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Bio

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Title: The Production of Space in the Franchise City Film

Abstract:

This article examines the production of space (Lefebvre) in the franchise *Cities of Love* in the context of the history of the city film, from the street film through the city symphony, the genre-inflected city (noir and sci fi), nouvelle vague films, the global city film, the transnational ghetto film to the franchise city film. Unlike the early city film, which not only emphasized the surface aspects of modernity but also offered a critique of modernity, the franchise city film adopts the rhetoric of globalization (simultaneity, coincidence, and multiplicity) without providing a similar critique of postmodernity and globalization. It denies the real effects of globalization (e.g. the increasing significance of ‘any-space-whatever’ (Deleuze) in global cities like Paris and New York) and insists on the embeddedness of stories in two of the world’s global cities that are defined precisely by their exposure to various processes of disembedding and to the transnational attenuation of local space.

The Cinematic City

The early city film established the city as a quintessentially modern space: it “changed visual perception and yielded new narrative forms and possibilities for aesthetic representation: abstract shapes and compositions, episodic narratives, and cinematic montage express the experience of urban modernity” (Mennel, 2008, p.23). Through their emphasis on oversized architecture, their celebration of machinery, and their reduction of humans to orderly masses, early city films like *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, *The Last Laugh*, *The Joyless Street*, *The Street*, *Metropolis*, *M*, *People on Sunday*, “fetishize[d] the surface aspects of modernity” (p.44) and encouraged the association of the city with “crime, anonymity, a loosening of morality, unemployment, and class struggle on the one hand, and movement, speed, entertainment, and liberated erotics on the other hand” (p.23). A few decades later, film noir reworked the Weimar city film by treating real locations as a theatrical stage lit with heavy expressionistic lighting, producing an effect of documentary realism *and* high artificiality. Decidedly ‘un-American’ in its pessimistic overtones, film noir reinforced the city’s association with “alienation, isolation, danger, moral decay, and a suppressed but very present sexuality” (p.49). The end of WW2 gave rise to a new film language of “the devastated city” (Italian Neo-realism): “the film city now began to emanate an aura of precarious insubstantiality—[its] forms infinitely subject to amendment or even cancellation” (Barber, 2002, p.57-58).

In the last few decades, the onset of the digital has brought to completion the trend toward urban and corporeal disappearance that began at the end of WW2. For instance, in opposition to earlier science fiction film, which associated the city with progress and the future, recent science fiction films present the city as derelict, a remnant from the past rather than a harbinger of the future. In what Joshua Clover calls ‘edge of the construct films’ (e.g. *Dark City*) the city belongs to the past and it is now technology and virtual reality that are associated with the future: the city becomes a relic of the past, an object one can experience only nostalgically from the point of view of virtual reality. As new technologies reveal ‘the edges of the construct’ they draw attention to the city’s growing obsolescence (Mennel, 2008, p.131). The trend to deterritorialization reached its apogee in the rise of the transnational/global city film (*Code Unknown* (Paris), *Dirty Pretty Things* (London), *Crossing Over* (L.A)), the transnational ghetto film (‘glocal cinema,’ e.g. the favela and banlieue film), and what I call ‘the franchise city film’ (*Cities of Love*).

In *Cities in a World Economy* (1994) Saskia Sassen argues that a new geography of centrality and marginality is now in place, one based on centrality/marginality between cities and centrality/marginality within cities, rather than between and within nations or regions; accordingly, she proposes a new typology of global, transnational and subnational cities. In *The Informational City* (1989) and *The Network Society* (1996) Manuel Castells observes that in a world that is increasingly defined by ‘flow’ (the flow of information, transnational capital, and people) the notion of ‘place’—nation, city, neighbourhood, or street—has become obsolete. This process of deterritorialization is best exemplified by the emergence of *the espace quelconque*—what Deleuze calls, in the context of post-WW2 cinema, ‘any-space-whatever’—the shopping mall, the hotel lobby, the corporate headquarters, the airport terminal, the multiplex cinema.

The franchise city film ignores all of these developments: it seeks to distract us from the spatial, temporal, national and transnational anxieties brought about by deterritorialization and to disguise the negative effects of globalization on human relationships.

The Production of Space

In *The Production of Space* (1974) Lefebvre argues that social space is a social product: social relations are translated into material and symbolic spatial relations. To talk about ‘the production’ of space does not mean to provide an inventory of space: Lefebvre distances himself both from studies that enumerate or merely describe space in terms of its ‘contents’ and from critical approaches, such as French structuralism and deconstruction, which “promote the basic sophistry whereby the philosophic-epistemological notion of space is fetishized and the mental realm comes to envelop the social and physical ones” (p.5). Lefebvre’s study of space is structured around the “perceived-conceived-lived” triad: the spatial practice of a society (the perceived), its representations of space (the conceived), and its representational spaces (the lived) (p.38-39). Representations of space are abstract, unlike representational spaces, which “have an affective kernel” (p.42) and “need obey no rules of consistency or cohesiveness. Ideally, the spatial practice, representations of space and representational spaces of a society are interconnected; however, Lefebvre argues that starting with the introduction of linear perspective, which produced “a homogenous, clearly demarcated space complete with horizon and vanishing point” (p.79), we have been witnessing the gradual subordination of lived space (representational space) to conceived space (representation of space). The subordination of lived

space to conceived space can be observed in the transition from the social space of the aristocracy to the significantly different social space of the bourgeoisie: “The facade of the bourgeois home is] designed both to be looked at and to provide a point of vantage. [...] *The outside is the only thing that matters: what one sees and what is seen* (p. 315). An increasing predominance of visualization is reflected, as well, in neo-capitalist society’s ‘abstract space’, which is “looked at passively and from a distance, without being lived directly. What is seen is not space, but *an image of space*: space becomes ‘intelligible’ to the eye, but only to the eye. Cinema plays an important role in the “abstraction of space” inasmuch as cinema works through fragmentation (of space) and abstraction (of lived time).

Drawing upon Lefebvre’s critique of the subordination of representational spaces to representations of space, theorists like Saskia Sassen and Manuel Castells have suggested that globalization has made the notion of ‘place’ obsolete and reduced the city to a mere sign. However, in *The Imaginative Structure of the City* (2003) sociologist Alan Blum seriously questions claims about the city’s growing obsolescence by arguing, against Lefebvre, that the visual—‘seeing and being seen’—is, in fact, necessary to the production of social space. For Blum, one of the signs of the city’s vitality—of the city as a social space—is its variety of ‘scenes’: “settings in which theatricality is intensified” (p.165). The scene has an invariably *local* character, combining instrumental with ceremonial elements: it fulfills a particular function (e.g. a restaurant) but it also *theatricalizes* and eroticizes a specific private experience (eating) by making it public: the scene “is an occasion for seeing and being seen and, so, for doing seeing and being seen” (p.171). Contrary to Lefebvre, Blum identifies the visual (the scene) as a pre-condition for the production of social space/collective life insofar as it embodies a collective desire to *represent* (visualize) shared intimacy. Blum’s ‘redemption’ of the visual from a sign of the increasing abstraction of space marking the decline of social space (Lefebvre) to an element constitutive of the essentially *theatrical* or *spectacular* nature of social space/collective life is also evident in his rethinking of another feature of urban life, its anonymity:

What is true of the city is the significance of its insignificance, the point of its drift, the integrity of its anonymity. [...] It is the promise of action that provides eventlessness with its dramatic character of anonymity. [...] The eventlessness of the city is endowed with drama through its connection with the image of its overcoming in action that makes urban

eventlessness a *spectacle* of anonymity rather than an *experience* of boredom” (p.282, 286).

Social space is *theatrical* (insofar as it consists of ‘*scenes*’) and spectacular (insofar as the *anonymity* and *eventlessness* of urban life appear as a *spectacle* to the inhabitant of the city). For Blum, seeing and being seen constitutes the contingency and freedom of social space/collective life rather than its repression: “In part, the fear of the street is the fear for the risk of watching and being watched, of encountering the contingent and the unknown, for the street, when engaged strongly, is a constant experiment with anonymity and heterogeneity released by the contingency of viewing and coming to view in ways that are incalculable” (p. 272).

Blum’s theoretical ‘project of redemption’ finds its cinematic equivalent in ‘the franchise city film’. In the face of the homogenizing effects of globalization the franchise city film, which exemplifies Blum’s revisionist account of the notion of ‘place’ in the age of globalization, resurrects the myth of the glocal city in which urban life is not alienated/alienating but deeply embedded in personal and collective memory and imagination. Unlike the early city film, which not only emphasized the surface aspects of modernity but also offered a critique of modernity, the franchise city film adopts the rhetoric of globalization (simultaneity, coincidence, and multiplicity) without providing a similar critique of postmodernity and globalization. On the contrary, it insists on the embeddedness of stories in two of the world’s global cities—Paris and New York—defined precisely by their exposure to various processes of disembedding and to the transnational attenuation of local space.

The Nouvelle Vague City: *Paris vu par*

It is instructive to compare the first instalment in the *Cities of Love* franchise to an early predecessor, the 1965 portmanteau film *Paris vu par*. The representation of Paris in the films of the Nouvelle Vague should be considered in the context of contemporary changes in production conditions and aesthetic preferences, both of which were put at the service of the same goal, *authenticity* (cinematic, intellectual, and moral), which manifested itself in a fusion of fiction and documentary. Nouvelle Vague films combined two conflicting trends to *truthfulness* and to *intentional artifice in the name of truthfulness* (foregrounding the artificiality of the medium in an attempt to reinvigorate film language). The Nouvelle Vague city comes close to Lefebvre’s

description of a representational space, “space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’. [...] It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects. Thus representational spaces may be said...to tend towards more or less coherent systems of *non-verbal symbols and signs*” (p.39). One of the features that distinguished the Nouvelle Vague from the French ‘cinema of quality’ was precisely the abandonment of the traditional script based on a literary source, and the transformation of cinema into a kind of language: *non-verbal* and *uncodifiable*. The knowledge of the city Nouvelle Vague directors brought to their films was that of the inhabitant and user, the private sociologist’s or the private detective’s intimate familiarity with the well known and lesser known parts of the metropolis, rather than the knowledge of the urban planner. Through their self-reflexivity and their use of experimental, modernist techniques, these films deconstructed the language of representation on which previous images of the city had relied and offered *a new representation of the city as a representational space* that transcends verbal and intellectual codes.

Paris vu par consists of six short films, each set in a different arrondissement: Claude Chabrol (La Murette), Jean Douchet (Saint-Germain-des-Près), Jean-Luc Godard (Montparnasse-Levallois), Jean-Daniel Pollet (Rue Saint-Denis), Eric Rohmer (Place de l’Étoile), and Jean Rouch (Gare du Nord). According to Barbara Mennel (2008), in the films of the Nouvelle Vague “the city, or more precisely the neighbourhood, appears as the setting for affective relationships substituting for conventional family structures: coffee-houses, bars, and the street become home” for the young protagonists. [...] Urban sites, such as streets, movie theatres, and arcades” contrast with interior spaces which are often presented as limited and oppressive (p.67-68). This is certainly true of most of the segments: in “St. German” interior space (the apartment) is associated with an inauthentic, deceptive and emotionally abusive relationship; in “Gare du Nord” the married couple’s apartment is also the site of an unfulfilling relationship which is contrasted with the appealing romance the protagonist finds in the street; in “La Murette” the family apartment is the site of constant fights and an emotionally abusive family relationships; in “Montparnasse-Levallois” the artist and the car mechanic studios’ are the site of romantic confusion and betrayal. “Rue de St. Denis” is the only exception inasmuch as it presents the interior space of the client’s apartment as a place where what starts out as a business transaction is transformed into a family-style dinner.

Referring to Simmel's idea that "the city is not a spatial entity which entails sociological characteristics but a sociological entity that is formed spatially" (Simmel qtd. in Sorlin, p. 25), Pierre Sorlin (2005) notes that whereas American cinema "depicts urban space as an autonomous entity, and then confronts it with its inhabitants," in "most European films cities do not exist by themselves, they are merely a setting and a stock of potential characters. [...] Towns gain life from the expansion of human exchanges; they are nothing but the relationships that exist between individuals" (p.35).¹ The image of Paris that emerges from *Paris vu par* is precisely that, a sociological entity formed spatially: it is not the pure physical spaces where the action is set but rather the relationships between characters that produces the social space of the city. Each segment undermines the conventional associations we have about this particular part of the city. "Saint-Germain-des-Pres" begins with a serious, self-conscious presentation of St. Germain as rich in artistic and intellectual history only to undercut the idealized image we have of that arrondissement by telling a conventional story about emotional and sexual manipulation. "Gare du Nord" opens on a mundane looking arrondissement where one hardly expects something as surreal as the very poorly motivated suicide in the second part of this segment. "Rue St. Denis" appears to tell precisely the type of story we associate with this arrondissement—a story about a prostitute—but then undercuts our expectations by showing the prostitute and her client engage in a familiar, almost marriage-like relationship. "Place de l'Etoile" is set near one of the symbols of Paris, Arc de Triomphe, but the story that unfolds there, with all its escalating absurdity and ridiculousness, has none of the pomposity and tourist appeal of the place.

The Franchise City, part 1: *Paris, je t'aime*

As we already saw, Blum maintains, in opposition to Saskia Sassen and Manuel Castells, that the notion of 'place' is *not* obsolete. Accordingly, he redefines the relationship between the global and the local, the periphery and the center, the public and the private to demonstrate that the city and collective life are not dead, and that neither is the communal subject. Nevertheless, *Paris, je t'aime* exemplifies the failure of Blum's revisionist critique of Lefebvre, which seeks to redeem the city from claims about its obsolescence by redeeming the negative features of urban experience in the age of globalization.

First, to counter the opposition of the local and the global, Blum argues that "the city is...not a local site in contrast to some global order" but a site at which the tension integral to the

very notion of locality—the tension between center and periphery—comes fully into view (p.89). The segments in *Paris, je t'aime* are set in Monmartre, Quais de Seine, Le Marais, Tuileries, Porte de Choisy, Bastille, Place de Victoires, 16th arrondissement, Eiffel tower, Park Monseau, Quartier des Enfant Rouges, Place des Fetes, Pigale, Pierre Lachaise, Faubourg Saint Demi, Quartier Latin, and 14th arrondissement. Although some of these are not as central or recognizable as others, they more or less represent the city of Paris we all know from guide books, films, and literature. Missing from the picture is the city's periphery, e.g. the French ghettos we saw in *La Haine*. But is a center without a periphery still a center? If locality is defined in terms of a tension between the local and the global, reproduced within the local as a tension between the center and the periphery—as Blum argues—the franchise city of Paris, a homogenous, periphery-less city untarnished by any tension between center and periphery, *does not* qualify as a 'locality'.

Second, Blum argues against those who point to the decline of the city and of collective life as a sign that the contemporary urban experience is fundamentally alienated. The fact that urban experience is alienated, writes Blum, does not make it less authentic or significant since “the expression of alienation is one of the voices of the city, one of the ways in which the city is experienced in modern life as a kind of place. The idea of the city as alienated is one part of the lived experience of the city” (p.66). Just as “indeterminacy suggests not the absence of form (the void), but the definitive form of social relationship that is the joint and reciprocal action(s) of engaging ambiguity” (p.66) so, Blum asserts, alienation is not the absence or decline of collective life but its very substratum! Blum redeems *alienation from lived experience* into a particular *type of lived experience*. Despite the downbeat ending, the majority of the segments in *Paris, je t'aime* are meant to reassure us that romantic misunderstandings, loss, despair, and unrequited love are easy to endure merely because they happen in a beautiful city like Paris. With the exception of the 16th and 14th arrondissement segments, all other stories produce a social space in which the ‘universal power of love’ appears as the lingua franca and the panacea for all types of miscommunication and alienation, from romantic, racial and religious to linguistic and national: estranged lovers are reunited, lovers pretending to be in love actually fall in love, lovers who appear to have fallen out of love find out that they have been in love all along, frustrated lovers who are looking for someone to fall in love with find the object of desire serendipitously, and so on. The same relationships—love, frustration, abandonment, nostalgia, fear, despair—are

replayed with different social actors who are chosen to represent a (narrow) range of gender, race, ethnicity and social class. The universality of the theme, love, and its simplistic treatment produces an equally simplistic, vague social space we recognize as “Paris” because we have at our disposal, before watching the film, the symbolic map of this ‘place.’ Paris remains a non-space: neither a spatial entity that entails sociological characteristics nor a sociological entity formed spatially but merely a conceptual entity, whose sociological and spatial characteristics remain in the service of the concept of romance.

Third, Blum argues that one of the distinguishing characteristics of the city is its variety of ‘scenes’, “settings in which theatricality is intensified” (p.165). Cities like Paris and New York are marked by the constant rise and fall of scenes, a sign of their continual regeneration and rebirth: “The presence of scenes, despite their mortality, means that the city continuously breeds the collective desire to represent shared intimacy in ways that are situated as special, particular, and exclusive” (p.183). Having associated the scene with a sense of shared intimacy and with collective life, Blum adds: “[t]hat this [this shared intimacy] may never materialize is not important if we understand the scene of the city as the site of the dream: the city is a scene by virtue of the promise it offers for its place to be a site of mutual recognition” (p.185). Just as he redeemed alienation as the substratum of collective life, rather than its decline, now Blum suggests, counter-intuitively, that the reality of collective life is irrelevant, because all that matters is the *promise*—the *idea(l)*—of collective life. The city is defined by the privileged position occupied by the present moment and the present moment is experienced as a (virtual) adventure, as the sheer promise of, or belief in, the possibility for something of social significance happening. In accordance with his project of redemption, Blum re-reads Simmel ‘against the grain’: “Such observations certainly tie into Simmel’s discussion of the blasé attitude of the metropolis...but in an altogether different way than typically supposed. Instead of standing for the alienation of the metropolis, why not conceive of the *indifference to the spectacle of diversity* to be the city’s way of letting the scene be, that is, of resisting the temptations of either condemning or embracing it mindlessly” (186, my italics). However, none of the segments in *Paris, je t’aime* represent public spaces that embody shared intimacy. None explore shared practices that are enjoyable simply by virtue of being shared and are thus transformed into social ceremonies. The film attempts to represent Paris as a diverse, multicultural place but only in one segment, Le Marais, do we witness characters in the film respond to the diversity of the social

space they find themselves in. The rest of the film remains “indifferent to the spectacle of diversity.” The stories in *Paris, je t’aime* are problem, genre, or style driven, rather than being embedded in a particular arrondissement or city. Inasmuch as every segment is supposed to serve merely as an illustration of a specific social problem (e.g. the race/religion segment), genre (e.g. the zombie segment), or filmmaking style (e.g. Tywker’s segment), the film takes place in ‘any-space-whatever’.

The Franchise City, part 2: *New York, I Love You*

The function of New York in early city films was ‘New York as actual location’. The earliest city films (1899-1902) were single panoramic shots emphasizing the height of New York buildings and the sheer expanse of the city: vertical pans from the lower depths of the city canyons up to the roof of the tallest buildings followed by horizontal pans; static shots of busy streets conveying the energy of urban life; long takes, taken from moving boats, of the decks and piers near Battery Park. Many early films experimented with visual tricks or ‘special effects’ establishing a close association between the city and cinematic technology. In Edwin Porter’s 1905 *Coney Island at Night* the spectacular illuminations of Dreamland and Luna Park, standing out against a pitch black backdrop, create a beautiful, abstract, ethereal image of pulsating lights that resembles a drawing. *Manhatta* (1920), the first consciously produced avant-garde American film, and a model for subsequent city films, was advertised as a New York ‘scenic’ of lower Manhattan. Interspersed throughout the film are Whitmanesque intertitles: “City of the world (for all races are here)”; “City of tall facades of marble and iron.” The film dramatizes the sublimity of this sublime yet man-made city of steel and iron by continually returning to images of its construction and the workers engaged in it. The camera foregrounds the super-human scale of the city: we rarely see shots taken from a grounded, human perspective. Through graphic blocking and chiaroscuro lighting New York emerges as a conglomerate of crowds and architectural shapes, a city of intersecting lines, shapes, surface, and light. Even when the shots represent mundane things (people, boats, buildings) the overall effect is painterly and abstract.

In these early films New York had not yet frozen into a limited number of iconic (cliché) views. No specific part or view of the city was privileged as a symbol of the quintessential “New York”; instead, we see a great variety of sights and points of view, each considered as representative as the others. As we advance chronologically, we witness the evolution of film

technology and film techniques: from street level shots to more dramatic shots from above or below, from static to travelling shots. These early shorts seek to map the city in terms of breadth and height rather than to capture a specifically ‘New York’ experience, to tell a specifically ‘New York story’ or to introduce us to specifically ‘New York’ social types. What characterizes these films is a fascination with the sheer look of the city, its horizontal and vertical coordinates.

In the 1930s the camera continued to emphasize the visual look of the metropolis but it also began to show interest in the people inhabiting the city. In *Manhattan Medley* (1931) the familiar fascination with the sheer scale and size of the city begins to be supplemented by more intimate observations of a wide range of human activities and encounters shot from a decidedly human point of view. A new kind of anthropological interest in the life of regular New Yorkers, not just in the abstract beauty of the metropolis, becomes evident as the high angle shots of traffic and crowds that dissolve the city into an intricate play of geometric shapes and light give way to street level shots of random little ‘events’ and facial expressions, the city’s ‘optical unconscious’. The film strives to provide a representative cross-section of the city: cabaret dancing girls, Broadway dancers, white upper class couples, and African-American couples. Jay Leyda’s 1931 *A Bronx Morning*, a city symphony on an intimate scale, focuses on one specific New York borough and its inhabitants and exploring the poetry of everyday life: people sit on the stoops, clothes swing on the clothesline, mothers and kids stroll down the street. Gradually, the fiction-documentary feel of these early films disappears, as seen in Depression era musicals like *God Diggers of 1933*. In the number “Lullaby of old Broadway” the city is reduced to a backdrop for a visually striking choreography of multiple bodies and body parts performing repetitive gestures and movements. Documentary images of the city shot on location are replaced by cardboard replicas of the New York skyline against which the human body, abstracted from its natural environment, performs its incessant, restless movements. The real city of the early city films dissolves into a prop for backstage musicals exploring ‘the American dream’.

According to Murray Pomerance, since the birth of the talkies there have been three different New Yorks: nostalgic NY (the 1930s, 40s and 50s), serious New York (the 1960s, 70s and 80s) and anxious New York (1990s to the present). 1970s cinematic representations of New York—e.g. *Annie Hall*, *Manhattan*, *Network*, and *Taxi Driver*—share “a belief in the city, New York City, as a deep well of authentic personal experience, a source of self, of tangible subjectivity, and of intense emotion, action, and human interaction” (Mark Shiel, 2003, p.168).

In these films New York has an emotional authenticity; the city appears “not just as a place but as an icon of a certain historically definable relationship between oneself, one’s past, and one’s place in the world—as a source of self and deeper meaning in life” (p.168). By contrast, in *New York Stories* (1989) the city figures through its psychogeography rather than its social space, which is here signified through a limited number of representative social types and a limited number of recognizable city views that demonstrate the reification of urban myth (e.g. the poetry of the city sung by people like E. B. White in *This is New York*) into advertising (postcard New York).

In *New York, I Love You* the city is constructed as a place where supposedly authentic human connections are forged behind the facade of impersonal transactions. Ironically—and revealingly—the most memorable feature of the film is the strong emphasis on transitions between segments. The recurrent character serves two functions: she binds together the separate segments into a unified, New York story, but she also lends reality and authenticity to the fictional stories by being positioned outside the world of fiction. The film seeks to maintain the illusion that although we think of New York as a global city in which millions of stories are constantly unfolding in parallel universes that never cross, ‘in reality’ it is a small town in which everyone knows everyone else, even if it is only through the mediating power of art (in this case a film screening). The porous borders between the different segments is meant to convince us that everything and everyone in the city is interconnected, that what appears as anonymous and homogenous space is actually a shared social space.

Let us consider *New York, I Love You* in the context of Blum’s arguments against the obsolescence of the notion of ‘place’, as we already did with the first instalment in the city film franchise. As we saw, Blum reads the lack of meaningful relationships between people not as a sign of alienation but simply as just another way of relating to others: not relating is a specific type of relating to others. Not surprisingly, he defines collective life negatively i.e., in terms of its lack rather than in terms of how it enriches experience: “The city’s saturation by stories of what is being missed and what is going on, evokes *an uncanny collective sense of a continuous scene of action, exclusive and remote*” (p.285). Integral to the imaginative structure of the city is *the collective sense of being excluded* from the scene that is always happening elsewhere: thus, paradoxically, being excluded is essential to the experience of a shared, collective life. The recurrent character continually reminds us that even as we focus on the specific story unfolding

right now, there are multiple other stories playing in the background, unfolding in another part of the city or just around the corner. Read positively, this underscores the sheer plenitude of urban life; read negatively, it reminds us that precisely because so much is going on, all the time, we are inevitably excluded from other ‘scenes’. Urban experience is then best described as *simultaneous inclusion and exclusion*.

Blum redeems another feature of urban life—its insignificance and anonymity—by arguing that the sheer desire for the memorable moment, the event, the adventure is already sufficient to render the urban experience meaningful (regardless of whether one actually experiences the moment as event). He urges us to consider ‘the aesthetics of killing time’—which includes most urban leisure activities—“in a stronger way, as part of the search of the social actor for action, that is, for eventful and fateful engagements in social situations” (p.280). Killing time is not escapist; investing inaction (waiting, killing time) with action, investing the insignificant with significance and necessity is an experience that redeems the simple thing-ness of the object and reclaims the forgotten, the residual, the minor (cf. Benjamin). Drift is thus associated with the distracted, wandering perception of the flâneur. The anticipation of the event, in the absence of the event, constitutes a new type of spectacle: the spectacle of the non-spectacular. Just as earlier Blum redeemed non-relation or alienation as just another type of relation, now he raises the non-event to the status of event. In *New York, I Love You* the concern for eventfulness translates into an obvious, self-contained narrative pattern that treats every episode as a joke with a punch line: almost every episode sets up a particular social situation only to reverse our perception of it at the end with a clever narrative twist. The event does not reveal a specific social interaction between specific social actors but functions merely as a little test of the viewer’s perceptiveness or ingenuity. None of the segments in the film excavate the forgotten, the minor, the irrelevant or the residual, and none manage to infuse the random and the ephemeral with a sense of inner necessity. Characters remain stationary or are caught in a moment of arrival or departure: we see points of departure and arrival but not the flâneur’s drift itself. There are no flâneurs here: the characters’ movements are circumscribed by the narrative concerns of the particular segment.

Only in one of the stories the action takes place (temporarily) in the character’s apartment (the young composer story); all other stories unfold in some kind of public space: the bar, the sidewalk outside the bar/restaurant, the dry cleaner’s, the coffee shop, the hotel, the cab, the

workplace, Chinatown, Coney Island, Central Park. There are no private spaces as such; yet the public spaces are not presented as anonymous or homogenous but, on the contrary, as idiosyncratic and familiar. Personal relationships are taken out of their enclosed/private space and projected onto public spaces, with the result that business relationships as well as interactions between perfect strangers are presented as authentic and personal.

Most contemporary films set in New York, Murray Pomerance argues, could have been shot on a back lot anywhere: although films open with a collage of ‘typical’ New York streets, as the action moves inside it becomes harder and harder to establish where exactly it’s taking place. Nevertheless, he continues to uphold the auratic image of New York: “I can think of no other city which can withstand this kind of abstract and universalizing view and still powerfully remain itself onscreen. [Unlike Paris and London] there is no place like New York that is also not in fact New York” (p.9). One could read his statement differently, however, as pointing to the power of the mythical image of ‘New York’ which continues to exist even in the absence of the actual city. Pomerance suggests that in the face of the homogenization of globalization New York persists as being somehow unproblematically identical with itself. *New York, I Love You* does not dare address one of the most debated issues, namely the suburbanization and mallification of New York. The spaces in the film are split between iconic ones (Coney Island, Central Park, Brooklyn Bridge, Chinatown) and a range of smaller, inconspicuous spaces that are not immediately recognizable as signifying ‘New York’ and in fact could be anywhere (the bar, the sidewalk outside the bar/restaurant, the dry cleaner’s, the coffee shop, the hotel, the cab, the workplace). Obviously missing are the most iconic New York sights: Times Square and the Statue of Liberty. In other words, the choice of locations seems to be based on the premise that precisely anonymous, unrecognizable, non-iconic spaces—the non-spaces—are most authentic. The city receives a ‘negative authentication’: as long as it appears as any-city-whatever—with a limited number of familiar, authenticating symbols strategically positioned here and there on the mental (rather than social) map—New York is ‘really’ New York.

Conclusion: The Franchise City Film

The early city film not only revealed the surface aspects of modernity but pointed to its hidden aspects, its ugly underbelly, e.g. social stratification and alienation.² In contrast to early city films, film noir, and science fiction films, all of which reflect the city’s cultural and social

topography, the franchise city film does not explore the social reality of the city in which it is filmed but merely exploits it as a convenient backdrop, a kind of shorthand for ‘globalization’. The format of each episode in the franchise, which encompasses multiple stories and establishes emotional connections between strangers, is obviously meant to underscore the global/local dialectic that characterizes contemporary urban life; however, neither of the two films made so far reveals a ‘deeper post-modernity,’ not least because only a few of the segments in each film addresses aspects of globalization such as labour migration, international tourism, transnational commodification, post-colonialism, transnational education, transnational capital, and the transnational sale of body parts.

Linda McDowell (2003) reminds us that in contemporary reality “the scale and magnitude of dislocation and movement is such that it is argued that we are entering a new era. [...] [T]he transnational attenuation of ‘local’ space, and this breaking of space into ‘*discontinuous realities*’...alters our sense of ourselves as individuals, members of various groups and communities, as citizens of a nation state” (qtd. in Siegel, p.155, my italics).³ John Orr identifies spatial disconnection as “a key theme running through the *fabula* of the new cinematic city” (p.287).⁴ The franchise city film covers up the spatial and psychological disconnection underlying postmodern urban life. Space and time are never broken or disconnected but cleverly stitched up through fateful random connections, serendipitous encounters and just the right amount of ethnic or racial seasoning for good taste. Orr isolates another “facet of the city equation: the chance encounter,” which he goes on to read as an expression of desire, “desire as the fleeting proximity of the Other’s body: a central trope for the cinematic city” (p.290). He links the chance encounter to a particular aspect of the structure of the city film: the deemphasizing of motivation—and hence the lack of affect—in favour of sheer action or the look. For instance, because the characters in *I Can’t Sleep* (Claire Denis) are strangers, the film does not give us the reasons/motivations driving their actions and looks. The relationships between them remain fleeting and accidental: they do not approach one another with the intention of getting to know one another. Their interaction remains on the surface, which is not to say it is meaningless. On the contrary, the emphasis on chance encounters and on simultaneity in *Cities of Love* belies a desire to (over)compensate for the alienation and abstractness that characterize postmodern urban experience, and to perpetrate the comforting illusion that socially and culturally embedded subjects co-exist, secretly implicated in each other’s lives.

In early cinema the ‘hidden city’ reflected what Kracauer calls ‘a hidden modernity’, a mapping of social/ideological structures and values spatially in the juxtaposition of above and below, providing a critique of modernity precisely though focusing on its ‘surface’ aspects. While foregrounding the pure visual spectacle of the metropolis, these films undermined the association of the city with the future or with progress by going underground and showing the hidden face of this progress.⁵ This spatial preoccupation has now been replaced by a temporal preoccupation of a similar nature, perhaps expressing a particularly post-modern anxiety. While *the ‘hidden modernity’ of the early city film* was conceptualized *spatially* (the hidden was something literally and/or metaphorically underground, e.g. *Metropolis*) what remains *hidden in post-modernity*, and in post-modern cinema, tends to be conceptualized *temporally* (the hidden is the simultaneous, that which happens *at the same time* somewhere else). The modern city film fetishized space (through what Panofsky calls the ‘dynamization of space’) while the postmodern franchise city film fetishizes time (‘the dynamization of time’). Spatial obsessions (topography, architecture) in modern cinema and in modernity aimed to return depth to a world that threatened to be reduced to sheer surface or spectacle, while temporal obsessions in the franchise city film seek to return multiplicity to a world that threatens to be reduced to the uniform, singular, universal, abstract time of globalization. If temporal anxieties have to do with the annihilation of time, the presentation of events/phenomena/subjects as simultaneous has the function of bringing depth back to time, ‘temporalizing time’ by inscribing different pasts and futures within the same present moment. Hence the crucial role of transitions—temporal and spatial—in *New York, I Love You*.

The insistence on a recurrent character and the hiring of a separate director to be in charge of transitions between segments betrays a deep-seated anxiety over the creation of a unified urban experience or, to use Kracauer’s term, a sense of the ‘solidarity’ of time and space. Despite all the transitions between segments, stories and characters, *New York, I Love You* is, one might say, ‘panned’, in the sense Kracauer attributed to this term in his discussion of *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, a film he described as presenting “a facade which hides nothing, which does not emerge from a depth but merely simulates one” (qtd. in Shiel and Fitzmaurice, p.49). According to Kracauer, montage in Ruttmann’s film was structured on “factitious transitions which are void of content” and therefore the symphony “fail[ed] to point out anything, because it [did] not uncover a single significant moment.” Similarly, the unity sought

in the two *Cities of Love* films is only a narrative unity (coherence in terms of related or recurrent themes—the beginning, middle, and end of romance, treated almost exclusively in an optimistic light) rather than a social unity or disunity. The theme is universal (love), the space a non-space consisting of mutually exchangeable parts.

Since the franchise city film denies us access to representational spaces, by assimilating them into a visual code that has been intellectually worked out, it spawns a *phantom representational space* and projects it ‘beyond’ the film in the form of ‘the real, gritty city’ that the franchise city film ‘conceals’ from us: in his film review A.O.Scott expresses his disappointment that instead of “plumb[ing] the depths or min[ing] the grit of the real New York, [the directors] have, instead, composed a flurry of valentines to a fantasy version of the city, one culled from other movies and also from literature.” Paradoxically, while the franchise city film seeks to maintain a certain mythical image of the city—and is criticized for it—it also keeps alive the obverse myth, the myth of the real city as it has never been (and perhaps will never be) represented on the screen. *Cities of Love* remains suspended between two utopias of social space: the utopia of a cohesive, unified social space (on screen) and the negative utopia (‘the real city’) of a disconnected, complex social space (off screen).

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¹ See Sorlin, P. (2005). Urban Space in European Cinema. In W. Everett and A. Goodbody (Eds.). *Revisiting Space: Space and Place in European Cinema* (25-36). Berlin: Peter Lang.

² See Strathausen, C. (2003). Uncanny Spaces: The City in Ruttmann and Vertov. In M. Shiel and T. Fitzmaurice (Eds.). *Screening the City* (15-41). New York: Verso.

³ Siegel, A. (2003). After the Sixties: Changing Paradigms in the Representation of Urban Space. In M. Shiel and T. Fitzmaurice (Eds.). *Screening the City* (137-160). New York: Verso.

⁴ Orr, J. (2003). The City Reborn: Cinema at the Turn of the Century. In M. Shiel and T. Fitzmaurice (Eds.). *Screening the City* (284-299). New York: Verso.

⁵ Barbara Mennel argues that Haussman turned Paris into a planned metropolis, “a vertically organized city, in which the underground world of sewer systems and later subways embodied a hidden modernity which found its way into films about cities” (p.7). This vertical organization took on a symbolic and metaphoric significance in films set not only in Paris but in other cities as well: e.g. *Metropolis*, *The Third Man*, and *Superman* all projected class values onto the urban structure of ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ (underground) worlds.