Crimes against urbanity: the concrete soul of Michael Mann
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Abstract: This article addresses the reimagination of urban space by the contemporary crime film. Through a case study of selected films by Michael Mann, it argues that the extreme stylisation of certain postmodern crime texts functions to aestheticise the industrial infrastructure of late capitalism, and that the genre offers a visual training through which generic sites of commerce, transit and industry (non-place) may be personalised, rendered habitable, and potentially reclaimed.

Keywords: Cinema; space; crime; the city; urban studies; Michael Mann; Los Angeles

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In his 1921 essay “The Hotel Lobby”, Siegfried Kracauer makes a suggestive point regarding the triangular relationship between detective fiction, urban space and modernity. For Kracauer, the hotel lobby was the paradigmatic modern space, a “negative church” (1995, p. 175) containing all the essential ingredients for a murder mystery. Crucially, it also offered a vantage point from which the everyday could “be exploited, if at all, aesthetically” (1995, p. 177, original italics).

The relationship between crime narratives and generic urban space is the central concern of this article, which will attempt to pose some tentative answers to a set of mysteries that lie at the heart of the contemporary crime movie – What are the aesthetics of detection? How do criminal fictions negotiate the postmodern city? Why do hotels, airports and train stations make such evocative crime scenes? And what can the genre teach us about the way we engage with our own urban spaces?

The films of Michael Mann are, I will suggest, exemplary of a tendency which is present, if unevenly distributed, across a large number of criminal fictions. The crime genre, particularly in its police-procedural and heist-movie variations, is in this sense a lens through which we can examine the mutually constitutive relationship between city-image and self-image. It aestheticizes the infrastructure of late capitalism through a dialectic of enchantment and defacement, providing a vantage point from which generic urban space can be reimagined as a site of fantasy.

I focus here on a selection of Mann’s crime films which, like all his work, exhibit a pronounced tendency towards spatial abstraction. My intention here is not to offer an appreciation of Mann’s work so much as to make a case for the crime genre’s capacity to function as a staging ground for spatial politics, a capacity which has implications for the way we visualize city space at the level of the everyday.

**On Concrete and Celluloid**

The contemporary crime narrative, as opposed to the traditional whodunnit, increasingly privileges spatial intelligence above all else. Missing persons, car chases, police raids, stakeouts, electronic surveillance – these generic tropes all revolve around the location of bodies within the urban environment. Before moving on to consider the way Mann’s films engage with the genre’s spatial imaginary, the following section of the article shall do two things: provide a brief overview of the intersections between spatial theory and screen/cultural studies, and offer some historical and cultural reference points for the particular variety of urban non-place so frequently inhabited by the crime genre.

Most work on “the cinematic city” tends to fall into one of the following three categories. First, various studies of early cinema have highlighted the reciprocal relationship of film and urban development at the levels of production, consumption and distribution. As both artefacts and catalysts of industrialisation, cinema and the modern city have been feeding off one another since the turn of the century, when rapid urbanisation in North America and Europe gave rise to a city-based workforce with clearly defined leisure time. Academic interest in the city-cinema nexus has often taken the form of renewed attention to a handful of exemplary texts, such as modernist “city symphony” films like Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) and René Clair’s *Paris Qui Dort* (1923). Much of this work has sought to track, through textual analysis or empirical
research, the ways in which cinema both facilitated and represented changing experiences of urban space (i.e. Arnowe & Lerner, 1997-1998; Clarke, 1997; Barber, 2003; Shiel & Fitzmaurice, 2003).

A second way in which the city has been mobilized as an area of inquiry within cinema studies is via phenomenology and spectator theory. The work of Giuliana Bruno (1997, 2002) and Anne Friedberg (1993) has been particularly influential in this respect. The latter’s notion of the “mobilized ‘virtual’ gaze” (1993, p. 2) is a useful model for the analysis of contemporary cinematic and televisual subjectivity. Drawing upon architectural, feminist and postmodern theory, Friedberg stresses the active nature of such a gaze – its visual flânerie – as well as its links with city-based practices of tourism and consumption. Bruno explores a similar terrain, examining the connections that exist between architecture and cinema (see also Vidler, 1996). For Bruno, cinema is “an inscription of spatial desire” (2002, p. 60), a “narrativization of space” (1997, p. 21).

A third branch of contemporary spatial theory comes in the form of what is sometimes referred to as postmodern geography. Drawing on de Certeau and Lefebvre, North American theorists including Edward Soja (1989, 1996), Sharon Zukin (1991) and Michael Sorkin (1992) have explored the contours of a new kind of city space – the sprawling, decentred, post-Fordist metropolis epitomized by Los Angeles and appearing in increasing numbers across the globe. A foundational text for this approach is Mike Davis’ City of Quartz (1991), a cross-disciplinary and painstakingly researched investigation into the histories – both real and imagined – of the City of Angels. Indeed, Davis’ more recent Planet of Slums (2006), along with the innumerable polemics of Paul Virilio (2005), provide a valuable flipside to some of the more romantic models of urban space through their close attention to the political economy of development, urban dysfunction and segregation, and, in Virilio’s case, the immensely important issue of technological relays between media, urban planning, and the military.

Such work often inhabits a productive space somewhere between screen studies and urban studies, constituting a dialogue which can be extended to consider such topics as the impact of media representations on property markets, the design of entertainment venues, technologies of spatial visualisation, the influence of cinematic texts in design discourse and practice, and, crucially, issues of media distribution. For the purposes of this essay, however, the discussion will be limited to the ways in which such issues haunt the films of Michael Mann, whose glossy crime epics engage this hybrid body of thought in interesting ways, and to what we as viewers might take away from this encounter. As hymns to the American Sunbelt city, Mann’s movies have a special relationship with the horizontal megalopoli theorized by Soja and his peers. Like many contemporary crime directors, Mann consistently privileges ostensibly empty, impersonal, outdoor spaces such as airports, car parks, gas stations and freeways, spaces that are as far away from “home” as one can imagine. These are the non-places posited by Marc Augé (1995) as the by-product of “supermodernity” – those generic urban sites which eradicate both difference and history, offering only “the shared identity of passengers, customers or Sunday drivers” (1995, p. 101).

The architectural iconography associated with non-place – malls, car yards, freeways, gas stations, and so on – has been used for a variety of ideological purposes throughout the twentieth century, and its representation in the contemporary crime film or TV series inevitably engages with these discourses to some degree. In other words, these spaces
have a representational history – and it is to this history that we will now turn. To this end, the following section attempts to draw parallels between seemingly disparate moments in twentieth-century cultural production in order to argue for the existence of a minor strand of anti-humanism (or proto-posthumanism) based around the fetishisation and occasional eroticization of non-place.

**Histories of Non-Place**

One of the most memorable moments in the cultural history of non-place occurred in Italy, 1910, when a group of Futurist artists and acolytes hurled 800,000 brochures into the air from the campanile of St Mark's. Entitled “Against Passéist Venice”, this manifesto called for the destruction of the city’s “stinking little canals” to make way for the mighty engines of industrialisation: “Your Grand canal, widened and dredged, will become, inevitably, a great mercantile port. Trains and trams racing along the roads constructed at last over your filled-in canals will bring you mountains of merchandise” (quoted in Tisdall and Bozzolla, 1977, p. 123).

The Futurist vision was one of unimpeded progress, the trammelling of nature under the wheels of technology. For Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and his followers, power stations and highways were the apotheosis of beauty. Speed reigned supreme, and science and war were two sides of the same coin. Despite becoming the officially sanctioned art of Italian fascism, Futurism never succeeded in realizing its grandiose architectural vision, Antonio Sant’Elia’s “new city” – a metropolis of straight lines, towering monoliths, massive industry and unrestricted mobility. Today – and to the benefit of us all – the Futurist cityscape lives on only in the imaginations of the road lobby and science fiction directors. Nevertheless, the Futurist moment lingers as a reminder of the cosy relationship between concrete-fetishism and authoritarianism that has existed throughout the twentieth century.

The Swiss-born architect Le Corbusier is also synonymous with a spatiality that now seems as radically anti-humanist as that of Sant’Elia. Le Corbusier’s legacy is the subject of much passionate debate from both admirers (Jencks, 1987; Tzonis, 2001) and detractors (Jacobs, 1960; Mumford, 1968). As outlined in his manifesto *The City of Tomorrow*, Le Corbusier’s utopian vision was to transform the slums of post-World War I Europe into cities “made for speed” (1971, p. 179). Such cities would feature high-density vertical development, standardized construction practices, grid-based urban planning and epic multi-lane freeways. Although Le Corbusier’s visions were largely unrealised, his theories influenced a generation of urban planners who saw in his project a cheap solution to public housing problems. However, the monolithic apartment blocks constructed after World War II throughout Europe, North America, Australia, and elsewhere have proven to be a disastrous effort at social engineering. The utopian minimalism of Le Corbusier quickly began to look more like “nightmare sterility” (Jay, 1994, p. 425), especially in the wake of the ecological and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

One other curious moment in the history of non-place comes to us via the British novelist JG Ballard, who returns to non-place repeatedly in his fiction. Ballard’s 1973 novel *Crash* is the story of a subculture of road accident survivors set in a London drained of its historical identity – a grey-skied empire of highways, overpasses, airports,
chain-link fences and car parks. These are all the icons of the Futurist city, but in Crash this “degraded landscape” (Burgess, 2004, par. 4) is stripped of heroic ambitions and invested instead with a kind of everyday ennui. Through unadorned, repetitive prose, Ballard injects a wilful perversion into this post-nuclear city space, sexualizing a sexless landscape: “Through the fading afternoon light the airliners moved across our heads along the east-west runways of the airport. The pleasant surgical odour from Gabrielle’s body, the tang of the mustard leatherette, hung in the air” (1995, p. 78).

Art cinema from the 1960s and 1970s continues this fascination/repulsion dialectic in a more ambivalent tenor. Godard’s Two or Three Things I Know About Her (1967) and Antonioni’s The Red Desert (1964) simultaneously aestheticise and critique the urban landscapes of post-War Europe – and, of course, the legacy of the Situationists and their tactic of derive has been very influential in these and other circles. Today, however, the non-places of (post)modernity are most commonly invoked as sites of emptiness. Few contemporary artists or filmmakers represent block housing or freeways as anything other than ciphers of alienation. Monolithic concrete structures and endless urban sprawl tend to function as spaces which threaten the very viability of the human subject, refusing any sense of intimacy or belonging. Matthieu Kassowitz’s La Haine (1995), Jem Cohen’s Chain (2004), Kristof Kieślowski’s Dekalog cycle (1989; see Labov, 2003) and Atom Egoyan’s The Adjuster (1992) all drive this point home forcefully. It is within this history of representation that the films of Michael Mann can be situated, and from which they depart.

A central claim of this article has been that crime cinema is especially well positioned to explore the secret life of industrial space. But what is the genre’s own history of non-place? Let us begin with film noir, which has always had a privileged relationship to the city – though its architectural lexicon is noticeably different from that of a film like Heat (1995). Generally speaking, noir privileges those city spaces which are “precarious and dangerous: rooftops, walkways on bridges, railroad tracks, high windows, ledges, towering public monuments (a Hitchcock favourite), unlit alleys, and industrial zones” (Christopher, 1997, p. 16). This claustrophobic cityscape mirrors its protagonist’s state of mind and finds its apotheosis in the modernist city par excellence, New York.

However, according to Edward Dimendberg (1995, 2004), a new type of spatiality began to emerge in late noir such as Hubert Cornfield’s Plunder Road (1957). “Centrifugal” space, characterized by horizontal rather than vertical development and sprawl rather than concentration, became a fact of life for an increasing number of American city-dwellers after 1930. It was reflected in the ubiquity of highways, suburban estates, industrial landscapes, shopping malls and “the type of extended development prevalent in southern California” (1995, p. 93). Consider West Coast crime films like Bullitt (1968), Point Blank (1967) and the Dirty Harry series (1971-88), which navigate a sun-drenched criminal megalopolis bearing little resemblance to the classic noir city. These movies reject noir motifs like staircases and dark alleyways in favour of a new, consumerist iconography – swimming pools, interior design and, above all, cars – set against the backdrop of an agoraphobic, technicolour city. This new vision more accurately reflected the urban experience of many Americans in the 1960s and 1970s, but it was also the result of certain technological and material factors, including the availability of new colour film stocks and the increased tendency towards location shooting that followed the decline of the studio system (Carringer 1998, p. 97). This space takes Los Angeles as its primary referent, but the centrifugal sprawl it maps could
be found in any number of cities. It is horizontal rather than vertical, fluorescent rather than chiaroscuro; its dystopic qualities stem from an aesthetics of absence, not excess.

Recall the memorable LA River assassination scene from *Point Blank*. The mise-en-scène here is an example of centrifugal spatiality at its most ostensibly alienating. Instead of claustrophobic alleyways, we encounter wide-open spaces and perfectly straight lines. Concrete stretches as far as the eye can see. Gone are noir’s shadows and night-shoots; in its place, a bleached sunlight that pervades every inch of the screen. This is Le Corbusier spatiality writ large, an architectural correlative to the casual brutality of the scene’s climax (assassination via telescopic rifle). Yet at the same time, there is a strange type of beauty here, and also an unrealised potential. As the next section of the article argues, in their aestheticisation of urban alienation films such as these also show us a way to overcome it.

**Michael Mann and “the deep purple glow of possibility”**

The agoraphobic cityscape recurs time and time again in the work of Mann, a director for whom centrifugal spatiality is a foundational condition. Often set in LA, Mann’s crime dramas obsessively map this faceless terrain, and like *Point Blank* they extract an emotional dividend from its blank industrial spaces through the interplay of two competing impulses: defacement and enchantment.

Mann’s *Manhunter* (1986), made during his stint as executive producer of *Miami Vice*, is based on the 1981 Thomas Harris novel *Red Dragon*, and like all Harris tales it features a complex plot that’s heavy on forensic detail. FBI criminal profiler Wil Graham (William Petersen) is lured out of retirement by his superior Jack Crawford (Dennis Farina) to help the Bureau track down serial killer Francis Dollarhyde (Tom Noonan), a yuppie psychopath who slays families in their homes. After a long and dangerous investigation, Dollarhyde is shot and justice prevails.

At the level of narrative, *Manhunter* is a formulaic paean to professionalism, to brooding alpha-males on both sides of the law. Graham is forever furrowing his brow and saying things like “This killing – it’s got to stop!” He is a model of masculine agency, a family man bound by duty. As such, he is the typical Mann hero: serious, solitary, sentimental. This aspect of Mann’s cinema appeals to some critics, who are impressed by his humanism and his melancholic tendencies (Combs, 1996; Butler, 1996; King, 1990; James, 2002; Sharrett, 2000; Sragow, 1999; Thoret, 2000). I tend to side with Adrian Martin who, though a devotee and a leading scholar of Mann, concedes that the director’s moralism “verges perilously on the cornball” (2004, p. 6).

However, as I have suggested, narrative is less important to the overall experience of crime cinema than we often assume. The paternalistic sentimentality of *Manhunter*’s plot-line functions primarily as a decoy, a sugar-coating that masks a more elemental appeal: the defacement of urban – and, in this case, domestic – space. *Manhunter*’s key crime scene is a modern, white, double-storey house. At the beginning of the film, in a sequence reminiscent of countless horror movies, we see the house from the killer’s perspective. In grainy Super-8 monochrome, a flashlight beam roams over carpeted stairs, passing over a stray toy, peering into a child’s bedroom, then lingering on a sleeping woman. Moody synthesiser music by Michael Rubin gives us a hint as to what
is in store for her. At this point, nothing remotely violent has happened, yet the sequence is positively terrifying because lighting, soundtrack and point-of-view conventions are telling us that this individual should not be here, that their presence in this family home is somehow wrong. Later in the film, we ascend these stairs and enter this room in full colour – we are now seeing the house from the perspective of Graham. This time around, the luxurious master bedroom looks more like a Pollock canvas: blood is splattered all over the bed and floor, defiling the room’s all-white décor. We see this murder scene in three quick reverse-shots from the investigator’s perspective, sufficient time to take in the horror of this gory tableau, but not long enough for our eyes to freely roam the room (a restriction that only increases our desire to see more). As he collects forensic evidence, Graham delivers a running commentary into his dictaphone (“Direction and velocity of bloodstains on the east wall indicate arterial spraying...”). Our third view of this space comes towards the end of the film when Graham returns to the crime scene one last time. Retracing the killer’s steps, Graham is now inhabiting the killer’s psyche. A phantasmatic vision of the slain mother gestures to him from the bed, her eyes blazing mirrors.

This room is more than just the space in which the story unfolds. Its meaning escapes narrative and generic constraints; it speaks on its own terms. What makes the defacement of this space especially interesting is the room’s social specificity. Like the interiors of Miami Vice, this bare, spacious room signifies wealth and style, and Mann’s high production values add yet another layer of gloss to this fantasy. Manhunter’s most potent pleasures stem from these perverse conjunctions of carnage and consumerism – bloodstains on shagpile carpets, sleek hotel lobbies and slashed throats, random violence and designer wardrobes. These are what Norman Klein, in a slightly different context, refers to as “consumer folkmares” or “savage reversals of the consumer act” (1997, p. 81) – taboo fantasies of urban delinquency. Indeed, if it weren’t for the film’s relentless moralism, Manhunter could almost be read as a satire in the vein of American Psycho (2000) – a black comedy about dream-homes and dead bodies, serial murder and sexy real estate, punctuated by ritual defacements of the spaces of late capitalism. In Manhunter, conventions of narrative and genre work to keep this impulse in check, but it lingers as a secret pleasure and an illicit promise.

This tendency is also present in Mann’s debut, Thief (1981), a film Jean-Baptiste Thoret in an extraordinary essay on Mann describes as “the bastard child of American hyperrealism, of an artificial America steeped in minimalist design but on which the wind of modernity will blow” (2000, n.p.). After being ripped off and bashed by the mob boss Leo (Robert Prosky), our career-crim protagonist (James Caan) exacts a spectacular revenge. He abandons his wife and adopted child, and proceeds to petrol-bomb every link to his past: his suburban kit-home, a bar where he conducted his business, and a giant car yard. Leaving a fleet of Cadillacs burning behind him, Frank then drives to Leo’s suburban home and proceeds to shoot his boss’s chest out all over an expensive shagpile carpet. The bizarre juxtapositions of the film’s climax – family cars and fire-bombs, dream-homes and dead mobsters – derive their power from the defacement of urban space, both commercial and domestic. As in Crash and Point Blank, Thief’s defilements encourage us to appreciate urban alienation as an aesthetic object, laying it before us like some kind of bloody prize.

Mann’s later West Coast crime films, Heat and Collateral (2004), use a similar aesthetic for a different purpose again: the enchantment of everyday urban space. These two
films are distinct in many ways – *Heat* is a dry, glossy heist movie with a cast of hundreds, while *Collateral* is a nocturnal character-study structured around a hitman narrative. However, they share a common muse: the city of Los Angeles.

LA is more than a setting here; it is a structuring trope, a visual fetish and a lead character. To properly understand these films we must first consider the ways in which they engage with what Jude Davies (2003) has dubbed “the LA symbolic”. Los Angeles has a very special place in the cinematic imaginary. Initially favoured by film producers for the visual genericity of its landscape, its agreeable climate and its unregulated labour market, the city has become the default setting for a century of American cinema. Over the years it has acquired a paradoxical character, an identity that revolves around its purported lack of identity. While notable exceptions exist (*Chinatown* [1974], for instance, or independent films including Charles Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep* [1977] and Thom Andersen’s *Los Angeles Plays Itself* [2003]), cinematic representations of LA tend to engage less with the city’s social and historical realities than with its mythologies, and especially with what Davis (1991) posits as their two opposing logics: sunshine and noir.

On the one hand, Los Angeles is frequently imagined as a city where the sun never stops shining, a Protestant paradise of easy money, palm trees and designer boutiques. In many ways this is the contemporary incarnation of the fantasy that fuelled immigration and property speculation in the area throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries – an Arcadian natural past wedded to a Utopian freemarket future (McClung, 2000). The flipside to this spatial fantasy is the recurrent nightmare of dystopian LA, the city as gangsta ghetto (*Colors* [1988], *Boyz n the Hood* [1991]), sci-fi hell (*Bladerunner* [1982], *Escape from LA* [1996]) or interracial battleground (*Falling Down* [1993], *Training Day* [2001]).

Cultural theorists are equally fond of fetishising Los Angeles. Since World War II, European critics from Sartre (1982) through to Baudrillard (1988) have approached LA with a mixture of awe and suspicion, reading the city through prisms of alienation/fragmentation and simulation respectively. The general thrust of these arguments is that the decentred urban planning model epitomized by Los Angeles is anathema to humanist values; that, like Augé’s non-place, LA eradicates identity, history and community and leaves in its place empty sites of industry and consumption. LA is thus profoundly generic, but in its hyper-genericity it is unique.

Davies argues against this “symbolic overdetermination” of Los Angeles on the grounds that it has given rise to its own set of erasures, including a suppression of the racial dynamics of urban space. Davies’ point is a valid one, but I tend to believe that the collective screen-dream of LA has certain uses, that it has a kind of untapped potential. Like it or not, Hollywood narrative cinema is the closest thing we have to a global vernacular, so the LA symbolic, while indeed a problematic spatial fetish, has functions that are not predetermined by the narrative structures or industrial contexts within which it is embedded. Deployed and consumed critically, the LA of crime cinema can become a site for collective spatial dreaming.

Mann’s LA crime films are obsessive in their level of geographical detail. With the significant exception of *Collateral*’s Vincent (Tom Cruise), Mann’s protagonists know their city as intimately as a lover: *Collateral*’s Max (Jamie Foxx) is a cab driver; Al
Pacino’s character in *Heat* (also named Vincent) is a homicide detective; his nemesis Neil (Robert De Niro) is, like Frank, a career criminal with extensive knowledge of traffic flows, getaway routes, and public transport. In both films, this obsessive attention to detail co-exists with another impulse: the invocation of LA as myth. Consider the following excerpt from a *New York Times* interview, in which Mann discusses his love of Los Angeles using terms which reflect his engagement with the LA symbolic:

> LA is electively urban. The internet is metaphor for LA. There are domains here, and there is no limit on capacity or cultural density... LA, especially at night, has the deep purple glow of possibility. Anything can happen. And that doesn’t last. (Hirschberg, 2004, p. 38)

This “possibility” is the key to *Heat* and *Collateral*, which reimagine the LA cityscape as a site of enchantment while leaving its mythical hyper-genericity intact. They relentlessly aestheticise that specific type of urban alienation so widely associated with LA, transforming it from a humanist tragedy into a new mode of spatial belonging.

*Heat* is shot over eighty different locations, almost all of which are sites of transit or commerce – freeways, underpasses, car yards, diners, shipping yards, a truck stop, a power plant, a train station, a car park, a high-rise office, a motel, an oil refinery, and so on. These various locations are stitched together through aerial shots, spectacular helicopter sequences that make LA look like a giant circuit board and which function to compress the landscape into manageable proportions (Cho, 1998, p. 145). The iconography of mass transit recurs consistently: the film begins at a train station and ends on an airfield at LAX airport. (This trajectory is reversed in *Collateral*, which opens at LAX and ends at a train station.) However, what is more significant than the spaces themselves is the way Mann renders them. The frequent use of static long shots, a blue-grey palette, a dry, arid lighting design, a score that oscillates between oceanic electronica and Glenn Branca’s dissonant guitar instrumentals – all these elements conspire to bleed the aforementioned sites of any residual homeliness or personality, only to replace it with a strange kind of majesty that stems from these sites’ purported genericity. Even the domestic interiors are sparse and minimalist. Neil’s bachelor pad is an interior-design fantasy, all sea views, bare floors and empty cupboards. (This exemplifies what Sue Turnbull [2006] cleverly refers to as *film bleu* – Mann’s update on *film noir*.) His accomplice Trejo lives in the quintessential Le Corbusierian dwelling – a modernist panopticon on stilts.

*Heat* pushes at the edges of the LA symbolic and locates a kind of urban sublime within these spaces of ostensible alienation – it offers us a glimpse of the infinite possibilities of city life, a dizzying encounter with the pleasures and contradictions, experiential and aesthetic, of the postmodern metropolis. It is full of minor moments of urban surrealism – huge mounds of yellow powder, blue pendants fluttering in the wind mid-gunfight, conversations about the iridescent jellyfish of Fiji... These moments are always narratively contextualized so as not to draw attention to themselves and operate as cumulative gestures rather than declarative statements, but they nonetheless provide an opportunity to disengage from the forward thrust of the narrative and explore the urban space of *Heat* at the level of light and colour rather than law and order.

*Collateral* operates around the very same logic as *Heat*: it takes the trope of LA-as-non-place as its starting point, then proceeds to enchant this mythical space. In *Collateral*,
the first stage of this process is explicitly spelled out by Vincent (Tom Cruise), a hitman from out of town. Just before he enlists Max as his unwilling chauffeur for the night, Vincent delivers the following monologue on LA:

Whenever I’m here I can’t wait to leave. Too sprawled out, disconnected...
Seventeen million people. This is a country – the fifth biggest economy in the world – and nobody knows each other. I read about this guy, gets on the MTA here. Dies. Six hours he’s riding the subway before anybody notices his corpse doing laps around LA. People on and off, sitting next to him. Nobody notices.

Coming from the mouth of a hired hitman, this anecdote is obviously ironic, but it neatly sums up the symbolic departure point of both Heat and Collateral: LA as alienation central. Max’s taxi is the film’s key set-piece and metaphor – it never sees the same passenger twice. As we soon discover, Vincent has five assassinations planned in five different parts of LA, and one night in which to do them all. Hence the whole pretext of the film is an excuse to go travelling through the LA nightscape, making Collateral a road movie without a destination.

As Augé argues,

movement adds the particular experience of a form of solitude and, in the literal sense, of ‘taking up a position’: the experience of someone who, confronted with a landscape he ought to contemplate, cannot avoid contemplating, ‘strikes the pose’ and derives from his awareness of this attitude a rare and sometimes melancholy pleasure. (1995, p. 87)

This self-consciously touristic gaze is the dominant visual logic of Collateral. Even though the two leads spend the majority of the film inside the cab, things rarely get claustrophobic, for the camera spends much of the time gazing out the windows at the sleeping city – the gleaming mirror-glass skyscrapers of New Downtown, the neon-lit groceries and video stores, the empty service stations, and, of course, the freeways. As in Heat, a series of majestic aerial shots stitch this disconnected cityscape into a more or less coherent whole, underscoring the city’s status as the film’s central character.

Like Heat, Collateral also includes several visually arresting moments which verge on the surreal. One example of this is the sequence in which Max and Vincent drive out to a Latino bar called El Rodeo. Along the way, they pass a collection of oil refineries lit in shades of green and yellow and set against a backdrop of chain-link fences and open space. Smoke billows up in all directions while operatic trip-hop fades in on the soundtrack, creating one of those quintessential Mann moments when lighting, sound and cinematography conspire to endow the infrastructure of late capitalism with a brutal kind of majesty. Later, Max is driving down a deserted stretch of generic LA asphalt when a lone coyote strides into the middle of the road. It’s a curious sight – a wild creature within the concrete wilderness – and lengthy reverse-shots from the perspective of both characters emphasize its incongruity.

These unexpected encounters with the urban sublime represent a new way of reading the non-place that surrounds us, those spaces of commerce, transit and industry in which we may spend a substantial part of our lives. They represent a new urban sensibility, a retraining of the senses powerful enough that we may never look at a
freeway or railway station in the same way again. If space permitted, an analysis of the ways in which other filmmakers have exploited this potential would no doubt reveal even more about how sites of industry, transit and commerce have been reimagined within genre cinema. In the absence of such comparative work, I would like to suggest in closing that the content of any given film (its narrative, its tone, its moral posture) is never related in a predetermined way to what that film may have to say about urban space. Both Heat and Collateral are violent, brooding, macho films, but their spatial politics are humanist, even Romantic. As I have argued, both films – Collateral especially – display a sensitivity to the emotional dimension of architecture, to the dreams and fantasies encoded in all urban space; and in their relentless aestheticisation of urban alienation they show us a way to make the city our own.

Although I have focussed throughout this article on the work of a single director, the element of spatial fantasy which permeates Mann’s movies is present to some degree in a vast number of post-noir crime movies. Directors such as William Friedkin, Abel Ferrara and Brian de Palma all relentlessly aestheticise the urban experience. So too do a vast number of Hong Kong crime movies, which continue to set new standards in their creative reinvention of the cityscape. (The films of Johnny To and Andrew Lau are particularly impressive in this respect.) And some of the most interesting texts to have navigated the urban sublime are the innumerable B-grade straight-to-video crime films from the 1980s and 1990s which present us with a cityscape that manages to be tawdry, terrifying and transcendent, all at the same time.

I’ve suggested here that the simultaneously delinquent and romantic spatiality of much crime cinema is worth taking seriously for its capacity to teach us new ways of imagining the cities around us. In this sense, the reading position that I have outlined here is essentially a compensatory pleasure for city-dwellers who lack the power to influence urban planning policy or practice: it is not a template for responsible city planning. Nonetheless, I would like to think that this criminal imaginary need not necessarily operate in the service of a nostalgic rejection of non-place in favour of less industrialised sites, but rather in the name of a new engagement with the fantastical element of city space, with its manifold contradictions and potentialities, and with the deep purple glow of possibility locked away in every inch of the urban landscape.

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1 Due to space limitations, Mann’s extraordinary Miami Vice remake (2007) will not be discussed here.
2 Critics of his work have rightly suggested that Augé’s rather totalising rhetoric ignores the range of possible identifications and relationships that exist between individuals and non-places (Dovey 1999, p. 50; Merriman, 2004; Morley, 2000), but his conceptualisation of non-place is, nonetheless, a suggestive model for the kind of everyday urban experience fetishized in crime cinema.
3 Ballard’s book was adapted for the screen, rather controversially, by David Cronenberg in 1996. See Sinclair (1999) for an excellent commentary on both versions, one to which this analysis is indebted.
4 Adrian Martin’s review of Collateral (2004), published in Melbourne’s The Age, was the first to make the connection between the work of Dimendberg and the cinema of Mann.
5 An unremarkable remake bearing the novel’s original name, directed by Brett Ratner and starring Ralph Fiennes, was released in 2002.
6 This essay was translated by Anna Dzenis, who published several of the first essays on Mann (i.e. 2002) and whose book on Mann is forthcoming.
7 Andersen has also published numerous essays on filmic representations of LA, including a piece on Collateral (2004).
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**Filmography**
The Adjuster (1992), Atom Egoyan
American Psycho (2000), Mary Harron
Berlin: Symphony of a Great City (1927), Walter Ruttman
Bladerunner (1982), Ridley Scott
Boyz n the Hood (1991), John Singleton
Bullitt (1968), Peter Yates
Chinatown (1974), Roman Polanski
Collateral (2004), Michael Mann
Colors (1988), Dennis Hopper
Dekalog (1989), Kristof Kieślowski
Dirty Harry (1971), Don Siegel
Escape From LA (1996), John Carpenter
Falling Down (1993), Joel Schumacher
Heat (1995), Michael Mann
Killer of Sheep (1977), Charles Burnett
Los Angeles Plays Itself (2003), Thomas Andersen
Manhunter (1986), Michael Mann
Paris Qui Dort (1923), René Clair
Plunder Road (1957), Hubert Cornfield
The Red Desert (1964), Michelangelo Antonioni
Two or Three Things I Know About Her (1967), Jean-Luc Godard
Thief (1981), Michael Mann