

Disappear Here: Los Angeles and The Flâneur

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Thesis

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Notes on Abbreviations

Georg Simmel’s essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” and book *Philosophy of Money* are abbreviated as MML and PM, respectively.

Walter Benjamin’s essays “Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century” and “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” are abbreviated as “Paris” and “Motifs,” respectively.

Raymond Chandler’s essay, “The Simple Art of Murder” is abbreviated as SAM.

All of Nietzsche’s texts that I cite are abbreviated according to the first letters of each title: *The Gay Science* is GS, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is Z, and *The Will to Power* is WP.

I'd be safe and warm if I was in L.A.

- The Mamas & The Papas

Take the highway to the end of the night.

- The Doors

*That there, that's not me.
I go where I please.*

- Radiohead

Introduction: L.A., Centerless-ness, and Driving

Los Angeles is a heartless city. Though its serpentine streets and endless freeways wind across the landscape like asphalt arteries, Los Angeles has no heart where they can all converge. It is a fragmented city, a city of displacement, a city without a soul.

Yet, Los Angeles isn't even a "city" at all. Rather, it is a sprawling collection of disparate locales and limitless distances, seemingly centerless. As historian Janet Fireman notes, "Most frequently we define region as the megalopolis, but the sprawl's boundaries vary according to the moment and the message. It could be the city of Los Angeles, where the 2000 census counted 3,694,820 people; or the county of Los Angeles, which contains eighty-eight incorporated cities and almost ten million people. Or sometimes the region is defined as a five-county area (Ventura, Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Riverside, and Orange), containing 16,373,645 people" (Fireman 517). Even in its layout, Los Angeles is non-concrete and radically unconcentrated. Its identity/demarcation as Los Angeles is fluctuational and undefined in its multiplicity and plurality. Because L.A.'s boundaries are so ambiguous and appear to have no limit, it seems as though people cannot discern what "L.A." actually is.

On his quest to define Los Angeles, to make sense of the "sprawl," Cees Nooteboom, in "Autopia," finds himself slighted by the city's vastness, what he calls its "centerless-ness:" "The essence of Los Angeles lies in the fact that it hardly has a center. It is a fluid, a 'moving' city, not only a city that moves itself – breaks itself down, builds itself up again, displaces and regroups itself – but also a city in which movement, *freedom* of movement, is a strong premise of life" (Nooteboom 573). Nooteboom categorizes L.A. as an amorphous, amoebic entity, constantly shifting, unstable, "displacing." Echoing Fireman, Nooteboom specifies how L.A.'s "boundaries vary according to the moment." There is something certainly disorienting about this centerless-

ness, the ever-changing, “fluid” nature of the city, that renders the idea of settling down and making a home for one’s self appear nearly impossible. In L.A., there is only “movement.”

In that manner, “this freedom of movement” that is so vital to one’s existence in Los Angeles manifests as constant driving. This is why Nooteboom refers to L.A. as “Autopia:” on the one hand, life in L.A. is predicated on vehicular transport and travel, “auto”mobiles. The only way to make sense of and to navigate this city’s vast distances is to drive. Without a car, you cannot exist in L.A., your experience of it is impossible, meaningless. On the other hand, given Nooteboom’s discussion of the city’s sprawling, amorphous, ever-shifting nature, another interpretation of the word “Autopia” makes itself known. This interpretation emphasizes the “auto” prefix as not just referring to “auto”mobiles, but to “auto” as the self, that “Autopia” can also mean a self-generating place (topos). In his discussion of automobile transport in the city, Nooteboom writes, “With their cars, Angelenos go places, they travel infinite numbers of kilometers in a world that continuously remains Los Angeles” (573). “The world” creates this innate futility for the driver who wishes to find some form of definition in this space. He or she drives and drives and drives but the world stays the same. In essence, the city performs constant autopoiesis, generating, reproducing, and maintaining itself (“continuously remaining Los Angeles”), regardless of its residents who yearn for some positional certainty in relation to it. However, in constantly reproducing itself, the city both affirms its centerless-ness and simultaneously effaces its concrete spatiality. As it grows, generates, sprawls, “Los Angeles” as a spatial demarcation becomes an abstraction, a representation of space rather than a physically tangible one. By being so autopoietic, Los Angeles essentially erases itself.

This impulse toward erasure even becomes translated onto those who inhabit its vehiculated space. We see this clearly in Nooteboom’s response to witnessing traffic on “The

Hollywood freeways.” “I find it hard to believe that the serpentine mass down there is caused by human beings whose being is an anecdote just as fragile as mine, because mine vanishes in this moment. I have, while I am clearly standing here, great difficulty believing in my presence. I harbor a great desire to vanish, to evaporate into the universe like a gas, or like nothing at all” (575). Nooteboom adds a new dimension to the disorientation that L.A.’s centerless-ness inspires: that this “serpentine mass” of cars, reduces him to the point of self-disappearance. The tangibility of his “anecdote,” of his subjective position, falters, begins to dissolve in the face of all this movement: he cannot even “believe in [his] presence.” He cannot believe that he exists. In this way, the human being himself becomes centerless, experiencing an impulse “to evaporate into the universe,” to become “nothing at all.”

Fireman’s and Nooteboom’s analyses of Los Angeles as a “sprawling,” “fluid city” reveal how the city’s identity is constantly in flux, never fixed, essentially non-existent. And now we see that L.A.’s identic nothingness, dislocation, and displacement translate themselves onto those who navigate its streets. Thus, commensurate with its autopoietic nature of self-generation and regeneration, L.A. exerts a caustic, degenerative influence over the personhoods of its residents. The innate overstimulation of experiencing and internalizing both L.A.’s centerless-ness and perpetual movement is unsustainable for an individual, whose experience of Los Angeles is essentially a winding drive to atrophy.

L.A. and The Flâneur

Allow me to suggest that the figure through whom we can properly understand Los Angeles’s atrophic influence over one’s self is Charles Baudelaire’s flâneur. The flâneur, the man of the crowd, the city-stroller, is the quintessential urban explorer, marrying constant movement with experiential, stimuli-intake. For Baudelaire’s flâneur, “the crowd is his element”

(Baudelaire 9). He “sets up house in the heart of the multitude,” feeling himself “everywhere at home” in the crowd and in the city, “amid the ebb and flow of movement” (9). Baudelaire describes this interaction with the crowd and the city as an immersion into “an immense reservoir of electrical energy,” and then “likens” the flâneur to both “a mirror as vast as the crowd itself” and “a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life” he encounters (9). Baudelaire summarizes the purpose undergirding the flâneur’s immersion into the city thusly: “He is an ‘I’ with an insatiable appetite for the ‘non-I’” (9).

Though the flâneur is associated primarily with 19th- and early 20th-century Paris and London, the characteristics this figure exhibits, I would like to argue, are a-temporal, seminal, and archetypal to one’s experience of urban life. That is to say, being a flâneur is not exclusive to the artist or the blissful aristocrat who walks down streets to gaze at crowds. Rather, the flâneur is both consciousness and physicality, an ontological state capable of being inhabited by anyone consciously aware of his or her own experience in the city-scape and of his or her surroundings therein.

Based on Baudelaire’s description, I would like to suggest that, in terms of how he captures his experience of Los Angeles, Cees Nooteboom exemplifies the essential characteristics of a flâneur. Remarking upon the necessity of movement (driving) throughout Los Angeles, Nooteboom laments, “I spend the entire day driving... You can’t go too fast, and the labyrinth is infinite” (579). The flâneur in Baudelaire’s Paris traverses the city on foot; for the L.A. flâneur, foot-travel is replaced by automobile transportation, yet the same impulse of crowd-immersion applies. Car traffic, with all of those vehicles lined up in their “serpentine

mass,” is a crowd experience; it is the Parisian, pedestrian foot-traffic experience translated onto the modern, industrial highway.

Commensurate with these crowd experiences are the experiences of external urban stimuli which the flâneur, as a “mirror” of this space, internalizes. Nooteboom recounts driving through L.A. and having advertisements and spaces of commerce “flung” at him: “flung at [me] from both sides: hamburger joints, gas stations, hotels, traffic information, churches praising God, words and names, names and words...with their rudimentary messages: Gas! Eat! Sleep! Pray! Drink! Stop!” (579). Through this description, he enumerates the chaotic, almost-imperative influence L.A. exerts over its inhabitants.

This deterministic character of Los Angeles manifests in how the flâneur’s internalization of his surroundings causes his self-dissolution. While gazing at the tempestuous sea of cars on the highway, Nooteboom proclaims that he “harbors a great desire to vanish” (575). In other words, he is an “I with the insatiable appetite for the non-I,” exhibiting the dangerous capacity for self-disappearance in the experience of urban life in Los Angeles.

One could posit this experience of the “non-I” as liberating rather than dangerous. To be a “non-I” is to move beyond one’s self, to be besides one’s self; it can be an experience of ecstasy, as the etymological construction thereof comes from the Greek *ekstasis*, meaning to stand (stasis) outside (ek) of one’s self. However, implicitly inscribed in an experience of ecstasy is a finitude, a comedown, a moment where the transcended-self returns to its tangible base. Concurrent with this return is a feeling of dysphoria, a sense of heightened existential unbearableness, disorientation, and numbness, where the “I” from which one departed morphs into a vessel of malaise and despondency. As such, one’s identic center becomes centerless, beginning to wither away and dissolve.

With this aforementioned danger of self-dissolution in mind, I wish to complicate Baudelaire's conception of the flâneur's urban experience as pure and deified. Though he discusses and stresses the "electrifying," expansive nature of the flâneur's urban crowd experience, I find the optimism with which he cloaks this figure to be dubious. Firstly, I am wholly skeptical about the idea of the flâneur being "at home" and "setting up house in the heart of the multitude." At its core, to be home is to be stable, to have a concrete base for one's self. Yet, the "home" Baudelaire posits exists "amid the ebb and flow of movement," this home is shifting in the chaos, fluid, centerless, paradoxical. This "home" is not a home at all; as such, the flâneur is essentially "homeless" in the crowd, shifting along with the pedestrian "ebb and flow," floating in non-definition and intangibility. This pessimistic non-definition and subsequent self-dissolution are reflected in the images Baudelaire uses to describe the flâneur: a "mirror as vast as the crowd itself" and a "kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness responding and reproducing the multiplicity of life." The first image of being a "mirror of the crowd" implies that the flâneur lacks individuality, that he is simply a reflection of the externalities surrounding him, that he is passively consumed by the crowd and the city, relinquishing his subject position. To be a mirror is to, in effect, be a non-entity, to be shapeless, a "non-I." Paradoxically, one can also find an "I" in the mirror. However, because this "I" is only a reflection of the subject and, oftentimes, a more idealized representation thereof, the reflection alerts the subject to his own deficiency, fallibility, and imperfection, that he can never inhabit this reflected "I." Not only is the subject visually doubled by the mirror, thus eliminating the singularity of his being, but the realization of his own impotence also internally fractures him, distancing him from his own "I."

With the second image, Baudelaire provides a more specific indication of this non-being. A "kaleidoscope" implies fragmentation, variation, and disarray. The fact that the flâneur is a

“kaleidoscope” that “responds to and reproduces the multiplicity of life” implies the complete supplanting and fragmentation of the flâneur’s self by the city and the crowd, that he becomes a “reproduction” of the city rather than an individual imbued with subjectivity. Essentially, by internalizing (responding to and reproducing) the stimuli of the cityscape, its “multiplicity,” the flâneur (as a tangible, singular being) shatters, fragments, and collapses. While Baudelaire views these “mirroring” and “kaleidoscopic” tendencies as freeing and posits the “non-I” as a pseudo-Buddhistic manifestation of self-annihilation, expansion and transcendence, the fragmentation and self-distantiation of the “non-I” can also render it a form of undeadness, as “something which remains alive even after it is dead” (Žižek). Sans personhood, the flâneur becomes an incarnation of entropy and dissolution moving through space.

While Baudelaire espouses that the city facilitates the flâneur’s self-generation, I wish to suggest the opposite, that the flâneur’s experience of urban life is rife with precarity and the danger of dissolution, that instead of facilitating his self-generation, the city galvanizes his degeneration, his decay. There can be no home in the ever-shifting crowd; to be a mirror for the city is to passively capitulate one’s individuality to it; and to be a kaleidoscope of urban experience heightens the severity of that capitulation to the realm of self-fragmentation. As a non-I, the flâneur is reduced to a living nothingness.

And yet, his nothingness is intrinsic to his construction: Baudelaire imbues him with an innate “desire” to disappear. But Baudelaire seems too blinded and “electrified” by the crowd and the city to conceive of the instability and jeopardy that the flâneur faces. He instead evokes the effusiveness and purity that these crowd and city-experiences supposedly inspire as a means to obfuscate the threat to one’s existence that the city poses. His implicit argument is that, though the flâneur seems and yearns to disappear into the crowd, into the city, he still remains himself,

retaining his personhood. I do not believe this retention is possible in the chaotic, tumultuous, ever-shifting cityscape that is Los Angeles. Rather, the more the flâneur immerses himself in this centerless city, the more his personhood disintegrates.

The Disintegration of the Flâneur: The Blasé Outlook and Ineffectual Novelty

Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel share my sense of the city's capacity to transgress and disintegrate the selfhood of the flâneur, and posit a paradigm for how that disintegration manifests.

Writing about the urban crowd into which Baudelaire's flâneur delves, Benjamin claims, "Fear, revulsion, and horror were the emotions which the big-city crowd aroused in those who observed it... there was something menacing in the spectacle they presented" (Benjamin, *Motifs*, 14). With this menacing nature of the crowd in mind, Benjamin re-contextualizes and redefines Baudelaire's proclamation about the "electrifying energy reservoir" of the crowd: "Moving through this traffic involves the individual in a series of shocks and collisions. At dangerous intersections, nervous impulses flow through him in rapid succession" (Benjamin, *Motifs*, 16). The flâneur is not "electrified" by the city, he is "shocked" by and "nervous" to be in it. Georg Simmel refers to these "shocks" and "collisions," the experiences of being jostled on the street, or hounded by advertisements, vendors, and storefronts, as "the swift and continuous shift" of "violent stimuli" (Simmel, *MML* 1). In this way, Benjamin and Simmel propose the city as a space of constant stimulation: it is violent, arresting, anxiety-inducing. The flâneur is, thus, bombarded with stimuli, unable to stave off the city's influence over his psychological and emotional state.

Simmel then presents the second stage of the flâneur's disintegration: that this urban overstimulation renders him void of any feeling or response to them at all. Simmel refers to this as the "blasé outlook."

It is at first the consequence of those rapidly shifting stimulations of the nerves which are thrown together in all their contrasts...An immoderately sensuous life makes one blasé because it stimulates the nerves to their utmost reactivity until they finally can no longer produce any reaction at all,...they exhaust their last reserves of strength and do not have time for new reserves to form (MML 3).

What Simmel essentially argues is that the flâneur is so inundated with stimuli that he can no longer feel anything towards his own stimulation. In this way, Simmel subverts Baudelaire's effervescent conception of the flâneur as a "kaleidoscope who responds to and reproduces" the stimuli of the cityscape, of the "multitude." It is this "multitude" which renders the flâneur blasé, unfeeling, utterly incapable of response and reproduction; the flâneur is trapped in a liminality of "contrasting," contradictory "stimuli." Resultingly, he can no longer react to his city, to the crowd, to his supposed "home." Adopting this blasé outlook, the flâneur exhibits a bifold disintegration: his identity dissolves because he can no longer experience the city, and, subsequently, the flâneur ceases being able to integrate himself in this urban space.

As Simmel further argues, "The essence of the blasé attitude is...that the meaning and the value of the distinctions between things, and therewith of the things themselves, are experienced as meaningless" (MML 3). After "surviving the nonetheless constant onslaught of sensual stimuli in the metropolis" (Choi 711), the flâneur looks upon the space from which he derived value and sensation as meaningless and indistinct. Benjamin notes this decay in the flâneur: "the luster [of the crowd] that had dazzled the flâneur had faded for him" (Benjamin, *Motifs* 31).

With his descent into the blasé outlook, the flâneur's selfhood "fades" into meaninglessness. However, this blasé outlook is only a substratum of an overarching philosophical force exerting itself over the flâneur and his city: nihilism, a sense of entropy and pervasive value-less-ness, meaninglessness, and centerless-ness.

While this paradigm of the blasé outlook appears inevitable, is there a way for the flâneur to escape this nihilistic, urban, self-destructive outcome? Benjamin and Simmel both posit a possible answer: the continual pursuit of "novelty" or novel stimuli. Benjamin proclaims, "The flâneur's last journey: death. Its goal: novelty" (Benjamin, Paris, 170). Now that the flâneur can no longer feel stimulated by the crowd to which he became accustomed (and which first shocked, "electrified" him), he must search for new stimuli which could potentially reinvigorate him into feeling again. Simmel echoes this belief of continued immersion into novel stimuli: "the search for mere stimuli in themselves is the consequence of the increasing blasé attitude... We have here one of those interesting cases in which the disease determines its own form of the cure" (Simmel, PM 257). This "cure" appears ironic: to cure the numbness resulting from overstimulation with more stimulation seems like an exercise in futility. Unless, that is, the novel stimuli are so excessive, so spectacular, so utterly shocking that they can reawaken the flâneur from his numb stupor.

However, this seems potentially dangerous in terms of what that novelty can entail. While novelty can embody advancement and progression, it can also be characterized by new extreme, transgressive stimuli, which reproduce, to an even greater degree, the shock value of what the flâneur experienced when he first entered the cityscape. For the flâneur, this pursuit of novelty can instill within him an indifference to morality, a proclivity for debauchery, and facilitate a further descent into self-degradation.

Commensurately, there is also the possibility that the flâneur will still evoke the blasé outlook towards these novel stimuli, that novelty will become old news instantaneously to the dispassionate flâneur. It would appear, then, that novelty actually perpetuates the cycle of the flâneur's descent into blasé nihilism. Yet, the blasé outlook that results from the inefficaciousness of novelty is not the same as that which stemmed from the flâneur's first over-inundation of urban stimuli. This new blasé-ness is more self-consuming for the flâneur, more totalistic; it is no longer just a blasé "outlook," but a blasé personhood, a being predicated on nothingness and non-reactivity, which then metastasizes into how that personhood is expressed. Not only is there a blasé personhood, but literarily, in terms of how the experience of the flâneur is recorded, there is also a blasé *style* of disaffection, indifference, and inhumanity. In this manner, blasé nihilism is an inevitability for the flâneur, for whom all urban stimuli become absent of meaning before his very eyes. Thus, flânerie loses its electrification, its shock, its "luster," and the flâneur loses himself. The flâneur's "last journey" is "death," and "novelty" is that which ensures it.

The Aim of This Thesis

In order to understand the degenerative effect that Los Angeles has on an individual's personhood, it is imperative to examine the L.A. flâneur and its interactions with its urban milieu. The flâneur is an ideal tabula-rasa figure onto which and within which a myriad theoretical, philosophical, and phenomenological frameworks and strains can be projected and intermingle. As such, the flâneur can illuminate the malignancy and emptiness undergirding certain facets of the L.A. experience.

Nooteboom presented us with a visitor's account of that pernicious experience through his transient Los Angeles flânerie, revealing the city's emphasis on vehiculation, its centerless

construction, and his own internalization of that centerless-ness. In L.A., the danger of becoming a centerless, heartless “non-I” is ever-present: even those who are just visiting the city experience the nascent atrophy of their being. If only a visit can entail and produce the potential evaporation of the self, what, then, does it mean to actually *live* in such an influentially centerless milieu, to be perennially subjected to the city’s chaos? Is it even possible for the flâneur to have a self or a concrete identity amidst the amorphous sprawl and overstimulating excess of Los Angeles?

In answering these questions, I will sequentially apply the Simmel-Benjamin framework of the flâneur’s overstimulation in the cityscape, subsequent descent into blasé nihilism, and his ultimately fallible, self-degenerating quest for novel stimuli, to three novels centered around the putrescent, existential experiences of L.A. flâneurs. Our first text, Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*, concerns the moral, nihilistic decay of the detective-flâneur at the hands of an amoral, valueless, crime-ridden Los Angeles. With Joan Didion’s *Play It As It Lays*, we move from L.A. as a crimescape to L.A. as a mediascape, a non-place, and explore the mediatized decrepitude of the L.A. *flâneuse*, a portrait of life corroded into nothingness by blasé indifference. And, lastly, with Bret Easton Ellis’s *Less Than Zero*, we will examine how dispassionate, blasé L.A. youth redefine and re-contextualize the flâneur’s quest for novel stimuli as a craving for “the Worst,” delving into spectacle and amorality to the point where the flâneur’s self disappears. Philip Marlowe, Maria Wyeth, and the mononymous Clay are all L.A. residents, and they are all L.A. flâneurs, lenses through which we as readers can understand and witness the destructive interplay between L.A. and selfhood. Through the varying transgressions levied against these flâneurs in their interactions with Los Angeles and its citizens in these three novels, I will attempt to chart a genealogy of the disintegration and dissolution of the self in Los Angeles. This is not meant to be

an ideology totality for Los Angeles; rather, it is an attempt to present a possible philosophical framework through which this city, bathed in blinding, perpetual sunlight, can be read. An attempt to see past L.A.'s plastic, palm-tree-laden façade and reveal the desert, the nothingness, lying dormant beneath it.

Chapter I. The Putrescence of The Detective-Flâneur

Me, I was part of the nastiness now.¹

Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles is a sprawling, morally centerless, "mean" city. "But down these mean streets a man must go who himself is not mean," Chandler writes in his detective-fiction manifesto, "The Simple Art of Murder," "who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero, he is everything" (Chandler, SAM, 4). In Chandler's eyes, the archetypal detective is an ideal: he is impregnable to, untarnished by, and unafraid of the corrosive influences of his "mean" world and "mean" city. Yet, it seems ironic, given Chandler's cynical outlook towards and construction of this "mean" world, that such an ideal figure could navigate these streets unscathed. In order to prove the irony of Chandler's proposition, we need to look beyond the detective's characterization as "the hero" and into the specificities of his construction and relationship with his urban milieu.

When Chandler says, "down these mean streets a man must go," a statement implying urban travel, movement, and exploration, he imbricates the detective's immersion into his world with the flâneur's journey through his. Chandler's detective, Philip Marlowe, is a flâneur. In Baudelaire's depiction, the flâneur is both a figure of the gaze and appears resigned to experience the city externally: he walks the streets, looks upon and loses himself in crowds, but we never see him go inside any of the buildings or any of the spaces which surround him. With Marlowe, the flâneur's exploration widens and becomes more penetrative, both physically and perceptually. Marlowe not only spends his time in cars driving and walking through Los Angeles, but he also enters a broad swath of opulent and perverse spaces throughout the city: the Sternwood Mansion, Geiger's porn shop and home/studio, Eddie Mars's Cypress Club, the

¹ Chandler, 230

decaying Fulwider Building, and, of course, his home and office, where representatives of those corrupt spaces invariably appear. In this way, Marlowe not only travels down these “mean streets,” but he also inhabits, infiltrates, and surveils them with his incisive gaze.

By applying this notion of the flâneur’s interplay with his urban milieu back to Chandler’s “Simple Art of Murder,” I wish to suggest that, in his essay, Chandler overlooks a significant potentiality in the detective’s interaction with the city, that the “mean” city can corrupt and corrode the detective so that he becomes “mean” himself. The flâneur derives his self-definition from the city in which he immerses himself; he is unable to resist the influence that his surroundings have over him. Chandler makes no mention of this critical, potential danger that the detective faces, even though he is constantly enmeshed in spaces of toxic corruption and entangled with amoral, criminal figures. This allows us to re-examine the phrase “he is everything” in a different light: with this totality, Chandler urges the reader to assume that to be “everything” is to be “everything” good, morally upright, and just. Yet, given that “everything” in Marlowe’s world is “mean” and crooked, then, by being “everything,” Marlowe directly participates in the “meanness” and anomie of his city. As Marlowe himself admits at the end of *The Big Sleep*, “Me, I was part of the nastiness now” (Chandler 230).

This chapter seeks to complicate Chandler’s claim that the detective is impregnable to and untarnished by his environment, to trace how Marlowe and Chandler arrive at this conclusion, what this “nastiness” entails, and what this means for the flâneur’s slowly degenerating ontology as he interacts with Los Angeles. I do not wish to simply argue that corruption in this cityscape is unavoidable, but that corruption defines Marlowe’s relationship to the crime and the criminals he ostensibly investigates. Through an application of Nietzschean nihilism to the Los Angeles Chandler constructs and Marlowe’s relationship with criminal

figures in *The Big Sleep*, I will commence my examination of the L.A. flâneur's disintegration into amorality. This chapter embodies the first stage of the Simmel-Benjamin paradigm where the flâneur, in this case Philip Marlowe, internalizes and becomes overstimulated by the corrosive cityscape and descends into the nihilistic, blasé outlook. Los Angeles is "Chandler's Waste Land" (Eburne) and Philip Marlowe a piece of its detritus.

Nietzschean Nihilism and Chandler's Non-Knight

Nietzschean nihilism begins with the claim that "God is dead" (Nietzsche, GS 343). By this, Nietzsche means that because the traditional Judeo-Christian God was fashioned by man to satisfy his "psychological need" (Nietzsche, WP 12) for greater meaning and spiritual protection, God is inherently not divine and entirely "unworthy of belief" (GS 343). God is, thus, artificial and man-made. As a result, His "divinity" and associated ideals are invalidated: there can exist no transcendent realm, no metaphysical "Beyond," for they are "purely fictitious worlds" (WP 12). Since this God was seen as "the basis of human moral life and all values" (Li 304), with His death, so die our ideals of Truth, The Good, and Justice.

As Nietzsche explains, "The goal is lacking; there is no answer to the question 'Why?' What does Nihilism mean?—that the highest values devalue themselves" (WP 2). This is existentially degenerating for an individual, who loses his purpose, his "goal," because the "high values" undergirding them and guiding him are found to be fraudulent and illusory; they "devalue themselves." An individual, mired in this valueless, desecrated world, subsequently succumbs to "the belief in the absolute immorality of nature, in aim- and meaningless-ness" because his "belief in God and an essential moral order is no longer held" (WP 55). Because God is gone—and along with Him, goodness and Truth—amorality and evil take their place, facing no castigation from this now cold, indifferent world.

Chandler's Los Angeles is a world where moral idealism has unraveled. As Chandler asserts, "law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practicing" (SAM 4). Our commitment to preserving ideals is untenable, inconsistent, and porous; "law and order" are just words, ineffective safeguards against a collectively amoral world. When Marlowe asks District Attorney Wilde why the "Hollywood police allowed" Geiger's smut store to "operate," the DA responds that this is "just why cities are run as they are run" (113). The implication of Wilde's statement is that corruption, amorality, and criminality are so entrenched in the functioning of Los Angeles, that it is futile for anyone to fight against and eradicate them. To put it in Chandlerian terms, "knights had no meaning in this game. It wasn't a game for knights" (156).

And yet, the idea of knights and knighthood plays an important role in *The Big Sleep* and literary criticism thereon. However, I wish to suggest that a sense of Nietzschean nihilism pervades Chandler's depiction of knighthood, which complicates and contributes a specific philosophical basis for critics' conceptions of Marlowe as both "knight" and non-knight. Before delving into those conceptions, it is necessary to foreground the ideological undertones of the traditional knights which Chandler draws upon. As Charles Rzepka posits, "the 'true' knight combines fealty to lord and lady with devotion to God...and tries to satisfy God's demands to do justice and to remain chaste" (Rzepka 704). Christianity and knighthood are inextricably intertwined to the point where service to a human lord becomes a metonymic form of service to the male-coded God, the "Lord." Philip Marlowe, "Chandler's 'true' knight" (Rzepka 704), arguably encapsulates this two-fold fealty when he explains to Wilde the rationale of his detective work: "I'm selling what I have to sell to make a living. What little guts and intelligence the Lord gave me and a willingness to get pushed around in order to protect a client" (114). Here, Marlowe invokes fealty to both a human lord, in this case, his "client," General Sternwood, and

to God, “the Lord,” positing that it was this higher power that bestowed him with his abilities to carry out his detective work. However, given that Marlowe’s evocation of God comes immediately after he admits that he’s “selling what he has to sell to make a living,” this renders his treatment of what “the Lord gave” him as more of a facetious gesture than a genuine acknowledgment of loyalty. By commercializing himself and his detective work, Marlowe transitively commercializes God, as if “God’s gift” is something he can transfer or “sell.” Marlowe’s gesture of equating “The Lord” with a means to make a living, while giving Him an implied monetary value, essentially devalues any notion of spiritual elevation. Thus, Marlowe’s, and, by extension, Chandler’s, relationship to God is more flippant and nihilistic than submissive and deferential. Chandler’s “knight” isn’t on a quest to do a service to God; he’s on a job to “make a living” for himself.

With Chandler’s flippancy in mind, I wish to examine the moment that comprises the foundation for critics’ formulation of Marlowe as a “traditional chivalric hero” (Fontana 180) and then suggest that Chandler’s conception of knighthood actually emphasizes and champions anti-chivalry, a fealty to amorality and corruption. Thus, Chandler’s version of “knighthood” can be viewed as a subversion thereof, as non-knighthood. The first glimpse we have of knights in Chandler’s novel is on a stained-glass panel in General Sternwood’s home:

There was a broad stained-glass panel showing a knight in dark armor rescuing a lady who was tied to a tree and didn’t have any clothes on but some very long and convenient hair. The knight had pushed the vizor of his helmet back to be sociable, and he was fiddling with the knots on the ropes that tied the lady to the tree and not getting anywhere. I stood there and thought that if I lived in the house, I would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him (3-4).

As Sharon Devaney-Lovinguth notes, this panel foretells “the mission that Marlowe will pursue throughout the novel: he will be a ‘knight’ who participates in the freeing of ‘ladies’” (Devaney-Lovinguth 8). In the same vein, Ernest Fontana reads the knight “rescuing” the naked damsel as foreshadowing Marlowe’s discovery of Carmen Sternwood nude in Geiger’s home and in his bedroom (Fontana 180).

While these perspectives hone in on Marlowe’s admission that he “would have to help” the knight, signifying a moral, almost chivalric impulse to do good, they overlook other crucial details of the panel and of the novel that render their assessments somewhat apocryphal. First of all, they don’t address that this panel is not actual knighthood, but an artistic representation of it. As such, they don’t consider the panel’s, and, therefore, the knight’s innate artificiality, that perhaps knighthood can exist solely as representation rather than actually be put into practice. Furthermore, they don’t explore the philosophical implication of the knight “pushing the vizor of his helmet back,” laying bare his eyes, his gaze, which turns this moment into one of male visual pleasure. Hypothetically, the knight wouldn’t have to remove his helmet to help untie the damsel’s knots, yet the person who constructed the stained-glass panel (Chandler) has him do so in order “to be sociable,” to let down the guard of his knighthood. This “pushing back” of the vizor is, thus, a moment of compromised knighthood: the knight not only humanizes himself, he also gives into his desire, infringing upon the “chasteness” of the “true knight.” Even though the damsel has “conveniently long hair,” she is still nude, and he looks at her unabashedly. Thus, the model knight on which these aforementioned critics base their characterization of Marlowe is actually a tarnished one. Moreover, by performing this ekphrasis of the panel, visually consuming it, Marlowe is inscribed in the gaze-paradigm that the panel depicts; instead of being a double for the knight and his “rescuing” gesture, Marlowe is doubled with his desirous gaze.

Furthering this theme, while Devaney-Lovinguth and Fontana posit that the knight is Marlowe's double, I wish to suggest, alongside Charles Rzepka in his essay on Gothic chivalry and *The Big Sleep*, that the novel also visually doubles Marlowe with the tied-up damsel (Rzepka 713). Waking up in Eddie Mars' hideout, Marlowe writes, "handcuffs held my wrists behind me and a rope went from them to my ankles and then over the end of the brown davenport on which I was sprawled. The rope dropped out of sight over the davenport" (190). Here, Marlowe is not only visually imbricated with the damsel, but, by being essentially put in bondage gear (handcuffs and rope), he also becomes a similarly sexualized object. Thus, Chandler doesn't simply render the supposedly chaste, pure knight as a desirous voyeur, he also transforms him into that which is gazed-upon. He sexualizes knighthood, and, thus, devalues its probity.

Chandler further devalues knighthood's probity by codifying Marlowe as crime kingpin Eddie Mars's knight. Mars refers to Marlowe as "soldier" (69) repeatedly, which doubles him with both a general recognizing a subordinate by rank and General Sternwood, Marlowe's actual, supposed "lord." Furthermore, Marlowe, when questioned by the police about Geiger's murder, admits that "I left out two things, not knowing just why, at the moment, I left out one of them. I left out Carmen's visit to Brody's apartment and Eddie Mars' visit to Geiger's in the afternoon" (108). Marlowe, the knight-for-hire, breaks the law to protect a liege crime-lord who does not even formally hire him; he plays the role of Mars's not-so-good little "soldier" intrinsically, "not knowing just why" he does so. Thus, Chandler subverts the notion of traditional chivalry and posits that this "knight" he depicts doesn't swear fealty to God or notions of justice, but to the preservation of corruption. As such, these chivalric values are inverted from godly idealism into utter amorality and nothingness. This nihilism is the philosophy that undergirds Chandler's conception of knighthood, which Fontana nearly enumerates when he mentions the "collective

entropy that envelops the world of the novel” (Fontana 183), but does not specify the exact character thereof.

However, Fontana does propose a subversion of the notion that Marlowe’s relationship to General Sternwood is emblematic of that between “the ‘true’ knight” and his feudal lord. He posits that “the General survives in illusion; the truth about Carmen would kill him, and, as we have seen, Marlowe ends up acting to sustain this illusion” (Fontana 183). Marlowe does not report Carmen’s murder of Regan to either the police or General Sternwood, and gives her time to leave town, essentially obfuscating his own case and implicating himself in the crime. In this way, Marlowe does not honor “truth” and justice, but untruth and fabrication; by never revealing to the General the moral degeneracies of his daughters in order to ease his mind on his deathbed, Marlowe, thus, lives by and promotes an ignoble lie. Though this gesture appears to be one of seemingly chivalrous preservation, it is actually rooted in anti-chivalry. His gesture of fealty is to “sustain the illusion,” the intangible, the false, which facilitates the “knight’s” embrace of the nothingness and irreconcilability of a nihilistic, “entropic” world. Marlowe’s knighthood is itself an illusion, an impossibility that inevitably gives way to “the debased realities of the post-industrial metropolis” (Fontana 185). Thus, in Chandler’s cityscape, knighthood can exist only as an artistic representation on a stained-glass window; it has no real “meaning” in the world beyond it.

L.A. Rain, The Fulwider Building, and The Detective

Using Chandler’s knight-less entropy as a philosophical guidepost, we can now examine the macrocosm of the “debased” metropolis and how it asserts itself over the detective-flâneur. Chandler’s nihilistic ecology of Los Angeles is so pervasive and so damaging to the detective-flâneur, that even the weather and the city’s buildings are agents of moral decay and criminality.

If “God is dead” and valueless, then this meaninglessness is transferred onto the nature and physical environment of the city as well.

As a result, this amorality is disseminated by the rain. Marlowe remarks, “In spite of the rain, or perhaps even because of it, there was business done at Geiger’s” (Chandler 31). Marlowe essentially argues that the rain inspires people to act in a criminal manner; that the rain drives them to immorally purchase and consume Geiger’s smut. The rain, thus, acts as a facilitator of moral corruption, a metonymy for L.A.’s nihilism.

Not only does the rain exert an influence over the residents of L.A., but it also asserts itself over the detective-flâneur. Chandler writes, “The rain drummed hard on the roof of the car and the burbank top began to leak. A pool of water formed on the floorboards for me to keep my feet in” (30). With this image, the rain penetrates Marlowe’s own protective sphere, his vehicle, that which allows him to perform his flânerie. L.A. is literally pounding on and seeping through Marlowe’s car until he, too, is partially submerged in it. This is an act of transgression by the world of Los Angeles against the flâneur, a gesture of hostility and encroachment, as if the world is almost trying to drown him. At one point, Marlowe remarks, “I stood there breathing rain” (183). To “breathe rain” is to not breathe at all. It is a sign of drowning, but more importantly, a sign that Los Angeles is overtaking the body of the flâneur. The rain instigates people’s criminality and penetrates the flâneur with that same amorality.

Even the buildings the detective enters affect that same sense of value and meaninglessness over the detective, further facilitating his descent into the city’s “nastiness.” Chandler writes, “I turned into the narrow lobby of the Fulwider Building. A single drop light burned far back, beyond an open, once gilt elevator. There was a tarnished and well-missed spittoon on a gnawed rubber mat. I shook the rain off my hat and looked at the building directory...Numbers

with names and numbers without names” (170). With this moment, we get a new inflection of *flânerie*, where the *flâneur* goes off the street and into the buildings surrounding him. Marlowe as a *flâneur* is putting himself at great risk entering such a space. This is a space of physical and temporal decay: the elevator was “once gilt,” an emblem of rust and corrosion, and is an acknowledgement of a more idealized, “gilted” past that no longer exists. The space is “tarnished,” a direct callback to Chandler’s “Simple Art of Murder,” indicating that exposure to L.A.’s denizens has completely debilitated the building over time. “A well-missed spittoon” indicates that there is trash and detritus strewn all across the floor. As such, this building is a literal wasteland. With the line “numbers with names and numbers without names” the space becomes a semiotic wasteland as well. Herein is the microcosmic unraveling of the relationship between sign and signifier, between sign and meaning. The “number” is the sign, while the “name” of the person who occupies and uses the space that the number denotes provides it with “significance,” or use-value. That there are “numbers without names,” an image suggesting spatial emptiness, signifies the erosion of the bond between a sign and its meaning and value.

If the *flâneur* derives his self-definition from his interactions with urban space, then the definition that Marlowe derives from this encounter is paradoxically rooted in definition-lessness and decay. The building even manipulates Marlowe, who notes that “the clandestine air of the building [is] prompting” (170) his movement through it. And he is also “tarnished” by it: “I came out at the fourth floor sniffing for air” (171). The building is so debilitated, the air in it so poisonous and polluted, that it suffocates Marlowe. First the outside world of L.A. drowns him, making him “breathe rain,” and now this building deprives him of “air,” of oxygen. L.A., through the decayed metonymy of the Fulwider Building, is facilitating an elemental onslaught on the *flâneur*’s physical being.

This onslaught continues after Marlowe exits the Fulwider Building, having just witnessed Lash Canino's murder of Harry Jones: "It was raining hard again. I walked into it with the heavy drops slapping my face. When one of them touched my tongue I knew that my mouth was open and the ache at the side of my jaws told me it was open wide and strained back, mimicking the rictus of death carved upon the face of Harry Jones" (180). Marlowe leaves the corrupted building only to be "slapped," beaten by the rain. Los Angeles is not only physically abusing him, but it is also making himself numb to his own experience. The rain alerts Marlowe to this realization. The rain "touches" Marlowe's "tongue," penetrating his physical interiority, and renders him aware of his bodily "aches" and facial contortions, from which he seems completely dissociated and detached. In this moment, Marlowe's body is ventriloquized, and his self-awareness and feelings are mediated by L.A. and the rain. By "mimicking the rictus of death" on "Harry Jones" without a conscious awareness of doing so, Marlowe embodies living decay. Harry Jones famously dies by drinking cyanide. Marlowe's opening his mouth, imbibing the rain, and then "mimicking" Jones' face of death functions as an equivalent, metaphorical death, that the rain and the cyanide are essentially one and the same form of poison. In sum, L.A. is trying to destroy Marlowe's body.

Private Eyes: Marlowe's Dream, Desire and Decay

Concurrent with the flâneur's bodily experience of the cityscape is a perceptual one, an impulse to *see* the city and the individuals comprising it. As Baudelaire writes, the flâneur "gazes upon the landscapes of the great city" and "watches the river of life flow past him" (Baudelaire 11). In Chandler's novel, Los Angeles not only penetrates his physical body, but also overtakes and manipulates his perception. The city's spaces and residents penetrate Marlowe's psyche through his gaze to the point where he himself is inspired to kill. As a figure of constant sight, a

private “eye,” Marlowe, the flâneur, is, thus, unable to resist internalizing the corrupt spaces and people that he encounters in his journey through Los Angeles.

The convergence of Marlowe’s physical flânerie (his ability to enter buildings in the city) and his gaze starts with his entry into Geiger’s house. The first person he sees is Carmen Sternwood: “Carmen Sternwood was sitting very straight...her body stiffly erect in the pose of an Egyptian goddess...Her eyes were wide open. The dark slate color of the iris had devoured the pupil” (35). Here, Marlowe’s ekphrastic gaze returns: he not only metaphorizes Carmen as an “Egyptian Goddess,” but also projects his sexuality over her by describing her in phallic terms as “stiffly erect.” The former gesture abstracts Carmen, while the latter renders her an object of visual pleasure. Furthermore, Marlowe acknowledges her gaze with precision and closeness (for to see a person’s “iris devouring the pupil,” one would have to be in close proximity thereto), implying that he too becomes an object of Carmen’s gaze. Inasmuch as he inscribes Carmen into his perception, he is also inscribed into hers; the visual objectification is reciprocal. Additionally, Carmen’s “iris devouring the pupil” groups her gaze together with a camera zooming in on something, when its “iris” similarly tightens around its aperture.

This image allows us to segue into what Marlowe sees next: “I looked at Geiger. He was on his back on the floor, in front of a thing that looked like a totem pole...Its wide round eye was a camera lens. The lens was aimed at the naked girl in the chair...[Geiger’s] glass eye shone brightly up at me” (36). With the presence of the camera and the fact that it’s “aimed at” Carmen, this scene doesn’t just become a defining moment of the male gaze, it is also a moment of cinematic and photographic pleasure. Furthermore, it is necessary to note how Chandler anthropomorphizes the camera: it has “a wide round eye,” which again groups it with Carmen’s “eyes wide open.” However, the camera’s “eye” is made of “glass” not flesh. Thus, not only is

the camera doubled with Carmen, it is also doubled with Geiger and his “glass eye.” Geiger, in this moment, is coded as a human camera, existing in a liminality between flesh and glass. When Marlowe says that Geiger’s “glass eye shone brightly up at me,” he becomes an object of the pseudo-camera’s gaze, and, by association, the gaze of the camera itself, inscribing him into a visual paradigm. There is an implicit recognition here between Marlowe’s gaze and the camera’s “eye.” A camera is an apparatus presented with visual stimuli, which it then captures, internalizes, and reproduces as either a physical film or photographic print. In the same manner, a flâneur registers the vast swath of urban stimuli with which he is presented, allowing it to impress itself upon his interiority.

Chandler manifests the subconscious impression that Geiger’s home has on Marlowe after he leaves Geiger’s and drops Carmen back at hers: “I dreamed about a man in a bloody Chinese coat who chased a naked girl with long jade earrings while I ran after them and tried to take a photograph with an empty camera” (42). Marlowe’s subconscious not only reproduces the murder event from which he just departed, but it also incriminates Marlowe as a participant in the crime as well. Not only is Marlowe implicated in the crime, but he is also inscribed into a system of photographic, visual spectacle: he is trying to “take a photograph with an empty camera,” to both mediate and mediatize corruption, but the camera is already empty before he even jumps into action. His dream renders him a smut photographer and alerts him to his own futility of being able to both combat corruption and document it. As Stuart Burrows posits in his essay “Noir’s Private ‘I,’” “The task of the classic detective is to restore innocence; the task of the hard-boiled private eye is to report on its loss” (Burrows 55). In this world, where “innocence” has no place, even the detective’s ability to “report” on criminality, to record it (both via film and in literature), is dashed by the fact that it is not worth doing so.

This subconscious acknowledgment of his own moral futility foregrounds Marlowe's irrepressible desire for Carmen, which then facilitates the degeneration of his morality. In discussing the ethical and sexual implications of the male gaze, Linda Williams claims, "To see is to desire" (Williams 3). That is to say, when anybody looks for an extended period of time at another person, that person is immediately encoded in a paradigm of desire. Marlowe is the poster-boy for this taxonomizing, covetous male gaze, even if he himself would not like to think so. Looking at Carmen naked in Geiger's house, Marlowe admits, "She had a beautiful body, small, lithe, compact, firm, rounded. Her skin in the lamplight had the shimmering luster of a pearl...I looked her over without either embarrassment or ruttishness. As a naked girl she was not there in that room at all" (35-36). There's an ironic duality to Marlowe's description. On the one hand, he is so covetous of Carmen's body, performing a blazon of her through his gaze, that he makes the effort of metaphorizing her as having the "luster of a pearl." On the other hand, he says that "she was not there at all." This latter statement, along with his attempt at dissuasion that he was neither "embarrassed" nor "ruttish" at the sight of her naked, manifests Marlowe's repression of the desire that otherwise exerts itself through his gaze. He tells himself that she is not there in order to make himself not feel anything towards her, but we as the reader are keyed into the absurdity of this gesture: Marlowe's masculine repression is entirely futile, since he has already indicated his poetic covetousness of Carmen's body.

We don't believe the story Marlowe is telling himself, and even Marlowe's desire frustrates his ability to formulate and spin that story. After Carmen has infiltrated Marlowe's apartment, waiting for him naked in his bed, he makes her leave, but "the imprint of her head was still in the pillow, of her small corrupt body still on the sheets" (159). Marlowe then "tore the bed to pieces savagely" (159). As Rzepka notes, Marlowe's use of the word "imprint"

“recalls the photographic ‘prints’ in which Carmen’s body has been commodified by pornographers” (Rzepka 718), further mirroring him in a system of visual pleasure. As such, Carmen leaves a “corrupt” “imprint” on Marlowe’s mind in the same way that she leaves an “imprint” on his bed; he cannot erase his desire for her. The gesture of Marlowe’s “tearing the bed to pieces savagely” could be read as an act of said erasure, that by destroying the bed, he is eradicating both her physical presence and the “imprint” she has left on his interiority. However, I read Marlowe’s “tearing the bed” as a signifier of his inability to repress his animalistic desire for Carmen; regardless of what he tells himself, he is incapable of escaping his lust, the result of his unceasing, all-consuming gaze.

To see Carmen is to desire Carmen, to desire Carmen is to internalize her, and to internalize her is to be defined by her. Because Carmen is the personification of L.A.’s nihilistic moral vacuity, Marlowe, through this construction, effectively desires the criminality and meaninglessness to which he has been subjected and ultimately reproduces it to a detrimental degree. Carmen is artificialized and mechanized by Chandler, as having “lips [which] move very slowly and carefully, as if they were artificial lips and had to be manipulated with springs” (157). As such, she is no longer really human to him, and instead, rendered an automaton. This construction foregrounds her own indifference to morality: characterized as an unfeeling non-human, she does not value other human life. Thus, when Marlowe makes her look at the dead body of Geiger on the floor, she says she “thought he was cute. She giggled and tried to tell me so” (37). She laughs at the sight of a dead body, turning death into both a form of comedy, which devalues its severity, and pleasure; a dead body is “cute” to her.

By desiring Carmen, Marlowe is subsequently inculcated into this perverse amorality, one that entirely devalues human life, and turns death into a sick joke. Immediately after

Marlowe shoots and kills Lash Canino, he says: “I began to laugh like a loon” (202). While one could say that his laugh is one of triumph, of self-approbation for outsmarting a criminal, this scene appears far more malicious given the context of his desire for Carmen and his internalization of her amorality. To “laugh like a loon” is to be reduced to a state of insanity and suggests an inability to distinguish right from wrong. Thus, Marlowe’s reproducing Carmen’s “giggle” renders murder a spectacle from which he derives pleasure, signifies the dissolution of his morality, and, ultimately, doubles him with Carmen. He becomes a perpetrator of the same amorality that the city has been pummeling him with; Marlowe has degenerated and has become “mean.”

We now can arrive at Marlowe’s defeatist declaration: “Me, I was part of the nastiness now” (230). The shift from “me” to “I” manifests a fragmentation of self, as though Marlowe has been split because of his interactions with both the nihilistic world of L.A. and the amoral characters populating it. There is also a disjunction between the tense of this sentence and the word “now.” Because this book is written in the past tense, it implies that there is a finality to the moments depicted, that everything that happened has happened, suggesting that Marlowe stands apart from this corruption. Yet, with “now,” the notion of finitude becomes more complicated, because this word signifies a temporality outside of the book’s parameters, where Marlowe is telling his story after the events in an imagined present, an imagined “now.” That he is “part of the nastiness now” indicates that this corruption was not finite like the rest of the events in the novel, but that it has carried over beyond the text, that Marlowe’s moral decrepitude is perennial. Los Angeles did not just decay Marlowe’s morality; worse, the city subsumed him into its own. Such is the fate of the flâneur: a putrescence into L.A.’s nihilistic “nastiness.”

However, I wish to advance a further reading that this “nastiness” to which Marlowe capitulates is not just the nihilistic totality of Los Angeles, but, more specifically, the pornographizing, mediating, and visually objectifying culture of Hollywood. This can be traced immediately to when Marlowe enters Geiger’s home and gazes upon Carmen who poses for the camera. As Rzepka writes, “Hollywood, the American dream factory, is the home of the stars, and the first syllable of the name ‘Sternwood,’ German for ‘star,’ suggests that ‘Sternwood’ is, macaronically, ‘Star-wood’” (Rzepka 717). In this way, by being both an object of photographic visual pleasure, a “star” stripped of personhood, and “macaronically” doubled with Hollywood, Carmen combines L.A.’s nihilism with Hollywood spectacle. Before, I posited that Chandler’s description of her as having “lips” that “had to be manipulated with springs” (157) rendered her an automaton. I wish to now suggest that this mechanization doesn’t just render her an automaton but a camera. Specifically, a camera’s shutter mechanism has a “*spring-loaded* door that opens...before closing up again to let light through the aperture” (Woodford 1. Italics mine). As such, Carmen is subsumed by both the technological apparatus and system which visually objectify her. By gazing upon her, which duplicates Marlowe with the camera that looms over her, Marlowe similarly inscribes himself in this system of visual nihilism.

Furthermore, Rzepka refers to Hollywood as “the dream factory,” implying that not only does it transform dreams into cinematic spectacle, but it also manufactures and influences viewers’ imaginations. This becomes literalized for Marlowe in the dream he has after he leaves Geiger’s house: the sight of both Carmen and Geiger with his “glass eye,” the humanized camera, “imprints” itself over Marlowe’s subconscious to the point where he becomes a cameraman and pornographer, directly playing into this system of bodily devaluation. To be an

object of the camera's "eye" is to be stripped of agency and humanity, rendered a commodity for visual consumption; Carmen is this mediated object.

Yet, as we explored with my construction of Marlowe's irrepressible desire for Carmen, not only does he desire her through his obsessive gaze, but by doing so, he also reproduces that which she embodies, he becomes an actor meant to be visually consumed. This is first foregrounded by Marlowe's "mimicking the rictus of death carved upon the face of Harry Jones" (180), which functions as a gesture of acting, of both bodily and expressive replication. Yet, in order to properly elucidate the consumptive aspect of Marlowe's descent into Hollywood, we need to return to the moment of Marlowe's utmost bodily, sexual exhibitionism: when he is tied up in bondage gear in Eddie Mars's hideout. As Marlowe admits, "handcuffs held my wrists behind me and a rope went from them to my ankles and then over the end of the brown davenport on which I was sprawled" (190). There is no camera gazing upon Marlowe, but there is still the reader, consuming his description of his body: immobile, "sprawled," restrained, and submissive. In this moment of sexualized vulnerability, Marlowe physically coalesces into the system of Hollywood media that seeks to strip those who are visually encoded in it of their agency. As such, he is "part of the nastiness:" the cinematically-coded "part" makes it seem as though Marlowe is the member of an ensemble cast of moral corruption and ontological decrepitude, of "nastiness." Thus, Marlowe experiences a double putrescence: the nihilistic world of Los Angeles strips him bare of his morality, and then the pornographizing world of Hollywood ties him up, puts him on display, and lets us watch.

Chapter II. The Hollywood Flâneuse²

Tell me what you feel. Nothing, she said.³

While Chandler emphasized Los Angeles's totalistic amorality and only teased his flâneur's degenerative immersion into Hollywood, Joan Didion, on the other hand, entirely inscribes her flâneuse therein. Thus, we move now from the flâneur's internalization of the cityscape's corrosive stimuli to the flâneuse's life under the blasé outlook, from the L.A. detective-flâneur's admission that he "was part of the nastiness" to the Hollywood flâneuse's affectless confession that she "feels nothing" (205). The former denotes the flâneur's capitulation to an amoral urban ecology, a descent into decay, but implies that he partially retains some sense of selfhood, that he is only "part" of the "nastiness." With the latter quotation, to "feel nothing," to "want nothing" (195), to proclaim "nothing applies" (4) signifies the flâneuse's total inculcation into and embodiment of the nihilistic, blasé ideology that Los Angeles fosters. Internalizing and personifying this philosophical disposition, the flâneuse doesn't just descend into the "nastiness" of her city, worse, she becomes a non-person, a "non-I" because of it.

² I draw this term "flâneuse" from Lauren Elkin's *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London*, in which she parses out a gendered-female version of the flâneur, whom she believes has been excluded from the male-centric canon of flânerie. In her book, Elkin posits the flâneuse's movement through the city as an act of feminist liberation, a breaking out of the domestic sphere: "She voyages out and goes where she's not supposed to; she forces us to confront the ways in which words like home and belonging are used against women. She is a determined, resourceful individual keenly attuned to the creative potential of the city and the liberating possibilities of a good walk" (Elkin 34). I find it necessary to acknowledge the importance of Elkin's view, as it allows the concept of the flâneur to both progress beyond male-codified confines and become more pluralistic, more inclusive, more of an ontological state. However, while Elkin emphasizes the gendered complexities of the flâneur, she makes no mention of the philosophical, "non-I" paradigm undergirding flânerie that Baudelaire presents. Instead, she cloaks flânerie with cursory ebullience and high-spiritedness: "a good walk" has "creative potential" and "liberating possibilities." She falls prey to the same effervescent view of the flâneur that Baudelaire does, of which, as I espoused in my introduction, I am skeptical. Didion shares my skepticism. Though Maria Wyeth drives across L.A. and is sexually liberated, qualities Elkin would approve, there is still a pervasive, depressive suffering which Maria cannot escape. This urban movement is not "creative" or "liberating," but an experience of oppression, degeneration, and non-being. Thus, while this chapter will employ the gendered inflection of the flâneuse, it will focus primarily on the philosophical dimension of self-annihilation that undergirds flânerie of which Elkin makes no mention.

³ Didion, 205

If the flâneuse derives her non-personhood from her interplay with the cityscape, and is, thus, a reflection thereof, then it follows that, for the flâneuse to be a “non-I,” the cityscape must also be a “non-city,” a space similarly deprived of any meaning or significance. Joan Didion’s Los Angeles is such a space, and Maria Wyeth is her faded flâneuse who faces, ingests, and manifests its nothingness. Through an application of Marc Augé’s concept of “non-places,” the notion of a media-scape, and Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytical mirror stage to Joan Didion’s *Play It As It Lays*, I will complexify Augé’s principle through the flâneuse’s interactions therewith, widen its scale to the level of urban totality as a “non-city,” and ultimately posit the nihilation of the flâneuse’s personhood by L.A.’s heavily mediatized non-place-ness. Marlowe’s Los Angeles was a crimescape which inspired its inhabitants to kill. Didion’s Los Angeles is a mediascape so pervasive and over-inundating that it performs a philosophical killing of the self.

Non-Places and Flânerie

Marc Augé argues that, “if a [anthropological] place can be defined as relational, historical, and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place” (Augé 77-78). Under Augé’s concept, non-places include “motorways, supermarkets, airports, service stations, malls, and hotels” (Sheringham 211, Harvie 144). They are essentially spaces of commerce or transience where social bonds break down and are rendered irrelevant, such that the subject moving through them feels perpetually isolated, “illegible, bored, and dislocated” (Merriman 24). As such, non-places are exemplary of Nietzschean nihilism’s valueless-ness translated onto both sociality and space.

However, Augé’s binary, contrapositive definition lacks an important nuance. Although these aforementioned spaces certainly are defined by commerce and transience, which would facilitate a lack of “relation” between those frequenting them, this does not inherently exclude

the potentiality for a “relation” to exist between the place itself and the individual passing through. As such, Augé does not conceive of the idea that a non-place can actually be definitive or “concerned with identity;” he does not see beyond his own binary. This is not meant to imply that the outcome of that relation between an individual and a non-place would be something benign. Rather, I see this as a profoundly destructive interrelation: to glean identity and personhood from a space rooted in non-identity and transience is a paradox that entraps the individual in a perennial phantasmagoria of inescapable non-selfdom and non-identity.

Maria Wyeth, Didion’s aimless flâneuse, constructs her identity from and predicates her flânerie on non-places. The intersection between Maria’s flânerie and Augé’s non-place manifests in her incessant driving:

Maria drove the freeway. She dressed every morning with a greater sense of purpose than she had felt in some time,...it was essential (to pause was to throw herself into unspeakable peril) that she be on the freeway by ten o’clock...She drove it as a riverman runs a river, every day more attuned to its currents, its deceptions, and just as a riverman feels the pull of the rapids in the lull between sleeping and waking, so Maria lay at night in the still of Beverly Hills and saw the great signs soar overhead at seventy miles an hour, Normandie $\frac{1}{4}$ Vermont $\frac{3}{4}$ Harbor Fwy 1 (15-16).

Even though Augé posits that non-places such as freeways are “unconcerned with identity,” Maria derives “purpose” and a sense of agency from her interactions there. She does not drive “on” the freeway, “she *drove* the freeway,” as though she was directing it and in control. This notion of control foregrounds Didion’s “riverman” simile, which imbues the non-place with a sense of agency and meaning, for to have “deceptions” is to be an actor in a clandestine or even duplicitous relationship with the driver.

However, undergirding this quotation is a pervasive irony and fallibility in Maria's derivation of identity and purpose herein. Although Didion claims that Maria "drove the freeway," controlled and directed it, this notion is a fallacy: the freeway is a wholly impersonal space, a medium for travel; it is both indifferent by nature of its materiality and uncontrollable due to its fixed quality. Regardless, Maria projects significance over this inanimate, insentient roadway as a means to imbue herself with meaning, perpetuating a self-referential cycle of autopoiesis that does not generate meaning or agency, but rather further mires her in her own meaninglessness and passivity. The meaning Maria foists onto the freeway is "precariously imposed," emitted from a state of internal chaos and "peril," and, as such, is subject to inevitable dissolution. Thus, her driving the freeway can be read as a "simulation of agency" (Rhodes 139) and control rather than actual agency, which implies that the purpose she has derived is similarly just a simulation. She thinks it is authentic but it is actually intangible and fraudulent.

Didion's "riverman" simile further asserts this artificialization of the flâneuse's agency. There is an innate disjunction in it: Didion applies the organic phenomenon of traveling on a river to the mechanistic experience of driving on a freeway, attempting to connect nature with a non-place, an inherent impossibility. A non-place is that which paves over nature and is characterized by its commercialized unnaturalness. This simile, thus, does not naturalize the non-place, making it seem salutary; rather, it makes the freeway artificialize the nature around which the simile is centered. By extension, its diction also artificializes the purpose and the activity of the "riverman" himself. The tautological alliteration of the line "a riverman runs a river," through its overuse of "r" words, both obscures the singularity of the riverman's action and alerts the reader to the musicality of the author's style rather than the substance of it. It renders the riverman's activity indistinguishable and indistinct from the surrounding words. Because Maria

and her *flânerie* are the referents from which this simile is derived, it can be posited that they, too, are similarly artificialized and rendered meaningless.

Yet, the ultimate transgression against the *flâneuse* in her association with this non-place is that it facilitates her own repression, a sign of internal fragmentation. Maria drives because her constant “momentum” staves off her feelings of “unspeakable peril” during moments of stasis. Her driving is a repressive gesture, meant to hide, obscure, and compartmentalize her existential suffering. Didion encapsulates this by placing the admission of her internal tumult in parentheses, visually separating these sentiments from the rest of the sentence and attempting to assuage its severity. Thus, in this sequence, there are essentially two Marias: the driver, who projects and derives meaning from an inanimate roadway, and the parenthetical Maria, the emotionally marginalized, suffering figure whom the driver wishes to quell. Maria is, thus, a repressive liminality, which her *flânerie* perpetuates: at night, “in the lull between sleep and waking,” an explicit representation of liminality, a phantasmagoria of highway signs imprints itself over Maria’s perception, supplanting and repressing her consciousness. In this way, Maria exploits her *flânerie* as a means to outrun and outdrive her tumultuous interiority, using the identity-less-ness of non-places to facilitate her escape from her own self.

This means of self-escape transforms into outright self-fabulation during moments where Maria frequents gas stations and supermarkets. A staple of Maria’s *flânerie* is that she would “drink Coca-Cola in Union 76 stations, Standard stations, Flying A’s” after which she would “put the bottle back in the rack (she tried always to let the attendant notice her putting the bottle in the rack, a show of thoughtful responsibility, no sardine cans in her sink)” (17-18). Again, the repressed, parenthetical Maria appears, using the gas station as an arena to stage her unfounded civility, to construct an image of herself (for both the attendant and herself) as orderly,

“responsible,” in control. It is a “*show* of thoughtful responsibility,” an outward performance, a simulation, of agency that Maria uses the non-place to help promulgate. It is a masquerade of her nothingness and isolation.

Maria’s impulse to fabricate an identity to counterbalance her internal nothingness reaches its fever pitch during a conversation she has with a woman at a “snack counter in Ralph’s Market,” who tells her how much she wants to kill herself. Maria suggests ““a Doctor,”” which the woman dismisses, and then tells her to just ““try to feel better. I mean you have to try, you can’t feel this way forever’,” all the while internally postulating various reasons as to why customers are using the phones at Ralph’s (101-102). The woman starts to cry, Maria touches her arm, and then, immediately, “the woman screams, ‘*Get your whore’s hands off me*’” (102). Here, Maria essentially uses the anonymity that the non-place traffics in as a means to present herself as an empathic, emotionally stable individual, in possession of the answers to other people’s issues, playing the role of a pseudo-therapist. This is a profoundly fraudulent gesture, as she essentially prescribes this unnamed “woman” everything that she herself needs but lacks: a therapist (“a doctor”) and effort (she tells the woman “*to try* to feel better”).

While Maria projects a false-image of herself to repress her own isolation, “the woman” is so overbearingly revealing that she too performs a similar act of identity-projection, albeit a more vocal, outward one. Maria’s acting the role of therapist, thus, inspires the woman to act out the role of patient, affecting a faux-talking-cure. However, this role-playing doesn’t render “the woman” passive or alleviated, it renders her hypertense and hypersensitive, erupting in anger at the slightest touch. By oversharing with Maria, “the woman” disseminates her interiority, her identity, until she is depleted of it, and all that remains is a sort of animalistic, hyperreactive, physical disposition. Maria fabricates an identity as a means to fallibly escape her internal

nothingness; “the woman” overexpresses her interiority until hardly any of it remains; both use the non-place of the supermarket as a space of identity-construction, which ultimately leads to their respective nihilities. Thus, Didion argues that non-places can be definitional to those who frequent them, even though this definition only further asserts their own oblivion.

L.A. as Non-City

Not only does Didion use Maria’s *flânerie* to posit non-places as definitive to identity, but she also uses Maria to widen this concept to the level of urban totality, arguing that L.A. itself is a non-place, and, therefore, a non-city.

We’re told that Maria knows “the still center of the daylight world was never a house by the sea but the corner of Sunset and La Brea” (115). For Maria, a “house by the sea” signifies a place of social bonds, of family, of meaning, an “anthropological place.” Yet, the actual “center of the daylight world,” of Los Angeles, is the “corner of Sunset and La Brea,” which is notable because it is the location of a “drive-in” movie theater that Maria stops at after “driving aimlessly down Sunset” (65). A drive-in theater is a space where individuals stay in their cars to watch a film, never interacting with one another, never leaving their vehicles. It is a space of myriad isolations gathering for an experience. For Maria, the “center” of the city is a non-place, but more specifically, it is a mediatized, film-centric non-place. This drive-in theater becomes a metonymy for understanding the macrocosms of both Los Angeles and Hollywood, where she participates as both a *flâneuse* and an actress.

Historian Janet Fireman notes the conflation between the city of Los Angeles and Hollywood being the entertainment-industry epicenter of the U.S.: “Los Angeles history and identity have been partly subsumed by the region’s association with the entertainment industry and popular culture. It has been difficult for people to separate stories about Los Angeles from

the movie stories Los Angeles tells about itself” (Fireman 517). In the same way that Maria derives identity from her interactions with non-places throughout L.A. and, simultaneously, uses them to fabricate her selfhood, L.A. is a city that also fabricates and fabulates “itself.” The city is a spatial embodiment of self-referential identity performance, rooted in the “stories” it both “tells about itself” and those that it disseminates. There are, thus, two Los Angeles’s: there is Los Angeles that is the concrete, geographical cityscape and Los Angeles as “Hollywood,” its highly mediatized, disseminated, and imagined identity.

Characterized as such, Los Angeles exhibits the tendencies of and can be experienced as a “media-scape,” a concatenation of “image-centered, narrative based accounts of reality” propagated by “television, video, and cinema, addressing” both a local and a “global audience” (Boomkens 27). This audience subsequently experiences the city to which this mediascape is anchored “through a complicated and interconnected repertoire of print, celluloid, electronic screens, and billboards” where “the lines between the realistic and the fictional landscapes they see are blurred” (Appadurai 35). As Didion notes, “Maria looked at television for word of the world” (100).

Arjun Appadurai’s quotation signifies the breakdown between the “realistic” place and the “fictional” non-place in a mediascape, which not only “subsumes” the “real” identities of the cities themselves, but also impinges upon the experiences that individuals have in those spaces. In Didion’s novel, newspapers, the “print” media to which Appadurai refers, figure intensely into Maria’s experience of Los Angeles as a mediascape. When Maria reads newspapers, “certain stories leapt at her from the page: the four-year-olds in the abandoned refrigerator...the rattlesnake in the playpen, the peril, unspeakable peril, in the everyday. She grew faint as the processions swept before her” (99-100). These stories “leap” at Maria, which imbues them both

with action and a life beyond the page on which they exist, an affective quality. On the one hand, there is the affective shock of reading about this “peril,” the spectacularized shock of infant-death; on the other hand, there is the funereal aspect of news story consumption, where the stories elicit an overwhelming, melancholic, mourning reaction in the reader: these stories are a “procession,” for Maria, evoking an image of funerary rites. However, both of these newspaper-inspired affects collectively contribute to Maria’s own deadening experience, she “grows faint” because of them.

Furthermore, not only is Maria overwhelmed by newspapers, she also can never escape them. When she goes to the “house in Encino” to get an abortion, “the floor of the bedroom where it happened was covered with newspapers” (80). Even in a private moment, seemingly separated from the outside world of Los Angeles (which is why Didion repeatedly stresses the location of the surgery as “Encino”), Maria is still inscribed in and pervaded by this system of mediation, of publicly disseminated “peril.”

This inscription becomes literalized for Maria: “When I first married Carter and my name began appearing in columns I received mail from mad people...It is no longer necessary for them even to write me. I know when someone is thinking of me” (183). Maria doesn’t just consume the “print” material that the mediascape disseminates, she directly participates in it. Resultingly, it disseminates her identity, her “name,” for public consumption, which, in effect, “subsumes” her. The “columns” become a mediated proxy for Maria’s selfhood, creating a chain of responses thereto: first, there are the “mad” fans sending her letters; secondly, there is Maria responding to the reception thereof; and ultimately, there is Maria’s psychological response to simply being “thought of,” which removes the tangible mediating factors of both the newspaper “columns” and the “mail,” but retains the emotional disturbance of being widely publicized. This last

scenario crystallizes the result of Maria's internalization of and externalization through the mediascape: she becomes suspended in an identic, mediated liminality between her reality and her disseminated, "fictional" image.

This microcosmic, personal in-between-ness translates itself over the macrocosm of Los Angeles. By perpetually disseminating stories about itself through various forms of media, as Fireman notes, the boundary between L.A. as a fictionalized, mediatized space (as "Hollywood") and L.A. as a concrete cityscape dissolves, is subsequently "blurred." Through this constant obfuscation of its own identity, L.A. becomes not just a non-place, but a non-city. By churning out representations of itself and, simultaneously, inundating its residents with media (news stories, advertisements, magazine-influenced cultural "standards"), the city loses the essence upon which those representations were founded; its "history and identity" are "subsumed by" the city's "association with the entertainment industry and popular culture." Through its construction as a mediascape, Los Angeles loses its "history," its "identity," and its "relation" with its non-mediatized roots (the three tenets of Augé's non-places) and instead becomes "Hollywood," its mediated "self."

The Non-City and The Blasé Flâneuse

By interacting with and participating in such a mediascape, the flâneuse also becomes "subsumed" by it: her flânerie and her outlook become mediatized. She is so unable to outdrive Hollywood entertainment's cultural ambit that her life itself becomes a filmic production.

In the car (her vehicle of flânerie), during a fight with her ex-husband Carter over getting an abortion, Maria realizes that "in the scenario of her life this would be what was called an obligatory scene, and she wondered with distant interest just how long the scene would play" (50). For Maria, her life is a "scenario," the outline of a script or a film: by mediatizing her life

as a film, she “distances” herself from her own experience. This self-distancing becomes vocalized during one of the Hollywood parties that Maria drunkenly exits: Felicia Goodwin sees her stumbling and calls her husband over to help, and Maria says, “‘Crowd scene, principals emerge’” (161). Maria acts as both a script-coordinator and director in this moment, narrating not just her own life, but also, in a self-reflexive manner, her own flânerie; this is specifically a “crowd scene” in which she is immersed.

Maria is so heavily influenced by the mediascape that she is unable to extricate her individuality from it; in fact, the mediated non-city she inhabits defines her. In her rental apartment, Maria watches a “television news film of a house about to slide into the Tujunga Wash,” a river that runs through L.A. county (103). The owner of the house is then interviewed about it: “‘You boys did a really outstanding camera job,’ she said. Maria finished the cigarette and repeated the compliment out loud” (103). Maria’s mimesis of the television media she consumes perpetuates a chain of mediated simulacra: Maria watches the destructive spectacle, then someone’s reaction to said spectacle, and then reproduces that same reaction. The implication here is that Maria does not have the capacity to produce her own thoughts in response to the media with which she is presented; rather, the media transplants her own consciousness and conditions her responses.

Furthermore, the inundation and internalization of this media directly impacts Maria’s relinquishment of agency and feeling: “The notion of general devastation had for Maria a certain sedative effect...between the earthquake prophecy...and the cheerful detachment of the woman whose house was in the Tujunga Wash, she felt a kind of resigned tranquility” (104). The news stories Maria consumes about potential “earthquakes,” the destruction of houses, the murders of women and children, “sedate” her, drugging and inducing her to the point of unresponsiveness.

All of this media intake makes her blasé: she experiences “resigned tranquility” at both the sight and thought of “general devastation.” She is “resigned” in the sense that she feels no need to emote or respond to these examples of devastation because doing so would be purposeless; and being “tranquil” in the face of images of catastrophe signifies a desensitization to violent stimuli, a nullification of her emotional response system. By both mirroring the media she consumes and being entirely unresponsive thereto, Maria capitulates to the mediascape, relinquishing her agency and reactivity, and is, thus, rendered passive and blasé.

The Mediatized Non-I

By Baudelaire’s definition, as a *flâneuse*, Maria is a “mirror” (Baudelaire 9), a reflection of the city in which she immerses herself. Because she is in a city that traffics in over-inundating, manufactured, image-reproduction, she becomes “subsumed” by L.A.’s simulacrum to the point where she reproduces it (by mirroring the words of the woman interviewed on television) and becomes utterly indifferent thereto (her “resigned tranquility”).

But there is also a third component to this idea of mirroring, that two selves appear when looking at one’s self in a mirror: there is the concrete, physical self, and the refracted, represented “self” that the mirror reproduces. In the mirror, an individual directly experiences his/her fragmentation through this visualized doubling. Jacques Lacan refers to this as “the mirror stage,” where an infant recognizes his image in the mirror as a more complete version of his physical self (Johnston 1). This more completed self then becomes translated as the infant’s “Ideal-I,” a source of comparison and subsequently fragmentation for the child who cannot inhabit this form of being (Johnston 1).

Didion reproduces and complicates this mirrored ideal-child dynamic through Maria, Helene, and Maria’s daughter Kate. While on the phone with Carter, Maria “was staring into a

hand mirror, picking out her mother's features" (62). Later on, she "looked again into the hand mirror and again saw her mother" (64). Here, Didion replicates Lacan's mirror-stage, with Maria imbricated as the child, and the image, the representation, the idea of her mother as the child's "Ideal-I." The maternal figure, in this case, is the prototypical, unattainable, physical ideal to whom Maria can compare herself, as her mother is both dead and, therefore, absent. Didion elucidates this progressive absence of the ideal-I in her novel through a gradual reduction of mirror sizes. First, we begin with the "hand mirror" in which Maria sees the image of her mother. Next, we have Helene "studying herself in a small mirror" (128) where she breaks down at the fact that her go-to hairdresser isn't in town, that she cannot inhabit her "ideal," cosmetic appearance. And then we have Kate, Maria's daughter, "smashing the Victorian doll Felicia had given her against a large mirror," causing the mirror to shatter (99). Didion captures a sequence of mirrored-doubles in this last moment: there is Kate with her reflected ideal-Kate; Maria with her reflected ideal-Maria; Kate with Maria as her reflected, maternal ideal-I; and Maria with Kate's manifestation as an idealized, unreachable, child-I. Yet, with the shattering of the mirror, all of these doubles come crashing down; this mirror-breakage is the ultimate reduction, where the collective of human, ideal-I's becomes absent and fractured, leaving a psychological gap in the individual that necessitates repletion and reconstruction.

Throughout this chapter, we have witnessed this notion of mirrored self-fracturing at both the individual and the urban levels: the schism between Maria as the suffering parenthetical, and Maria as the driver who facilitates the repression thereof, and, also, the division between Los Angeles as the tangible cityscape and Los Angeles as Hollywood, its mediatised, culturally disseminated ideal image.

With this in mind, we can now return to Didion's "still center of the daylight world," a drive-in movie theater, where Hollywood and Maria coalesce into a mediatized reconstitution of Lacanian mirroring. The flâneuse's ideal-I is, thus, no longer rooted in herself, as evidenced by its progressive collapse throughout the novel, but is, instead, reconstructed by Hollywood. This manifests in Maria's response to watching herself in Carter's film, *Angel Beach*:

Maria had seen it twice, once at a studio preview and a second time by herself, at a drive-in in Culver City, and neither time did she have any sense that the girl on the screen was herself. 'I look at you and I know that . . . what happened just didn't mean anything,' the girl on the screen would say...[S]he liked watching the picture: the girl on the screen seemed to have a definite knack for controlling her own destiny (19).

In his essay, "Gender and Lacanian Tragedy in Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*," Chip Rhodes brilliantly posits that this moment is a "literalization of Lacan's parable of the mirror stage," but Maria "is not terribly troubled by the discrepancy between her felt sense of self and the self reflected in the mirror image of the film" (Rhodes 139). In fact, "she prefers the image that is more of her Ideal I" because this "simulation of herself has agency" (Rhodes 139). However, Rhodes does not go far enough to explicate the implications of this mediatized mirror stage; he does not acknowledge the uncanny narrative reflexivity and self-fragmentation that this moment congeals for Maria.

By "not being terribly troubled by the discrepancy" between her "felt self" and the reproduced, mediated image thereof, "the girl on the screen," the novel asserts Maria's complete capitulation to the mediascape, as she becomes a passive, unfeeling consumer of her own identity. Lacan's mirror stage is meant to inspire discomfort in the individual who recognizes the ideal, unreachable image of himself in the mirror. Here, by enjoying the "picture" that she

watches, Maria allows the image of herself to supersede her subjectivity; she allows her non-existent “Ideal-I” to supplant her actual self.

Not only is she rendered passive by the mediascape in which she herself is filmically participating, she is also interpellated thereby. The “girl on the screen” directly addresses her: “I look at you and I know that what happened just didn’t mean anything.” The object which Maria “watches” gazes back at her, but there is a discrepancy between the agency of their respective gazes. Maria “watches” the film, performing a much more passive, consumerist, self-negating gaze, while the Maria-on-screen “looks” at her, actively scrutinizing her, exerting agency over her. Maria’s character even narrativizes Maria, remarking upon the meaninglessness of her experience: “I know what happened just didn’t mean anything.” Maria is, in a sense, watching a representation of herself tell her who she is. This mediated mirror reflection, thus, reflexively interpellates Maria with an awareness of her own “felt self’s” nothingness.

Yet, regardless of this awareness, Maria still “enjoys” watching herself on screen because the “girl on screen had a definite knack for controlling her own destiny,” “the girl on screen” exerts agency over herself. I said before that Maria’s *flânerie* of driving the freeway and projecting meaning over that non-place enmeshed her in her own purposelessness rather than staved it off. Now, with the depiction of Maria’s character’s agency on screen, the non-place of the drive-in theater literally and figuratively projects that image over Maria herself, rendering any sort of activity or response thereto irrelevant, stripping her of the ability to project, and saturating her in consumptive passivity. In witnessing a filmic depiction of her character’s agency, acknowledging that Maria does not “have any sense that the girl on screen was herself,” and “liking” the spectacle thereof, Maria’s self entirely fragments. However, she “is not terribly troubled” by it because she cannot even feel it.

Because the mediascape of Los Angeles inundates Maria with mediated catastrophes, spectacle, and even herself, she becomes entirely numb and indifferent thereto. By interacting with and becoming a prop for L.A.'s "Hollywood" non-city and allowing the non-city to represent her through its filmic apparatuses, Maria relinquishes her personhood to her surrounding space, degenerating into a passive, blasé, non-I state. Even though her "aimless" flânerie takes her to the supposed "center" of Los Angeles, a drive-in theater, her identification with and reproduction in this non-place deprive her of herself. In both reflecting and being reflected by this paradoxical "center" of the non-city, the flâneuse remains centerless, empty, and blasé.

Chapter III. Numbness and Novelty: The Will to The Worst

*I realize that the money doesn't matter. That all that does is that I want to see the worst.*⁴

In the previous chapter, we examined the mediatized vacuity of Didion's flâneuse, how her interactions with the non-city mediascape of Hollywood rendered her a blasé, unresponsive non-I, appropriating her into the spectacle it disseminates. Even though this mediascape deprived the flâneuse of an identity-driven center, Didion posited that it still had a tangible center at "the corner of Sunset and La Brea," in the form of a drive-in theater. In Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero*, the "center" of his Hollywood is no longer the space of spectacle, the drive-in theater, but the spectacle itself. Thus, Los Angeles becomes even more of a non-city: it is not so much experienced as a space, but rather as stimuli. Yet, through this acknowledgement, we simultaneously return to the prototypical, essential characteristic of the flâneur, who regards the city first and foremost as a series of stimuli.

The individuals who experience them are not those who constructed and capitulated to the Hollywood mediascape, but rather, their children. As such, they inherit the blasé philosophical outlook of their parents, genealogically inscribing them into L.A.'s nihilistic valueless-ness and experiential numbness. However, because they don't directly contribute to the production of media in their city (they aren't actors, actresses, directors, etc.) they approach their non-city with a degree of consumptive boredom. Born into this mediascape, these kids feel that they've seen it all. They crave something new, a new stimulation to shake them out of their blasé stupor.

The repository of the coalescence between this nihilism and the need for novel stimuli is Ellis's enfant-flâneur, the mononymous Clay. Appellatively, Clay is the quintessential flâneur:

⁴ Ellis, 160.

his name not only denotes passive pliability and the capacity to be influenced by and made into the image of his surroundings, but it is also earthen, innately tethered to the surrounding world. By being “clay,” Ellis’s protagonist contributes a new image to which we can “liken” (Baudelaire 9) the flâneur, which carries on the Baudelairean view of the flâneur as the passive “mirror” and fragmentary “kaleidoscope.” However, this image directly heightens the flâneur’s lack of agency and the amorphousness of his personhood, for to be “clay” is to be “moldable,” and, therefore, relinquish the right to mold one’s self and define it.

As the epigraph of this chapter suggests, that which molds Clay is amoral, degrading spectacle, “seeing the worst” (160). Through an examination of Fredric Jameson’s notion of postmodern pastiche and Guy Debord’s concept of “the spectacle” in Bret Easton Ellis’s *Less Than Zero*, I will explore the L.A. spectacle-scape’s influence over the flâneur’s blasé outlook and subsequently posit a reconfiguration of the flâneur’s quest for novel stimuli to combat this indifference, as a Will to “The Worst.” Thus, I am complicating Walter Benjamin’s assertion that “novelty” precludes the flâneur’s decay into nothingness, arguing that novelty as the pursuit of “The Worst” affirms and facilitates rather than prevents the flâneur’s disintegration and dissolution of subjectivity. Through Clay’s interactions with his city and his voyeuristic participation in its spectacles, the flâneur moves beyond the otherwise neutral stance of the blasé outlook and degenerates into the nothingness of a blasé personhood; the flâneur becomes “less than zero.”

Disappear Here: Pastiche, Radio and Billboards

To understand the flâneur’s relationship with Ellis’s Los Angeles, it is necessary to discuss the notion of postmodern pastiche. In “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” Fredric Jameson claims that pastiche is “neutral imitation of a peculiar or unique style...mimicry without

the satirical impulse, parody that has lost its sense of humor” (Jameson 5). There is a referent that an individual appropriates as a means for self-definition without any sort of acknowledgment of, critique or protest against it. Pastiche is, thus, passive, and, because it is predicated on one’s surrender to a referent, a signifier of the “end of individualism” and the end of “unique selfhood” (Jameson 5-6).

Bret Easton Ellis’s novel begins with an instance of pastiche:

People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles. This is the first thing I hear when I come back to the city. Blair picks me up from LAX and mutters this under her breath as her car drives up the onramp (1).

Though the first line reads as an original declaration by the narrator, the subsequent sentences invalidate its authenticity. As the narrator admits, this sentence is the “first thing I hear:” these words are not his own, but rather a direct reproduction of another’s statement, without any quotation marks, which would have demarcated this phrase as someone else’s. Thus, Clay’s expressiveness “merges” with Blair’s, which becomes the referent for his defining categorization of Los Angeles. As such, Clay’s thoughts which appear to be his own, are not. Instead, he passively reproduces the sentiments presented to him. This first line, while functioning as a comment on the disorienting, fear-inducing experience of driving in L.A., also serves to thematically foreground and textually manifest Clay’s, the flâneur’s, impressionability and malleability, his emphasis on pastiche-like appropriation of stimuli, which pervades the rest of the novel.

Jameson then heightens his concept of pastiche to the level of identity construction in the postmodern mediascape, arguing that individuals glean a sense of personal history and identity from “our own pop image” representations of that history (Jameson 10). In this way, Arjun

Appadurai's "complicated and interconnected repertoire of print, celluloid, and billboards" (Appadurai 35), media entertainment, and spectacle become the referents both informing and supplanting the flâneur's individuality.

Furthermore, it is necessary to add another technological source of "pop" media dissemination to Appadurai's systemic framework, radio, which Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno analyze in their version of the mediascape, "the Culture Industry." They argue that radio propagates a uniformity amongst consumers that renders them passive, non-subjects: "The [radio] democratically makes everyone equally into listeners, in order to expose them in authoritarian fashion to the same programs put out by different stations. No mechanism of reply has been developed" (Horkheimer 95). As a result, the radio producers and their consumers "both content themselves with the reproduction of sameness" (106). The radio strips consumers of agency by prescribing them a collective, uniform listening experience, creating a procession of unvarying musical simulacra from which they cannot escape. As Horkheimer and Adorno write, the consumers cannot respond to this "sameness," they just have to "content" themselves with it, they have "no mechanism of reply," they cannot speak up. Rather, the "authoritarian" radio speaks for them. What can be extrapolated from this is that the pervasiveness of radios in vehicles renders driving in a car an arena for mediated passivity and domination.

As such, in *Less Than Zero*, radio (and, by extension, music) and billboards, the tenets of the mediascape, figure so intensely into Clay's pastiche experience of Los Angeles as a flâneur that they displace his narrativity and his ability to enumerate his experience. Resultingly, he is rendered a blasé participant with no agency. As Clay is driving with his father, his dad "plays a Bob Seger tape, as if this was some sort of weird gesture of communication" (33). This "gesture"

signifies passivity and a capitulation to a mediated referent, as the father is using music as a proxy for actual interpersonal communication, actual expression.

This idea of music as a “weird,” uncanny, “gesture of communication” then transforms into a “gesture” of narrativity during a moment of Clay’s flânerie when he drives through the city listening to a song “about an earthquake in L.A.” on the radio:

‘My surfboard’s ready for the tidal wave.’ A car pulls up next to mine at the next light and I turn my head to see who’s in it...The driver rolls down his window and I tense up and he asks me something,...positive that I’m this certain actor. ‘Now I’m part of the debris,’ the girls are squealing...I finally make an illegal left turn and come to a side street, where I park for a minute and turn the radio off, light a cigarette (37-38).

The song lyrics contextualize and metaphorize each moment of Clay’s interaction with the other drivers. Firstly, the “surfboard” is a means of transportation that becomes a metaphor for Clay’s own vehicle. Then, immediately after the “tidal wave” line is sung, “a car pulls up next” to Clay’s, those inside try to talk to him, and he “tenses up,” as though he is experiencing the shock paralysis one would experience when facing a “tidal wave.” In a similar vein to Maria Wyeth’s encounter with the suicidal woman in Ralph’s in *Play It As It Lays*, this moment of social interaction on the non-place of the road, like the “wave,” is overwhelming and hostile to the flâneur, whose private world is both physically and metaphorically breached thereby. As such, Clay never responds to the other driver’s questions; he never speaks at all. Rather, the song both responds for him, appropriating his first-person “I” narration, and speaks to his internal discomfort by “squealing” the lyrics, shrieking for him. Overstimulated by both the song’s lyrics and the one-sided-ness of the interaction, Clay flees, allowing the experience to impinge upon his flânerie. However, he stops driving so that he can “turn the radio off,” as though it was the cause

of this disruptive interaction, the uncanny, narrative-determinism of its lyrics too much for the flâneur to bear. Clay's impressionability, his ability to be narrativized by the referent of the radio, and, thus, the mediascape, realizes the domination of the flâneur by pastiche.

While the radio controls the flâneur's tangible, exterior experience, which momentarily disorients him, the mediatized referent of the billboard heightens this control, penetrating the flâneur's interiority and subsuming it. Thus, not only does this referent narrate the disappearance of the flâneur's subjectivity, it also asserts and facilitates it. This manifests through Clay's encounter with a billboard on Sunset boulevard:

All it says is 'Disappear Here' and even though it's probably an ad for some resort, it still freaks me out a little...I put my sunglasses on even though it's still pretty dark outside and I keep looking into the rearview mirror, getting this strange feeling that someone's following me (30-31).

The notion of a billboard as text is quite significant. Billboards, first and foremost, are spaces of advertising, meant to determine and influence a consumer's taste and desire, by directly speaking thereto. Thus, they are a form of a corporate interpellation of the human subject, a form of address. Furthermore, billboards emblemize both a hyper-acceleration of consumption (as the consumer who is driving past the billboard needs to be able to quickly gaze at and read the advertisement, thus internalizing it, before it vanishes out of view) and hyper-transience (billboards are quite literally tabula-rasas, in the sense that what is advertised on them often changes depending on how long a specific company has a right to project its image or product thereover). As such, the hyper-acceleration of billboard advertising caters to the gaze of the flâneur speeding by, who wishes to see and be stimulated by all the city offers, while the change-over of advertisements on billboards, the tabula-rasa nature thereof, mirrors both the flâneur's

impressionability, his ability to “reflect and reproduce multitudes” (Baudelaire 9), and his internal fluctuation.

In encountering the “Disappear Here” billboard, Clay experiences this aforementioned tripartite framework: he gazes at the billboard, is addressed by it, and ultimately allows it to contextualize and expedite his identic instability. For Clay, this billboard is an imperative, ordering the driver to evaporate, to “disappear here,” the “here” being in Los Angeles rather than the destination advertised. Clay actually believes that the billboard is talking to him: he writes that it “says” to “disappear here,” anthropomorphizing it and allowing it to influence him. By putting on his “sunglasses even though it’s pretty dark outside,” Clay listens to the billboard: he blinds himself to his surroundings, denying himself perception thereof. He even imbues the billboard with personhood and an aura, positing that, as he drives away, he feels “*someone’s* following” him.

And this billboard does latch itself onto Clay’s psyche to the point where it follows him everywhere. While he’s waiting for his friends at the beach, Clay “stares out at the expanse of sand that meets the water, where the land ends. Disappear here” (64). Though the billboard is physically absent, Clay still repeats its advertised message to himself, contextualizing his experience of witnessing “where the land” ends, where it “disappears.” Even the names of the nightclub spaces he frequents accentuate this disappearance: he goes to “The Land’s End,” “After Hours,” and the “Nowhere Club,” all of which suggest a space beyond time, where everything “ends” and disappears. Thus, his external surroundings give credence to the ad’s imperative, which determines this flâneur’s interaction with L.A.

Not only does the billboard referent contextualize Clay’s experience, it also, ultimately, supplants him. As Clay watches Julian have sex with a businessman from Indiana, Ellis writes, “I

don't close my eyes. You can disappear here without knowing it" (165). Here, Clay reconfigures and appropriates the "disappear here" imperative into his own declaration, "you can disappear here without knowing it." He essentially becomes the advertisement himself, though what he markets is not a resort, but the passive, non-agential self-dissolution that L.A. inspires, that "you can disappear" in L.A. "without knowing it." By unconsciously allowing the diction of the billboard to overtake his own narrative voice, becoming a mediated pastiche, Clay-as-a-subject degenerates into passivity, he "disappears."

Spectacle, MTV and The Will to The Worst

Guy Debord widens Jameson's concept of this pastiche to the level of social totality with his idea of a "society of the spectacle," where "the spectacle is not [just] a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images" (Debord 4). Debord posits that not only are individuals subsumed by the referent of mediatized "images," but their lives and interrelations are also directly determined and legislated by them: they are inspired to reproduce the spectacle that pervades their environment.

Less Than Zero's Los Angeles is a society of the spectacle, with the "collection of images" that "unifies" (Debord 3) L.A. youth stemming from MTV. In nearly every space that Clay inhabits, he or someone else is watching MTV. However, the act of watching it is not something stimulating, but is rather a placating, passive phenomenon. After Muriel shoots up heroin in front of Clay and his friends on New Year's Eve, Clay looks into the house and sees Muriel "lying on the couch, smoking a cigarette, sunglasses on, watching MTV" (77). Saturating this sentence with appositional gerunds and the verb-less "sunglasses on" effectively erases Muriel and instead prioritizes her (non)actions: "lying," "smoking," and "watching." As such, given the context of what Muriel just put herself through, "watching MTV" allows her to numb

herself to, reject, and recover from her degrading external experience. Furthermore, as Clay exhibits, watching it also facilitates an internal self-denial comparable to the billboard's notion of self-"disappearance." After he discovers an old shoebox filled with photographs of his time in high-school that he "can't deal with looking at," he puts the box away and writes, "Light a cigarette and turn on MTV and turn off the sound" (62). In this moment, there is a schism between Clay's mediated yet tangible history (his photographs), which overwhelms him, and his mediated, present experience (watching MTV), which, like Muriel, erases him as a subject. With this rapidly composed fragment, Ellis not only supersedes Clay's personhood with television, but he also transforms the line into a self-repressive imperative statement: it reads as though Clay is ordering himself to do these actions while he is acting them out. There is a disjunction in how this phrase is expressed, a certain self-distancing, which echoes Clay's own internal self-erasure. Thus, he "puts the shoebox back in the closet" (62), hiding and repressing his memories, the same ones that gave his identity tangibility and history, and, instead, uses televised images to further distance himself until he is no longer truly present. By "turning the sound off," Clay uses MTV to enter into a vacuum of media-induced emptiness, where he no longer has to feel or hear anything; he "turns on MTV" and "turns off" himself.

Yet, accompanying this numbness is a latent sense of boredom. While the spectacle of MTV allows for momentary escapism, it is still virtual and intangible, due to the distance between it and the consumer thereof. Rather than just passively and circuitously consuming it without end, the flâneurs in Ellis's Los Angeles crave a novel experience. They crave not just to consume the spectacle, but to live it out. As such, Ellis takes Debord's idea of "social relations among people mediated by images" and inverts it, depicting what occurs when people themselves "mediate" the spectacle, taking it into their own hands.

The threshold for overcoming the blasé numbness of Ellis's flâneurs is so intense, however, that it merits stimuli of a perverse, shocking, and morally degraded nature if it is to be overcome and allow the flâneur to feel again. Ellis articulates this impulse for novel, degenerative, transgressive stimuli as a Will to "The Worst," modeled after and reconfiguring Nietzsche's concept of The Will to Power⁵. After Clay learns that his friend Julian is a sex worker and paying off a debt to a pimp, he agrees to accompany Julian on one of his assignments and participate in the act:

I want to see if things like this can actually happen. And as the elevator descends,...I realize that the money doesn't matter. That all that does is that I want to see the worst (160).

Clay's flânerie, his experience of Los Angeles, can be defined through the lens of "wanting to see the worst." It explains why he hoards newspaper clippings of atrocious murders and natural disasters, fantasizes about bodies burning in car crashes, watches horror films "only for the gory parts" (88), and participates in a group-watch of a snuff film where a little girl is murdered and a boy castrated. However, though these moments are horrific, they are still all mediated by either a newspaper, a screen, or one's own psyche: they are simulations, representations of experience rather than direct, tangible experience. Hence, in order to stimulate himself back into actual feeling, Clay has to directly experience and "see the worst," "descending" into degeneracy. It is psychologically imperative for him to do so: sitting in a chair watching his friend have sex for money, Clay writes, "I tell myself I could leave...But, again, the words don't, can't, come out and I sit there and the need to see the worst washes over me, quickly, eagerly" (163). The Will to

⁵ The Will to Power is an attitude, an impulse, a state of mind that can be mobilized in order to assert one's being and desire over his or her world (Nietzsche, Z II, 12). Here, by wanting to see "the Worst" that his city has to offer, Clay not only projects his desire over the world, impelling his experience, but he also has the world project itself over him.

the Worst is a frisson for Clay, his “need” overcomes his rational, bodily inhibitions, it “washes over him” with perverse ecstasy to the point where he talks to himself as though he is no longer in his own body. Now, it is definitely possible to critique and castigate Ellis for thinking that male prostitution is the ultimate form of horror; this appears tame and almost lame compared to the other more degenerate spectacles that Clay and his friends watch. Yet, I would like to argue that Ellis does not view the actual, physical act as horrifying, but rather emphasizes the importance of Clay’s being witness to something exploitative/spectacularized *in the flesh* that is neither mediated nor artificial. Thus, Clay “wants to see if things like this can actually happen,” to prove that that which he sees on TV has a basis in reality; he wants to experience the spectacle directly without the televised barrier, for this barrier reinforces the possibility that that which he sees is contrived.

As a result, he and his friends do everything they can to stage and participate in The Worst that Los Angeles has to offer. One such occurrence arises when Muriel shoots heroin in front of Clay and his friends:

Muriel holds the syringe and Kim whispers, ‘Don’t do it,’ but her lips are trembling and she looks excited and I can make out the beginnings of a smile and I get the feeling that she doesn’t mean it...Muriel closes her eyes and the syringe slowly fills with blood. Spit says, ‘Oh, man, this is wild.’ The photographer takes a picture. My hands shake as I light a cigarette (77).

Kim’s “smile” and “excitement” at the sight of her friend’s degrading act transform this moment from one of perverse disturbance into one of visual pleasure, of entertainment. “The photographer takes a picture,” which indexes this moment as one of amoral mediatization, a replication of the visual media these kids consume. They, thus, capture and manufacture their

own spectacle out of reality itself, just without the artificial sets or special effects. And then there's Clay admitting that he stayed in the room to watch: "My hands shake as I light a cigarette." He does not say that he averts his gaze from what is in front of him. Instead, he emphasizes how "his hands shake," signifying either revulsion, nervous excitement, uncontrollable ecstasy, or a combination of the three, which effectively do not matter in the sense that at least Clay can feel. Experiencing "the worst," then, becomes Clay's referent for his sensory experience.

This mediatization of perverse spectacle reaches its apex when Clay and his friends go to an alley behind Melrose to look at the dead body of an eighteen-year-old:

He's lying against the back wall, propped up. The face is bloated and pale and the eyes are shut, mouth open and the face belongs to some young, eighteen-, nineteen-year-old boy...I cannot take my eyes off the dead boy. There are moths flying above his head, twirling around the light bulb that hangs over him, illuminating the scene...Trent starts to laugh...Rip then sticks a cigarette in the boy's mouth. We stand there for five more minutes. Then Spin stands up and says, 'Man, I need a cigarette' (174-175).

Clay cloaks this horrifying moment with a diction of contrived, visual, filmic spectacle. The "dead boy" is specifically "propped up," as though he is literally a "prop," suggesting that he was deliberately staged for people to look at. By describing the "light bulb hanging over him" that "illuminates the scene," Clay cinematograph-izes the dead body, as though he is lighting a "scene." This isn't simply a dead body, this is a "scene," a moment of entertainment exhibition, almost a public art piece in which Clay and his friends can participate. Trent "laughs" at the dead body, a callback to Carmen Sternwood's "giggling" at the sight of Geiger's corpse in *The Big Sleep*, a circuitous act of L.A. nihilism. Clay accentuates this idea by dehumanizing the boy's

body, performing an ocular blazon that separates the boy's body parts from the boy himself: he says that "the face is pale" and "the eyes are shut," not bestowing him with male-coded possessive signifiers until he says that they "belong" to "some boy." Not only does this anonymize the victim whom they gaze upon, but it also renders his facial features as "belongings," as commodities, further asserting that their collective gaze is an act of consumption. As such, not only is this moment one of visual, filmic spectacle, it is also an appropriation of advertising and commerce. Notably, when Rip "sticks a cigarette in the boy's mouth," Spin says, "Man, I need a cigarette," creating a feedback loop of consumptive inspiration, as though this image makes him want to go out and purchase cigarettes. The "dead boy," thus, becomes a cigarette ad, rendering him a humanized version of a billboard. As Debord writes, "the world which the spectacle makes visible is the world of the commodity dominating all that is lived" (Debord 37). Here, this impulse to consume and commodify, to "see the worst," "dominates" both "all that is lived" and that which is dead.

However, the "domination of the commodity" that is inextricably tied to Clay's Will to The Worst doesn't facilitate his freedom out of the blasé outlook, but rather "dominates" him to the point where his subjectivity disappears and he becomes a commodity. This coalesces during Clay's voyeuristic participation in Julian's sex work:

The man shifts his gaze from Julian over to me, to make sure that I'm watching...The man sits me down in an easy chair and positions me nearer the bed and then, satisfied, walks up to Julian...I light a cigarette. The man rolls Julian over. *Wonder if he's for sale.*

I don't close my eyes. You can disappear here without knowing it (163-165).

Clay willingly participates in this act of sex work without remuneration for it. While Julian is commodified into a tool of sexual commerce, Clay is similarly objectified, rendered a "prop" like

“the dead boy.” The man “shifting his gaze from Julian over to” Clay renders Clay an object of his “look.” As such, he becomes a commodity of sexual “satisfaction” for the older man: the man “positions” Clay, directing him as if they were actually having intercourse, and is “satisfied” because of it, a statement implying the apex of sexual gratification, orgasm. Thus, Clay’s “need to see the worst” isn’t just an act of gazing, of “seeing,” but an act of being and participating in “the worst.” This participation fragments Clay, with the last four sentences of the paragraph facilitating that contrapuntal fragmentation. Clay oscillates between narrating the scene, and using phrases from other people or media that he internalized to similarly contextualize it. “*Wonder if he’s for sale*” was a throwaway phrase that one of Clay’s sisters spoke at the beginning of the novel that now exerts an uncanny prescience over Clay’s witnessing Julian’s sex work, where his body is literally for sale and for use. But it also contextualizes the possibility of Clay’s own commodification that undergirds his participation in the act, that he, too, is “for sale,” as long as he is paid back with an experience of “the worst.” With “you can disappear here without knowing it,” Clay becomes the billboard which he had internalized; he becomes an advertisement, a spectacle himself. This transformation shocks him into unfeelingness: after he leaves the room with Julian, Clay remarks, “I have been sitting in the chair for five hours” (165). “The chair” doesn’t just directly signify the “easy chair” he is put in, but also denotes the electric chair, since Clay has been continuously shocked “for five hours.” He then “looks at Julian’s face” and notes that “it doesn’t disturb me anymore” (165). Clay’s “need to see the worst” renders him so numb that he no longer feels “disturbed.” The shock of The Worst and the novelty thereof, subsides for him, and Clay “disappears.”

The Worst, ultimately, supplants Clay’s actual experience of his urban milieu: “These images stayed with me even after I left the city. Images so violent and malicious that they

seemed to be my only point of reference for a long time afterwards. After I left” (195). The Worst is his referent, “his only point of reference,” of his milieu. This is the first gesture of the flâneur’s disintegration and displacement from Los Angeles, as he can only remember “images” rather than the actual space itself, thus capitulating to the spectacle. “After I left” signifies the ultimate disintegration of the flâneur, the absence of his “I” subjectivity. This is a novel where the flâneur is so overwhelmed by The Worst that his “I”-ness, his capacity for individualism and personhood flees his body.

The Worst is not the flâneur’s way out of the blasé outlook, but rather his way into blasé nothingness. A direct participant in the spectacle, the flâneur relinquishes his subjectivity and degenerates into commodity. Thus, he becomes a deadened “non-I,” a casualty of the spectaclescape: his urban milieu subsumes and disintegrates his selfhood, leaving him in an alley behind Melrose to rot.

Coda

The flâneur is not just an individual, it is an ontology, a philosophical condition that bridges expansive urban exploration with physical and psychological atrophy. The flâneur, as I have examined it, supersedes the boundaries of gender and age, despite incorporating both into its physical manifestations. It is male, female, young, aging, but at its core, beyond these signifiers, it is a state of being predicated upon non-being: the flâneur is an “it,” unconfined by physicality. As such, the flâneur is timeless, a genealogical archetype of the urban metropolis.

Chandler’s detective-flâneur, Didion’s Hollywood flâneuse, and Ellis’s enfant-flâneur, while originating from different time-periods, share, exhibit, and build upon the tenets of flânerie’s archetypal non-I-ness: they are all rendered isolated, lost, and inhuman because of their relationship to the cityscape. Los Angeles, with its centerless construction and deviant, transgressive amorality, inscribes itself over the flâneurs who inhabit it, orchestrating their inevitable disintegration.

When Baudelaire conceived his Parisian flâneur, he envisioned him walking through his city, debonair, constantly gazing, breathing in its various aromas. There is a certain vulnerability in this gesture: to walk in a city is to experience it directly, unfortified by the doors of a carriage or other means of transportation. In this manner, the city can easily penetrate and influence this Parisian wanderer.

The L.A. flâneur, however, lacks this debonair quality and openness, prioritizing, instead, driving as the means of experiencing this urban setting. The L.A. flâneur encloses itself behind those vehiculated fortifications, the doors of a car, seemingly separated from the city. But, as I have shown, those doors are just as tenuous, porous, and exposed to the city’s influence as the walking flâneur is to his. Thus, the L.A. flâneur drives endlessly across the highway, windows

down, car trembling from the Santa Ana winds, inhaling the smog that hangs over Downtown, unable to escape the spiritual pollution that the city generates.

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