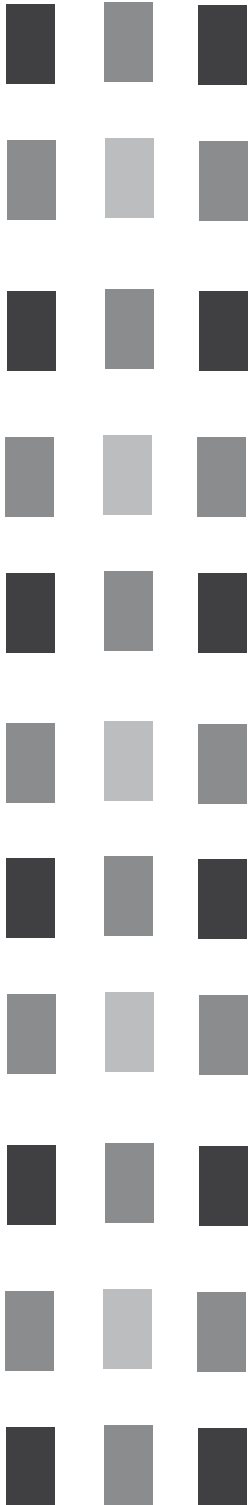


# Spaces of Momentary Encounter in the Generic City

Cross Media Analysis

*M. Eric Gamble*



In the concrete reality of today's world, places and spaces, place and non-places intertwine and tangle together. (Marc Auge)

The space of appearance is the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly. (Hannah Arendt)

Over the last few years I have collected images, moving and still, actual and virtual, of the disconnected spaces which appear within and outside of many rapidly expanding cities (fig. 1). Known in totality as the Generic City, these spaces are potentially emblematic of the search for self in a fractured, endlessly repetitive, desensitized world. Places of transit, gaps and spaces in between domestic and occupational life, and other places of momentary encounter are components of the discontinuous remains of contemporary life and figure prominently in the articulation and construction of (sub)urban subjectivity. Banal yet potentially deeply symbolic, within these gaps meaningful communicative space between individuals is problematized. On the one hand, these non-places are both the by product and generator of the disconnection and solitude which arise from supermodernity. On the other, the ethereality of empty space holds the possibility and promise of a more satisfactory world and unlimited control.

These layers of spatial reality, alluded to in the colloquium introduction, contribute to the construction of the social. But are these residual, history-less spaces remedial? What do they signify? What is envisioned and represented, seen and said? In terms of behavior, perception and information, these ever-present spaces lead to no-where or what-ever. In fact, 'traditional' social life is non-existent. The question is, what new forms of social interaction are to be found in the Generic City and what role do new media play in this construction? Media in many respects supercedes architectures original capacity to convey meaning.

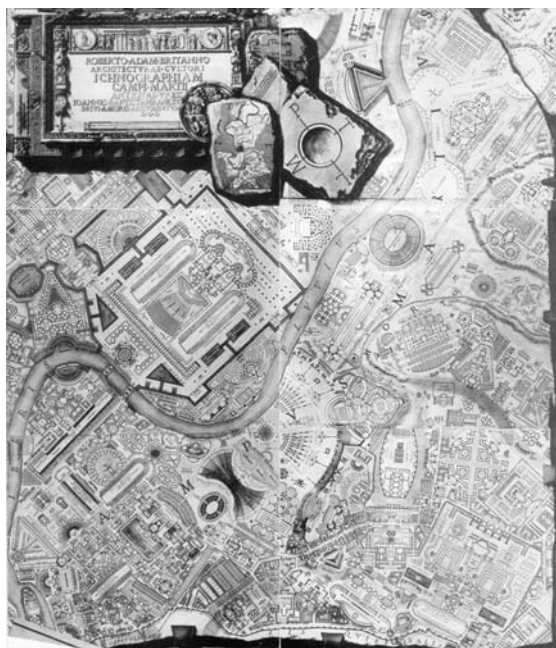


1 | Atlanta Highway, 2003

Place erodes into a fluctuating reality where nothing is clear and the possibility of 'gathering' is lost. To Deleuze, "any space whatever"<sup>1</sup> are the disconnected or empty spaces which appeared in cinema after World War II – mirroring demolition, reconstruction, waste lands as well as undifferentiated urban tissues along proliferating auto oriented industrial areas. These "any space whatever," most importantly, have no coordinates and break the narration of actions and the perception of determinate places. In this sense, they are pure potential.

Cinema is an important vehicle for this exploration, having the capacity as an ideological apparatus to induce an artificial psychosis, a mechanically reproducible and repeatable representation of an elsewhere and an elsewhere – a representation possibly mistaken for perception. These filmic spaces can encapsulate and release vast forces of disintegration, opening up something too beautiful, intolerable, powerful, unbearable or unjust, and potentially profoundly empty. In these non-place regimes, one finds the cleared path of self-discovery through the virtual, without the weight of complicated narratives or necessary contexts (fig. 2).

The accompanying alienation, however, creates an intricate dialogic between displacement and anchoring, despondent fantasy and erotic impulse, criminal violence and moral discipline. In our excavations of the life and history of the metropolis, spaces lived by each of us serve as precise material replicas of the internal consciousness, or rather the unconsciousness of the dreaming collective. This episodic revealing conjures images and memories



2 | Campo Marzio, Piranesi, 1762

defined by Walter Benjamin as "telescoping the past into the present". Deterritorialization, the nomadic subject, gendered and interstitial space are the focus of this essay. Photographs and cinema construct/capture new experiences of space and time.

### Memory and Alienation

Mass industrialization, railroad travel and cinema forever altered the experience of moving through space. The cityscape became a series of fleeting impressions and momentary encounters. No longer understood as static perspective or as a centered and composed picture, the city was recognized as a place of machinic, multi-dimensional traveling. Two notable examples: Dziga Vertov's *The Man with the Movie Camera*, (1929), or *Berlin: A Symphony of a Great City*, by Walter Ruttmann (1927). This new visual sensibility depended upon the traveling eye, a cosmic reordering of the world that inverted the notion of interior and exterior, exposing strange juxtapositions of fragmented and paradoxical views. The locus of desire in the city and a determinate feature of modern urban life were the rapidly changing streets and boulevards, and the new spaces and structures of commodity exchange, entertainment, and transit.

Edward Hopper's distillation of metropolitan life clearly relates to the cult of distraction portrayed by Benjamin through photographs and cinema (fig. 3, 4). Like Eugène Atget's empty streetscapes of Paris at the turn of the century, Hopper's paintings trope the subversive nature of photographs, and embody the profound alienation embedded in the urban experience. His powerful, often symmetrical compositions of the everyday are enigmatic and searching, delineating strong connections between the face and body of the city, and the construction of consciousness.

French filmmaker Chantal Akerman, whose cinematic oeuvre is acutely connected to the pace of life in the metropolis as well as the desires of the female subject's relation to spaces of transit and power, is similarly very aware of the cogency of the cinema and its correlation to paradigms of me-

memory and aura. As an underlying theme throughout *Le Rendez-vous d'Anna* (1980), and *News From Home* (1977) Akerman attempts to explicate the spaces of our collective temporal cognition to include an account of the cumulative psychic effects of film going and its impact on our conception of time, space and the past.

Benjamin, borrowing from Freud, found that consciousness protected us against the stimuli and shocks of everyday existence ensuring pernicious memory traces did not register. By lingering in the interstitial space of the everyday, Hopper records the unconscionable and the relentless longing of reminiscence. Akerman masterfully appropriates the medium of cinema as an agent for expanding the archive of voluntary memory and reducing the play of involuntary recollection. In *Le Rendez-vous d'Anna*, Anna desires to exist in this state of distraction and, always bordering on vagrancy, moves through a series of generic, indiscernible spaces: hotels, the motorway, restaurants, underpasses, train stations, automobiles. Like Hopper's *Western Hotel* these non-places demolish sense regimes of place/memory and history, instead memorializing movement, speed, and the eternal present (fig. 5, 6).

Deleuze further expands Benjamin's notion of the telescopic capacity of film through what he calls the crystal-image, which is the foundation of the time-image. Think of photographs or filmic excerpts that combine the history of the recorded event with the immediacy of its viewing: the crystal-image is the indivisible unity of the virtual image and the actual image. David Rodowick sums up the time-image as a fluctuating actual and virtual image, imbued with memory traces, confused



3 | Edward Hopper, *Western Hotel*, 1930



4 | Eugene Atget, *Rue Galande, April 15, 1899*



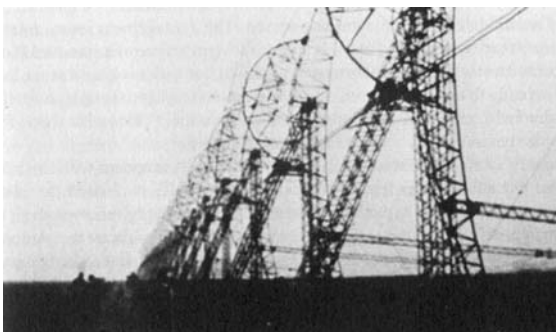
5 | *Buford Highway Bus Stop*, 2003



6 | Still from "*Le Rendez-vous d'Anna*", 1980



7 | Still from "*Paris, Texas*", 1987



8 | Still from "*Red Desert*", 1968

mental and physical time, actual and virtual, and sometimes marked by incommensurable spatial and temporal links between shots. The actual image is objective, in the present, and perceived. The crystal-image always lives at the limit of an indiscernible actual and virtual image.<sup>2</sup>

The Italian Neo Realist filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni's interest in the reduction of narrative to a series of strong geometric compositions, sounds, and the interplay between the banal and the extreme, intimately relates to the suturing together of memory and indiscernible space. *L'Avventura* (1960) depicts neurotic, alienated and guilt-ridden figures portrayed through minimal narrative and maximum visual and aural saturation. To Antonioni "(This film is) neither a denunciation nor a sermon. It is a story told in images, and I hope people will be able to see in it not the birth of a delusory emotion but the method by which it is possible to delude oneself of one's feelings." Deleuze summarizes that idle periods in Antonioni, beyond showing the banalities of daily life, reap the consequences of the effect of a remarkable event that is reported only through itself without being explained. The method of report in Antonioni conjoins idle periods and empty spaces: drawing all the consequences from a decisive past experience, once it is done and everything has been said. Subjective and objective connections blur, distinctions between and imaginary and real are lost. Indiscernibility dominates. Characters oscillate in empty and deserted spaces (fig. 7, 8).

In *Paris, Texas* (1987), director Wim Wenders further pursues displacement through the road movie genre, a staple of American culture and endemic of our fascination with the myth of the wanderer. The opposition between memory and amnesia continuously unfolds through the story's central character, Travis. He appears from nowhere in the vast American Midwest landscape, and his inability to recollect is continually reinforced by his surroundings. He is literally lost in the physical and familial landscape of his birth (fig. 9, 10). Burdened with layers of history, yet refusing recollection, Wenders' character is constantly under



9 | Still from "*Paris, Texas*", 1987



10 | Atlanta Aerial Photo at the periphery, 1998

attack and ultimately finds it impossible to reenter his past. Traveling from inauthentic marker to inauthentic marker without feeling the need to poses 'authentic' life by totalizing the markers into universal and unmediated vision, the wanderer renders impertinent any opposition between rest and motion, between domicile and travel. Michel De Certeau argues that for the nomad, the space of transit is the only space of order, an immobility. The unchanging traveler is pigeonholed, numbered and regulated in the grid or flow of the city, making possible the production of an order in transit, a state of reason.

Memories are dependent on the cinematic apparatus: recorded and replayed. In *Paris, Texas*, through 8mm home movies, In *Until the End of the World* (1985), through the application of complicated technologies that record and replay dreams. Storytelling and travel frame the central problem of memory/technology and the ways in which the contemporary subject is confronted by a 'disease' of images and the ensuing challenges of decipherment. Basic to a profound modernity, compounded by visions of lived experience and our condition as voyeur, we look at the cinema screen or the picture frame moment to moment, existential, scopophilic.

The city I live in is not the embodiment of civic art, it is a collection of mechanized systems, governed by the laws of high speed transportation infrastructure. Media space and spaces of consumption are the surrogate domains of that visceral "space of appearance" described by Hannah Arendt. Virtual space supplements the lack of gathering space, yet the a-historical imperative of the modern narrative results in architectural and urban projects characterized by a breach in space and time with context – large gaps remain.



11 | Still from "Paris, Texas", 1987



12 | Still from "L'Eclisse", 1962

### Duration and Depth

"... the cinematic apparatus implies not only the passage of time, a chronology into which we would slip as if into a perpetual present, but also a complex, stratified time in which we move through different levels simultaneously, present, past(s), future(s) -and not only because we use our memory and expectations, but also because, when it emphasizes the time in which things take place, their duration, cinema almost allows us to perceive time"<sup>3</sup>

The duration implied in Atget's photographs become pervasive in the work of Akerman and Antonioni, who fundamentally restructure spatial and temporal relations by deploying long shots and avoiding conventional close up and 180 degree camera movement. For example, in the opening sequence of *Le Rendez-vous d'Anna* (fig. 11, 12), we move from the silence of the opening credits to a long, symmetrically balanced shot of the train platform. We are forced to look and to wait, literally for minutes as Anna waits for the train. As the

train arrives and she steps into our frame of vision with the crowd, the camera holds the same position, and maintains this distance as she walks into a phone booth to place a call. In Antonioni's trilogy – *L'Avventura*, *L'Eclisse*, *La Notte*, powerful geometric composition and the long shot work concurrently, like De Chirico's paintings, to inscribe a profound understanding of the interrelationship between duration and emotion. By collapsing space and focusing on the surface of things, both animate and inanimate, Antonioni makes the contours of visible objects, the "surface of the world", speak to each character's uncertainty.<sup>4</sup> In *L'Avventura*, for example, the interplay between the use of deep flat perspective, ellipsis and protracted time sequence contributes to the sense that the motives of the characters are unclear or confused – that the characters, too, are suspended in the eternal present, locked in the crystal image. Antonioni intentionally wastes the time saved through the use of the ellipsis, extending the duration of the sequence and rendering the emotional and the banal in varying degrees of improbability, even after the characters move out of the frame.

As an analog to Akerman's insight to place and memory, ellipsis here segregates specific fragments of the space or text traversed, allowing only specific isolated memories and events to exist independently. Every walk or each trajectory constantly leaps, undoes continuity and undercuts plausibility, creating through elision gaps in the spatial continuum. In another instance, we jump in time from a longshot of Anna on the platform at the train station, to a medium shot of her staring ahead into space in the cabin of the train car, to a long shot of the anonymous metropolitan landscape speeding past the window of the train.

Gerhard Richter's paintings (fig. 13), too, possess a powerful filmic quality that arguably addresses the problem of duration. Yet this duration is quite different. The temporal dimension is palpable, even if the subject remains indistinct. The viewer is displaced, ambulatory, vulnerable. The gaze out of the image captures a fleeting viewer. We are confronted with a brief record of our existence, a palimpsest of desires manifested in one instance and a longing for completeness that can only decay into isolated episodes of experience. Voluntary memory, the mnemonic realm where many of Richter's subjects exist, eradicates the fragile inner connections linking experience to perception.

### Indiscernibility and Sexuality

The city figures prominently in all of the above examples. A history of space and subjectivity confronts both the observers of the film and the characters portrayed. The city appears not only as



13 | Gerhard Richter, "Administration Building", 1985



14 | Still from "Crash", 1999



15 | Still from "Crash", 1999

scaffolding for banal or intense episodes, but in some cases becomes a protagonist.

In David Cronenberg's adaptation of J. G. Ballard's *Crash* (1999), the Generic City becomes the locus where speed consumes time, narrative, subjectivity, as well as place. Ballard's characters must linger in the realm of acceleration and hyper reality to achieve the desired a/effect, which always results in unfulfillment (fig. 14, 15). The incomprehensible city becomes a blur in the prosthetic space of the machine. The machine as a tool has its correlation in the development of the machine as armor, providing protection against fragmentation and pain. Ballard's fixation is reciprocal, concerned with the literal intertwining of the visceral body with the armor of the machine. The immediacy of

this relationship is expressed in the way in which Cronenberg documents the crash – instantaneous and extremely violent without clichéd slow motion tracking shots or explosions. Sexual fulfillment is only achieved when the characters break free of the grid of the city, swerving, crashing head on, or ultimately plunging headlong into the moving vehicle of a cinematic femme fatale. Erotic misery is a retreat into the very essence of a full blown subjective crises overruled by desire. Displaced for minutes or hours in motion, crash equals orgasm, first frenetic and then intensely calm, dislocation resurrects consciousness from the space of reason.

Place is further compressed into, and alienated from, spaces of appearance, particularly by the absence of naming. Machine and tenant take the place of specific proper names and titles. The geography of meaning is held in suspension, and in the non-place of acceleration and speed, cease to maintain any real significance. As an active agent of memory, names imply specific times and places. Thus, the absence of any significant nomenclature (e.g. geographical location, time, surname), indicate an intense denial of conventional subjectivity of the individual and the city. Author and authority are subsumed by the silent anonymity.

Indiscernibility is closely related to filmic critiques of the 'pleasure of looking'. Attempts to break the binary opposition of inside and outside, male and female, result in films with gender problems, spaces of homosexual or asexual interaction. While Akerman presents us with the trappings of the male dominated gaze, she presses the issue of how our representations and recollections of public and private space construct the subject geographically as well as sexually. *Le Rendez-vous d'Anna* is positioned at the beginning of an opus of cinematic work that rethinks and represents other possibilities of how we construct space and how space constructs us. We trespass into the nowhere of the Generic City, into the spaces of neither here nor there, the interstices, margins, passages and thresholds.

We cannot compare the work of Hopper and Akerman without acknowledging the relationship between memory, space and gender. For example, Akerman's perspective is very closely an inversion of Hopper's in that perceptions of gender, the gaze, and gendered space are inverted and express the dilemma of the female role in the space of the modern metropolis. While Hopper's paintings and Antonioni's depiction of the female subject, such as *Girlie Show* or Claudia in *L'Avventura*, may parallel the intense longing evoked by Akerman, these women are still enframed within the gaze of patriarchal society, typically rendered as displaced domestic subjects in the urban environment, or women of ill repute in male dominated interiors – trespassers or objects of desire. Akerman's femini-

ne characters, on the contrary, exploit a dominant, almost masculine, role throughout the film. The house, as a locus of domesticity, is perhaps portrayed by Akerman as a site of chaos and unconscious memory, a memory that must be evaded.

Today, the abolition of distance in time by various means of communication extends the confusion and alienation we have examined, elusive and fragmentary stories whose spatial and temporal gaps mesh with the social practices they symbolize. The image of the city we have discussed, according to Paul Virilio, suffers the direct and indirect effects of iconological torsion and distortion in which the most elementary reference points disappear, one by one, as electronic media subsume



16 | *Atlanta Pedestrian*, 2003



17 | *Atlanta Aerial*, 2003



18 | *Atlanta Aerial*, 2003

subjective experience as previously known (fig. 16–18). As travelers, we are no longer primarily concerned with displacement or with being displaced in the space of a passage. This devaluation of private space, loss of protective enclosure, is no longer that of the spectacle. As Baudrillard states, "When all becomes transparent and immediately visible, when everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication, we are no longer a part of the drama of alienation – we live in the ecstasy of communication, and this ecstasy is obscene." To Deleuze, these spaces, and their corresponding narratives do not

necessarily endeavor to restore our faith in the world, because the notion of one world is no longer valid. One could perhaps argue that the proliferation non-linear narrative and the coexistence of mutually exclusive worlds in so much new media are simply a mirror of an eccentric global society and its residual spaces. Correspondingly, media has in fact forever changed the way we think and feel about space and time, forever.

*Author:*

M. Eric Gamble, Assistant Professor  
Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta

#### Notes:

- 1 *Espace quelconque*. See Chapter 7 in: Deleuze, Gilles: *Cinema I*, Minneapolis, 1989.
- 2 See chapter 1 in: Rodowick, David N.: *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine*, Durham/London, 1997.
- 3 Jacques Aumont: *The Image*, pp. 129–130.
- 4 Chatman, Seymour: *Antonioni or The Surface of the World*, Berkeley, 1995.

#### Bibliography:

- Auge, Marc: *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, New York, 1995.
- Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminations and Reflections*, edited by Hannah Arendt, New York, 1968.
- Boyer, Christine: *The City of Collective Memory*, Cambridge, 1996.
- Brougher, Kerry and Ferguson, Russell (ed.): *Art and Film Since 1945: Hall of Mirrors*. Los Angeles, 1995.
- Bruno, Giuliana: *Street Walking on a Ruined Map – Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari*, Princeton, 1993.
- Casey, Edward: *The Fate of Place*, Berkeley, 1999.
- Certeau, Michel de: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, 1985.
- Chatman, Seymour: *Antonioni or The Surface of the World*, Berkeley, 1995.
- Clifford, James: *Traveling Subjects*
- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix: *Nomadology: The War Machine*, New York, 1986.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema I and II*, Minneapolis, 1989.
- Friedburg, Anne: *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, Berkeley, 1993.
- Flaxman, Gregory (ed): *The Brain is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*, Minneapolis, 2000.
- Mast, Gerald, Cohen, Marshall and Braudy, Leo: *Film Theory and Criticism*, 4th Edition, New York, 1995.
- Rodowick, David N.: *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine*, Durham/London, 1997.
- Rosi, Braidotti: *Nomadic Subjects*, New York, 1995.
- Simmel, Georg: *Metropolis and Mental Life*.
- Totaro, Donato: *Off Screen Magazine*, 01.11.01 at [http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/index\\_offscreen\\_essays.html](http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/index_offscreen_essays.html)

#### Credits:

- 1, 16 Photo: Paul Grether.
- 2 Campo Marzio, Piranesi, 1762.
- 3 Edward Hopper, Western Motel, 1930, Whitney Museum.
- 4 Eugene Atget, Rue Galande, April 15, 1899.
- 5 Photo: M. E. Gamble.
- 6 Chantel Akerman, *Le Rendez-vous d'Anna*, World Artist Home V, 1980.
- 7, 9 Wim Wenders, *Paris Texas*, 20th Fox Pictures, 1987.
- 8 Michelangelo Antonioni, *Red Desert*, Home Vision Entertainment, 1968.
- 10 United States Geographic Survey.
- 11 Wim Wenders, *Paris Texas*, 20th Fox Pictures, 1987.
- 12 Michelangelo Antonioni, *L'Eclisse*, Home Vision Entertainment, 1962.
- 13 Gerhard Richter, Administration Building, 1965.
- 14, 15 David Cronenberg, *Crash*, New Line Entertainment, 1999.
- 17, 18 Photo: Vincent Labarre.