

CINEMATIC TOPOGRAPHIES AND THE 24-HOUR CYCLE

Introduction

How does a film enter a city?

This question, seemingly absurd, identifies a formal problem with which narrative fiction films have struggled since the early days of cinema. How does a film, in its opening moments, establish the magnitude of urban space, of the city as a whole? And then, having done this, how does a film move into the city, to find the human scale at which narratives typically unfold? In the course of the cinema's history, a variety of conventions have evolved to meet this challenge.

The most familiar of these involves an opening, "establishing" shot of a city skyline seen at some distance, like the views of New York City from the waters south of Manhattan which became a cliché in films of the 1940s and 1950s.

People are normally absent from such scenes, blocked from view by architectural structures and shrunk to invisibility by the distance from which these views of the city skyline are filmed. Transitions are therefore required, to take both film and viewer into urban spaces of more intimate scale, in which human Figures are central and from which stories may be generated. The variety of such transitions is a principal focus of this article.

Cartographies of the cinematic city

In this article, I examine two formal conventions developed by filmmakers to accomplish the transition just described. The first of these conventions was briefly fashionable in American cinema of the mid-1940s, after which it seemed to disappear. It involves the illusion of a camera moving through the urban sky in search of a window, then choosing one such window through which people and human interaction can be glimpsed.

As if seeking out people and drama – the constituent features of narrative – the camera seems to cross the threshold of the window and enter an interior space. From this point, camera and viewer follow the characters and events they have discovered.

The second convention has a longer history and many variations, running throughout the history of cinema since the late 1920s and reaching, perhaps, its period of greatest popularity in the 1960s. In hundreds of film openings, an individual (typically a man) is seen driving a car as it approaches a city from a distance. It is common for these scenes of driving to accompany the unfolding of a film's credits, such that arrival in the city coincides with the credits' conclusion. Car and driver are then absorbed within urban space, as they join the networks of people and places from which narratives are generated.

At one level, each of these conventions is engaged in what narratologists call *focalization* (Genette, 1972), that process by which narratives of any kind (cinematic, literary, etc.) arrive at a perspective and scale from which a story may be told.

This function is less important to us here than what we would call the *cartographic* effect of these conventions, their role in orienting the viewers of films relative to the spaces which these films construct. All films, Thomas Conley has suggested, partake of what cartographers call "locational imaging" (2007, 23).

Each film produces its own map, its topography of spaces and of the relationships between them. Conventional film narratives must produce a sense of cartographic coherence for their narratives to be intelligible, but the map which a film constructs is more than the functional support for its story. A film's "locational imaging" is also the pretext for visual pleasures of no obvious narrative value. The scenic natural vistas at the beginning of 1950s Western films or the movement through neon-lit streets in films noirs of the 1940s locate us in specific geographical regions, but they are also the supports for well-established forms of aesthetic pleasure.

“[T]o each film its map”, Conley writes, but this map is only partially the servant of narrative and verisimilitude. The needs of story and intelligible setting impress themselves upon a film’s map as what Conley (invoking Jacques Lacan) calls “points de capiton”. These anchoring points ground a story in spatial coordinates which assist in the orientation of the spectator. However, the cartographies which a film constructs will always exceed (and sometimes undermine) a narrative’s simple need for spaces in which to unfold. In the case of those films set in cities, the elaboration of a coherent cartography is regularly in tension with the impulse to perpetuate the city’s illegibility, so that viewer interest and a sense of the city’s elusive depth are maintained (see, for example, Kalifa, 2004).

The window as threshold

In the mid-1940s, a small corpus of Hollywood films offered a stylish and novel way of entering the space of cities. The first moments of *Nocturne* (1946, dir. Edward L. Marin), *The Black Angel* (1946, dir. Roy William Neill), *Repeat Performance* (1947, dir. Alfred L. Werker) and *The Velvet Touch* (1948, dir. Jack Gage) begin with panoramic views of the illuminated night-time city (Los Angeles in the first two films, New York in the others.)

In all four films, the viewer’s attention is made to follow a highly mobile camera as it seeks, amidst the vast array of buildings filling the city landscape, a window. Finding this window, the camera then appears to pass through it (through a series of special effects), and enter a dwelling. Inside these domestic spaces, the camera discovers scenes of conflict or violence, which present each film’s central characters and initiate the central lines of the narrative.

As they seek the windows which are their points of entry into buildings, the four films examined here follow different patterns of movement. All of these involve vertical displacements which diverge from the strictly horizontal movements charted by the conventional map.

The opening image in *Nocturne* is that of a busy street in Los Angeles, shot at ground level. The camera then rises and pulls back, capturing in panoramic fashion the expanse of the city as a whole, before reversing its course and descending, diagonally, to approach (and ultimately penetrate) the windows of a house located in the Los Angeles hills (Figure 1).

This movement takes us from a street-level effervescence to a bird's eye view of the city's enduring structure and from there, descending, to the isolated space of human drama. *The Black Angel* is also set in Los Angeles, and similarly begins at street level. As vehicles cross the screen, their movement "reveals", as if by chance, a well-dressed man standing on the sidewalk. The camera approaches him, then reverses direction and, as if propelled upward by his gaze, moves towards an apartment window which the camera will enter, detaching itself in this moment from the man's point of view (Figure 2).



Figure 1 – *Nocturne*



Figure 2 – *The Black Angel*

In *Velvet Touch*, we begin high above the illuminated sky of New York's Broadway district, then descend in a straight diagonal, past theatrical signs and into the window of a fashionable apartment (Figure 3).

Repeat Performance, whose themes are partly oneiric and otherworldly, begins above the city, in a cloudy sky, before descending in a straight downward trajectory through illuminated windows,

then moving sideways and forwards as it finds the open window through which our attention as viewers is directed (Figure 4).



Figure 3 – *Repeat Performance*



Figure 4 – *The Velvet Touch*

By moving through an urban landscape to find its story, each of these films offers a panoramic sense of the city's broader geography. At the same time, these panoramic views of the city do more than simply orient the viewer; they bind the narratives which follow to broader cultural understandings of urban life. These opening scenes invoke (and reiterate) a broadly shared cultural understanding of the night-time, mid-20th century American city as a space of affective sensations and aesthetic effects. These affective responses are central to a number of twentieth century aesthetic formations and stylistic movements, from the *fantastique social* named by Pierre Mac Orlan in the 1920s (1928) through the visual nocturne of painters or photographers of city life (Sharpe, 2008) and, most notably, the American *film noir* (Naremore, 1998).

Of the four films discussed here, only *The Black Angel* is regarded unequivocally by historians as an example of *film noir*, although the other three are often said to occupy the margins of that movement. Nevertheless, the formal convention shared by all four films, that of the camera's "discovery" of human drama behind the surfaces of architectural forms, fulfills a key thematic promise of the *film noir*: that cities, particularly at night, are

full of violent and dramatic possibilities which may be discovered through a random sampling of urban spaces. As the camera moves across buildings in all four films, the urban night becomes what Rowe and Bayington (2011) have called “a field of attractors and deterrents”. The distinction between spaces which attract and those which deter is usually tied to the presence or absence of illumination: light will entice, while darkness will repel. In the films discussed here, this distinction is played out quite explicitly, as the camera moves past the darkened sides of buildings, seeking out the lit window which promises human characters and personal dramas waiting to be discovered.

The automobile as narrative agent

The formal device just described, in which the film camera traverses the city in search of dramatic possibilities, seemingly guided by its own curiosity, would come to seem retrograde by the end of the 1940s. Thereafter, a more common convention for taking films and their viewers into cities involved sequences in which one or more individuals (usually men) drive an automobile into urban space. One reason for the increased frequency of such scenes, from the 1950s onwards, had to do with changes in the form of film credit sequences. As these slowly changed from printed tableaux to words superimposed on live action, the driving sequence became a convenient device for holding viewers’ attention while the names of a film’s personnel passed by in sequence. Scenes of moving automobiles also became effective visual backdrops to the theme songs which, beginning in the 1950s, became increasingly common in popular cinema (Straw, 2012). In dozens of films whose narrative action unfolded in cities, opening sequences began outside of urban space, and used the time of credits and theme songs to show us an automobile journey into that space.

Of many possible examples, we will focus briefly here on *Les tontons flingueurs* (1963, dir. George Lautner), *The Pawnbroker* (1964, dir. Sidney Lumet), *Tony Arzenta* (1973, dir. Duccio Tessari) and *Intent to Kill* (1958, dir. Jack Cardiff). In each of these, auto-

mobile journeys which begin on the peripheries of cities have arrived, by the end of the credits which are these scenes' raisons d'être, at locations deep within metropolitan space. While *The Pawnbroker* shows the morning journey of a shop owner to his place of work in Harlem (Figure 5), the other three driving sequences unfold, for the most part, in the nocturnal city. In *Les tontons flingueurs*, a gangster drives through the rural French night to arrive in Paris just as dawn is breaking (Figure 6). The eponymous central character in *Tony Arzenta* leaves a suburban apartment to drive into a nocturnal Milan characterized by the spectacle of neon lights and crowds (Figure 7). In *Intent to Kill*, a British thriller set in Montreal, an assassin follows a South American dictator from the suburban airport into the city as day ends (Figure 8).



Figure 5 – *The Pawnbroker*



Figure 6 – *Les Tontons flingueurs*



Figure 7 – *Tony Arzenta*



Figure 8 – *Intent to Kill*

As suggested, the rationales for these driving sequences were usually practical, linked to new conventions for presenting credits and to the new importance accorded a film's theme music. However, we may also see these sequences as fulfilling important cartographic functions. The journey of the moving car turns landscape into an itinerary leading, usually, into the heart of a city. To watch such sequences is to receive a detailed understanding of the relationship between periphery and centre in each city's case. At the same time, these automobile journeys, in the mobile vision they allow, become the pretext for panoramic views of city surfaces and of the conduits (the highways, overpasses and bridges) which are the infrastructure of the modern metropolis. While, in the films of the 1940s discussed earlier, the camera was endowed with a mobility unavailable to human beings – the power to move amidst buildings and peer through windows – in the postwar city of conduits and circulations viewers felt liberated when their own vision was aligned with the enhanced mobility of the modern automobile.

In the automobile journeys examined here, the rationality of the city is alternately concealed and revealed. Light, for example, as in *Les tontons flingueurs*, shows the rationality of transportation arteries and public works, but illumination also participates in a play of forms and sensations which confuses our sense of place. This confusion is particularly striking in the opening sequence of *Tony Arzenta*, in which municipal lighting meant to illuminate transportation arteries comes to be absorbed within a general kaleidoscopic confusion in which commercial, festive lighting predominates. Likewise, in those sequences which are set at night, the headlights of the car illuminate a trajectory, but are also agents of fragmentation and dispersion, producing a sense of refracted illumination and jumbled, overlapping architectural forms. Armengaud has usefully described the ways in which the lights of the car transform the night-time cityscape into a play of intensities: “[the car’s] headlights spread forth in a tracery of fragments. This plotting of headlight beams is visible due to the association of movement with points of light: light reveals the

movement, gives it its identity, its landscape; the threads of the headlights weave together in the black ‘emptiness’ of intensity: at night things take shape through intensity: fusion, flame, electricity, internal combustion engine, gas”. In this play of affect and intensity, the strictly cartographic function of the driving sequence risks being lost.

Conclusion

In her book on the Parisian night in the 19th century, Simone Delattre suggests that “la ‘topographie imaginaire’ du Paris nocturne implique tout à la fois la ville-labyrinthe où l’on se perd et la ville-panorama, où les fonctions et les secrets prennent sens grâce à une vue englobante” (2003). The tension described here, between the labyrinthian and the panoramic city, is a familiar one to those who study cinematic representations of urban space. The panoramic perspective on the city, insofar as it is usually devoid of human figures, is a poor support for cinematic narratives, though they will often begin there and seek to return to a panoramic view as part of their movement towards resolution. The labyrinthine view, in contrast, endlessly generative of narrative possibilities, will always undermine the cartographic intelligibility which most films seek to elaborate. Stylistic devices for entering into cinematic cities, like the threshold-penetrating camera or the moving automobile, seek out spaces of mystery and disorientation which confuse cartographies, even as lines of their movement draw new cartographies of urban space.

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