

“A Southern California Beach That Never Was”: Adapting the Noir City in *Inherent Vice*

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In Thomas Pynchon's *Inherent Vice* (2009) and Paul Thomas Anderson's cinematic adaptation of the novel (2014), the urban and suburban spaces of Los Angeles figure prominently in the narrative. While generally reproducing the language and atmosphere of the adapted text in a faithful manner, Anderson, whose works have repeatedly revisited the U.S. West (Sperb 5), experiments with a unique way of representing the city in his film. The film transforms Pynchon's meticulous topography by deliberately confining its space. The fragmentary representation of space in the film makes it difficult for the viewer to reconstruct the narrative space in its totality. At the same time, however, Anderson inserts some moments of geographical specificity into his film and subtly merges the extratextual Los Angeles into the fictional world. The film gradually charts its fictional city with its separate spatial fragments from the ground up, no matter how incomplete the resultant narrative map might remain to be. Anderson's film, in a sense, is an adaptation not only of Pynchon's novel but also of the urban space itself. Going back and forth between the intratextual and extratextual spaces, the film constructs a dialogic space that is located somewhere between the two.

As David Fine remarks in *Imagining Los Angeles*, Los Angeles emerged as a result of a land boom near the end of the nineteenth century and began its existence as a literary city in the 1920s (4, 14). Since then the city has given birth to many stories of unrealized dreams, broken promises, and impossible escapes, stories that can be subsumed under the novelistic and cinematic categories of hardboiled fiction and film noir. The state of California, with its location on the continent's western edge, has historically figured as an ultimate destination of the U.S.'s westward expansion. Southern California has also produced romantic dreams and hopes for a

new life by containing one of the world’s dream factories, Hollywood. At the same time, novelists and filmmakers have been sensitive to the dark side of this Golden State, transforming “[t]he land of the fresh start . . . into the land of the disastrous ending” (Fine 82). Southern California has been an amorphous narrative space that has adapted itself to the imagination of the storyteller, and the American dream of starting over has always coexisted in tension with a nightmarish awareness of the impossibility of escape. Pynchon’s novel and Anderson’s film adaptation continue to explore this tension by bringing the conventions of hardboiled detective fiction and film noir into contact with the Los Angeles of 1970, a time that is characterized by a sense of loss, disappointment, and disillusionment, a time that comes after the “[e]nd of a certain kind of innocence” (Pynchon, *Inherent Vice* 38).

Inherent Vice constructs a unique narrative space with this transitional moment as its historical background. For one thing, the Los Angeles in *Inherent Vice* is a space where the actual and the imaginary merge with each other, with the boundary between the two constantly blurred. References to historical incidents and real-life figures exist side by side with fictional events and quirky characters, and the foggy and smoggy atmosphere and the possibilities of drug-induced hallucinations sometimes threaten to encroach upon the reality of what is happening within the narrative. And construction businesses and their restless cycle of land development and destruction make buildings and places appear and disappear almost overnight and contribute to the hallucinatory nature of the urban and suburban spaces, forcing, for instance, one victim to feel that he “must be trippin” after observing that his old neighborhood has totally vanished (Pynchon, *Inherent Vice* 17). At a different level, while Anderson’s film is an adaptation of Pynchon’s novel, the adapted novel itself is aware of and refers to its generic precursors, both literary and cinematic. The homicide detective Christian F. “Bigfoot” Bjornsen tells the protagonist Larry “Doc” Sportello to forget “that old-time hard-boiled dick era,” while Doc thinks of Sherlock Holmes as a “real” detective living “at this real address in London,” worships “great old PIs” such as “Philip Marlowe, Sam Spade, . . . Johnny Staccato,” and wears a suit that John Garfield is supposed to have used in the film version of “*The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946)” (Pynchon, *Inherent Vice* 33, 96, 97, 344). These allusions suggest that Pynchon’s text can hardly be called an original text because it could not have existed without its generic precursors. In addition, the genre of detective fiction has been particularly susceptible to the process of adaptation in a somewhat different sense. As Scott Macleod argues, this narrative genre, including its hardboiled variant often associated with Los Angeles, has been characterized by “its ability to adapt to

changing cultural movements and social anxieties” (114). The process of adaptation, then, is not a one-way transformation of the original text into its cinematic version but “an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, with no clear point of origin” (Stam 5). The Los Angeles in Pynchon’s text is already an amalgam of the real and the imaginary, the city as a real geographical entity and its representations in literary and cinematic texts. *Inherent Vice* adds one more thread to the meshwork of texts that has constituted the city.

Another prominent characteristic of *Inherent Vice* in terms of narrative space is that it does not provide the reader or viewer with a comprehensive view of the society in its totality. This issue concerning space is to an extent related to the nature of *Inherent Vice* as a (hardboiled) detective story. Doc incessantly moves from one place to another, trying to give a definite shape to the enigmatic events and relationships that he encounters. Despite his effort, mysteries continue to proliferate themselves in front of his eyes, and he ends up not even knowing what it is that he needs to know. The narrative unfolds itself in a chaotic manner without leading straightforwardly from a mystery to its resolution, as if to imitate the sprawling expanse of the city itself. This kind of plot complication has accompanied hardboiled detective fiction almost since its beginning, the most well-known examples being Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* (1939) and Howard Hawks’s 1946 film adaptation (O’Farrell). Chandler and Hawks construct a plot complicated enough for the reader or viewer to understand that the focus of the narrative is not so much on the intellectual puzzle of solving a case as on the individual characters and the relationships between them that gradually emerge as the story moves forward. *The Big Sleep* is also an important precursor in its representation of urban space. In his book on Chandler’s fiction, Fredric Jameson says that Los Angeles is “a new centerless city,” “a spreading out horizontally, a flowing apart of the elements of the social structure,” in which each social class “is isolated in its own geographical compartment” (6, 7). In such a fragmented space, Jameson continues to argue, the detective figure had to be invented “to see, to know, the society as a whole” (7). In each of Chandler’s novels, Philip Marlowe at least can close a case—no matter how bitter or depressing that closure might be—after driving and wandering around the city and visiting various places and people associated with the social structure from its highest to lowest strata. As a result, Chandler’s fiction gains “a kind of completeness” and provides the impression that the author “has touched all the bases, that this itemization of the flora and fauna of Los Angeles county is an exhaustive one” (Jameson 51). This is not the case with Doc and *Inherent Vice*.

Here again, each class or group of characters is “isolated in its own geographical compartment,” but the detective fails not only in solving his case—since he does not even know what it is that he has to solve—but also in seeing and knowing “the society as a whole.” Even if he cannot grasp the total big picture, however, Doc continues to drive through the streets of Los Angeles and tries to help his clients and people in need as much as he can, without expecting any financial reward.

Anderson’s film has generally been praised for adapting the work of an unadaptable novelist and for its faithfulness to the novel’s language and atmosphere. But many critics and reviewers have pointed out that the film departs from the adapted text in at least two notable respects. The first point concerns the assignment of the narrator’s role to Sortilège (Joanna Newsom).¹ In the novel, she is a relatively minor character who “used to work in Doc’s office” and is said to be “in touch with invisible forces and could diagnose and solve all manner of problems” (Pynchon, *Inherent Vice* 11). Her position as Doc’s ex-assistant and her knowledge of spiritual matters apparently make her an appropriate candidate for the narrator’s role, allowing her to move into and out of the narrative world almost like a ghost. Sortilège’s mysterious nature is emphasized at the end of the film when Shasta Fay Hepworth (Katherine Waterston) says to Doc (Joaquin Phoenix), “She knows things, Doc. Maybe about us that we don’t know.” At the same time, by giving a body to the voice of the novel’s invisible and impersonal, if not omniscient, narrator, the film seems to limit the possibility of a detached, all-seeing perspective on the narrative world.

This limitation of the narrator’s point of view is related to the film’s second point of departure from the novel: the intense compression and fragmentation of its narrative space. Pynchon’s novel abounds in toponyms. It provides a meticulous verbal map of the places visited by Doc during the course of his investigation and follows his movement from one place to another, inviting the reader to have actual maps of Los Angeles County and Las Vegas on hand. Compared with the novel, Anderson’s topography is terse and laconic. As Howard Hampton remarks, Anderson’s restrained use of landscapes and exterior shots is one of the film’s most notable characteristics (30). Instead, the film often jumps from place to place, making it hard for the viewer to visualize a larger whole within which each filmed space can be located as its constitutive part. Questioned about the frequency of dialogue scenes taken in long takes and close-ups, Anderson answers in an interview as follows:

It’s claustrophobic.... I came up in an era where, if you’re making a period film,

you're obligated to have an unmotivated crane shot in the street—a mass of cars, a mass of billboards. What a waste of money, time and feet of film. An avenue to hopefully making an audience feel they're inside a film was to get rid of those. That coupled with not just having enough money—it was just, "What is the minimum we need to do to open it up and get on with the most important thing?" (qtd. in Romney 23)

Here, it is hard to tell whether the director is being honest or not. As he says, reducing the number of crane shots or establishing shots will certainly help to lower the budget required to shoot a film, especially a period piece like *Inherent Vice*. But it might be difficult for some viewers to "feel they're inside a film" without the sense of a larger space within which each shot or scene is to be placed. Whether it is the result of practical concern or not, Anderson's decision confers a particular atmosphere on the narrative space of his film. This is an issue that deserves to be examined in detail.

Probably the most comprehensive view of space offered in the film is a cartographic image that appears on the screen near the story's beginning. An ex-convict named Tariq Khalil (Michael Kenneth Williams) visits Doc's office to talk about the sudden disappearance of the old neighborhood of his street gang, the "Artesia Crips," an allusion to the real Los Angeles gang named Crips. After hearing that the neighborhood is now being replaced with Channel View Estates, one of the redevelopment projects devised by the real estate developer Mickey Wolfmann (Eric Roberts), Doc says to Tariq, "Okay. Can you show me up here on the map?" As a medium close-up of Doc's client dissolves into the image of a map of Los Angeles County, Sortilège's voice-over narration begins to quote almost verbatim a passage from Pynchon's novel: "Long, sad history of L.A. land use. Mexican families bounced out of Chavez Ravine to build Dodger Stadium, American Indians swept out of Bunker Hill for the Music Center. And now Tariq's neighborhood bulldozed aside for Channel View Estates." The map shows the general regions of the South Bay, South Central (now renamed as South Los Angeles), and Gateway Cities, with Artesia Boulevard running horizontally and dividing the map in its middle.² The viewer cannot determine the exact location of Channel View Estates, but the novel suggests that it is located somewhere between Gardena and Compton (17). The map's image then dissolves into a two-shot of Doc and the ghostly Sortilège, as they drive on a sunny street to the place in question.

This cartographic image is interesting in what is not directly shown on the screen. First, although the static image of the two-dimensional map cannot tell the

history behind each of the places it represents, Sortilège's narration adds a temporal or historical dimension to the map. Her words about the "[l]ong, sad history" of dispossession and forced relocation that non-white groups of residents have gone through make the viewer realize that there is more to this map than meets the eye. Behind each of the land development projects mentioned here is a scheme of racial segregation and "rearguard social containment" (Heise 172). The rich and the powerful try to grab the lands of ethnic and racial minorities, erase the traces of the previous residents, and circumscribe themselves within spaces of privilege. In the process, the urban space is divided into separate fragments. Considering that Tariq regards Wolfmann's project of gentrification as "white man's revenge" for "Watts" in the novel (17), it becomes meaningful that Anderson's map shows the toponym at its top center. As Thomas Heise remarks, the Watts riots of 1965 were "[t]he most traumatic inner-city disturbance the country had yet witnessed," and the event changed the cityscape of Los Angeles "by sparking further retrenchment" (174). As will be discussed below, Anderson will respond to this historical moment once again later in the film. Combined with Sortilège's narration, the map quietly tells the history of the city's division into separate geographical compartments. Second, the way Anderson crops the map's image is effective in partially hiding the toponyms shown on the left edge of the screen, particularly the names of the three beach cities. The viewer can of course compare this map with a more complete one and identify these places as Manhattan Beach, Hermosa Beach, and Redondo Beach. But the effect of the film's map is to merge the fictional Gordita Beach into these extratextual locations by transforming the latter into, as it were, anonymous beaches. While establishing ties with the actual Southern California, Anderson's map simultaneously points at the fictionality of the film's narrative space. To borrow the words of the novel's narrator, what emerges here might then be called "a Southern California beach that never was" (6).

The comprehensive view of space offered by this map, however, is an exception. The film's confinement of its narrative space can be observed at multiple levels. At the most macroscopic level, Anderson never goes out of the area around Los Angeles by omitting the scenes that take place in Las Vegas. In the novel, Doc's accidental and almost anti-climactic encounter with—or rather, his "blurred glimpse" of—Mickey Wolfmann occurs in this city (243). The film transplants this significant event to a rehabilitation facility named Chryskylodon in Ojai, and Wolfmann's reconversion to capitalist endeavors after his brief adoption of communal ideals is succinctly conveyed with the images of newspaper photographs and headlines.

The claustrophobic atmosphere is enhanced further by the frequency of interior sequences, the compression of the characters' movement in terms of both time and space, and the story's sudden transitions from scene to scene. As Rolando Caputo remarks, "so many edits from scene to scene seem abrupt" because of "the absence of traditional 'filler' shots (such as establishing shots) that generally buffer the transition from one scene to a new situation." The scarcity of panoramic shots of landscapes or cityscapes is one of the film's most conspicuous visual characteristics, and Anderson rarely shows the exterior of a place that appears in the story for the first time. The scene in which Doc wakes up from unconsciousness at the future site of Channel View Estates, for instance, is suddenly cut to the one of a dialogue between him and Bigfoot (Josh Brolin) inside a room in Parker Center; Doc's phone conversation with Hope Harlingen (Jena Malone) in his living room directly segues into their face-to-face dialogue in the living room of the Harlingens' suburban house, supposedly located in Torrance; and the two-shot of Doc and the marine lawyer Sauncho (Benicio Del Toro) watching and talking about the schooner *Golden Fang* is cut to another two-shot of them continuing their conversation in a seaside restaurant. Also, the film contains some scenes of driving, but the viewer is often prevented from gazing at the landscape outside the vehicles' windows. An extreme example of this visual confinement is the film's extended final shot, which frames the faces of Shasta and Doc riding a car while its windows are totally clouded in a dense fog. In these examples, the spaces surrounding the scenes and characters are almost absent, and it becomes difficult to situate these scenes within a larger geographical whole. The film's focus is apparently not so much on the individual locations where the scenes take place as on the characters' faces and the dialogues between them. The almost unnatural frequency with which these facial close-ups appear on the screen fortifies the sense of confinement and anxiety in the fictional world (Tochigi 86).

In addition to splitting the urban space of Los Angeles into myriad fragments, these methods of representing space have the effect of conferring strange anonymity on the individual locations that appear in the course of the narrative and, by extension, on the city as a whole. By refusing to show the larger space in which these scenes are to be situated, the film seems to rob each location of its uniqueness and singularity. The Harlingens' house could be located in any suburban residential tract; the restaurant visited by Doc and Sauncho could be any restaurant with a nautical atmosphere; the foggy San Pedro pier where Doc meets Coy Harlingen (Owen Wilson) for the first time could be any location by the sea; and the mansion Doc visits to talk with Sloane Wolfmann (Serena Scott Thomas) and her current

boyfriend, Riggs Warbling (Andrew Simpson), could be any residence located in one of the affluent hillsides surrounding the city. Each of the places remains a separate geographical fragment, as if to show that these characters are living in different worlds totally separate from each other. And as the film continues to cut from one location to another, the city itself gradually loses its singularity and acquires anonymity. The Los Angeles in the film, in other words, is transformed into a nameless space that could be any city. This foregrounds the imaginary and phantasmagoric quality of this fictional world. As will be discussed below, however, Anderson’s film also contains some moments of geographical specificity that do not have their counterparts in Pynchon’s text.

Finally, at a more microscopic level, some qualities given to the film’s individual images circumscribe the scope of its narrative space. In Pynchon’s novel, the intrusive narrative voice moves back and forth freely between detached descriptions and less impersonal passages colored by subjective thoughts and perceptions, often abandoning its pretense of omniscience and sharing the detective’s confusion. Anderson’s film imitates this unique voice of Pynchon’s narrator by visually privileging Doc’s perspective and state of mind. When Doc appears for the first time on the screen, an overhead close-up of his face shows him lying supine on a couch in his room at twilight. The camera cuts to a medium long shot of Shasta in her “new package,” looking down at her ex-boyfriend while standing partially framed by a partition wall and the open doorway, which is an appropriate way to introduce a woman who has come out of the past to haunt the present. This is a point-of-view shot taken from Doc’s perspective, looking up at her from a slightly low angle. The shaky handheld camera also adds to the subjective quality of the image. The next shot forms a shot/reverse shot pattern by reproducing Shasta’s point of view, and the camera shows Doc’s face again in close-up as he sits up on the couch to look up at her face more closely. The scene then cuts to a close-up of Shasta in shallow focus, with the background blurred in contrast with her face. Throughout the film Anderson frequently employs some of the visual elements observed here: the low-angle (point-of-view) shot, the handheld shot, the close-up composition that grows tighter and tighter as the camera gradually and surreptitiously closes in on its subjects, and the shallow depth of field that is sometimes combined with foggy, smoggy, or smoky backgrounds. All of these elements contribute to circumscribing the spectator’s vision as well as to forcing him or her to share the detective’s limited understanding of the world around him.

Of particular interest is the relatively lower position Doc occupies in this

opening scene. Here, Doc remains lying or sitting on the couch and looks up at his ex-girlfriend while the latter looks down at him from above. This spatial positioning of the two characters is not limited to the relationship between him and Shasta. Whether he is talking with Tariq, Bigfoot, Sloane Wolfmann, two FBI agents (Timothy Simons and Sam Jaeger), Clancy Charlock (Belladonna), Mickey Wolfmann, Penny Kimball (Reese Witherspoon), Adrian Prussia (Peter McRobbie), or Puck Beaverton (Keith Jardine), the film often captures Doc's opponent from a low angle or shows him or her looking down at the detective from above. Of course, this can be explained by the protagonist's generally relaxed attitude and his characteristic posture: Doc usually makes himself comfortable, or makes himself appear to be comfortable, by sitting back on chairs. At the same time, however, the other characters' downward gaze directed at him implies that—in spite of his laid-back posture—he is not always in control of the situation around him. In this context, his posture might be read also as a sign of his passivity. It is the series of characters and the increasingly complicated relationships between them that control him and stir him into action. One notable exception is the scene in which Doc shoots Adrian Prussia from the top of the stairs and kills him, but this is an exception that proves the rule because it is the only moment in the film that forces him to resort to violence in self-defense.

Doc's relatively lower position within the film's spatial arrangement therefore ties in thematically with its refusal to offer panoramic or comprehensive views of the narrative space. The film makes the viewer share the perspective of the detective who cannot grasp a geographical expanse in its entirety. In this respect, Doc's gaze differs from that of a cartographer or map-reader, who can look down at a spatial whole from above. But as he recalls at one point in Pynchon's novel, "the word is not the thing, the map is not the territory" (194). What he can do is to dive into "the territory" itself, continue wandering around the city, excavate what is hidden behind its surface, and gradually build his spatial knowledge from the ground up, not from above. And the viewer accompanies him in this piecemeal construction of the fictional urban space, no matter how incomplete or fragmentary it might turn out to be.

The Los Angeles in Anderson's *Inherent Vice* is a fictionalized city that retains only tenuous ties with its extratextual counterpart. But at the same time the director includes some rare moments of topographical specificity. The opening shot of the film, for instance, shows two beachfront houses with a view of the Pacific Ocean between them. While the film specifies its location and time by writing on the

screen, "Gordita Beach, California / 1970," the viewer can read a small sign on the left house that indicates the house number as "4210 / THE STRAND." This is an actual address in Manhattan Beach that is not mentioned in Pynchon's text, although the author is supposed to have lived in the area while he was working on *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). The same location will appear once again near the end of the film, with the camera placed a little further away from the houses and the beach. By superimposing the name of the fictional beach city onto a very specific street address in Manhattan Beach, the film deliberately rewrites the place and conflates the intratextual and extratextual spaces in this opening shot. Another example is Parker Center, also known as the Glass House, probably the most easily recognizable landmark in the entire film. Doc visits the building several times in the course of the narrative, but its exterior appears for the first time midway through the film. Anderson captures the building in one of his characteristic Steadicam tracking shots as Doc walks toward the entrance and comically dodges some police officers who threaten to knock him down. Named after "the infamous Chief William [H.] Parker," Parker Center housed the headquarters of the Los Angeles Police Department from 1954, entailing "the displacement of much of Little Tokyo" (Pulido, Barraclough, and Cheng 55), until the department moved to a new location in 2009, the year of the publication of Pynchon's novel. Completely closed in 2013, the building is now being threatened by possible demolition (Smith), which might add one more episode to the city's cycle of erasure and redevelopment. The extended exterior shot of the now vacant building connects the fictional world to the past of the actual Los Angeles, while also preserving on film this monument to the LAPD's "troubled past" (Pulido, Barraclough, and Cheng 56). A third example of the film's geographical specificity is the address mentioned by a phone answering machine in a flashback sequence: "4723 Sunset Boulevard." This is another instance of the film being more specific about a location than the novel, since Pynchon's narrator only mentions "an address down Sunset somewhat east of Vermont" (164). In the film, Doc and Shasta, desperately hoping to find a dope seller, rush to the location, only to find a vacant lot. Doc later revisits the place in the story's present and finds a literal Golden Fang, a ridiculous, hallucinatory building that has probably been born out of one of the city's redevelopment projects. In the extratextual world today, the building of a medical facility can be found at this address, which is a little west, not east, of North Vermont Avenue. In all of these moments, the real and the actual quietly merge into the film's otherwise anonymous geography. Of course, these appearances of specific locations can be regarded as a result of the visual nature of

film as a medium, which has to show in images what novels describe in words with various degrees of specificity. Still, such moments stand out in contrast with the general avoidance of spatial specification in Anderson's film.

One last example of the film's specific depiction of Los Angeles can be considered in this context. In addition to the shots of the beachfront houses and Parker Center, a rare establishing shot appears on the screen when Doc goes to visit the office of the loan shark Adrian Prussia. As Sortilège's voice-over narration continues from the preceding sequence, Doc gets out of his car, which is parked on a deserted street, and walks across the street while the camera moves horizontally with him from left to right. On the left side of the screen a long fence standing along the street hides what appear to be freight rail tracks, while on the right side is a portion of a somewhat dilapidated industrial area. One of the factories or warehouses on the right has a sign that reads, "L&M STEEL CO.," which helps the viewer to identify the shooting location as North Alameda Street, between East Weber Avenue and East Dixon Street, in the city of Compton, Los Angeles County. Here again, the film is more specific about the location than the novel. In the passage that corresponds to this establishing shot, Pynchon's narrator says that Adrian's office "was tucked somewhere between South Central and the vestigial [Los Angeles] river, hometown of Indians and bindlestiffs and miscellaneous drinkers of Midnight Special, up a wasted set of what looked like empty streets, among pieces of old railroad track brickwalled from view, curving away through the weeds" (315). As in the case of the possible location to find a dope dealer, the novel only indicates a general location. Anderson could have chosen to go along with this description and avoided including any element that would make it possible to identify the place, just as he did in so many other scenes in the film. But he did not. Considering what happened in the 1960s, especially the Watts riots of 1965, this street acquires a particular significance. As Becky M. Nicolaidis writes, Alameda Street functioned then as a fissure, a border, that divided the surrounding area into two totally separate worlds: "Black and white were sharply divided here, with Alameda Street constituting a virtual 'wall' between the races. Blacks lived to the west, whites to the east. In this area, segregation was a visible reality, especially in the realms of housing and education" (285). Appropriately, Adrian seems to live on the eastern side of this dividing line.

Pynchon does not mention Alameda Street in *Inherent Vice*, but he was aware of the actual and symbolic significance of the street. In his 1966 essay titled "A Journey into the Mind of Watts," which Thomas Heise calls "a psycho-geographical

exploration into the perceptions of violence from the perspective of Watts’s residents” (211), Pynchon regards the street as a border between the real and the unreal:

The white kid digs hallucination simply because he is conditioned to believe so much in escape, escape as an integral part of life. . . . But a Watts kid, brought up in a pocket of reality, looks perhaps not so much for escape as just for some calm, some relaxation. And beer or wine is good enough for that. Especially good at the end of a bad day.

Like after you have driven, say, down to Torrance or Long Beach or wherever it is they’re hiring because they don’t seem to be in Watts, not even in the miles of heavy industry that sprawl along Alameda Street, that gray and murderous arterial which lies at the eastern boundary of Watts looking like the edge of the world. (Pynchon, “Journey”)

In this essay, the novelist, a descendant of an Anglo family with a long history in North America, deliberately adopts the perspective of African-Americans living on the western side of the dividing line. While regarding the media-saturated “white culture that surrounds Watts” as “unreal,” Pynchon repeatedly calls Watts “a pocket of bitter reality.” Whether the director was thinking about this essay when shooting on location or not, Anderson’s inclusion of this “gray and murderous arterial” that marks “the edge of the world,” then, is a sudden intrusion of what is real and actual, what is geographically and historically specific, into the otherwise anonymous narrative space. The film subtly connects its fictional Los Angeles with the past of its extratextual counterpart.

Like many film noirs, *Inherent Vice* tells a story that is obsessed with the past. At one point in the novel, Mickey Wolfmann is quoted as saying, “I wish I could undo what I did, I know I can’t” (150). In another scene, Coy Harlingen also tells Doc that going “[b]ack where I was would be nice” (161). These words succinctly summarize one of the dominant themes in film noir: the desire to go back in time and the fatalistic awareness of the impossibility of doing so. But *Inherent Vice* differs from other works in the genre in that it lets the protagonist partially succeed in undoing the wrongs that have been committed in the past. Doc visits Adrian’s office in order to look into the case of Coy as well as to avenge the death of Bigfoot’s partner, Vincent Indelicato. He does well in both of these cases without expecting any financial reward. He returns Coy to his family and thereby brings back the supposedly dead to the world of the living after a long period of separation that the

saxophone player has suffered as the result of a wrong career choice made in the past. In one of the most emotionally charged moments in the film, Coy says, “You know what the Indians say. You saved my life, now you’re responsible for it,” to which Doc replies, “You saved your own life, man. Now you get to live it.” Pynchon’s novel also refers to this saying twice (171, 363). These words become all the more powerful in the film because they resonate with Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958), another cinematic work about bringing back the dead to the world of the living. In a well-known scene that takes place on the edge of the Pacific Ocean in this now classic film noir, which is also an adaptation of Boileau-Narcejac’s novel (1954), John Scottie Ferguson (James Stewart) says to a woman who plays the role of Madeleine Elster (Kim Novak), “I’m responsible for you now. You know, the Chinese say that once you’ve saved a person’s life, you’re responsible for it forever, so I’m committed.”³ But of course Scottie cannot save her. He tragically repeats the past that haunts him, failing to undo what he has done. Whether the saying is of Chinese or Indian origin, these words connect the two narratives and highlight the contrast between them. Where Scottie fails, Doc succeeds. He can help others to move out of what Pynchon would call their bad karmic cycles.

Perhaps *Inherent Vice* most radically deviates from its generic ancestors and rewrites the noir tradition by implying that sometimes it is possible to go back to the past, in order to excavate and actualize what could have been. Comparing Pynchon’s *Inherent Vice* with F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925)—another novel that has many thematic connections with *Vertigo*—David Cowart remarks that “Gatsby-like, Pynchon wants, as it were, to change the past” (127). In this context, it is appropriate that Anderson closes his film with the image of the detective looking into a rearview mirror and quietly smiling, just after telling his ex-girlfriend that “[t]his don’t mean we’re back together.” Despite his words, Doc’s face seems to be suggesting that sometimes it pays to look back into the past.

In these manners, Anderson’s film gradually constructs a narrative map of Los Angeles with its miscellaneous fragmentary spaces. On the one hand, the film renders the urban and suburban spaces partially anonymous by refusing to provide the viewer with comprehensive views of the individual scenes that take place. In doing this, Anderson adheres to the noir tradition, which has been characterized by a strong sense of nightmarish confinement and entrapment. At the same time, Anderson opens up the film’s narrative space by subtly building connections with its extratextual counterpart in terms of both geography and historiography. No matter how fictional or hallucinatory it might be, the film suggests, this is an extension of

the actual Los Angeles in this actual world. The film accompanies the detective in his piecemeal mapping of the city from the ground up, uncovering what has been erased by the city’s endless cycle of destruction and construction. What emerges in the process is a middle and mediating ground located somewhere between the actual and the imaginary Los Angeles, a Southern California beach that perhaps never was but still could have been. Once again, the city of Los Angeles adapts itself to the imagination of the storyteller by offering a geography of subjunctive hope.

Notes

1. As critics have pointed out, this change allows the film to deviate from the male voice-over narration typical in film noir, thereby subverting one of the genre’s conventions. See, for example, Hatooka 145-48; O’Farrell; and Tochigi 85.
2. The renaming of South Central took place in 2003, just six years before the publication of Pynchon’s novel, which, of course, uses the old toponym in the narrative. The change of the area’s name can work both ways. It can result in erasure of the past with “the official, state-sanctioned term,” but at the same time it might lead to the recovery of what has been “obscured by sensationalistic media depictions and popular understandings of South Central” (Pulido, Barraclough, and Cheng 122).
3. Pynchon’s novel does not fail to mention *Vertigo*, but in a different context (298). And regarding Anderson’s film, one blogger says that Penny Kimball’s clothes, in the scene in which she sits on a park bench with Doc, are similar to the Kim Novak character’s in *Vertigo* (“Inherent Problems”).

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