporarily) of the narration of Documenteur and of Mur, Murs and by deliberately choosing to include her voice but not her own image, Varda forces us to reconsider the artificial definitions of documentary and fiction. The mention "film de fiction" is a give away, because it reveals the director's intention to make us reflect on this particular label and its limits. Is Documenteur really a fiction about Émilie and Los Angeles, or a fiction meant to question the creative process of making a film and telling a story? With its attention to Angelenos and to local spaces, can it really qualify as a documentary film? Or is it meant as an essay on love and motherhood? On close examination, Documenteur is all these things at the same time. When analyzed in detail, it is apparent that Documenteur and its companion piece are experimental in that they combine different cinematographic tendencies. A different angle of Los Angeles is presented in each film. The diptych shows some of the many

faces of the city, and the variety of artistic creations it can generate.

This combination of documentary and fiction contributes to another important aspect of Varda's cinema that I wish to discuss, her relentless questioning of cinema as a significant practice. Varda uses other strategies to make the viewer aware of the elaborate nature of filmmaking, which obviously flavor her treatment of the city. Varda is not simply interested in telling stories or in showing a specific place, but in questioning the language of cinema. Her alternative version of Los Angeles in Documenteur therefore needs to be considered in the light of this particular ambition.

3.2.2.c A playful deconstruction and questioning of the fundamentals of cinema

Even though her career looks now like that of an accomplished filmmaker, one needs to remember that Varda came to cinema by chance. From early in her career, she showed an interest in questioning the notions of image and of representation. Varda has always been keen on reflective on her own practice, and on the medium of cinema, be it in interviews or in books such as Varda par Varda[169]. She is widely recognized for her formal experiments, such as in Daguerréotypes.

When she comments on her own film practice, Varda often refers to the notion of *cinécriture*, which is most probably inspired by Astruc and his idea of "caméra stylo". Varda uses this expression because to her it stresses the specificity of film in comparison with other artistic media. Unsurprisingly, many of her films, like Salut les Cubains!, are accompanied by the mention: "cinécrit par Agnès Varda", or by "un film cinécrit par Agnès Varda". Other scholars pinpoint this particularity in Varda's work:

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169 Varda, Agnès, and Bernard Bastide. Varda Par Agnès. Paris: Editions Cahiers du cinéma: Diffusion Seuil, 1994.

> Varda speaks of *cinécriture* in terms of the "untranslatable" quality of film, its capacity to signify according to its own specific systems of meaning, and its fundamentally visual mode of organization. She cautions against taking the meaning of writing in this new concept too literally because for her, *cinécriture* "means cinematic writing. Specifically that. Not illustrating a screenplay, not adapting a novel, not getting the gags of a good play, not any of this". (TDD 219)

It is clear that whatever the subject Varda comes with a critical and uses cinema as a means to explore its multiple facets. In the present diptych, she shows that the city of Los Angeles has many facets, and thus encourages the viewer to reconsider her expectations vis à vis the representation she is shown. Do they come to the theater with the conviction that they are going to see a classic city symphony, a modern or feminist take on the documentary, or something else altogether?

The city in Documenteur is a milieu that can be played with, deconstructed and reconstructed at will. By having spectators screen the two films together, Varda shows her determination to make us reconsider the different representations that she uses in each film. In Documenteur in particular, she lays bare the careful construction that lead to Mur, Murs. When Émilie records the voice-over narrative for Mur, Murs, we are reminded of our earlier viewing experience and are enticed to question the reasons and meaning of this episode in Documenteur. In pinpointing the technical recording of the voice over, Varda underlines the malleability of cinema. Émilie can "become" the director, by impersonating the voice of the narrator. She can be the protagonist of one film, a technician working on the other, and can assume any other role on or off screen. Playing with the actors and participants in both films challenges our expectations as spectators, and it forces us to reconsider the classical process of story making. We become aware of the potential impact that such shifts have on our

experience as spectators, and that the careful elaboration of filmic representation should never be underestimated.

Whether she tackles a geographical space, a group of people or a single individual, Varda's *cinécriture* is consistently critically engaging. By assembling a multi-faceted representation of the city, she entices the viewer to watch this place anew. Film language can relay several discourses that are either complementary or in opposition, as both parts of the diptych illustrate. It can portray the city as an indifferent and ostracizing space. In specific scenes of Documenteur, Varda focuses on homeless people and beggars who live in close proximity to Émilie and her son. Yet she also shows the city as a more welcoming space, where familiar figures help the protagonist find her bearings. The complex cinematic construction of Los Angeles offered in Documenteur shows that the director wishes to present a multi-faceted portrayal of Los Angeles. Varda's film shows that from a similar starting point, the space of the city, one can create numerous artistic representations. It is up to the director to decide which *cinécriture* is more appropriate for a project, and which objectives it will illustrate. The changing versions of Los Angeles offered by Varda prove that she aims to contest past representations of Los Angeles, while simultaneously questioning our way of seeing and understanding film. By constructing varied images of the city, she attests that the perception of a place is not exclusively in the eye of the beholder, but also in the hands of the director. Modifying facets of the city her way of answering more straightforward and/or classical urban images. Los Angeles is many things simultaneously, a derelict coastal city, a vibrant art scene, a space to wander and to enter into exchanges with others. It also gives the director a chance, as Flitterman writes, to explore "the parameters of film language

and the varied strategies of cinematographic representation these suggest." (TDD 219).

3.2.3 Creating and alternative cinema

Even though most commentators (including myself) use simple designations to describe Varda's films, when closely examined one sees that her practice always favours a varied and sophisticated *cinécriture*. Varda's approach to the city of Los Angeles is in tune with the rest of her work, since she opts for an original and personal diptych, which, as I will demonstrate, resists more traditional forms of cinema. In both films, Varda simultaneously tries to present a specific place and its inhabitants to the spectator, while she also invites her to reconsider both her preconceptions about Los Angeles, and the medium used to represent it.

As outlined in details in the introduction of this chapter, the director opts for a double exploration; first through a documentary exploration of the vibrant art scene characterised by Californian muralists in the eighties, and second through an intimate self-reflexive fiction about love, friendship and solitude. The take chosen in each case varies, but the end result consists of a rich and unique combination of sights and sensations, a notion dear to Varda's cinematography: "Cinema is the movement of sensations"[170]. While Varda has used the diptych in previous works (see Lions Love), this choice of a double creation in a specific location is quite unusual. In comparison with Norman Klein who creates an imaginative tribute to the city using film *noir*, combined with documentary pieces, and personal testimony, Varda's approach definitively at grip with the present. While the first part of the dyptich is

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170 This quote is taken off and translated by Smith. (AV 26-27).

akin to a work of cultural geography, like that undertaken by Klein for BTL, Documenteur presents a more intimate and personal vision of the city. It focuses on the movement of Émilie's sensations (to paraphrase Varda herself). By presenting the city to the spectator under a new and different angle that amalgamates together Émilie and the director's reactions to her environment, Varda compels us to reconsider our previous experience of the city.

The version of Los Angeles that we are offered as spectators in Documenteur does not rely on well known sites or places such as Venice Beach, or Hollywood Boulevard. On the contrary, Varda offers an alternative to the glitz and lights of this cinematic city. She takes us on an intimate journey through the city with Émilie, a mother often estranged from her surroundings, as she battles through her emotional turmoil. The fact that the director privileges an exploration lead by an outsider is a challenge to more traditional urban films, which often rely on local, street-wise, and male protagonists. The potent monologue that accompanies our journey evolves with the protagonist's fluctuating emotions, and is tinted by her loneliness. It is driven by the character's sensations rather than by her actions, as would be the case in a more traditional film. The flux of images that Varda edits sometimes diverges from the monologue of the protagonist. It often seems to have a life of its own, as the editing skips from one episode of Émilie's narrative to another in an apparently unrelated location. This type of visual disruption enables Varda to suggest new interpretations of Émilie's story (by association). These images also enable the director to show us alternative fragments of life in the city, and to echo some of the subjects tackled in the first film of the diptych. The attention paid to the participants' everyday work, and to their cultural and ethnic background ties Émilie's story within the wider frame

of Varda's project. Documenteur is certainly the narrative of Émilie's emotional journey, but it does not take place in absentia; it is determined by her environment and her fellow Angelenos.

The choice of Émilie as the main driving element of Documenteur is crucial to understand and analyze Varda's treatment of the city. Her decision to position a woman and an outsider at the core of this urban exploration is evidence of her interest in an alternative viewpoint. As in the work of contemporary experimental women filmmakers Chantal Ackerman and Yvonne Rainer, the idea of a potent feminine gaze and voice are central to Varda's project. As spectators, we are required to turn away from the traditional male gaze, and from the more classical versions of California associated with these figures. In Documenteur, we are indeed far from the film *noir* and its clever private eye. The fact that it is difficult to identify with Émilie makes Varda's unconventional choice even more striking. Despite our knowledge of her intimate thoughts, Émilie's detachedness is almost overwhelming. This particularity of Documenteur proves that Varda is not interested in giving us a simple, pre-digested perspective on the city. She wants us to approach the space of the city through the experience of Émilie's emotional geography, an experience that requires the engagement of the spectator. The fact that her monologue accompanies us during most of the film shows the didactic and leading role that Émilie is supposed to play *vis à vis* the spectator. Her impressions, as personal and individual as they may be, are to be our guide through the city coupled, of course, with Varda's careful visual editing.

In this editing, one can recognize some of the director's typical concerns as evoked earlier in this chapter. When Varda makes the disparities of the city and its

inhabitants more visible, it is because to her they make this place all the more interesting. By having these differences stand out, she offers us her alternative and personal vision of Los Angeles. The city is made of lonely exiles like Émilie, but also of troubled couples, of happy single parents like Tina, and of many other individuals, whose stories the director may want to unravel. These multiple elements contribute to the appeal of the city for Varda, and help her elaborate such a wide-ranging diptych.

The configuration she chooses in Documenteur invites us (when combined with that presented in Mur, Murs), to borrow Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's expression, to unthink and to rethink Los Angeles. True to her ambition of having her spectators questioning her cinematographic representations, Varda invites us to partake in a collaborative visual discovery that shuns simple answers. It is only if we accept the gaps of Émilie's story, and the fluctuating images edited by the director, that we can experience a truly alternative vision of the city. In Unthinking Eurocentrism, Shohat and Stam analyze cultural productions that they define as diasporic, yet their chapter "aesthetics of resistance" is congruent with Varda's project. Their description of diasporic films is consistent with Varda's work in this particular diptych: "(...) diasporic films call attention to the fault lines of gender, class, class ethnicity, religion, partition, migration, and exile. Many of the films explore the identitary complexities of exile –from one's own geography, from one's own history, from one's own body- within innovative narrative strategies."[171] One could say that in the first part of the diptych, Varda concentrates on the fault lines of gender, class ethnicity, and exile of Los Angeles's many communities, while in

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171 In Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media. London; New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 318.

Documenteur she focuses her exploration on the body and mind of a particular character, Émilie. Documenteur thus examines the complexities of Los Angeles, as well as those of Émilie's emotional journey (which are marked and influenced by her environment). The fact that her journey ends with a section in which the spectator is left to decipher and interpret the city's sights, without Émilie's guidance, confirms Varda's desire to "educate" the spectators and to trigger their reflection. Left to ourselves, we have no choice but to wonder why the director exiles us from the protagonist's intimate thoughts, and why she opts for such an unconventional open ending. This unusual choice, added to other narrative strategies that I have already highlighted, show that Varda's ambition is to resist traditional film conventions, in order to achieve an individual way of filming. Finally, this ending also reveals that beyond the rich visual portrayal offered in the diptych, the filmmaker expects the spectator to engage in an individual interpretation and evaluation of, the two films, and of the scenes and characters she has been shown.

The space of Los Angeles thus constitutes an experimental playground for the filmmaker. It is a starting point malleable enough to be configured in the way she wants, and a milieu complex enough to highlight different individual trajectories. In unravelling personal stories in Mur, Murs, and in forcing the spectator to share the emotional itinerary of an estranged mother in Documenteur, Varda presents a portrayal of the city which is both comprehensive and personal. By creating this original diptych, Varda contests the stereotyped versions of the city of angels, all the while re-asserting her aesthetic and theoretical priorities. If her films play with aesthetics of resistance, it is because she aspires to make the spectator participate and reconsider the visual creation that he has come to see.

In this vibrant diptych, the city is cinematographically created, enacted and interpreted in specific ways, which depend heavily on Varda's decisions and ambitions. In this particular diptych, the configuration she privileges is akin to her the rest of her cinematographic practice, as she strives for an alternative and thought-provoking representation of a space. Rather than building on past versions, she decides to anchor the first part of her project into the present, and to give voice to the various artistic and ethnic communities of Los Angeles. The end result is a vignette portrayal of the city built on the careful editing of urban scenes mixed with an eclectic collection of interviews. Following this collective portrayal, she juxtaposes an alternative version of Los Angeles, which sheds light on different aspects of this coastal city. In Documenteur, the city is the element in reaction to which the protagonist is going to evolve, ultimately maturing to a state of peaceful serenity. Varda opts here for a more intimate representation of the city embracing the movement of her protagonist's emotions. In this section of the diptych, the city's exploration is conducted on the one hand by Émilie's physical and emotional journey, and on the other hand by the director who assembles an exciting visual patchwork of city scenes. The challenge is for the spectator to accept the ellipses in the narrative and the rather unconventional strategies used by Varda. The open ending for instance confirms Varda's choice of a representation that invites the spectator to participate, and decide for herself what to make of the final festive scene. In Documenteur, the director expects us to reconsider the journey we have taken after having seen her two films. It is often said that Los Angeles has captured many authors and artists' imagination. What Varda suggests in this conclusion is that as spectators, we too ought to reflect on our experience of this city and let our imagination wander further.

CONCLUSION

At the end of this exploration of three imaginary configurations of Los Angeles, what conclusions can we draw? Is the elaboration of Los Angeles completely distinct in each of these cultural productions? Is the artist's experience of the city so individual that no parallels can emerge between their imagined urbanities? In analyzing the characteristics of these works, there appears to be a number of recurring elements. This could be due to their contemporaneity, the productions under scrutiny reflect their particular *Zeitgeist*. On the other hand, it is not only time, but also space that shape these productions. Because these artists tackle an overdetermined space, whose traditional representations still fascinate[172], their work is critically engaged with these earlier layers of significant representations. This desire to take the ghostly figures of earlier representations into account is one of the common denominators between these three works. Either explicitly, like Klein, or more ironically like Yamashita, these artists refer to other imaginary configurations of the city. All are well aware that by adding their own version of the city to the vast corpus of urban literature and cinema, they partake in the collective elaboration of L.A.'s imaginary identity. Even Varda, who cannot be described as a local, carefully assembles two films that discuss the role of art *vis à vis* the city. One could object that any artistic project is built more or less openly on past representations. If this reflexive attitude is not a central characteristic in defining these artists' imagined L.A., what characteristics are common attributes of the imaginary city that these three

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172 Proof is the latest *noir* film Black Dahlia (2006) directed by Brain de Palma.

works present? The city that these artists create is an eclectic entity characterized by its minorities. All three artists reassert the role that minorities have played, and continue to play today in Los Angeles. They all decide to shed light on the more obscure heroes of the city, and to unravel their particular stories. To do so, they do not rely on the form of the political manifesto. More simply, they integrate these groups' presence into the canvas of the city, giving minorities an important role in the functioning of Los Angeles. In Tropic of Orange, Bleeding Through: Layers of Los Angeles 1920-1986, Documenteur, and Mur, Murs, Los Angeles would be a different city, if these minorities were ignored. The form their participation takes is what varies from one work to the other.

In Tropic of Orange, Yamashita wants all Angelenos to be acknowledged, whatever their social status, ethnic origin, or gender. Political refugees, illegal immigrants, homeless people, Chicanos, African-Americans, Nikkei[173], and many others, all inhabit her literary universe, and contribute in various ways to the making of the city. The specific urban geography she designs is inclusive but not idealistic. As many of her characters testify, L.A. is far from being free of prejudices and inequities. The city is a space that enables the meeting of many different actors, but it does not guarantee a harmonious melting pot. Power relationships influence the daily life of Angelenos, and tensions are often looming under the surface. But the magical twist of events that literally makes Los Angeles part of Mexico is a playful way for the novelist to turn the tables on American society. Previously ignored groups like homeless communities take advantage of the stasis that takes over California. The

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173 This expression means of Japanese lineage; however some dictionaries translate it as Japanese emigrant or Japanese American.

massive stroke suffered by the city's transportation system turns out to be a blessing, rather than a plague.

> Amazing thing was everybody in L.A. was walking. They just had no choice. There wasn't a transportation artery that a vehicle could pass through. It was big-time thrombosis. Massive stroke. Heart attack. You name it. The whole system was coagulating right then and there. Some of the broadest boulevards had turned into one-way alleys. Cars so squeezed together, people had to climb out the sun roofs to escape. Streets'd become unrecognizable from an automobile standpoint. Only way to navigate was to feel the street with your own two feet. So people were finally getting out, close to the ground, seeing the city like he did. (TO 218-219).

This is an audacious transformation, which compels the locals to reconsider their surroundings. They have to leave their cars behind and use their senses to adjust to the shifting environment. In a similar way, Yamashita expects her readers to reconsider the configuration of the city. She invites us to re-view the city from several different standpoints, some like Emi's are cynical, while Murakami, and Arcangel have a more poetic outlook. The commotion in Yamashita's text compels us to look at L.A. with a renewed curiosity, like the epitome of what we are capable of building at the end of the twentieth century.

A similar drive to focus on ordinary Angelenos pervades the collaborative project led by Klein, Bleeding Through: Layers of Los Angeles 1920-1986. The format of the DVD-ROM gives rise to an experience of the city that relies on an almost hypnotic journey through a myriad of meticulously collected and reproduced documents. The main difference between Yamashita's novel and Klein's project is that he focuses on the past and the haunting presence of disappeared neighbourhoods,

than with the city's present condition. In a dizzying array of archival material, photos, and clips that he tries to organize through to a *noir* narrative thread, Klein tries to make his reader/*vuser* experience Los Angeles differently. The challenging combination of music, images, and text aims to generate a new contemporary type of *flanerie*. The recombinant poetics that structures the whole project reveals two basic objectives. First, like Yamashita's text, Klein's BTL is a social critique. It pinpoints many questions that are either left in the shadows, or simply unanswered for example, what was the role of women in the development of the city? What situation did ethnic minorities occupy in L.A. at various stages of the past century? What arguments were made to convince Angelenos of drastic redevelopment plans? And how is the city today still carrying the traces of its past history? The second objective of Klein's project is to make us reconsider the very format he uses, the interactive database narrative. When there are so many artistic forms representing the city, what is the point of experimenting with a new one? Is there anything truly innovative in playing with the technical possibilities of this particular format? No doubt there were many factors justifying the choice of format at the time of the making of BTL. One possible reason is the desire to question the modalities offered by this new format. Another is the team's desire to reflect on the fragile status of earlier media. What will happen to the memories that we thought captured on the fading paper of an old photography? Do visual archives have a long-term future? New media enthusiasts may question the future of the book, but what Klein does in his project is highlight the importance of using alternative modes to document the past.

Documenting both the past, and the present in L.A. is also one of Varda's objectives in her Californian diptych. Like Klein and Yamashita, she creates a piece

which reveals the major role of minorities in Los Angeles. In the first part of the diptych, Varda constructs a poetics of space based on a collective portrayal of Angelenos. The film attempts to present a comprehensive image of L.A. in the early 1980s. The artistic community chosen as the initial topic of Mur, Murs is a concrete example of how art is significant outside of the more traditional network of museums and galleries, an idea that is dear to the director. In this film, Varda shows that this city's history is not only written in its literature, but also painted on its walls. The essential role of minorities, which was often ignored in official history, is palpable in these murals. Varda is a *cinéaste passeur* who mediates between the people she meets and the spectator of her film. She aims to make their voices heard, and their artwork seen. Rather than presenting a glamorous and glittery California to her continental audience, she suggests a more sophisticated version of Los Angeles, which focuses on locals. This thoughtful approach is also visible in Documenteur. In the second part of the diptych, the director literally invites the spectator to deconstruct the version of the city that she has built in Mur, Murs. Emily, who wanders the streets of coastal L.A. and walks pasts the murals of Mur, Murs, conducts an intimate exploration of the city. She is the protagonist of Documenteur, a woman in search of a home, and an outsider who would like to belong somewhere. This marginal status makes her akin to the many anonymous faces that the director films. The recurring shots of homeless Angelenos echo Émilie's marginal position. This darker take on the city is a complex counterpart to the colourful and upbeat Mur, Murs, yet it is definitely anchored in the same space. In offering a double exploration of the city, Varda proposes an alternative to traditional representations. Her experience of the city may be that of an outsider, but its artistic transformation shares some of the concerns of Klein and

Yamashita.

Focusing on the ordinary, revealing the role of minorities, and highlighting marginal discourse are part of Klein, Varda and Yamashita's ambitions when creating their own version of Los Angeles. Analyzing these works by three different artists is an important project, because too often scholars only focus on well-known authors such as Bret Easton Ellis, or present a more "black and white" picture. Due to its size, the city of angels certainly is a space where frictions and violence occurs. This emphasis on L.A.'s problems is a common subject of enquiry, and it often finds echoes in the type of literary or cinematographic work that is associated with this city. I am not saying that this type of analysis is not informative, but, at the same time, it more often than not leads to dark and pessimistic readings of the imaginary territory of Los Angeles. There are more balanced visions of L.A. available too, as this study has shown. These address the dystopian predisposition of the L.A.'s imagined urbanity, and develop original versions that shun away from stereotypes. By mapping out alternative territories, they entice readers, viewers, and participants to reconsider their conception and preconceptions of this mythical city. Hopefully this analysis will, in a similar manner, convince my reader to unthink and rethink her general assumptions about this particular city, and to read beyond the blank[174] and bleak canon.

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174 In his Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture, and the Contemporary American Novel, James Annesley characterizes the fiction of Ellis and some of his contemporaries as blank fiction. According to his analysis, these writers are preoccupied with "sex, death and subversion", they favour "blank, atonal perspectives and fragile, glassy visions. (...) and "their novels are predominantly urban." p. 2.

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APPENDIX 1 : ILLUSTRATIONS

Plate 1.1: Yamashita's first table of content

HyperContexts

	Monday Summer Solstice	Tuesday Diamond Lane	Wednesday Cultural Diversity	Thursday The Eternal Buzz	Friday Artificial Intelligence	Saturday Queen of Angels	Sunday Pacific Rim
Rafaela Cortes	**Midday** -Not Too Far from Mazatlan chapter 1	**Morning** -En México chapter 10	**Daylight** -The Cornfield chapter 18	**Dusk** -To the Border chapter 24	**Dawn** -The Other Side chapter 30	**Nightfall** -Aztlán chapter 38	**Midnight** -The Line chapter 45
Bobby Ngu	**Benefits** -Koreatown chapter 2	**Car Payment Due** -Tijuana via Singapore chapter 12	**Second Mortgage** -Chinatown chapter 15	**Life Insurance** -L.A./L.J. chapter 26	**Visa Card** -Final Destination chapter 34	**Social Security** -I-5 chapter 40	**American Express** -Mi Casa/Su Casa chapter 49
Emi	**Weather Report** -Westside chapter 3	**NewsNow** -Hollywood South chapter 9	**Disaster Movie Week** -Hiro's Sushi chapter 20	**Live on Air** -El A chapter 27	**Promos** -World Wide Web chapter 29	**Prime Time** -Last Stop chapter 41	**Commercial Break** -The Big Sleep chapter 44
Buzzworm	**Station ID** -Jefferson & Normandie chapter 4	**Oldies** -This Old Hood chapter 13	**LA X** -Margarita's Corner chapter 16	**You Give Us 22 Minutes** -The World chapter 22	**AM/FM** -FreeZone chapter 31	**The Car Show** -Front Line chapter 37	**Hour 25** -Into the Boxes chapter 48
Manzanar Murakami	**Traffic Window** -Harbor Freeway chapter 5	**Rideshare** -Downtown Interchange chapter 8	**The Hour of the Trucks** -The Freeway Canyon chapter 19	**Lane Change** -Avoiding the Harbor chapter 28	**Jam** -Greater L.A. chapter 35	**Drive-By** -Virtually Everywhere chapter 42	**SigAlert** -The Rim chapter 46
Gabriel Balboa	**Coffee Break** -Downtown chapter 6	**Budgets** -Skirting Downtown chapter 14	**The Interview** -Manzanar chapter 17	**Time & a Half** -Limousine Way chapter 25	**Overtime** -El Zócalo chapter 32	**Working Weekend** -Dirt Shoulder chapter 39	**Deadline** -Over the Net chapter 43
Arcangel	**To Wake** -Marketplace chapter 7	**To Wash** -On the Tropic chapter 11	**To Eat** -La Cantina de Miseria y Hambre chapter 21	**To Labor** -East & West Forever chapter 23	**To Dream** -America chapter 33	**To Perform** -Angel's Flight chapter 36	**To Die** -Pacific Rim Auditorium chapter 47

Plate 1.2 Yamashita's second table of content

Contents

Plate 2.1: Norman Klein as the narrator of BTL

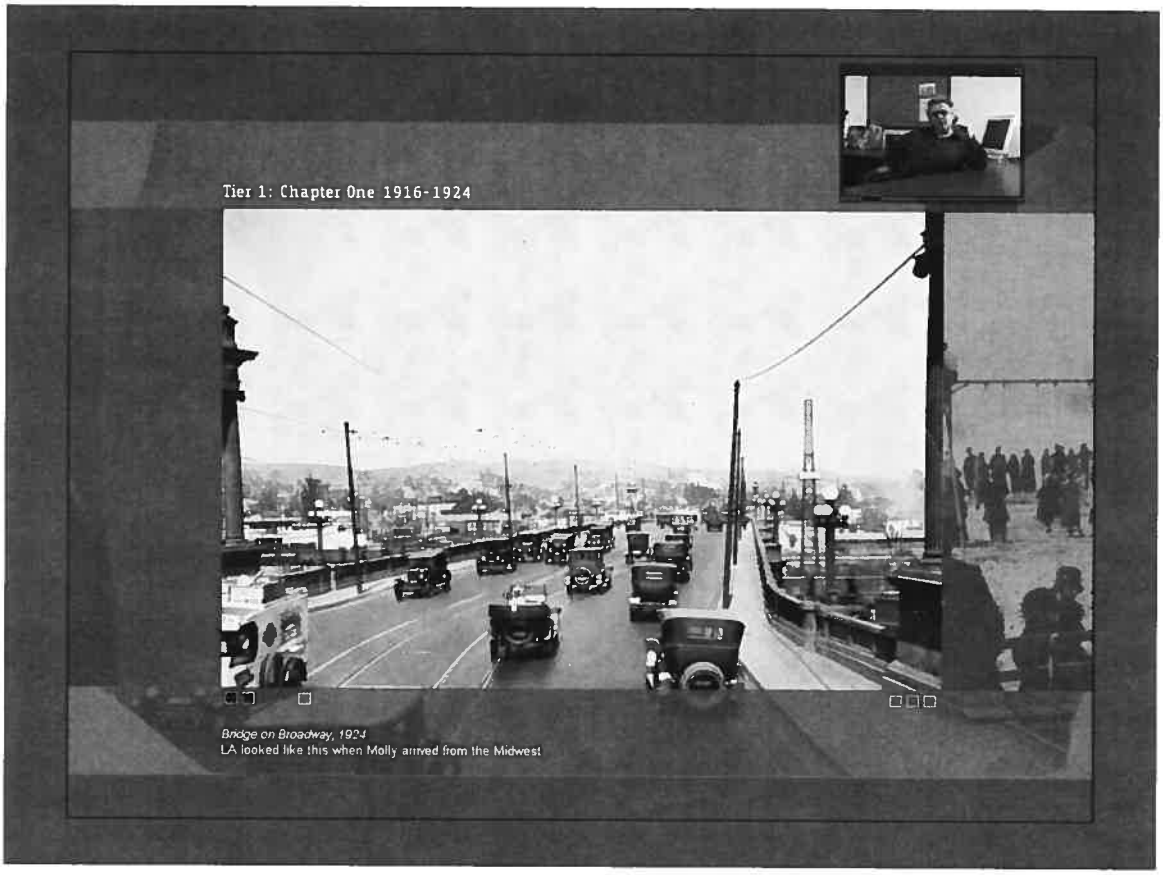


Plate 2.2: Megan E. Abbot's classification in The Street Was Mine

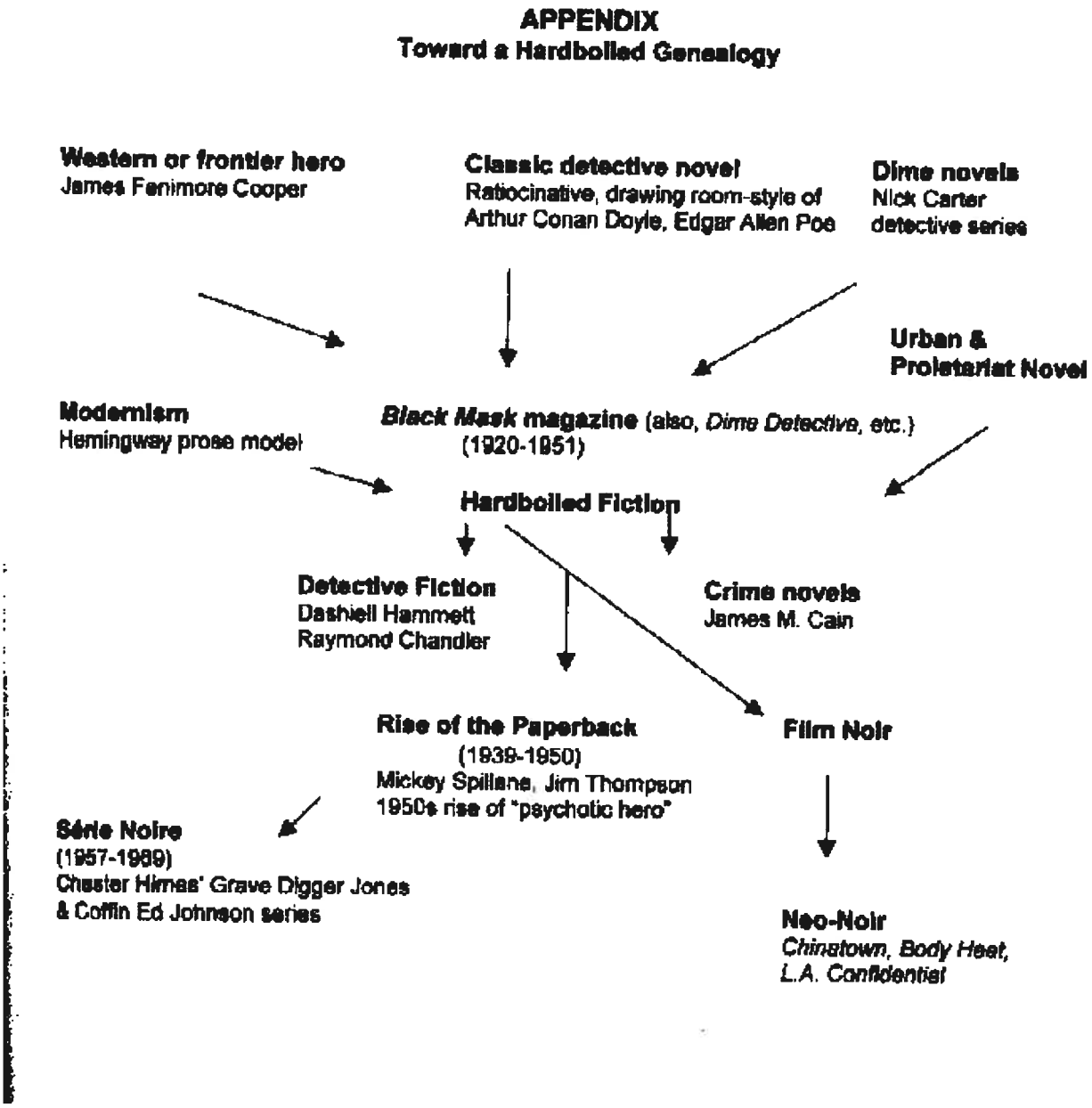
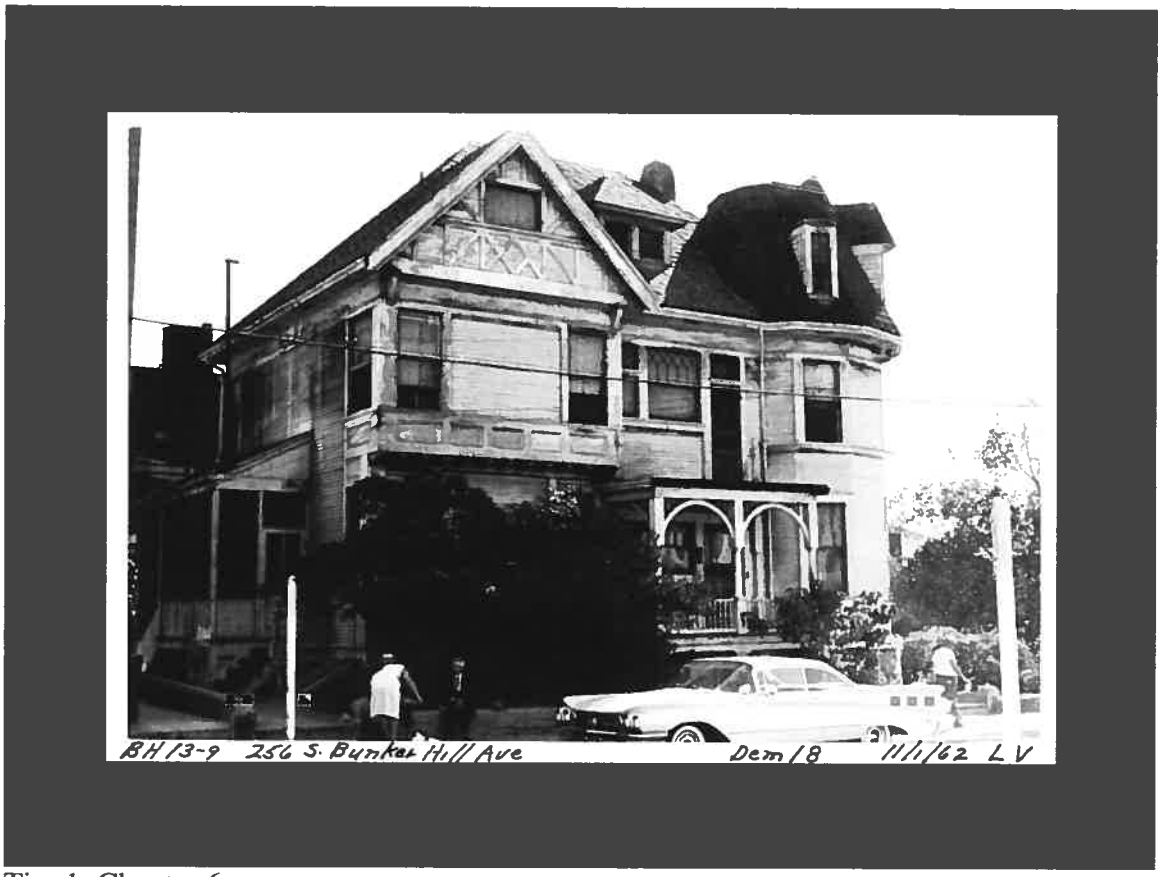


Plate 2.3: Bunker Hill, one of the disappeared neighborhoods of L.A.



Tier 1, Chapter 6

Plate 2.4: Demolition of Bunker Hill

Tier 1,Chapter 6

Plate 2.5 : Renovation and reconstruction

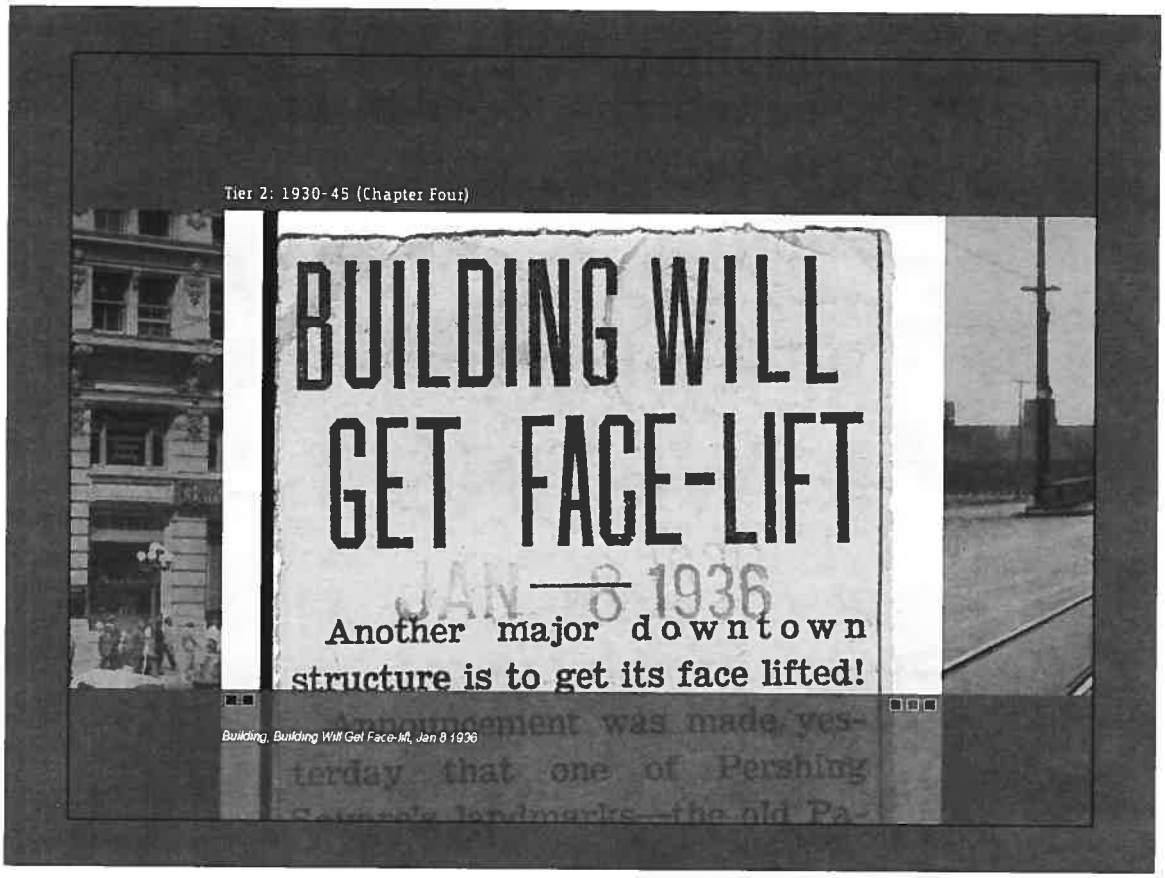
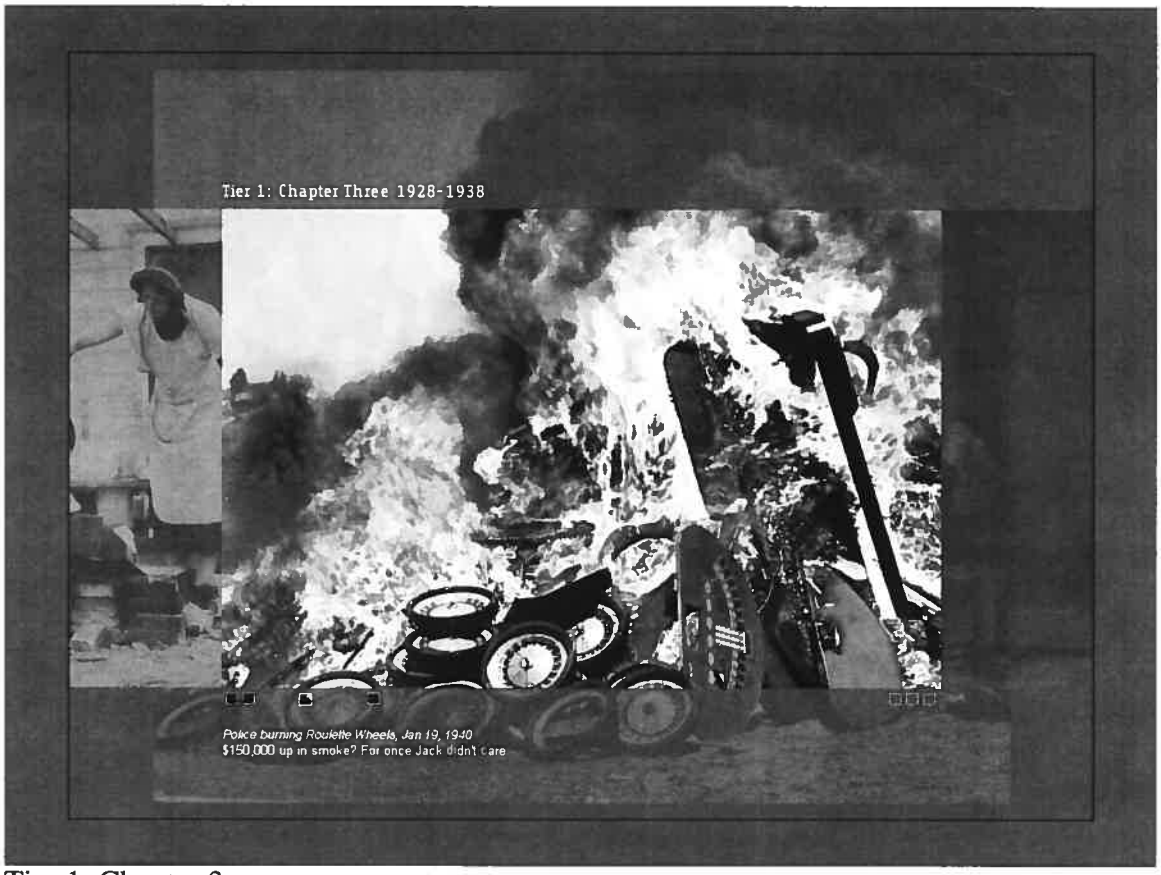


Plate 2.6 : Gamblers at the table

Plate 2.7: Burning roulettes after a police operation



Tier 1, Chapter 3

Plate 2.8 :Dollar Day, 1951

Plate 2.9: One of the clippings about crime and death in L.A.

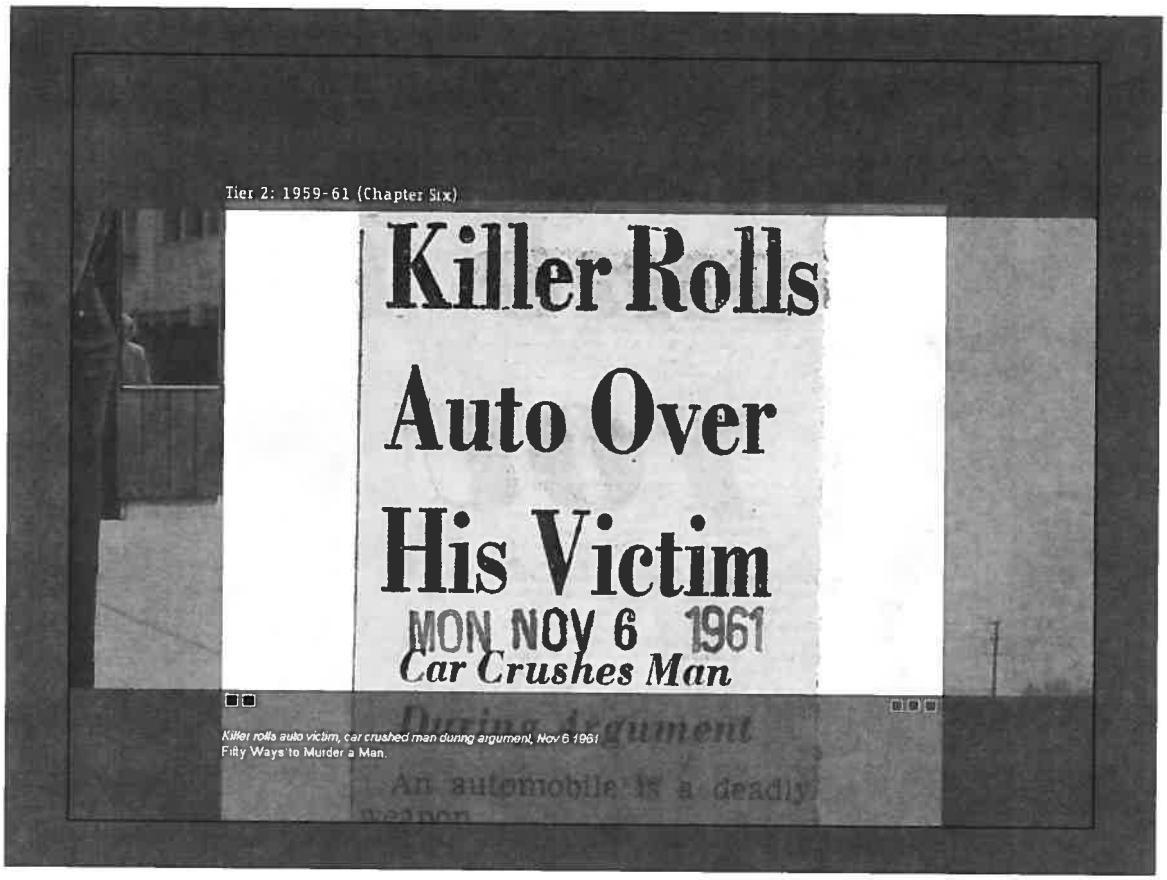


Plate 2.10: *Noir* filmography

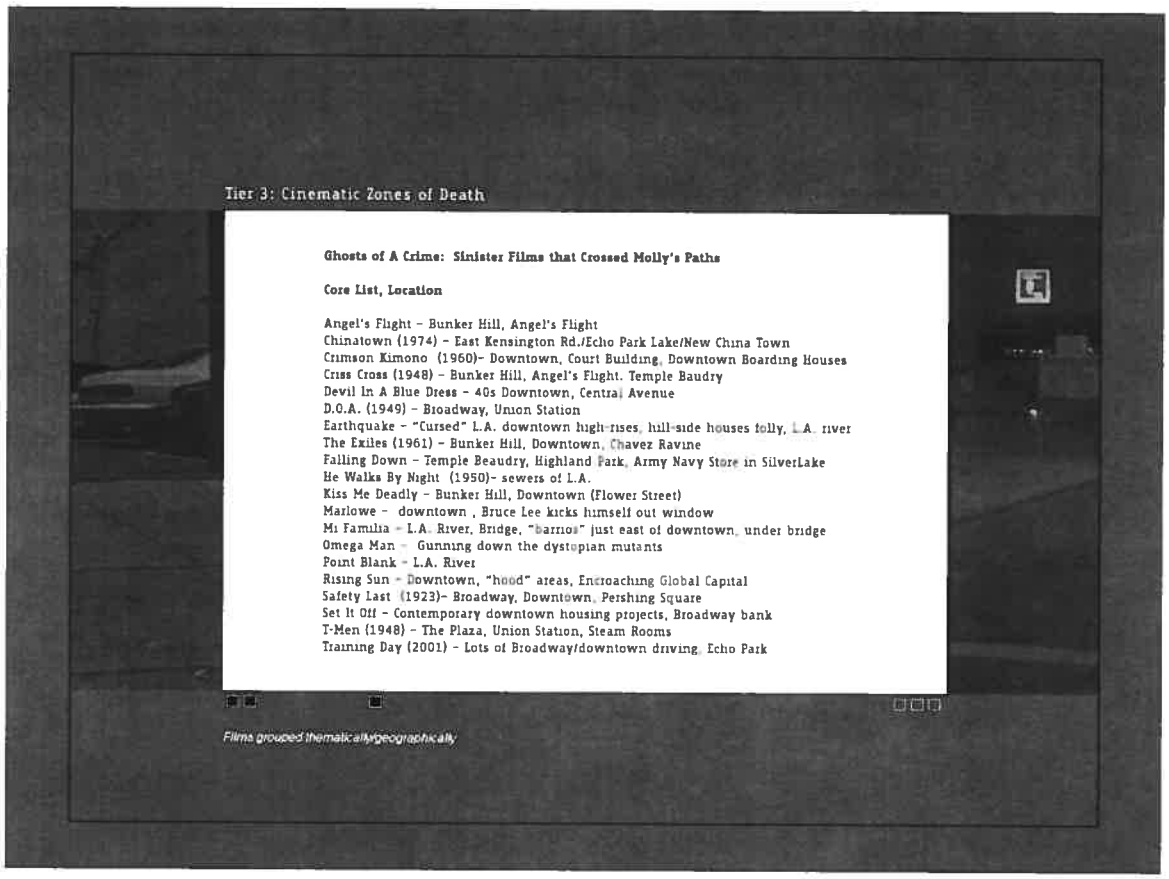
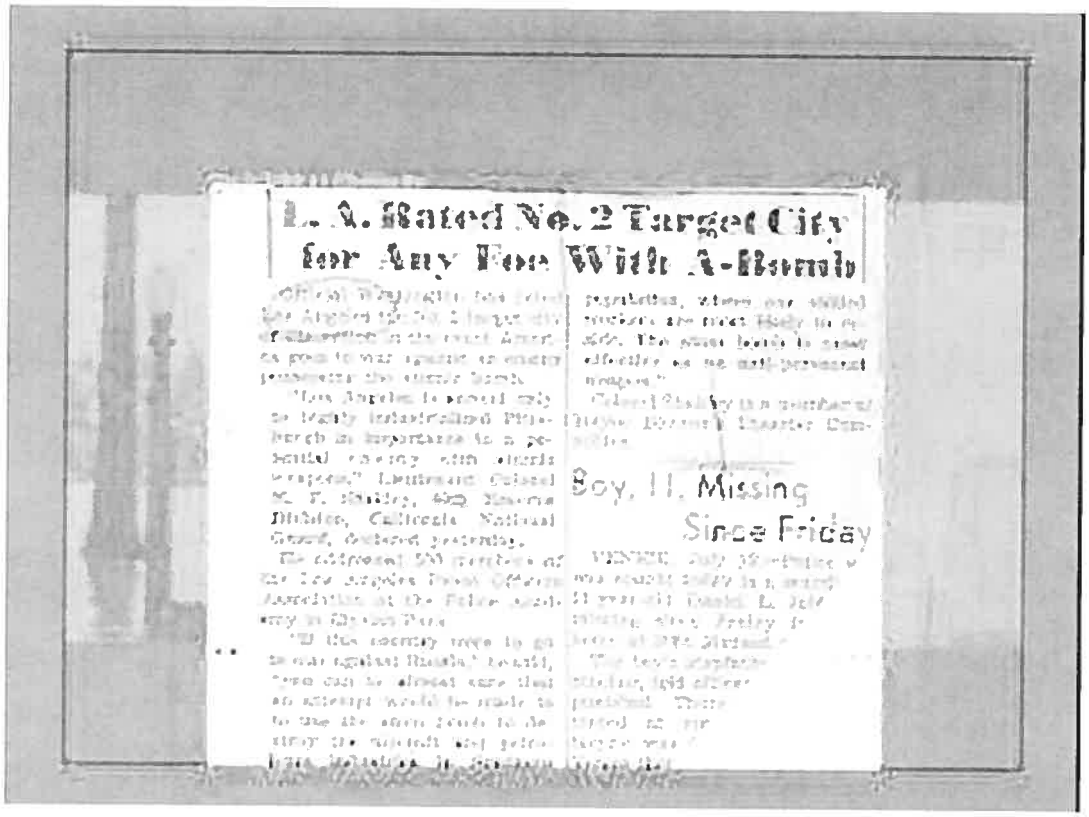


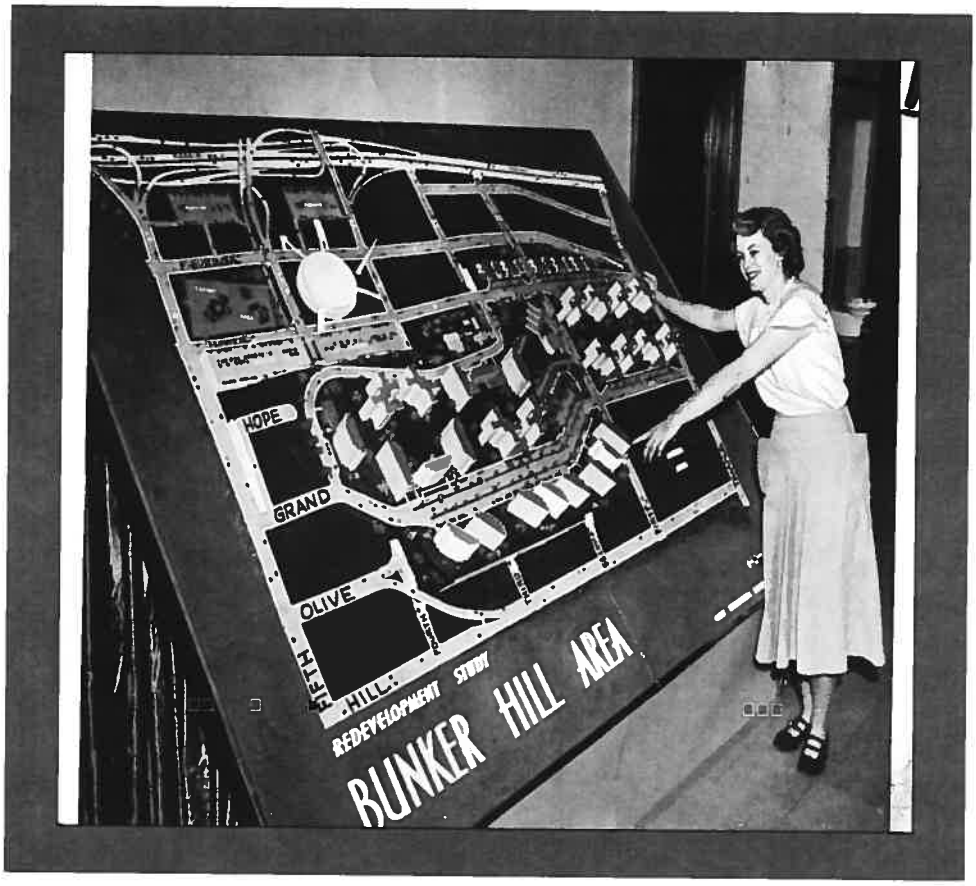
Plate 2.11: Paranoia and the Bomb



L. A. Rated No. 2 Target City
for Any Foe With A-Bomb

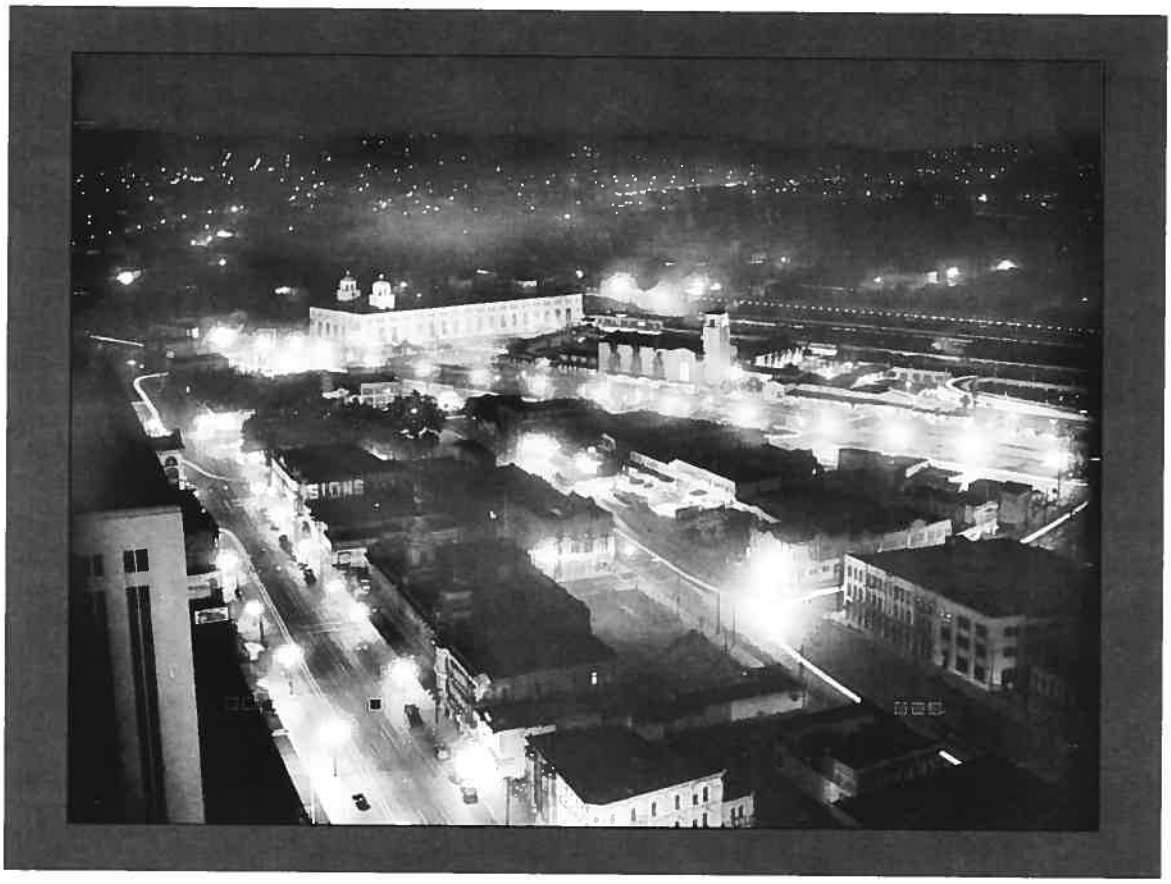
Boy, 11, Missing
Since Friday

Plate 2.12:Reconstruction Plan



Tier 1, Chapter 6

Plate 2.13:Union Station

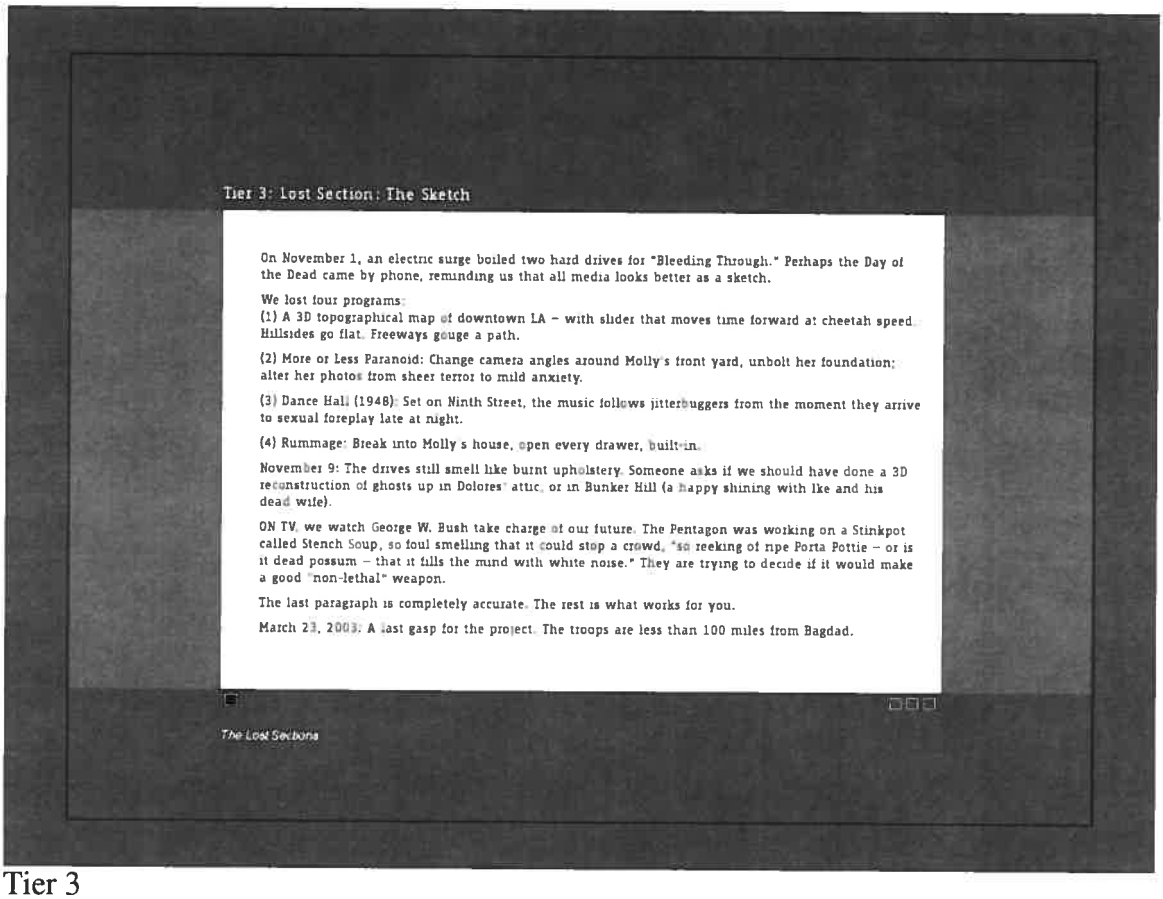


Tier 1 Chapter 7

Plates 2.14, 2.15. 2.16: Jack does Hamlet at Vaudeville, Jack posing as a Jewish gangster, Jack as Ronald Coleman

Theodora Kinder Collection

Plate 2.17: the lost section



Tier 3

Plate 3.1: The Fall of Icarus, by John Wehrle

Plate 3.2: The Freeway Lady by Kent Twitchell

Location: 1255 West Temple St. Los Angeles Prince Hotel, exterior; other views available on the artist's website: http://www.kentsart.8m.com/

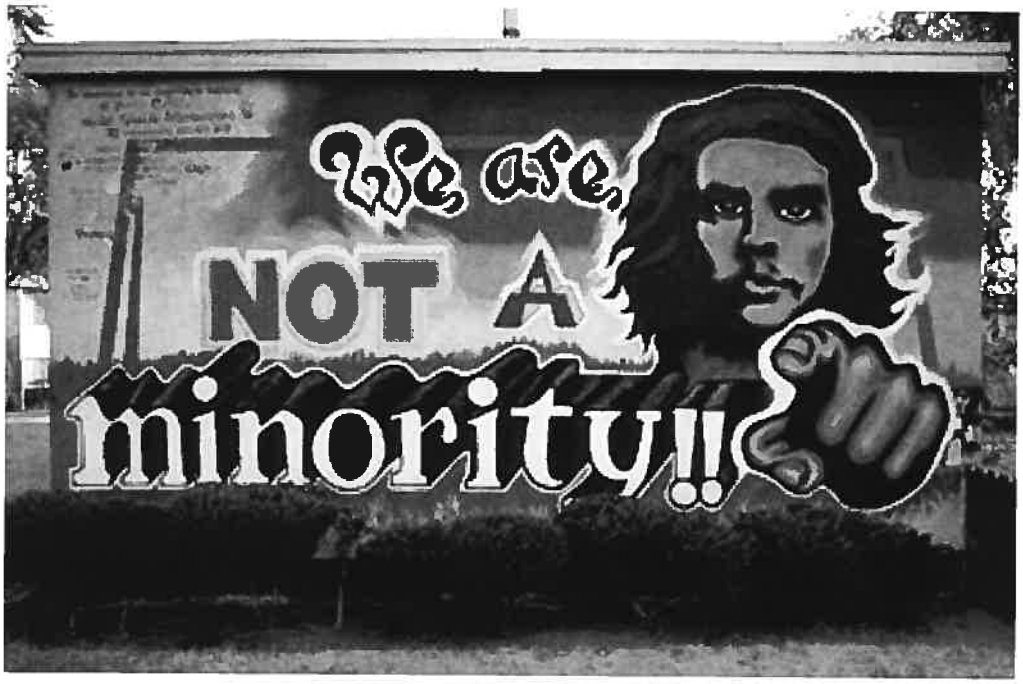
Plate 3.3: Strother Martin Monument by Kent Twitchell

Location: 5200 Fountain Ave at Kingsley Dr.

Plate 3.4: The Holy Trinity with Virgin by Kent Twitchell

Location: Otis Art School (old bldg)
Address: 2401 Wilshire Blvd. (near Carondelet St.)

Plate 3.5: We are not a minority, by El Congreso de Artistas Cosmicos de las Americas de San Diego (Mario Torero, Rocky, El Lton, Zade) 1978



Location: The murals of Estrada Courts
Address: 3217 Olympic Blvd.

Plate 3.6: Quetzalcoatl, by Willie Herron III

Location: Mercado Hidalgo
Address: City Terrace and Miller Ave.

Plate 3.7: The Wall that Cracked Open, by Willie Herron

Location: rear alley
Address: 4125 City Terrace Dr. (near Carmelita Ave.)

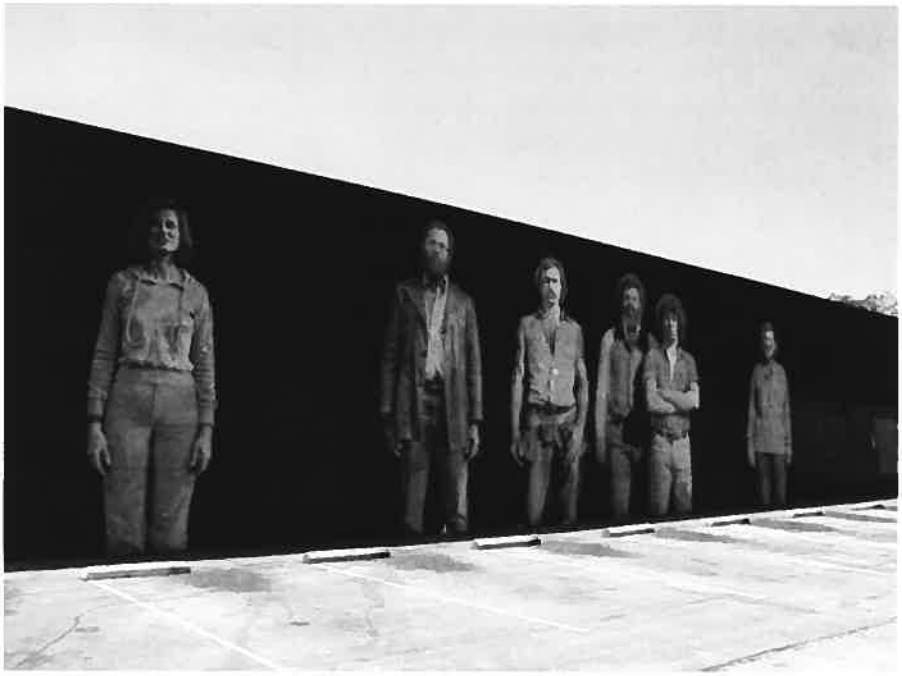
Plate 3.8 : Moratorium. The Black and White Mural, by Willie Herron III and Gronk

Location: Estrada Courts
Address: 3221 Olympic Blvd.

Plates 3.9 and 3.10 : Tapestry of Spirit, supervised by Roderick Sykes and Jacqueline Alexander

Location: St. Elmo Village
Address: 4830 St. Elmo Drive (near La Brea)

Plate 3.11: 6 L.A. Artists, by Kent Twitchell



Location: Employment Development Dept.
Address: 1220 Engracia Ave. (at Cravens Ave.) Torrance

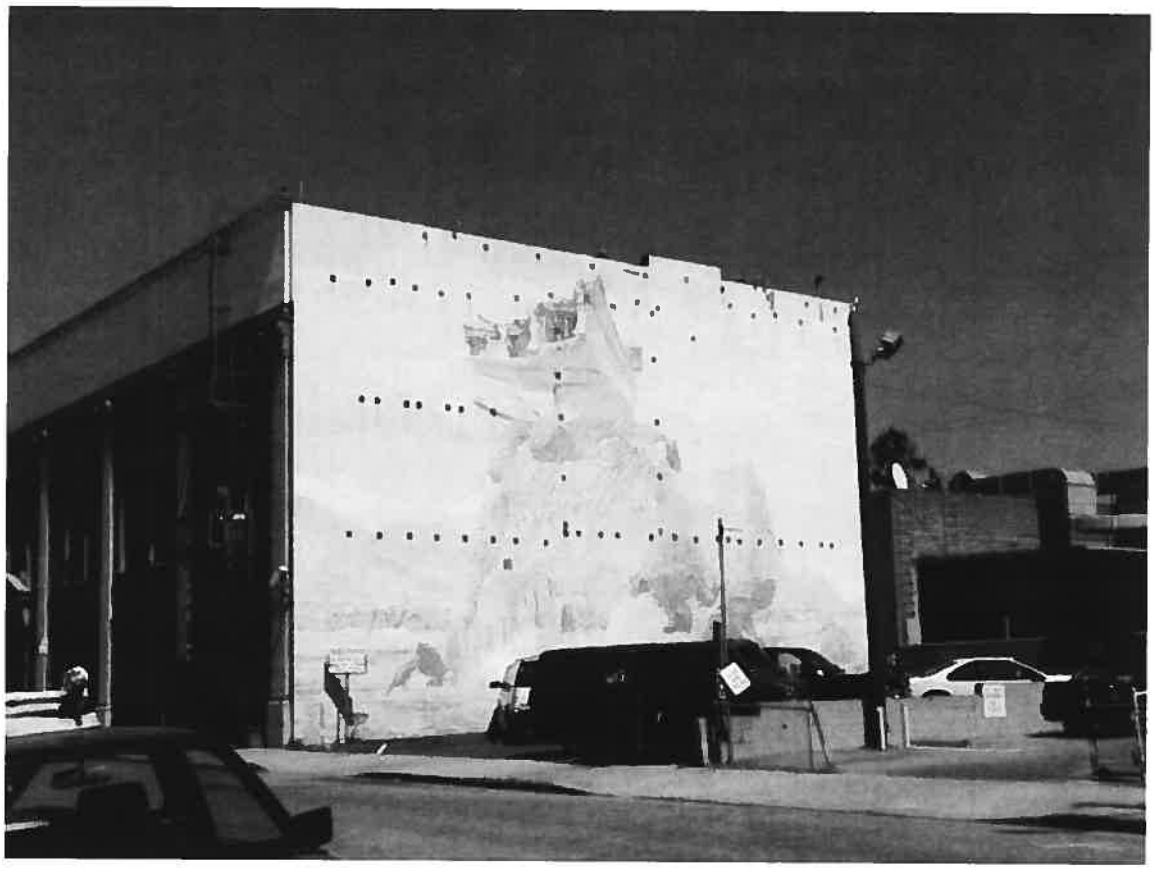
Plate 3.12: The Groom and the Bride by Kent Twitchell

Location: Victor Clothing Company
Address: 240 S Broadway (at 3rd St.)

Plate 3.13: Brandelli's Brig, by Arthur Mortimer

Location: Brandelli's Brig bar
Address: Abbot Kinney Blvd. and Palms Blvd.

Plate 3.14: The Isle of California, by L. A. Fine Arts Squad (Victor Henderson, Terry Schoonhoven, Jim Frazin)



Location: Village Recording Studios
Address: 1616 Butler Ave. (near Santa Monica Blvd)

APPENDIX 2: PARTIAL OUTLINE OF BTLDVD

Preface

Tier 1:
The Phantom of a Novel: Seven Moments

Seven moments that Molly 'claims' to remember the most. She is being interviewed in 1986, probably in her nineties. Asked why only seven, Molly explains: she compares her life to folding and packing an overnight bag. She believes in the old proverb that the trimmer the vessel, the more it can carry.

Chapter One 1916-1924
Molly is Wooed By Her Future Father-in-law. Two Sporting Men. The burning house. Prohibition Downtown.

Chapter Two 1922-1928
Molly's brushes with glamour. Gloria Swanson. Sister Aimee. At home. Movie Riots alongside Chaplin. Slapstick and Echo Park.

- From *Teddy at the Throttle* (Gloria Swanson trys [sic] to hold on)
- L.A. Gas Company excavations, 1926
- Gloria Swanson, Au revoir, not Good-by, Jan. 6 1956
- Sister Aimee Semple Me Pherson, 1934
- From *Circus Today*, 1926
- Marsha Kinder collection
- Theodora Kinder collection
- 25 000 crowd in near-riot at Chaplin opening, Jan. 31, 1931
- Interior
- Broadway Avenue between 5th and 6th Street
- Spring and Main Street
- Orpheum Theatre on Broadway
- Broadway north from the 10th street, 1931
- 7th and Broadway, 1927
- Intersection of Crown Hill Avenue and West 3rd Street, 1929
- Old Brown Derby Restaurant
- Echo Park Lake
- Waiting for a bite, Ocean Park, people fishing from a bridge

Chapter Three 1928-1938
Molly Learns to Sleep like a Cat. The Great Depression with Jack. Gambling Ships and the Flood of '38.

- Slot Machines on the boat, Jun. 19 1940
- Marsha Kinder collection: Jack playing lord and master. After about 10 minutes he was exhausted.
- Marsha Kinder collection: 1931, Jack thinking he is Lord Byron in the snow, with Molly and Nettie on holiday, mostly flirting with Nettie, one too many winks and rubs, even for an in-law. 'I guess you think women are like skis,' Molly finally said, 'one for each foot.'
- Opening of Union Station, April 1932
- From *Pie-Eyed* (1925) with Stan Laurel (3 different clips)
- Will Morrisy and Chorus Girls at the Plantation Café, 1927
- Interior of a Californian bungalow
- From *His Marriage Vows*, 1927, Groom waits in the wrong church for his wedding
- From *the Wrong Mr. Fox*, 1917, Molly was always amazed at how Jack would be taken in by characters like these
- Betting on the horses, the 512 Club, Oct 21, 1931
- From *Super-Hooper-Dyne-Lizzies*, 1925
- Hill Street, Easter Building in the background
- Broadway at Spring Street
- South Pasadena, ASP Market
- Figueroa, South Spruce Street, Nov. 1938
- Long Beach earthquake, Salvation army, 1933, women serving food
- Amnesia victim, 1936

Chapter four 1936
Showing skin on the beach. Jack's aching back. Molly discovers that her legs are holding back better than most women her age.

Chapter Five 1948
Feeding the Creature with Two Heads. Dollar Day and the City of Circulation.

Chapter Six 1959-1961
Jack scratches out a murder in his diary. A life of erasures on Bunker Hill. Turning gray downtown.

Chapter Seven 1961-1973
Criminal acts that Molly has supported over the years, in order to sleep with a good conscience. Why the coils of her bed never made any noise on to the street. Molly of no bloom. Finally, by 1986, Molly loses track of sunrise from sunset.

Tier 2:
The Writer's Backstory

Gathering characters and incidents, to fill in the novel or film. Molly may be the heroine in a murder story, but she will still shows no sign of noir guilt. Her first husband Jack is quite the opposite. The fragrance of Molly's world.

1916-1930 (Chapter One and Two)
Crawling back home before sunrise, while Molly sleeps like a cat.
(Ike, Jack, Nettie, Gloria, Chaplin, Sister Aimee)

1930-45 (Chapter Four)
The Beginning of the End Downtown
(Dolores, Jack)

1948-59 (Chapter Five)
One City Too Many, Crossing town
(Walt, Jack)

1959-61 (Chapter Six)
Collective Paranoias
(Jack, Third Man, Walt)

1961-73 (Chapter Seven)
Clues to Other Crimes
(Walt's Daughter, Molly's workers, Third Man, new criminal customers)

Tier 3:
Excavation: Digging behind the story and its locale

The writer has enough backstory to manage the opening scene. But for an instant, the pleasure of researching as an end in itself seems much richer than making plot points, storyboards, movie setups. Why give up feeling so completely inhabited? The 'making of' has become a picaresque, like the ancient story of the bear who accidentally swallowed all things, and refused to exhale.

<u>People Molly Never Met But Would Make Good Characters in Her Story</u>
The interview often turns into anecdote for a subplot.

- Marshall Wright, The Zoot Suits
- Bill Shishima, Japanese-Americans
- Dorothy Woods, Julius Schulman, On Sister Aimee
- Theodora Kinder, Real Estate
- Theodora Kinder, Murders
- Julius Schulman, The Zoot Suits and Mayor Shaw
- Norman Klein, On first arriving in L.A.
- Theodora Kinder, Jim Fong, Bill Shishima, Shopping
- Jim Fong, the advent of television
- Arnett Hartfield, Downtown Theaters
- Bill Shishima, Internment
- Bill Shishima, On Mexican friends
- Bob Pramenko, Grand Central Market
- Norman Klein, What Molly never noticed or forgot of L.A's story
- Julius Schulman, The bubonic plague and Chavez Ravine
- Esther Raucher, Communist sympathizers
- Bill Shishima, Chavez Ravine
- Dorothy Woods, High School
- Bill Shishima, Dec.7th 1941
- Marshall Wright, Police
- Arnett Hartfield, On segregation
- Julius Schulman, Brooklyn Avenue
- Esther Raucher, Fear of Police
- Georja Skinner, Boyle Heights and the Christmas House
- Catalina Gonzales, Dancing at Olvera Street
- Bob Pramenko, Smog
- Norman Klein, Writing a story as a novel
- Marshall Wright, Julius Schulman, Bunker Hill

Collective Dissolve: Bunker Hill
The violation of Bunker Hill spans every character's story.

What Molly Barley Noticed or Managed to Forget
Political shocks that Molly blissfully ignored, no matter how close they came.

Cinematic Zones of Death
Hundreds of movie murders within a three-mile radius of Molly's house.

Mapping the Unfindable
Maps of the city and something!!.

Lost Section: The Sketch
The pleasures of calamity.