PROJECTION AS PARADISE IN SARAH MORRIS' *LOS ANGELES*

by

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(Under the Direction of Isabelle Loring Wallace)

ABSTRACT

This paper considers Sarah Morris' 2004 film *Los Angeles* and its potential success as a "city portrait," a description encourage by the artist's work in both painting and film. The film invokes a number of established cinematic modes – both avant-garde and commercial – without explicitly favoring any one tradition. Morris thereby appropriates the visual vocabulary of Hollywood while maintaining a distance that reveals her cinematic maneuvers as such. As a portrait of the city's own visual language, I argue that *Los Angeles* articulates a divide between literal, urban location and Hollywood simulation. Furthermore, a reading of the film alongside the fragmented, commercial form of the feature trailer reveals the inherent ability of the cinematic medium to perpetuate desire and projected fantasy within its spectator.

INDEX WORDS: Sarah Morris, Los Angeles, Film trailers, Simulacrum, Desire, Experimental film, Contemporary Art

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B.A., Georgetown University, 2008

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2014

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May 2014

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CHAPTER 1

I.

Since the late 1990s, New York-based painter and video artist Sarah Morris has made eight films based on the central conceit of major urban centers: New York City; Las Vegas; Washington, DC; Miami; Los Angeles; Beijing; Chicago; and Rio. Typically, these films are developed in conjunction with a series of geometrical, abstract paintings titled by landmarks of the corresponding metropolis – for example, New York's *Marriott Marquis* (1998), DC's *Watergate Complex* (2000), and *Creative Artists Agency* (2004) in conjunction with the 35mm film *Los Angeles* (2004) (fig. 1). Despite their abstract forms, a sense of architectural design encouraged by the specificity of their supplemental, location-based titles has contributed to a reading of these paintings as a form of portraiture, based not on specific individuals but on the idea of particular city. In the same way, her films' embedded identification with specific urban landscapes has led critics to label these films "city portraits."[1] As we shall see in the case of *Los Angeles*, this is and is not an adequate label.

Each of Morris' city films functions through a similar system of wordless, steadily edited sequences, though a subtle evolution has occurred: 1998's *Midtown*, less than half the length of *Los Angeles* and significantly lower in film quality, relies more heavily upon generic Manhattan street images, shots of bustling commuters blurring together with few establishing interior shots. 2000's *Capital* intermittently entices the viewer with more specifics, recognizable Washington landmarks and political personalities among more standard urban footage, while *Miami* (2002)

[1]In addition to the term's logic based upon the films' content, titles, and association with the painting series, itself involved with the origins of portraiture, Morris' own web site refers explicitly to Capital as a "city portrait" [*Sarah Morris: Films: Capital*, http://sarah-morris.info/?/Films/-Capital/, (November 2012)]. However, in response to interviewer Hans Ulrich Obrist's comment that "… [Morris] obsviously already [had] this idea of a portrait in Midtown in '98, in the very first film… It is a portrait of the streets of Midtown Manhattan," Morris herself claims the term was applied after she began the films and sounds, to her, "…too earnest in a way": *An Open System Meets and Open System: Sarah Morris and Hans Ulrich Obrist in Conversation*, ed. Cristina Bechtler (New York: Springer Wien New York, 2013), 81-2.

shows more polish, both in terms of its glitzy landscape and the upgrade to 35mm film. However, in her fifth film, *Los Angeles* (2004), Morris targets a subject that inevitably implies a distinct relationship between form and content.

As a painter working in film, Morris moves from a medium traditionally associated with portraiture to a form whose temporal and experiential nature complicates representation. Despite *Midtown*'s portrayal of Manhattan facades and residents, many of its frames remain saturated with the cascading colors of Times Square advertisements and interlaced lines of building fronts. These images bear resemblance to the abstractions of Morris' Manhattan series of paintings, a connection which presents film as aligned with the function of her canvases (fig. 2,3). By contrast, *Los Angeles* emphasizes the difference between its film and painted portraits, the latter only beholden to the film's specific images by name and the suggestion of form. Morris' paintings avoid the representational more intensely than those of Manhattan, instead sacrificing specificity for a mobile visual experience, which tends toward the idea of a glass façade or subway map but ultimately obscure such definition. These canvases favor this experience over any firm sense of object or place, a movement without destination which Morris explores further in her film. The film *Los Angeles* projects images of perpetually crisp, distinct objects. Its viewer recognizes individuals and places in the particular, most even recognizable by name. In a reversal of her painted images, Morris' films convey information with the photographic precision offered by their medium; however, this distinctive representation of objects retains an ambiguity in Morris' particular sequencing, which further complicates the series' claim to portraiture. Morris' cameras follow and peer yet provide no concrete depiction of the city at large. Two scenes consecutively edited elicit a search for causality, and the subsequent dismissal of that hope by the next, more confounding image redirects the viewer to the process itself. Rather than

eliminate confusion entirely, film's clarity of image merely displaces each city's indefinable qualities onto the temporal properties inherent to cinema. The question of an image's identity thus becomes one of the significance of that image in the context of others, and the subject of *Los Angeles* becomes its system of montage.

Though its individual frames come closer to portraiture, the cinematic mode further complicates this categorization, inciting confusion of meaning and uncertainty of correlation between sequential images. *Los Angeles* thus infects form and content with the same enigmatic tenor as her paintings of the city. Through her canvases, Morris portrays an imposed geometrical system rather than well-defined objects. Similarly, her films explore a cinematic formal system, specifically one inspired by Hollywood's editing but infused with avant-garde tensions. More than in her other films, *Los Angeles*' formal elements – specifically, the steady momentum of sequential, often dynamic images, sustained for a duration which undermines its narrative, studio origins – create a portrait of the experience of Los Angeles as provided by the cinematic products of its Hollywood industry, here both the depicted content and chosen form of *Los Angeles*. Despite its photographic mode of representation, the cinematic process which governs these images maintains an uncertainty as to their veracity and intended meaning. The medium's expansion across time insists upon an understanding of the moving image as corollary to its spectator's subjective perception of reality, though here informed by Hollywood's ubiquitous objects and maneuvers. However, the length and pacing of the film deny any promise of narrative destination or complete urban image. Rather, by avoiding categorization and exhibiting an arsenal of visual motifs borrowed from the mainstream film industry whose surface she depicts, as well as from the avant-garde's method of self-reflection, Morris encourages a viewing of *Los Angeles* as portrait of the cinematic system. As a result, the film prompts its spectator to

consider the nuanced interactions of its moving images, the expectations they incite, and the cinematic experience as such.

II.

From its first scene, *Los Angeles* announces itself quietly. A tight close-up of a woman's reflection as she applies lipstick occupies the right side of the screen, surrounded by a blurred palette of black and green produced by her foregrounded presence and the distant walls of an indeterminate interior. Against this backdrop, the film's title appears, modestly sized, and briefly glows before quietly dissolving, at no time obscuring the filmed event (fig. 4). From this initial, mirrored image, the film then moves to another, which is no less indexical: several close shots of a film reel run through post-production equipment ubiquitous in Hollywood and necessary to cinematic works like the one before us. The camera's lens returns to the woman within a matter of seconds, still framed within the mirror's glass but this time shot from further back – and now removing her lipstick with the wipe of a cloth. This second, more elaborate presentation of the film's initial image, like all hints of logical closure within Morris' work, both reassures and entices: The woman reappears following the unexplained images of post-production equipment, but only to erase the action she does in the film's opening scene. Moreover, although the viewer is returned to this woman, as if to establish her as a character of interest, her character is never developed further. She is only a prelude to another abrupt cut, to a tracking shot of a domestic interior in which a casually-dressed, young girl appears, her hair hiding her face and signifying her ancillary presence on the periphery of a space familiar from a number of major Hollywood productions.[2] After barely coming to rest, the camera cuts to another tracking shot that further

[2] The Hollywood Hills house is actually the Sheats Goldstein Residence, recognizable from such films as *The Big Lebowski*, in which the building serves as the Malibu home of porn mogul Jackie Treehorn, a character whose

explores this same space but from the reverse angle. The consecutive scenes, although strikingly similar in subject and movement, include subtle changes in lighting and composition that wreak a startling effect, thus connecting two fluid shots in a noticeably discordant way. This longer shot follows a silhouette that may be the first woman's return, but the space and time of the scene are altered by a realization that the once stationary girl has disappeared from the chair where she sat a moment ago. These inconsistencies compound to incite enough confusion of rhythm, tone, and orientation to breed immense doubt as to the continuity of this cinematic work. With expectations established and consistently thwarted, the viewer remains perplexed, if not on guard.

Within these first fifty seconds, the film has prompted immense skepticism yet still engages one's attention. The films rhythmic editing and fluid camera movements provide formal qualities that exhibit propulsive momentum even while sometimes clashing. The motion of Morris' tracking shots seduce though their transition repels. Two scenes of the woman applying and removing lipstick relate, but an interposed shot of disparate, post-production imagery interrupts the conversation. The soundtrack also contributes to this ambiguous but compelling atmosphere, constructed of unobtrusive yet pleasant synthetic tones. Throughout its 26 minute, 12 second run time, explicit recurrences of figures appear less, yet the film still inundates the viewer with countless shots of similar locations, persons, and compositions, many of which seem significant until swallowed up by the surrounding flood of other images. More disorienting, some of these shots do offer vague hints of possible correspondence with each other. Consecutive sequences portray a night scene; or, the printing of a script leads into a casting

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outward poise and charisma hide ultimately sinister consequences for the film's protagonist, The Dude. In fact, many of The Dude's Philip-Marlowe-esque predicaments and beatings can be traced to Treehorn, whose appearance resonates with the conflicting issues of glamour and power associated with Los Angeles' image-conscious culture at large.

audition, where actors may be rehearsing the very lines reproduced in the duplicated script. Yet, even as the hint of a structure builds, the lack of any further follow-up inevitably denies fulfillment, substituting gratification and direct continuity with a rupture and deferral of the viewer's expectations. We are provided constant lip-movement with no audible dialogue, cars driving toward unknown locations, one-sided gazes to figures unseen, which leave the viewer at a perpetual precipice beyond which he must provide the view. Rather than entertain the possibility of arbitrary editing, the film's enigmatic juxtapositions asserts the authority of even the most confounding image pairs, compelling the viewer to search for meaning: Why is the interior explored twice? Who is the woman with whom we began? Is she the same woman who strides through the home seconds later? Her face having been pulled back into a darker obscurity until she walks off camera, these questions remain unanswered, and we are left only with the image of exotic fish, another red herring, which is in turn followed by a parade of downtown buildings, luxury goods, and lavish interiors, all peppered with tabloid-leading celebrities and sometimes inexplicable mundanities. Will this ride reach a conclusion, or are its scattered images simply strewn together to provoke fleeting associations?

Largely focused on Hollywood, *Los Angeles* is, as I will argue, a film about film. Much of its imagery maintains a recognizable relationship to the film industry. The opening sequence makes this point immediately through its juxtaposition of post-production equipment, but Morris' emphasis on the film industry continues throughout. Approximately one and a half minutes into the film, the viewer sees the first of several shots of Dennis Hopper, tightly framed in the driver's seat of a luxury sedan, which gives way to a landscape of the concrete covered Los Angeles River and, after that, several consecutive clips best described as behind-the-scenes footage from the Kodak Theatre's Academy Awards red carpet celebration (fig. 5,6). Glimpsed

around the obstructions of live television cameras and photographers, Heath Ledger and Naomi Watts greet Francis Ford Coppola, and sequential shots find Jennifer Garner replaced with Jamie Lee Curtis, both actresses engaged in almost identical, swift turns of the head in order to pose for a clamoring off-screen audience with their silhouettes lost in a sea of velvety pink. As with the film more generally, these images, familiar to us through the mediation of cameras and screens, run by in a way that seems to declare their importance without offering explanation, especially when constantly interrupted by cuts to other, sometimes distractingly disparate images: a closed-circuit security monitor, an American Airlines jet taxiing, an intimate view of a woman's teeth whitening procedure. Taken in larger segments, the footage seems too busy and unguided to reveal any particular meaning. Even the revisiting of Hopper's drive at points throughout the film does more to confuse than to elucidate a cohesive structure, as no extrapolation can be drawn from such repeated fragments. In fact, the baffling insignificance of this deliberate repetition further frustrates by establishing a cyclical system, anathema to satisfying conclusions. Hopper's drive, like the ride of the film itself, seems to go nowhere. With significant movement of rhythm but little in theme or narrative, *Los Angeles* cultivates a sense of monotony that remains at odds with the audience's desire for linear development, progress, and eventual conclusion, a well-timed structure that seems to propose an enigma in place of explicit intention. However, this evasive puzzle further engages the spectator in a way that underscores its images as fragments indicative of and evolved from its film industry subject.

Liam Gillick's propulsive electronic score also subverts any initial expectations of culmination, while its fluid beats and vague melodies occasionally provide the illusion of suspense or narrative progress.[3] The soundtrack recalls Minimalist compositions by Terry Riley

[3] "Liam is always saying that I'm always talking on the phone and he hears all the conversations that go on and knows my motivations and knows the things that go on in the making of the films. So he gets a sense of what the

and Steve Reich, a form of music that, due to its cyclical, meandering, and non-invasive movement, influenced film scores, supplementing action with atmosphere and subtle cues. In *Los Angeles*, this soundtrack displaces any dialogue, or any sound that might correlate to the image on the screen, for that matter, which create the effect of objectifying distance from the spectacles on screen. Repetition, however, combines with formal cues that maintain the possibility that any subsequent shot might deeply link to its predecessor, that the film might "take off," propelled toward narrative movement, such as the tightly composed ending that playfully edits together various beautiful celebrities waving gushing farewells (fig. 7). Like the music, which sometimes hints at a dramatic swell or wistful melody only to be submersed again within an often dreary commercial pleasantness, the film presents images suggestive of exterior narrative and symbolic significance even as it fails to gratify the spectator's desire for direct answers. More than simply avoiding any conclusion, the constant fluctuation of cinematic modes with no discernible pattern effectively hinders the viewer's ability to recall the order, or even appearance, of images seen as much as the anticipation of those to come. In this way, Morris' cinematic method threatens to disassemble and even negate the very images it projects.

III.

Los Angeles' constant assertion and subversion of cohesive narrative begs a question: Why does Morris refuse the viewer a more coherent narrative structure? Importantly, this visual process of constant, disconnected movement between disparate images denies depth, the viewer's desire to obtain knowledge from the images, just as it refuses narrative progress. Morris thwarts this search for understanding in ways that resonate with the hard reflective surfaces of

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narrative could be, or how I am trying to shape the narrative. He comes up with a set of modular pieces. He might come up with twenty, twenty-five, thirty tracks, and then I bring them into the editing phase and place them to the images": *An Open System*, 27.

the city, not to mention the inherently unknowable figure of the celebrity, the abundant appearances of whom fail to accrue to knowledge. As I will argue, the film establishes itself as a depiction of Los Angeles, and its method purposefully reflects the elusiveness of the city. The title provides an unadorned reference to its sole shooting location, a suspicious directness which simultaneously triggers myriad questions about the materials – cultural, architectural, industrial, and otherwise – that comprise the abstract notion of a city. *Los Angeles*' inclusion as part of a series of films limited to major metropolitan locations reinforces the relationships of the images therein, concisely embodied in the problematic "city portrait" term. This natural yet vague label underscores the film's attempt to document a place, a task which suggests the capture of reality even as its executor acknowledges its inherent challenges. Morris embraces this problem of naming the indefinable content of Los Angeles by pairing it with the extremely literal, photographically derived cinematic form. The attempt to visualize an entire city through film necessitates the visual articulation of sprawling and often obscure ideas, though by means of a limited perspective. In *Los Angeles*, series of tight shots, often individual close-ups, stand in for vast social and economic perspectives, and an expansive urban landscape at its widest scope is afforded only the abbreviated vista of a downtown block. The nationally recognizable status of Morris' on-screen subjects, both celebrities and landmarks, further heightens the viewer's skepticism of the film's fidelity to its inherently dense subject and begs one to consider the insufficiency of the "city portrait" label. In this way, Morris adopts a highly evocative but inherently disjointed cinematic language and selective cast, both provided by Hollywood, for a work that claims to visually represent that industry's larger urban context, promising concreteness while presenting obvious gaps in form and content.

Of course, this invocation of a specific urban location has a cinematic precedent in the city symphony, a mode of early film that anticipates Morris' experimental form of quasi-narrative suggestion. The avant-garde ancestors of Morris' film originated as early as 1921 in Paul Strand and Charles Scheeler's *Manhatta*, though its mature form emerges in Walther Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* (1927) and Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). Alexander Graf argues that these early city films "…display an almost total suppression of intertitles, narrative and plot elements, and a rejection of the documentary form in the traditional sense, in favor of asserting rhythmic and associative montage as formal devices."[4] In these films, the replacement of any synchronized sound with an exclusively musical soundtrack likewise bolstered the cinematic process over the narrative force of the image, giving the films what Stephen Barber has called a "hallucinatory texture."[5] Building upon these precedents, Morris further emphasizes discrete formal cuts and movements over broad continuity, dispensing even with the city symphony's signature structural device, a dusk-to-dawn framework that asserted, though in the broadest sense, linear form among the flood of and faces and facades.[6] The elements of broken continuity, uncertainty of orientation, and repetition of image all exhibited in the first moments of *Los Angeles* interrupt linear and chronological progression and, thus, negate a teleological understanding of the film. This lack of destination effectively disrupts any temporal orientation of the film in general. As each scene might occur at one or another moment, Morris partially disengages attention and empowers the viewer to consider entering or leaving the screening at will.

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[4] Alexander Graf, "Paris – Berlin – Moscow: On the Montage Aesthetic in the City Symphony Films of the 1920s," in *Avant-Garde Film*, ed. Alexander Graf and Dietrich Scheunemann (New York: Rodopi B.V., 2007), 78-9.
[5] Stephen Barber, *Projected Cities* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 31.
[6] Graf, 78-9.

Later developments in both cinema and installation art further realize the implications of the viewer's response to such non-progressive visual structures. What Ruttman and Vertov incited within the viewer by means of loosely connective, prolonged montage, structural filmmakers like Michael Snow pushed to greater extremes. Whether the case of *Wavelength*'s (1967) single, 45-minute zoom or *Le Region Centrale*'s (1971) three-hour exercise of erratic, pre-programmed camera movements, the viewer generalizes the film's formal properties, condensing them into explicit concepts that stand in for narrative subject. Regardless of the scope – that is, one protracted shot or a multitude of non-accumulating images – the combination of length and consistently repetitive content effectively lessens the necessity and practicality of viewing the work's entirety. Though *Los Angeles* shuttles across Hollywood with constant movement, the film goes nowhere, leaving the viewer with a sense of ultimate understanding as unresolved as Warhol's static *Empire* (1964). Once enabled with the authority to disengage and possibly turn away from the film, the spectator might note the chosen array of cinematic modes – shots of different lengths, positioned from different angles, or utilizing motion in different ways – thereby inferring a structure of repeated visual cues, the viewer's own best guess of when an accurate sampling of the work has elapsed. With Morris, the lack of narrative and only occasional reappearance of particular figures and places prompt the viewer to seek out variances in form like those mentioned, which frustratingly recur at a similarly inconsistent rate. Nevertheless, that rare repetition of a celebrity or camera maneuver recalls the unfulfilled promise of continuity and prompts the viewer to wait for ending credits, the final sign of theatrical relief. By requiring its viewer to resort to the parsing of essential formal properties, a maneuver inherent to the spectatorship of experimental film and video installation, *Los Angeles* incorporates a filmic vocabulary that forces an interrogation of the way in which the viewer

digests information during a cinematic projection. Still, the fact that Morris builds her formal vocabulary with images of narrative film's headquarters perpetually questions its relationship with Hollywood storytelling, just as each celebrity subject could also be acting for her camera. Morris' film thus situates itself between an assortment of conflicting extremes: document and fiction; fragmented mosaic and cohesive narrative; art film and commercial video collage. Each of these binaries, which occur throughout the formal, narrative, and ontological levels of the film, works to construct a solid critical structure around a blank though engaging void, an omission that activates the viewer's creative response and thus makes him an accomplice in the projected cinematic fantasy.

The documentary mode offers a natural lens through which to attempt an interpretation of *Los Angeles*' incorporation of Hollywood imagery within a non-narrative structure. Formally, the film *Los Angeles* consists of meandering shots with intermittent connections but no clearly defined narrative thread. Two consecutive shots, say, of a session at a modern karate dojo, are followed by a view of traffic across a busy thoroughfare at night. This juxtaposition might traditionally signal a break from the previous scene, a visual palette cleanser to signal a larger transition to a setting across the city. However, that expectation is immediately compromised by continued shots of night traffic, placing extended emphasis on what the viewer took to be only utilitarian transition. A moment later, we see an interior in which Robert Evans receives a thorough shave from a topless woman, affirming the unpredictable and listless direction of the film (fig. 8). This lack of overt storyline transfers greater weight to the documentary aspect of the structures and people shown. With no narrative purpose, the numerous, intimate studies of figures, most with particular cultural value beyond their image, take on the sense of a superficial documentation of reality. Story is thus replaced by the urge to analyze the represented image.

However, the film's superior production value complicates the documentary nature of *Los Angeles*. The 35mm film stock alone presents a visual tone that clashes with an offhand, shoot-from-the-hip documentary style, both in its logistical and economic impracticality. Furthermore, the film owes its fluidity to its common use of tilts, pans, tracking shots, and other rudiments of camera movement that necessitate the kind of intricate staging that belongs properly to mainstream Hollywood film.[7] Beyond the overt aesthetic signifiers of a highly staged production, the myriad logistical concerns necessary in order to gain access to high-profile celebrities and locations signal to the viewer a strong authority by the filmmaker over the images captured. These traces of meticulous staging subvert any inferred documentary aspects of the film, blurring the line between reality and fiction in a way that calls into question – or perhaps merely reflects – the nature of the film itself. Morris' film, notably indebted to the vocabulary of the major motion picture, thus turns the eye of the film industry upon itself without sacrificing any of the medium's inherent fictionalizing elements. In this way, film's capture-and-project nature reveals images while maintaining an obscurity as to their underlying character, implying intention on the part of the filmmaker while deliberately widening the uncertainty at the film's – and film's – center.

IV.

If Morris so notably exploits the uncertainty between document and fiction, while also confusing relationships of juxtaposition with those of causality, what correlations do these ambiguities have to the city she supposedly depicts? As I have already begun to argue, Morris characterizes Los Angeles as an impenetrable yet seductive set of images, the materiality of

[7] "My camera always stand out because at that time it was an ARRI 35mm camera, which is a behemoth. These television paparazzi couldn't understand why you would have a camera like that on the red carpet. Or to have a camera like that above the red carpet – it looks like a weapon…": *An Open System*, 34.

which becomes secondary to its perception through visual culture by people outside of the city. Importantly, the confusion invited by the film's heavily edited form echoes the enigmatic nature of Los Angeles itself, a city whose districts and landmarks seem to float unmoored with no defined center around which to revolve. For the viewer, Hopper drives to locations yet never arrives, a transitory action that symbolizes the film's sustained wandering. This lack of progress also characterizes literal movement in Los Angeles, where travel between locations requires extended drives across nondescript freeways, a positive action nevertheless negated by the particular method of transportation like jump cuts between scenes. Miles throughout these limitless, distance-distorting passageways cannot easily be measured in the gridded coordinates of city blocks but, rather, must be counted on an odometer. Morris' interspersed images of tinted windows, reflecting skyscrapers, and glistening water offer concise visual translations of the city's conceptually fragmented nature. That is, while a building's glass façade provides no grounding with which the spectator might anchor his sense of space, interior shots with no overtly obscuring surfaces offer just as little in terms of geographical fixity: A casting room, an outdoor café, and a gated mansion convey generic types associated with Los Angeles, but none provides distinct information which might orient the viewer within the city's geography. This explosion of fixed topographical specificity obscures any concrete understanding of Los Angeles at large, an effect that corresponds to the ambiguity-inducing formal elements of *Los Angeles*.

The city's industry is strikingly similar to its physical design, as Morris' sometimes producer, Ania Siwanowicz, writes of her own discomfort with the town's character while making the film. She had to "socially map out the city" to order it in her mind.[8] This task proved just as disorienting, as she found social interactions limited strictly to phone calls:

[8] Ania Siwanowicz, "Follow Up," *Sarah Morris: Los Angeles*, Ed. Cay Sophie. Rabinowitz, (Köln: Galerie Aurel Scheibler, 2005) 21.

> "Without a telephone line, nothing is possible in Los Angeles. I remember thinking that there must be some problem with people who do everything in real time. There is no time lag in phone time, no time to think about and weigh your options. I suppose it kind of scared me. It was difficult to imagine having definite answers to propositions on the spot, to making decisions right away."[9]

This real-time existence teaches one to live in vulnerability and in the moment, which disregards the proposition of future closure. Rather:

> "…in Los Angeles no project is ever close or truly discarded, and no bridge ever burned. Each conversation has *to be continued*. 'To be continued' takes the place of 'good-bye,' even if there is no interest – no chance for a second date. And everyone in Los Angeles can afford to be super nice, because they cannot afford to be anything less than super-vague."[10]

In the same way that the film undermines the authenticity of its own subjects, the city and its inhabitants remain constantly on the defense.

Like its spatial ambiguity, the conceptual nature of the city suffers a disorienting crisis of identity. With no sense of its average citizen or urban nucleus, Los Angeles becomes displaced by Hollywood, a city identified with images rather than physical landmarks. *Los Angeles* calls attention to this fact by attempting to visually define the city with locations more closely associated with film culture than actual urban space. Just as its cast remains exclusive to A-list celebrities and notable industry players, filled in with miscellaneous personnel and assistants as extras, *Los Angeles*' set pieces are culled from a visual culture recognized globally and not necessarily known in terms of the city's physical landscape. Rather, the interior of I.M. Pei's Creative Artists Agency resonates due to its significance within the entertainment industry and not the actual space of the city. Specific locations like the concrete-covered channel of the Los Angeles River speak as much to its appearance in an action sequence from James Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* as the city's development or, to synthesize both Los Angeles and Hollywood histories, the underlying plot points of Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*. Moreover, the

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[9] Siwanowicz, 21.
[10] Ibid.

cinematic references reach a far wider audience yet still retain the landmark identity attached to the city: A vehicle-mounted shot carries the viewer through the Second Street Tunnel, more familiar as the Los Angeles of 2019 in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* than that of Morris' in 2004, thus deliberately prompting the viewer to process the city through the filter of Hollywood. As her images of Los Angeles' sites often coincide with their corresponding appearance as set locations in movies, Morris' reliance on visual recognition as an integral part of communication between her film and its viewer places a heavy burden on popular cinema. She concedes to the essential elusiveness of Los Angeles and instead turns completely to the postured faces and places produced by Hollywood. Here, the unmoored spaces of mainstream cinema culture function as a meeting place through which the viewer can communicate with Morris and her film in the hopes of eventually penetrating a mutually recognized fantasy and moving toward an understanding of Los Angeles itself.

Nowhere does Morris sustain a more precarious balance between Los Angeles terrain and Hollywood mythology than in her footage of the red carpet of the Academy Awards. The film keeps its viewer adrift throughout much of its duration, traveling shotgun with Hopper or floating loosely through unnamed sidewalks, but this glamorous runway remains a location paradoxically precise and unfixed at the same time. Less a distinct point than a mobile abstraction, the Awards pre-show adopts a signifier for heads of state in order to transfer the same royal gravity to the men and women in front of the camera. Here, the red on which one stands rather than blood flowing through veins pronounces nobility, and celebrity is ordained by the pointed lens rather than the sword's blade. With location at its most symbolic, attention transfers to the effect of the red carpet on the beautiful people it frames, emphasizing their status as landmarks of Hollywood and, through Morris' film, Los Angeles itself. This device grants a

power to the celebrity that synthesizes the industry and the city, thus justifying the constant primacy of the camera in *Los Angeles.* Though the transparency of its lenses might seem passive and benign, the camera proves potent in its ability to confuse the city with its fiction-propelled media counterpart, as when gowned celebrities submit themselves to poised tripods and cranes.

Morris literally exposes much of Hollywood's equipment, but the conceit of the camera lens is further amplified by the film's ubiquitous glass imagery: an aquarium tank, a Lamborghini's headlights, the polished glassware of an outdoor bar. Still other objects gazed upon push back, as the same reflective facades in *Los Angeles*' filmed skyscrapers that confuse physical space and cinematic location also bar the viewer's entry into any concrete definition of the city (fig. 9). These surfaces of varying degrees of transparency enable Morris' cinematic expression while also contributing to the film's elusive content. Much of the commercial, architectural, and cinematic imagery of *Los Angeles* puts forth a reflective veneer, calling attention to the paradoxically transparent and reflectively opaque properties of glass. The artist offers tinted windows and shimmering jewels, glass surfaces that reject the advances of the viewer's gaze even while lenses and celluloid of the same material allow for the film to be made at all. Glass thus proves a fickle medium, able to counter its beholder as easily as it could bestow the world. Of course, cinema has at least somewhat harnessed the temperamental material, once passed through its barrier with the invention of the camera and then doubly extended through the windows of *Citizen Kane* by advances in depth of field.[11] This supply of reflective surfaces, tools of observing without being observed, is further complicated by tightly framed shots of water, shown in public fountains but acting as agent of blurry obfuscation for the viewer seeking Los Angeles through its public images (fig. 10). For answers as to what exactly the city so

[11] David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 56-7.

desperately desires to protect, one might find a clue in the image of a store's sunglass display, foreshadowing the accessories' ubiquitous appearance in the film. These one-way screens are worn as armor by the guarded West Coast elite while also allowing for the possibility that behind there is nothing (fig. 11). Like the closely managed images of celebrities, on display but at the same time only the product of a deliberately cultivated character, the inanimate figures to which Morris draws attention put forth a sense of intentionality and significance, even as they are passively constructed by the cinematic projector.

Morris' presentation of reflective objects and defensive celebrities matches the tensions inherent to her subject's ambiguous identity, a city which offers only its Hollywood image for licensed use. As it targets a Los Angeles imbued with this dual quality of revealing and reflecting, the camera of Morris' film sees much but penetrates very little, as buildings and tinted windows deflect outward rather than inviting its audience inward (fig. 12). Interestingly, the tension between revealing and obscuring was operative even in the film's production. Even the people who appear in the film, the vast majority actors and other makers of cinematic fantasy, evoke skepticism with their identities. Countless industry players appeared in front of Morris' camera on invitation from the filmmaker, though for this reason they appear on their own terms.[12] When appearances must be negotiated, authenticity is contaminated, and actions become deliberate. Thus, whether prompted by Morris or the actor himself, the viewer regards Hopper's image with the same cultural and monetary value as *Los Angeles*' high quality production grade. Morris has spoken openly about her experiences shooting the film, most often regarding her personal interactions with celebrities in order to gain their consent to appear on camera.[13]

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[12] Ezra Petrino and Stephanie Moisdon, "Bar Nothing by Sarah Morris," *Self Service* (Vol. 21, Fall 2004), 337.

[13] "They are so used to being in control of all of those elements that the idea of asking them to put their faith or trust in me and go into a context they know nothing about is astronomical, and it could be very dangerous for them. I

Though the filmmaker captures impressively intimate scenes with high-profile actors and producers, they appear at the cost of any unguarded vulnerability; rather, the individuals she films remain in constant control of their appearance, promoting the notion of confused reality through preparation and projection. Warren Beatty, for instance, who, while unseen, receives a credit, engaged in a prolonged negotiation with Morris regarding his possible participation.[14] This courtship period, while sidestepping any impersonal use of agents and publicists, remained amicable, intimate, but nevertheless enigmatic. Power roles clash from their first conversation, in which Beatty calls Morris at her *Parallax* studio.[15] The filmmaker notes that Beatty seemed constantly on guard about the details of his appearance in a way that suggested he was trying to figure out her "angle" in a Hollywood-induced power play. Similarly, a missed phone call from Beatty resulted in weeks of delayed communication, spite in the guise of a busy schedule. This play of authority permeates Morris' work from pre-production to the audience's reception. With their guarded approach, the celebrities of *Los Angeles* become nothing but their armor and, thus, as objectified as storefront sunglasses; similarly, the constant appearance of camera equipment suggests that the limitless layers of glass lenses between these images and the viewer serve the same function of distortion and covering. Just as these celebrities' appearances only seem to support their identity as titans of projection, deflection, and reflection, the cinematic medium likewise maintains its own guarded nature in *Los Angeles*: With every possible genuine moment comes the possibility, and then probability, of its being staged.

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mean, they don't know what it is I represent. So I think it caused trauma on the other side…. Some were successful; others…thought they were just too old to be an image. Vanity never dies." *An Open System*, 35-6.

[14] Gaby Wood, "Engaged and Not Engaged," *Sarah Morris: Los Angeles*, Ed. Cay Sophie. Rabinowitz (Köln: Galerie Aurel Scheibler, 2005) 17.

[15] Notably, the name references Alan Pakula's *TheParallax View* (1974), the New Hollywood thriller that partially defined the actor's own career, a name now procured by Morris.

V.

Of course, Morris is not the first to associate Los Angeles with projection and dissimulation. While *Los Angeles* targets the confusion between the film industry and the Hollywood Hills as a geographical location, Jean Baudrillard isolates the nexus of culturally informed unreality within the microcosm of Disneyland. As the red carpet encourages a view of Los Angeles as idea, it voids the city of its soil and replaces it with a concrete of the same transformative properties as Disneyland's plastic. Hollywood's reprocessing of urban landmarks into easily consumed images also has the same glorifying side effect as the saccharine, infantile sheen that coats the miniature mistranslations of old world castles and towns. Furthermore, Hollywood's voracious plunder of every variety of genre and period trope coincides with the densely packed, caricatured worlds within Disneyland, creating an "…imaginary [that] is neither true nor false; it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real."[16] These layers of untruth directly relate to Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum, which reveals the search for authenticity as futile, since authenticity is itself an effect – an idea that emerges from the back-and-forth between revealing and covering up.[17] Simulation blurs true and false precisely because it is not representation. In the example of a person's simulating an illness, he would thus need to produce symptoms. "…[T]he feigning or dissimulating leaves the reality principle intact: the difference is always clear, it is only masked; whereas simulation threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false,' between 'real' and 'imaginary.'"[18] Thus, once the actions of an illusion become reality, at what point is the illusion itself not a reality? Especially in the ever-ephemeral relationship between the celebrity and the filmgoer – our watching a man

[16] Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," trans. Paul Foss and Paul Patton, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Ed. Vincent B. Leitch, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001) 1741.
[17] Baudrillard, 1733.
[18] Baudrillard, 1734.

we will almost certainly never meet but through other strips of celluloid – the need for proof of truth loses urgency. Rather, the film industry's gears continue to shift in order to produce a simulacrum, a void encircled by evidences of the photographic image but whose obscurity remains always intact.

The process of constructing active images while perpetually sidestepping any concrete definition thrives in *Los Angeles* through its central concept of projection. Morris' film posits an urban landscape based upon familiar visual modes and images of Hollywood, that name itself only procured through synecdoche for the abstraction of the film industry. *Los Angeles* appropriates the visual product of its namesake in an attempt to convey a sense of substance behind the rapid flutter between showing and hiding. Even if in reality this Hopper is an impostor and the woman under the title screen a different person from the one in the following sequence – even if Morris shot the mirrored façade that piques our interest in another city in another country – viewers are compelled to buy wholeheartedly into the illusion as if reality. Morris in fact places an unfathomable distance between the exposed celebrity and the viewer, a divide we can sense but which *Los Angeles*' cinematic momentum encourages us to ignore at least long enough to follow its trail of images. The spectator's same sense of uncertainty which threatens to belie every apparently vulnerable appearance of celebrities, themselves projecting for the camera, directly corresponds to the technical apparatus of cinematic projection at large. Most essentially, the cinematic system of projection is constructed as an extension of the basic human function of perception, in which the eye accepts images through the transmission of light directed across an object. Once the viewer identifies this object as a work of art, however, a modification is made to this system which implies the intentionality of an artist as the object's creator as well as a communicational relationship between the artist and spectator, in which the

art object acts as mediator. In the case of a sculpture, that mediating device creates distance between the artist and the spectator; within the cinematic system, the abstract intentionality implied by the artist's construction and display of her object manifests itself through the more physical projection of illuminated images. This cinematic scenario, which photographic technology has rendered capable of conveying hyper-real visual images of all sorts, replaces as mediator the physical object with that of the screen. Here, distance – between spectator and artist; between the viewer and his understanding of just how congruently the images being projected align with his sense of reality – becomes both constructive and destructive, projecting a world which closely resembles the spectator's reality while at the same time negating that correlation with the unavoidable acknowledgment of a fictive element. This fiction resonates throughout, in terms of the genuineness of the subject's shown as well as the unstable physicality of the illuminated image itself. Los Angeles survives through private moments hidden from any screen, and so *Los Angeles* distracts from its naturally abbreviated, representational quality with perpetual movement from Clooney to Coppola to Century Plaza for the same reason that the projector needs the film to keep rolling: Obscure moments maintain the illusion that the viewer sees everything. In this way, the extension of basic visual perception by means of adding intermediary elements to construct the cinematic apparatus endows the projected image, a positive presence, with a tautological obscurity, an uncertainty which highlights its elusiveness while reaffirming its significance.

The construction of an acute though enigmatic sense of fiction, essential to the cinematic apparatus, sustains the potency of the illusionistic image within the spectator's reality. Any portrayal presented upon the screen may elicit some degree of skepticism, but a certain grounding of that projection within the spectator's reality remains necessary for general

conceivability. That is, without some tie to the ground, illusion floats increasingly higher, losing any impact that fiction might have upon the spectator. Just as a tenuous tie to reality enables the cinematic audience to believe that five boys racing downhill on mountain bikes could fly through the air a moment later, the spectator of Morris' film subscribes to the notion of George Clooney's debonair pose as document of reality – or at least close enough to reality to remain engaged with the projection. The viewer pieces together this belief from a film that creates distance as it proffers information. *Los Angeles* negotiates the spectator's acceptance of these projected illusions by contextualizing them among the unusually candid (Jada Pinkett Smith's expression a moment before the camera she plays toward goes live) and shockingly revealing (Bret Ratner, fully frontal and without pants or cut-away edits). These seemingly privileged perspectives inform the film at large, blending the spectator's acknowledgment of the image's artifice with its adherence to reality. Of course, just as the power of illusion requires the support of impending reality, inversely, that same grounding of an imaginary element propels verity beyond mere ocular perception. This mutual perpetuation of reality and illusion generated by projection illustrates in formal and structural terms the unstable nature of the simulacrum.

Between the isolated image and overriding cinematic system of projection, *Los Angeles* further promotes Hollywood as simulacrum through the properties of editing. By introducing sequence and activating a temporal property in the image, film's linear nature allows for projection's hybrid of fantasy and document to occupy a formal space that becomes an intersection of the illusionistic image and the rigid verity of the cinematic equipment. *Los Angeles* relies on the association of its shooting locations with the fictional spaces of Hollywood in order to create a confusion of reality; similarly, editing provides opportunities for intermittent breaks from an otherwise endless reproduction of linear time, allowing Morris to move from

Hopper to highway to red carpet rather than exert an even more conspicuous, *Empire*-like focus on one image. These literal gaps in continuity occur specifically at the divisions between individual frames of a celluloid film reel, which provide a physical counterpart to the voids opened by the covering-and-revealing movement of the simulacrum. With the ability to fluidly leap across time and space, the editor can manipulate these cuts for broader effects like pacing and momentum. Avant-garde filmmakers have historically isolated the cut as an essential property of cinema. While a lineage of filmed animation and manipulated materials born from early modernists thrived in the films of Stan Brakhage, and the concept of collage ushered in appropriation-based assemblage films, *Los Angeles*' projections rely upon the editing together of urban scenes shot solely by the direction of Morris. The film's high production value thus distracts from its inherent minimalism, which more closely resembles the dream-like wanderings of Maya Deren or the earlier Surrealists.[19] Though without any concrete narrative progress, Morris more rigidly constrains her images within the cinematic form, disallowing her hand in any space between the camera and editing bay. Of course, this focus on editing offers a common ground between Morris' invocation of both art and narrative film techniques, as Eisenstein's experiments in montage provided a foundation for both avant-garde and studio filmmakers. The influence of such variations on basic editing techniques by Eisenstein or, later, members of the French New Wave upon subsequent experimental and mainstream cinema suggests a powerful narrative tendency within even the most essential elements of the medium.[20] Hollywood often

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[19] James Peterson divides avant-garde filmmaking between three strains: the poetic, minimal, and assemblage. He argues that "… each of these strains challenges, without completely confounding, the skills viewers learn from experience with a wide range of other kinds of discourse, such as literature, painting and commercial films": James Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the American Avant-Garde Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 6.

[20] P. Adams Sitney illustrates the distance bridged by montage in recalling Eisentstein within a discussion of Peter Gubelka's reductively experimental *Arnulf Rainer* (1960), "… a montage of black-and-white leader with white sound (a mix of all audible frequencies) and silence": "In his criticism of Eisenstein's claim that the raw power of cinema resides in the collision between shots, Kubelka argued that the strongest connections are between frames…

utilizes an abundance of cuts in rapid succession to emulate a frenzied experience or maintain a single perspective for an extended time to convey a more mundane sense of reality. While no extreme styles of editing appear in *Los Angeles*, the lack of distraction by dialogue or energetic music makes the viewer more sensitive to these cuts. This hyperawareness of pacing for emotional cues conflicts with the film's relatively direct and unadorned images, inflicting an uncertainty of intention by the artist for the viewer.

VI.

As I have already discussed, Morris' cinematic mode finds a natural precedent in the early avant-garde film tradition of the city symphony. In *Los Angeles*, she amplifies Ruttmann and Vertov's emphasis on cinema's formal maneuvers over linear structure. This liberation of narrative instead allows hints of intention and meaning to appear, although isolated, intermittent, and sudden. Those moments of perplexity and those of possible clarity both occur within the spaces between frames, where juxtaposed images might connect as easily as clash. However, Morris' placement of this language within contemporary Los Angeles carries with it a more modern cinematic sensibility, both in terms of technology and of Hollywood's influence, to which narrative is essential. More evocative than the safe anonymity of the city symphony crowds, the viewer now faces questions of continuity, identity, and meaning: Who is this woman? Is it the same woman as before? If so, what does she signify for Los Angeles, or even for the film's next shot? Morris thus situates her viewer deep within each scene, unsure whether to trust the instinct to connect images or the skepticism that warns against such interpretation.

He would have us dispense with the very notion of the shot. What we call a shot, he points out, is a series of frames with weak articulations between them…": P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-garde, 1943-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 288.

How does one reconcile the erratic editing of the avant-garde with familiar tropes of the mainstream?

As I will argue in conclusion, there is a way in which mainstream film can be reconciled with the formal strategies of the avant-garde and, provocatively, the form of which I speak is both commercial and ubiquitous. Appearing on mainstream television and in droves at the movie theater before every commercial film, the film trailer – notable for its brevity and the sense of desire it inspires – integrates early cinematic strategies of montage with contemporary commercial ambitions. It also, as I will argue, provides an ideal form for Morris' *Los Angeles*, which uses it to incite interest and even desire. That is, as an abbreviated cinematic form which specializes in constant montage, the trailer deals in the void between edited frames and thereby becomes an effective extractor of the spectator's own ideal projections.

The feature film trailer rearranges fleeting glimpses of a complete, linear narrative to provoke expectations of plot, character, and tone. Likewise, *Los Angeles*' offers its viewer a succession of related motifs that evoke familiar forms of storytelling without producing explicit instances of such. Furthermore, the trailer's inherently commercial function appropriately reflects the society and industry depicted in the film's images. In addition to the uncertainty regarding the images within Morris' film, the specific assemblage of its shots notably follows the visual grammar of the trailer, a model whose brevity requires a reliance on the implication rather than the overt retelling of narrative. The contemporary trailer relies on the rapid editing together of seemingly disparate images to suggest a narrative whole, punctuated by tantalizing gaps. Such a trailer, for instance, often repeats similar structural motifs that mimic linear role of plot in the feature film. The first half embraces dialogue, putting music to the background in order to establish exposition and a tonal reference in terms of genre and traditional character cues;

however, despite flourishes of mixed emotions – e.g., playfulness, drama, and suspense – a midpoint arrives like the drop of a lynchpin to signal a much more forward-moving and visually extra-contextual second half. This second act builds to the finale and relies on the quick editing of shorter shots that, while now dictated by the presentation of the film's cast and characters, are more dynamic in both the actors' expressions and mise-en-scène. Thus, during this commercially arranged climax of images with music, the larger framework washes away, allowing the liberated snapshots to inundate the viewer with visual stimuli, each of which imply narrative possibilities and serve as more abstract, emotional capsules, existing on the border between the scripted text of the film and its resonance as a real cinematic product. That is, at this point when all images become emotional commodities – a soft-lit shot of an enticing woman holds the same appealing significance as a flawlessly timed tracking shot of a small-town roadside – the viewer simultaneously becomes more free to indulge in the pure emotion of the images. Here, smiles from characters that in the first half of a trailer appear in the contexts of conflict now appear unburdened by the vicissitudes of life and plot and, rather, gain an impossible elevation of unadulterated ecstasy. The audience infers a potentially equal joy within the edited shots of the feature film, a sensation simultaneously transferred outside the 35mm frame and adapted to cinematic and social experiences in general. That unfiltered joy, even as only a vague suggestion of an ideal, exhilarates the viewer and contributes to his conversation with the abbreviated visual text.

The effect of montage at the center of the trailer relies on the strength of what is shown to project and suggest potential, though ultimately uncertain, further action. When shown a woman walking, we partially attempt to visualize where she is going; if we are then suddenly enveloped by a fish tank, we adapt this new information into our attempted visualization. In the same way,

presenting a film under the title *Los Angeles* incites a hermeneutic challenge as soon as the first shot appears. Understanding that the viewer invariably fixates upon both the fragments shown and the void left by the breaking-up of the image, Morris makes specific editing choices which maintain a similarly ambiguous suggestion of meaning. The editing together of scenes that seldom fit into cohesive contexts forces the viewer to construct strings of connectivity that extend further with each additional shot. Importantly, *Los Angeles*' extended run-time breaks the most codified characteristic of the trailer, which relies on brevity in order to guarantee that the viewer is left wanting more. Indeed, at over 26 minutes, Morris draws out an inherently succinct, roughly two-minute form, affecting a monotony whose antithesis to the trailer prompts the viewer to recognize the effect of that form and consider desire as such.

The trailer exists as an assemblage of visual quotes from a larger work, with that primary text always in mind. In her book *Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers*, Lisa Kernan points out that "[t]railers construct a narrative time-space that differs from (and creates desire for) the fictive world of the film itself."[21] Thus, Morris' adoption of the trailer vocabulary hints at something more expansive, of which this film presents the highlights. A close shot of Hopper driving his car with no sound and unclear surroundings suggests the possibility of a larger scene, in which the actor plays a role that contributes to a connective story, in which he speaks or the camera zooms out for more spatial context. To extend that hope across the entire film, these segments suggest but fail to deliver the possibility of a cohesive story. In this case, the distant chance that we might understand the Hollywood mythos, might actually come to know "Jack" and "Dennis," and might realize a hidden potential in our own life, thus transcending the vagueness of all these words by actualizing our desires.

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[21] Lisa Kernan, *Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004) 10.

VII.

The trailer's effectiveness lies in its ability to elicit desire, but notably, that desire is for something absent and comparatively whole. Perhaps the theory of desire best suited to this material is authored by Jacques Lacan, who argues that the self is defined in relation to the projected image of the other, influenced by the individual's perception of a missing element within himself.[22] This inherent, subjective sense of lack, however, must be coupled with a desire to correct these insufficiencies in the name of wholeness. Perfection thus aligns itself with totality, an ideal whose essential impossibility forever leaves a blank space, open for our projection, which in turn always carries the chance for perfection. This sense of impossibility, a permanent obstacle between the ideal and its realization, allows the object of desire to remain beyond understanding and indefinable; this lack of definition allows for the projection of a possible ideal that could theoretically be attained. In this way, one is driven by the non-existence of some element but also, necessarily, the acknowledgment of its possible existence – a desire for it. The object of desire must be perpetually just-out-of-reach, defined by Lacan as the "objet petit a," an object unattainable and through its very unattainability eternally driving our desire. In fact, the obscurity of this object is strong enough to compel the subject to articulate its uncertainty as a loss, prompting a yearning for a piece that was never part of a whole self to begin with. To fully realize and name the object (and, thus, the futility of its being attained) would deaden subjectivity, which requires desire across an unbridgeable gap. While the object of desire requires obscurity, at the same time the goal of desire remains to overcome that obscurity and to realize wholeness through closure.

[22] Alice Lagaay, "Between Sound and Silence: Voice in the History of Psychoanalysis," *Episteme* (Vol.1, Issue 1: 2008) 60.

By definition, the trailer must be preoccupied with cultivating the viewer's desire for the product from which its fragments come. The particular object toward which it projects is the promise of a cohesive narrative in a feature film. This sense of wholeness, in line with Lacan's theory of desire, manifests itself in the cinematic product through tight pacing, logical progression, and, above all, a conclusive ending. This familiar structure itself establishes a common language between the spectator and the filmmaker, based on genre tropes, plot devices, and other signs of narrative expectation. Through the trailer's montage, we are presented basic elements with which we construct our own notion, though in the vaguest sense, of the most idealized film possible. As Kernan puts it:

> "The restriction of trailers to a few minutes of carefully selected and edited shots and scenes endows what we do see, from faces to car crashes, with a kind of pregnancy or underdeterminancy that allows audiences to create an imaginary (as-yet-unseen) film out of these fragments – we desire not the real film but the film we want to see."[23]

Here, the commonly repeated opinions that trailers are "better than the actual movie" or that "the book is better than the movie" hold weight: Both trailers and written fiction maintain a level of visual abstraction made concrete in the feature film. As this distance from actualization is closed, the space available for idealization and desire is also decreased. This is not to mention the possibility that feature films, never so fluid or fast-paced, are always imperfect versions of a trailers' fleeting, exciting glimpse at story. Morris' soundtrack establishes soft, non-intrusive tone, which further promotes the marketing goals of enticing without drawing attention toward the act of advertisement itself. The line between document and fiction is thus again blurred, as the marketing-conscious viewer focuses on the technicians behind the camera and the professional identities of the models in front. If *Los Angeles* is a documentary, it is one the

[23] Kernan, 13.

professional's work in the field of salesmanship, fantasy, and desire, before and behind the camera.

Perhaps it is already clear how the Lacanian notion of desire lends itself to the form and function of theatrical trailers, themselves advertisements and thus inherently tied to the commercial goal of enticement and desire-construction. The trailer's language of implication and suggestion manifests itself in the assemblage of fragments of a film, perceived by the viewer cyclically rather than as strictly linear narrative, thus constructing a scaffolding that suggests without defining a central object. That object is necessarily left a void, containing nothing but at the same time standing in for the possibility of the lost ideal – lost, implying that it does exist, without which ideal would dissolve within ungrounded fantasy. Although trailers suggest the broad outline of a cohesive narrative, the projections most important for the viewer are only implied fragments, relatable as parts of the larger movie-going experience: a seductive glance, a moment of agony, an act of violence. Sometimes the next shot seems to logically proceed; sometimes its context in the actual film completely alters its meaning.[24] In this way, the theatrical trailer uses fragments to gesture at a whole that the viewer must engage in and flesh out, using his own assumptions of genre, conflict, resolution, and even cinematography, based on past cinematic experiences and hopes for those in the future. *Los Angeles*' uncertainty regarding its own identity – as document, art film, criticism, love-letter, or otherwise – disorients the viewer by undermining these maneuvers. Even beyond a close-reading of the montage, certain cues might develop particular expectations. A film by a director with auteur status might, for instance, provoke excitement from a select fan-base, the members of which would gain interest in the film based on an elevated expectation; that hope of being further impressed, however, is a

[24] Kernan, 11.

vague expectation for quality, a general pleasure that by necessity cannot be anticipated. In this way, a cultural vocabulary of genre and artists functions similarly to more specific, formal cues like edits and camera movements. *Los Angeles* amasses an army of these cinematic signifiers in its actors, sets, and visual tropes, all of which convey through their familiarity a sense of meaning even though one is never explicit. Of course, were Morris to provide any more overt guidance through titles, dialogue, or linear editing, the clarification of intentions would make a predictable "exactly this" of her je ne sais quoi. To lift the lights would reveal that behind the reflective glass lies probably mundane offices populated by temps rather than lavish agencies with bustling stars. Logically, if desire must be hidden and yet somewhat known to be accepted as a possibility, Baudrillard's description of the cultural simulacrum as simultaneously covering up and revealing provides the quintessential vehicle for human drive. The viewer of *Los Angeles* thus leaves holding on to a scattered sampling of images from the film's entirety, but that confusion of overstimulation makes room for false memories willed into existence by anticipation. Through hazy recollection, desired answers to a woman's initial appearance in *Los Angeles* becomes as real as if she actually reappeared in the film, having now walked from her own reflected image to the person or camera she hopes to impress. Morris' presentation of Hollywood in the guise of Los Angeles takes advantage of these projective instincts, appropriately aligning form and content in a way that both overtly and surreptitiously manipulates cinema as a tool for sustaining desire.

As I have argued, the fleeting nature of desire lends itself to cinema's particular mode of illusion, rooted as it is in the concurrent affirmation and disavowal of the fictive image. Distinctly illustrated by trailers but also present in cinema at large, projection provides the ideal vehicle for the simulacrum in its paradoxical balance of presenting and obscuring the represented

object, yet the fragile system of illumination also mimics Lacan's characterization of human perception as desirous gaze. The simulacrum's effect sustains illusion for the spectator based upon a specific proportion of definition and ambiguity. While that active gap allows for innumerable suggestions to develop into possibilities for the viewer, most abstractly it offers the possibility of fulfillment of the quintessential object of desire, traced to infancy by Lacan with the concept of the mirror stage. Here, the subject first acknowledges his own self-conscious being, though in the regrettably rift-causing form of his image in the mirror, at a distance, and from an illusionistic perspective suggestive of an outside gaze.[25] Despite its dislocated, cyclical structure, *Los Angeles* does contain a finite beginning and end, properties as inherent to film as to the human life; however, at the film's point of origin, the cinematic eye first opens upon a mirror, a medium which complicates depth and eschews distinction regarding our glamorous woman and our sense of orientation at large. Thus, *Los Angeles* shares the same illusive origin as human subjectivity.

Los Angeles entices its viewer with obscured images, inciting a preoccupation with revealing the underlying image that hides behind this glass so elusive it may not be there at all. This same structure of windows and mirrors comprises the medium of film itself, and it permeates the glamorous projection of its Hollywood industry. Fixed upon a screen which adopts the same disorienting properties of the mirror, we inevitably elevate the cinematic image by means of the information it fails to give us. Morris' *Los Angeles* thus points a camera on the film industry and furthermore employs each of its own visual tactics upon itself. She multiplies the potent transparencies that push us away, but she avoids a linear path, instead allowing lines of vision to wrap endlessly around the land of celluloid and dreams. Within this system, the

[25] Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," trans. Alan Sheridan, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Ed. Vincent B. Leitch, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001) 1285-6.

illuminated fantasy infects not only our perception but solid ground itself, negating the physical landmarks of Los Angeles for the projected backdrops of Hollywood, provoking the question of which actually came first. Through this distance, we blur the distinction between ourselves and our objects of desire, and in seeking reorientation we never forget the self-affirming mirror of our infancy. Projected for us but met with our own desirous projections, these layers of mirror upon mirror encase the otherwise sharp image within an environment of uncertainty, through which the human spectator will always filter out disappointment and replace it with wishful thinking. For this reason, Morris only has to briefly point her lens a well-known starlet for us to see our better selves, at a desert for us to see a town of brilliant tinsel.

VIII.

Los Angeles ultimately fulfills the promise of portraying the city that has cultivated and now thrives upon its own visual form. Answering the challenge of representing a vast spatial and cultural network within a concise image, Morris turns to the more expansive cinematic medium. However, rather than exploit the abundance of precise, photographic pictures that film offers as a means of greater clarity, *Los Angeles* successfully depicts its namesake by echoing the cinematic experience throughout levels of form and content. Los Angeles, more than a collection of buildings or a community of individuals, reveals itself most accurately as a series of projected images. Though video artists have before deconstructed Hollywood treasures to distilled, objectified images, as in Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), Morris works solely with the constructive devices of the industry to subvert and call attention to its techniques. As a result, *Los Angeles* exists primarily within its celluloid frame rather than on a sculpture made from a projector screen. That identification as art object derives instead from its associated canvases,

which underscores the claim of portraiture even when engrossed within a medium that mimics experience. A complex system by necessity, the phenomenon of film requires both a revealing and obscuring in order to remain extant: a projection which constructs an image through the ghostly perception of transmitted light, a dynamic world created from reels riddled with regular gaps, an industry whose employees serves as public images yet never fully expose themselves. Los Angeles is a city whose physical materials are transmuted into Hollywood through the cinematic experience, and no still image can provide its sufficient visual abbreviation. Rather, Morris embraces this system of pans, scans, cuts, and perpetual movement, using its evasive actions to reveal itself as subject. Like her paintings that might form a fixed location if not for their dynamic line and color, Morris portrays Los Angeles as a series of pulleys and levers, a process made transparent so that its viewer might recognize it as process.

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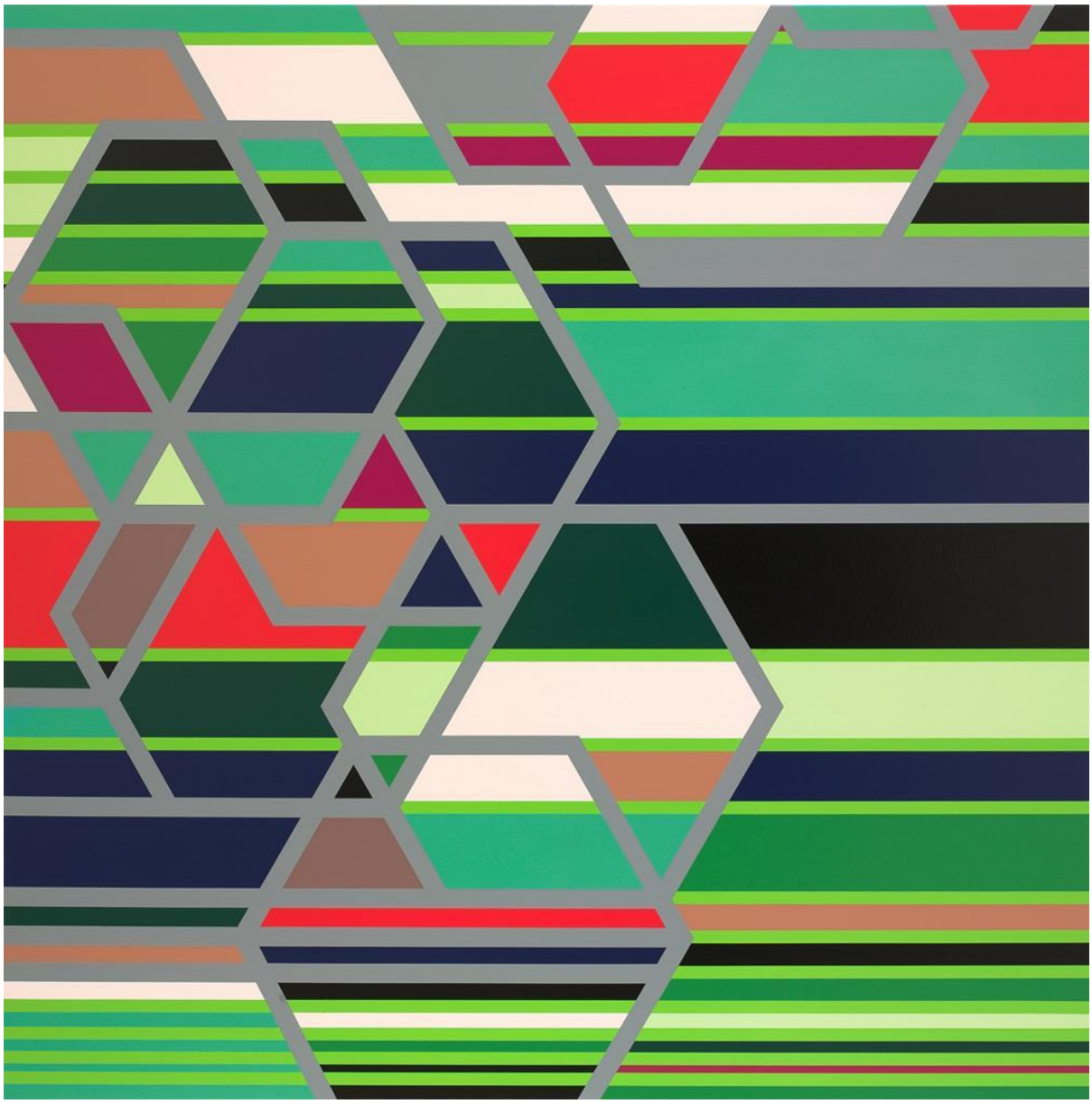

Figure 1 – Sarah Morris, *Creative Artists Agency[Los Angeles]*, Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 213.9 x 213.9 cm, Museum of Modern Art, 2005.

Figure 2 – Sarah Morris, *Midtown – Seagram (Fluorescent)*, Gloss household paint on canvas, 121.92 x 121.92 cm, Exhibited at Friedrich Petzel Gallery, 1999 (photograph by Larry Qualls).

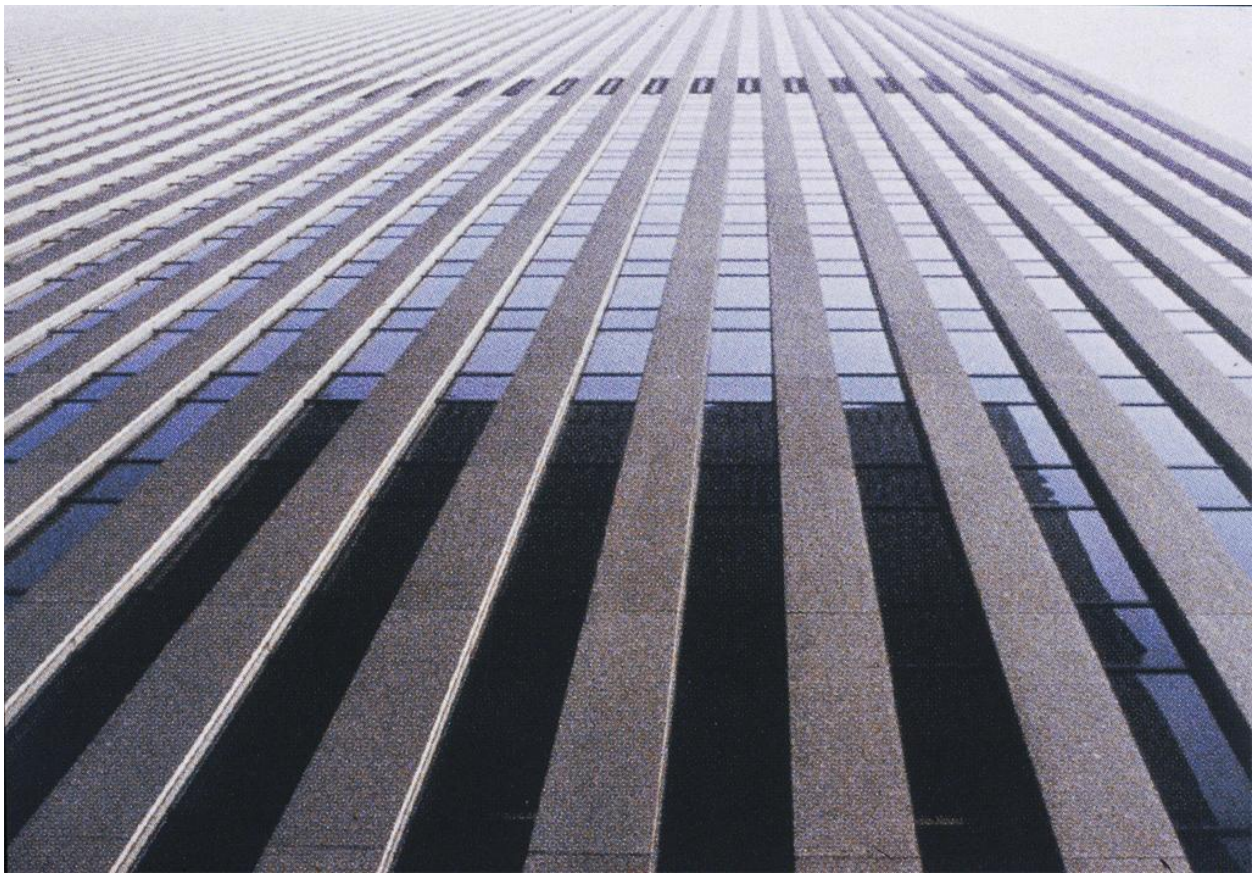

Figure 3 - Film still from Sarah Morris, *Midtown*, 16mm, DVD, 1998.

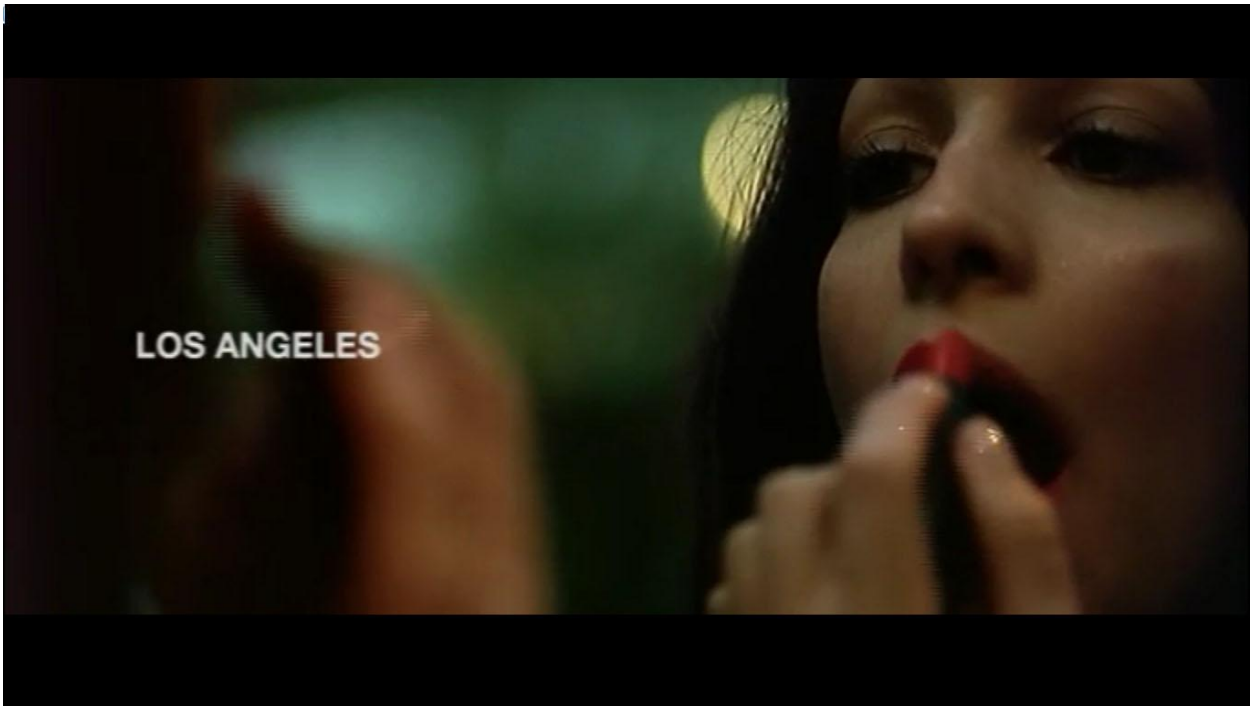

Figure 4 - Film still from Sarah Morris, *Los Angeles* (Title), 35mm, DVD, 2004.

Figure 5 - Film still from Sarah Morris, *Los Angeles* (Dennis Hopper), 35mm, DVD, 2004.

Figure 6 - Film still from Sarah Morris, *Los Angeles* (Red Carpet), 35mm, DVD, 2004.

Figure 7 - Film still from Sarah Morris, *Los Angeles* (Waving Goodbye), 35mm, DVD, 2004.

Figure 8 - Film still from Sarah Morris, *Los Angeles* (Robert Evans), 35mm, DVD, 2004.

Figure 9 - Film still from Sarah Morris, *Los Angeles* (Cityscape), 35mm, DVD, 2004.

Figure 10 - Film still from Sarah Morris, *Los Angeles* (Water), 35mm, DVD, 2004.

Figure 11 – Film still from Sarah Morris, *Los Angeles* (Sunglasses), 35mm, DVD, 2004.

Figure 12 - Film still from Sarah Morris, *Los Angeles* (Limousine), 35mm, DVD, 2004.