

Bilal Khbeiz

Los Angeles: The Invention of Public Weather

01/05

As will be obvious to the reader, the writer of this portrait for the city of Los Angeles is a stranger, a recent addition to this city. The many ideas and remarks which follow, notwithstanding their accuracy, should be regarded first as the nodes along a line of thinking particular to newcomers, one which is best described as an education in anger which besets newcomers persistently hailed by the new city with the question: who are you?

Crawford Macpherson notes that the rights of private property are founded on the twin activities of permitting and prohibiting: parking here is prohibited, do not block this entryway, no dogs allowed, so on and so forth.¹ Accordingly, the assumption is that ownership provides one with the right to withhold service and prohibit use. A guest may be invited to rest on a couch or be asked not to do so. These same twin activities apply to what are generally known as public spaces. Macpherson adds that in their struggle to win their civil rights, blacks had to argue long and hard against the owners of whites-only establishments, who countered that they had the right, as private owners, to withhold service from anyone. Equally relevant are women's struggles against the many exclusive men's clubs in England. Yet it is noticeable that such struggles are no longer occurring today. An exclusive men's club or a whites-only establishment is not targeted as long as they do not threaten the already-acquired civic rights of women and blacks. In fact, opening a club for white men that caters to the sexual fantasies of non-white women would be a perfectly acceptable business endeavor. Today, exclusive clubs are prevalent: some are tailored for black women, others for Latinas, the elderly, or the obese.

These preceding remarks on the spirit and letter of the law are directly tied to the significance of building and sustaining public spaces at a time when such spaces are unavoidably governed by the laws of private property. In Los Angeles, the deciding factors which direct the use of public spaces are born of the general temperament of the residents, of their moral and political inclinations and, more importantly, of their racial or ethnic backgrounds – factors which narrow the function of public spaces and direct them away from promoting open-ended conversations. For if a conversation were to take place in such a space, it would inevitably be preoccupied by a number of fixed givens – national, racial, ethnic or other more reductive bonds. This is of course not particular to any one city. In Beirut, where once I lived, a conversation is always determined by various axioms. Yet what is worth pursuing is whether the construction of little cities within the administrative space of the larger city is

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unavoidable. Matters of tourism aside, a Little Italy or Little India, found in almost every major metropolis, is indicative of the limited paths open to conversation between the different races and ethnicities.

The Freedom to Be

Relations between the central authority and these little ethnic cities are defined by a simple but dangerous equation: the former resides in a well-guarded and closed fortress while the inhabitants of the latter attempt, on a daily basis, to avoid any encounter with the apparatus of authority. It is an equation by which one is allowed to live freely under the law. But upon whom is this freedom bestowed? In America, one can live as an Armenian, an Iranian, an Arab, or a Jew without ever rubbing against the American way of life, which is kept hidden well within official quarters. Accordingly, civil rights activists have not accomplished the integration they fought so hard for. Even if any one person has now the right to live in the Mexican neighborhoods of Los Angeles, he or she must bow to and observe a number of rules and constraints ranging from conditions born of deep-seated interethnic fears to basic issues such as finding alternative foods to those prevalent for the dominant ethnicity. In consequence, this offers the police an immense moral authority to exact punishment. In itself, that exceeds the tasks and role of the law, or at least transposes the law onto the forcefulness of the police. It is common to find that the brutal repression of one particular ethnicity by the police is looked upon favorably by other ethnicities. Accordingly, the police are always admired and defended by one ethnicity or another, but never at any one moment by all. The social make-up of the city effectively turns into a spread of horizontal segregation tied together only by the brute force of the police.²

At this level, Los Angeles is not unique among metropolises. Yet unlike other cities, it is expansive, stretching over large superficies. Although many consider it a car city, residents spend much of their time at home and leave only to go to work. Moreover, if we note that companies, banks, and department stores prefer to employ locals, Los Angeles then appears as a stretched city composed of smaller localities, separated by invisible borders and inhabited by one dominant ethnicity and/or race. To speak of leaving the privately owned space for the American public space, for work or leisure, is in fact meaningless. One lives with one's own and marries within established ethnic or racial bounds. In traveling between localities, the car becomes an extension of one's privately owned space and renders any encounter with others

unlikely.

Los Angeles is not a city of coincidences. Even Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social domains which delimit the circles in which residents live and define the attributes which distinguish them from one another is not applicable to Los Angeles.³ Judges here do not live with other members of the legal profession, nor do doctors, intellectuals, or university professors. Only film stars have gathered on one side of the city. But that is a fact which does not challenge the general make-up and subdivision of the city. Again, what is foregrounded in Los Angeles is ethnicity – most obviously through the proliferation of languages and dialects on storefronts and road signs in parallel with English, which is still assumed to be the language of all definitive remarks. In such a forest of signs, the strangeness a newcomer experiences is twofold: first as a tourist with a legal passport and visa in his pocket, and second as an illegal visitor without either visa or passport entering the enclave of ethnicities. In looking at these many other languages, one feels that to become American, English and naturalized status are insufficient. In fact, one has to belong to a single ethnic group and live below the state and to the side of the English language in which policies are argued and decided.

A City for the Memories of Cities

In Los Angeles, people often say that their city dreams of emulating New York and that New York dreams of Paris. It may be no more than a current saying, but something said nonetheless, and it invites one to discover Los Angeles' purloined letter. This city, for both outsiders and inhabitants, is the city of American cinema par excellence, a cinema which is already an economy on its own producing unprecedented profits. Yet the significance of cinema lies elsewhere: it is as if Los Angeles is a late city. It was founded, built, and then inhabited when other American cities had already established a history and a collective memory, and when they had already become material for stories and novels. Los Angeles lived major events on screen in order to know what happened "once upon a time in America."⁴ Events occurred in Detroit, Chicago, and New York and then were reenacted here in Los Angeles. Roland Barthes is known for having stated that events in Racine's theatre do not happen onstage.⁵ In Los Angeles, events also happen in a cinematic aside. Moreover, and in contrast with Racine's theatre, events here leave no traces. Events watched here happen elsewhere. And so Los Angeles sleeps assured because the traces and consequences of events will always fall on other cities. All it has to do is

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tell the story during one of its many leisurely afternoons. It is in accordance with this that the question of public spaces in Los Angeles gains its urgency. For when events do not stamp a city, they become merely transient. In other words, events here end with the conclusion of their reenactment, and as such, are always belated with respect to the actual consequences, which occurred elsewhere and long ago. These transient reenactments take place after mourning concludes elsewhere and long after emotions of anger or elation have subsided. Simply said, Los Angeles will never punish a murder in Chicago, for what happened in Chicago is bygone, and further, no law allows for a culprit to be punished twice. What takes place after these reenactments is similar to a conversation between an American and an Australian concerning which driving regulations are best. Regardless of the conclusion of such a conversation, the laws will remain the same, and the whole matter turns into an inconsequential pastime.⁶

It is common knowledge that television is material for conversation. Also common is the inclusion of science fiction novels and films in our personal imagination. Yet we cannot deny that it is all a sort of play with time and that talk of love and death in films is unreliable. A murder takes place in the Chicago of the 1920s and in the 1990s we are moved by it! What does Drew Barrymore have to tell us about the killings in Chicago? Probably nothing. Once done with acting in the violent scenes, she returns to what she was. She has nothing to say about Iraq or the current financial crisis. This is in no way an attempt at insult. Rather, as an actress, she has never been exposed to events, never been scorched by the sun of Baghdad. What of death, hunger, thirst, fatigue, and arousal she conveys is nothing short of poor imagining. Yet it must be said that such are the kinds of imaginings that nourish the cinematic imagination: extreme – even excessive – and quite unlike those that govern the living, whether it be the coincidence of birth or the inevitability of death. Rather, cinema always lives in what can be termed the Shakespearean literary moment, namely that which aims to rearticulate and redefine all of what makes a human life. Everything that rots in cinema will smell of Denmark as every lover is a Romeo or a Juliette.

Dreaming of Water

It happens that the sun in Los Angeles is bright, like that of Baghdad and Rio de Janeiro all wrapped in one. And yet it isn't quite the same. Nature here is still, tempered, and unlike harsh and uncaring virgin nature. Here one can find myriad gardens and forested lands that exceed

some of those in Europe in their superficialities. And yet all of it remains a garden and no one thinks of calling it a forest.

Obsessed with water, with trees aplenty standing for unmistakable symptoms, Los Angeles expands laterally. Unlike the spread of Baghdad which scans the desert in search of food and water, Los Angeles stretches to colonize the sand with water networks and well-tended trees. It must be a desert-phobia which prods the city to manufacture what can be termed a shared and public weather. To say that the city plants trees in the desert is incorrect. Los Angeles was never a desert, but it holds the desert as its resident nightmare. Still, with such a threatening other, residents are rarely willing to settle here. One stays in wait, ever-ready for the onslaught of the nightmare. In its diligent lateral spread, it abandons its center and turns it into a place for taking pictures worthy of postcards. Life here is not to be found in the center, rather it occurs on the edges where residents resemble frontier guards.

What is coherent in Los Angeles is the weather. It is as shared as the obsession with water, and is most probably a substitute for public space. But in being the only thing that is shared, one notices the diversity in languages and dialects. Conversation is thus difficult. In fact, this city is for families, and it isolates individuals like the mad once were on ships of fools.⁷ To seem normal here, one ought to shop in large department stores and act as if he or she is in a hurry to be home with the children.

Death in Public Spaces

This resident desert-nightmare spreads in the folds of the city as a fear of desiccation. People here are afraid for their bodies and faces. They fear dry skin. All that is sold in this city speaks of softness. Skin here is besieged and avoids all that could intimate dryness. And so people buy soft sheets, soft clothes, soft furniture. Life here is performed with soft untarnished skins. A life acted, without an inside, like an emptied mummy with nothing to show but a soft, un-textured skin. For cinema leaves no traces on the body and insides of the city. Cinema happens in the open air and is a maker of voyeurs. It takes place where everyone can see and anyone can reenact. Life under cinema becomes spectacle. This is why residents here act as if streets are extensions of their private bedrooms. Streets are used as one uses a private space. The city accordingly appears like a yawning retiree. There is little contact on the streets, and consequently little violence. Yet when violence does happen, it appears as if it is made for the camera – soft, calculated, and certainly not deadly.

Death here is weighty, probably because

cinema so arrogantly appropriates all of life. If conversations do begin, they do so from tale-bearing and tattling: Janet Jackson has gained a few pounds, pictures inside! Such are the covers of magazines, and this is how conversations are initiated. Where did Cameron Diaz dine? Are Brad and Angelina still in love? This is a sample of what is talked about by retirees – those who are mostly concerned with waiting for death and leaving it for another day. Tattling for them is how they spend their time, even if all agree that what is happening in Iraq is more important than the love lives of film stars. But the former, unlike the latter, is inadequate for tattling. Right now, this city has no solutions to offer Iraq. Better to talk of what is topical in cinema until Hollywood decides to tell the story of Iraq, that is, after the warm blood of war cools and dries. Only then will cinema tell the story and archive it on the shelves of memory.

Public spaces in Los Angeles seem reserved for what will happen outside the city. Once finished, those events will be acted out here: here a stage set for the battle of Tora Bora, there another for the swamps of Al Ahwaz and over there a little Wall Street. But not until the event has passed will it be ready to be filmed and unpacked. Because it is reserved, all that happens now in public spaces is a reenactment of past events without any suggestion that people can use these spaces. Events are malleable because of the past, while the living are not. Only cinema can recall the past, but in order to do so, the living must be cast aside. The stage set must not be disturbed by the contingencies brought along by the living. No living being is allowed to have contact with a star, in whose presence one must act as if one is invisible. This is how this city, built as it is on the memories of other places, succeeds in pre-empting public space. For what could there be in such a space, if the city lives daily on recounting the stories of other cities? Public spaces thrive on the present without which only brute and excessive death remains – death which could have been avoided had the city tried to live in the present.

There are no public spaces in Los Angeles. People share little. The city does not meet around its open spaces as Athena once did. Rather, the city is regulated through its highways. There, residents meet at a precise hour and have their daily event. To know these highways is to know the city well. Moreover, there the law becomes less stringent and sometimes nonexistent – no traffic lights, no speed limits, and no pedestrians. Once on a highway, a driver feels liberated from innumerable regulations, but only to enter another set of rules. Cars seem careful not to

transgress the distances separating one from another. This is not done out of courtesy, but rather from fear of death. On the highway, people live in their defensive cocoons, avoiding all contact. To not maintain that distance would lead to a death caused by one of three states: distraction, daydreaming, or inattention – three states which are cinema's main axioms, without which it cannot survive.

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Translated from the Arabic by Walid Sadek.

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1

Crawford B. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

2

For more on this issue see Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (New York: Vintage, 1992).

3

Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

4

A reference to Sergio Leone's film *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984).

5

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6

Karl R. Popper, *The Myth of the Framework: In Defence of Science and Rationality*, ed. M. A. Notturmo (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

7

Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Vintage, 1990).

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